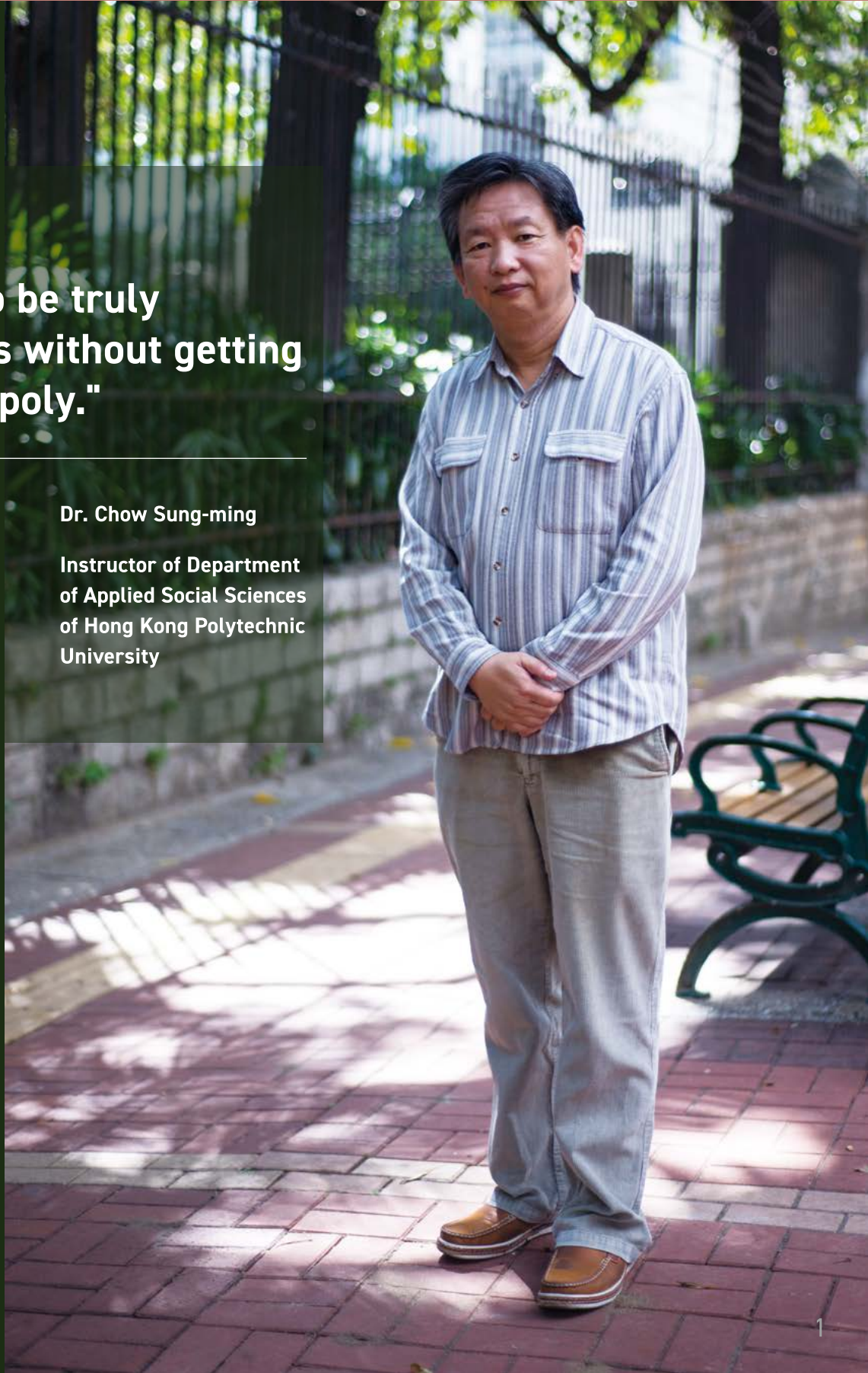


**"It's hard to be truly
autonomous without getting
rid of monopoly."**

Dr. Chow Sung-ming

**Instructor of Department
of Applied Social Sciences
of Hong Kong Polytechnic
University**



CHOW SUNG-MING : CONSUMERS CAN BE MORE AUTONOMOUS

We first met Dr. Chow Sung-ming, instructor of Department of Applied Social Sciences of Hong Kong Polytechnic University on a sunny morning in late February. Since the campus was not yet fully open, Dr. Chow proposed to talk to us at a nearby park. We started walking from the university gate, through the Gun Club Hill Barracks to Jordan Path. He told us why he started to promote consumer movement, "I worked at Oxfam after leaving my job in media. It was when I began to care about issues like globalisation and fair trade. As I learnt more day by day, I paid more and more attention to them". We then sat down on a bench in Jordan Path. The sun was shining and the birds were squeaking. Cat feeders came occasionally. Kittens wandered in groups. It was comfortable scenery.

Dr. Chow removed his mask and continued, "Generally, Hong Kong people talk about core values, such as democracy, freedom, the rule of law, and so forth. Yet, fewer people care about fairness, equality, and the disparity between the rich and the poor. The reason is straightforward. Since Hong Kong pursues capitalism, many people believe that they can get rich through personal effort." However, in reality, we lack choices either in economic development or consumption. He again cited a famous quote from TV series "When Heaven Burns", "The city is dying, you know? We want economic autonomy, but we can't get rid of real estate hegemony, monopoly of Hong Kong's economic resources by large corporations. The mainstream economic activities always affect the lives of everyone."

Breaking the monopoly by consumer movement

In recent years, more people choose to support small shops. Last year, some people advocated the yellow-blue economic circle. Dr. Chow believes that these consumer movements undoubtedly help break the monopoly by the few corporations, promote competition and rejuvenate the city with diversity and openness. "However, the survival and operation of small shops depend on different economic activities, and these activities are beyond our control. Take



café and restaurants as an example - small shops still rely on imported food ingredients, in other words relying on the suppliers. If they can't get rid of monopoly, it's hard to be truly autonomous."

Dr. Chow said that consumer movements can be divided into two categories. One is to advocate what to buy, while the other is to promote what not to buy. "Boycotting is generally a relatively short-term strategy. If we cannot establish a channel for long-term consumption with alternatives, boycotting would be just a slogan." Therefore, he is more concerned about what to buy, such as fair-trade products or local crops. But such goods are usually of higher production costs and are relatively niche that hard to enter the mainstream. "Consumers are very pragmatic. It may not last long if you buy or stop buying for solely political reasons. Behavioural change can only sustains unless the quality of products is good and reasonably priced, or the consumer can establish a relationship with the producer. For example, if you know a farmer quite well, you will be willing to buy the vegetables he grows - it is completely different from buying vegetables in wet markets."

Personal consumption changes the mainstream economy

Consumers can tell merchants their wants through personal choices, and even bring some changes to mainstream economic activities, just like the consumer movement originated in Europe and the United States. At that time, people concerned about food safety most, and then began to pay attention to the livelihood of farmers. It gradually developed into a reciprocal process between consumers and producers. Eventually, fair-trade products began to appear in the market in the 1970s. All stuff used in 2012 London Olympic Games was fair-trade product – an achievement brought by consumers who kept persuading the London government.

However, not everyone in Hong Kong cares the above issues. Therefore, Dr. Chow keeps advocating through writing and publications. It may not change the mainstream value at once, but the works can be kept in the libraries for students and the next generations to read. He called this "seeding".

Protect farmland and promote local agriculture

In 2015, the government conducted a consultation on the "New Agriculture Policy". Dr. Chow grasped the opportunity to publish the book "A Reader on Local Agriculture". A few months later, government officials discussed the details with him. The government then proposed and reserved "Agriculture Priority Areas" for long-term agricultural development in the Policy Address in the same year, but till now no follow-up is seen.

Monopoly of big business and suppliers makes it difficult for small merchants to survive, and thus consumer choices become limited. "Hong Kong's major commodities and food are imported goods. Local production is scarce. Consumers can hardly make the purchase decisions as they wish". To change the situation, Dr. Chow believes that promoting local agriculture is one of the keys. Seven to eight years ago, he began to care about land use in Hong Kong, "There is insufficient land in Hong Kong. Property prices are so high that many people cannot afford. Some community groups proposed to utilise brownfield sites for housing, but we objected". He said that brownfield sites were once rural farmland. They are currently used as parking lots, open storage, container yards and industrial workshops. If these brownfields sites are used for housing, nearby farmland will also be turned into brownfield sites for a higher economic value.





NGOs work in hand through government subsidies

Dr. Chow emphasises that agriculture does not just benefit Hong Kong economically, "Apart from producing food, agricultural lands are also green spaces that help discharge floods, improve the ecological environment and provide ideal living spaces for birds, butterflies, dragonflies, etc." He said that most European countries provide land subsidies to local farmers, "and farms close to the urban areas can supply fresh milk and cheese to the residents." He suggested that Hong Kong to introduce Value Assessment of Ecosystem Services and establish corresponding "Payment for Ecosystem Service" (PES) system. Such system encourages service providers to provide services that are beneficial to the ecosystem by giving them corresponding compensation or remuneration.

Dr. Chow also suggested that non-government organisations and community groups can work together to provide more options for consumers. "Take catering as an example again. Social enterprises that provide food services - such as food banks or those with kitchens - may wish to cooperate with crop growers here to provide local food." As for the organic certification of products or fair trade certification, he suggests setting up a grading system so that the food suppliers and consumer can adapt to the highest standard step by step. "Vegetables grown locally are more expensive because the current environment is not conducive to production. As long as we are willing to try and believe what can be changed, there will be more room for such products."

Jordan Path is still peaceful. Cats and birds stay together, without cannibalism – a scene different from what described in the literary Chinese writing "Cat catches bird". This is a lovely picture. We hope Hong Kong can maintain such openness and diversity so that everyone here has more choices.



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WHAT IS "CONSUMPTION"?

Generally speaking, it refers to our behavior of purchasing goods or services, and probably, this behavior is based on necessities, life quality improvement, or even fulfillment of personal desires. However, in addition to the above definitions, there is more discussion about different consumption patterns in recent years. People believe that consumption is not only a behavior "satisfying needs", and have begun to think about the impact of its power on society and reflect on the meaning of consumption.

Consumption is not only to satisfy one's lust

In recent years, people have mentioned different consumption patterns such as "ethical consumption", "sustainable consumption", and "collaborative consumption" (see the table below). These concepts are not the same, but they have one thing in common: from focusing on the consumption pattern of "individuals" to that of the "society". It is believed that buying goods or services does not simply satisfy people's needs and desires, but act as a medium for them to find or think about the meaning of life. Consumers can reflect their wishes and preferences to producers through the market, thereby changing producers' production systems and sales strategies, and ultimately building a better society.



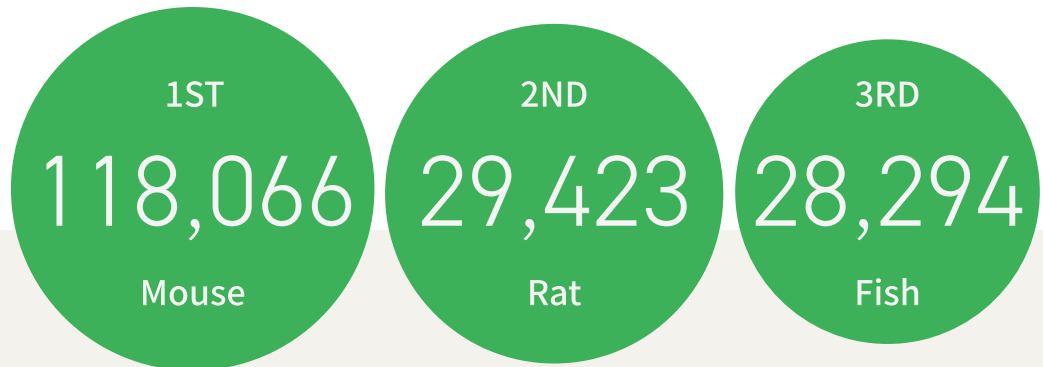
Different Consumption Patterns

	Ethical Consumption	Sustainable Consumption	Collaborative Consumption
Origin	Also known as “Responsible Consumption” or “Just Consumption”, suggested by Ethical Consumer in 1989	The concept started in 1970s and was proposed to the United Nations in the report Our Common Future by the World Commission on Environment and Development in 1987	Also called “Sharing Economy Consumption”, suggested by American scholars Marcus Felson and Joe Spaeth in 1978
Highlights	Consider ethical responsibility as the basic rule during consumption, so as not to exploit nor damage humans, animals and environment, for the benefit of the disadvantaged groups, the society and the world	In addition to satisfying individual needs and increasing living standard, one has to minimise the use of natural resources and toxic materials, as well as reduce wastes and pollutants during production and consumption processes	Fully utilise the resources by sharing idle items or skills, maximise the value of the resources, and let the sharers get what they want
Social Impact and Meanin	Contend against the idea of profit maximisation of Capitalism	Keep balance among the environment, ecosystem, society and economy	Build up trust by “sharing” instead of “possessing”
Examples	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Fair Trade Products ○ Cruelty-free Products ○ Non-animal tested cosmetics 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Forest Stewardship Council (FSC) Certified Paper ○ Marine Stewardship Council (MSC) Certified Seafood 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Airbnb ○ Uber ○ Co-working space

Ethical Consumption

Sometimes we may not be aware of the harm inflicted on animals during the manufacturing process. For example, animal tests for some products (such as cosmetics) are common in Hong Kong.

Numbers of animals used in experiments in Hong Kong



Reference: the 2016 data cited by the Secretary for Food and Health, Professor Sophia Chan, in the Legislative Council on 21 March 2018

Sustainable Consumption

A study found Hong Kong people have a high level of awareness but a low level of willingness of sustainable consumption. In other words, they concern about related topics such as energy conservation and waste sorting/separation, but are not willing to take action.

Sustainable Consumption Index



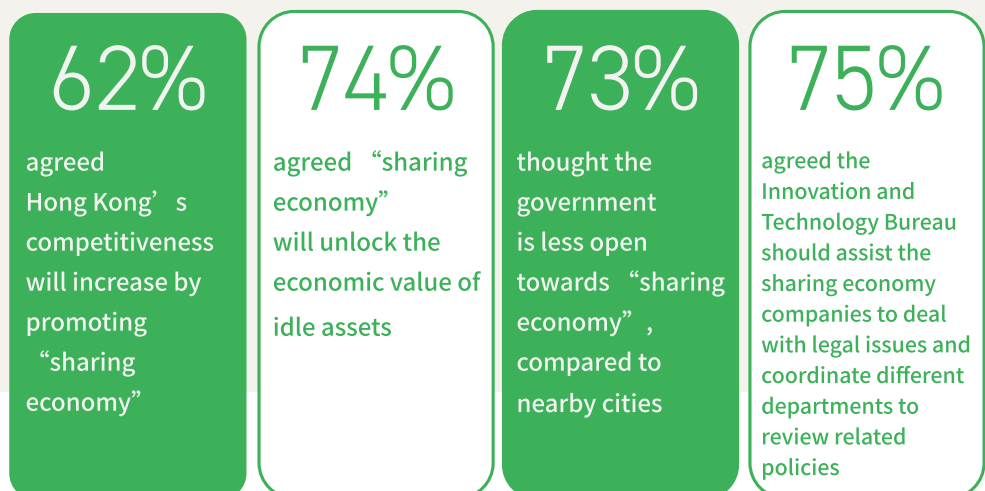
Reference: Sustainable Consumption for a Better Future – A Study on Consumer Behaviour and Business Reporting by Consumer Council in February 2016

Collaborative Consumption

A survey found most people agree there are advantages of sharing economy but think the government is not quite open towards it.

Survey on Sharing Economy

Reference: Survey on Innovative Technology and Sharing Economy by Public Opinion Programme, the University of Hong Kong in September 2017



Bringing about social change through consumption

You may wonder the power of consumption alone on the producers and the development of society. Indeed, there are examples in history of bringing about changes and even balancing the government by the power of consumption. The most famous one is the Non-cooperation Movement launched by Mahatma Gandhi in the Indian independence movement, aiming at protesting against the colonial government's monopoly on salt production. Gandhi led his followers to produce salt. The Non-cooperation Movement successfully put pressure on the colonial government and drew global attention. Martin Luther King Jr, leader of the American civil rights movement, initiated the black citizens to boycott public transportation as a way to challenge the racial segregation measures. One year later, he successfully forced the city government to abolish the policy.

For persons we interviewed in the cover stories, Wah-kee not only regards his store as a small business in Ping Shek Estate, but also as a neighborhood with human touch, fully trusted by residents in the Estate. In "The White House", Javis uses tea as a tool to let the guests experience tranquility and take good care of their soul. The shopkeeper of the social enterprise MentalCare cares about communities in need in this society while doing business, and provides equal employment opportunities for all. These three stories tell us that in addition to monetary rewards and materialism, social value and meaning also matters in the process of sales and purchase.

Using consumption to support your agreed values

Whether it is ethical consumption, sustainable consumption, or collaborative consumption, it is a consumption choice with values. Consumers can purchase goods or services that conform to their values. They can also adopt a boycotting approach to refuse to purchase any items from those companies that violate their values. American writer and educator Anna Lappé once said,

"Every time you spend a penny, you are voting for the world you want." And how would you vote for it?



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