

# Go green over red packets

This Chinese New Year, ditch paper and opt for e-hongbao to protect both health – and forests

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For The Straits Times

Each year, more than a billion people celebrate Chinese New Year worldwide. It's a centuries-old festival that celebrates familial bonds, and is an opportunity to connect with and offer blessings to loved ones.

Also known as the Spring Festival, Chinese New Year celebrates the turn of the seasons, and the wealth that nature provides: fresh water, clean air, favourable climate and an abundance of food. Even in these modern times, nature continues to underpin all economies and societies through the goods and services it provides. Yet, some choices made during this season could reduce its ability to provide the abundance often taken for granted.

While traditions such as Chinese New Year are cherished, should it

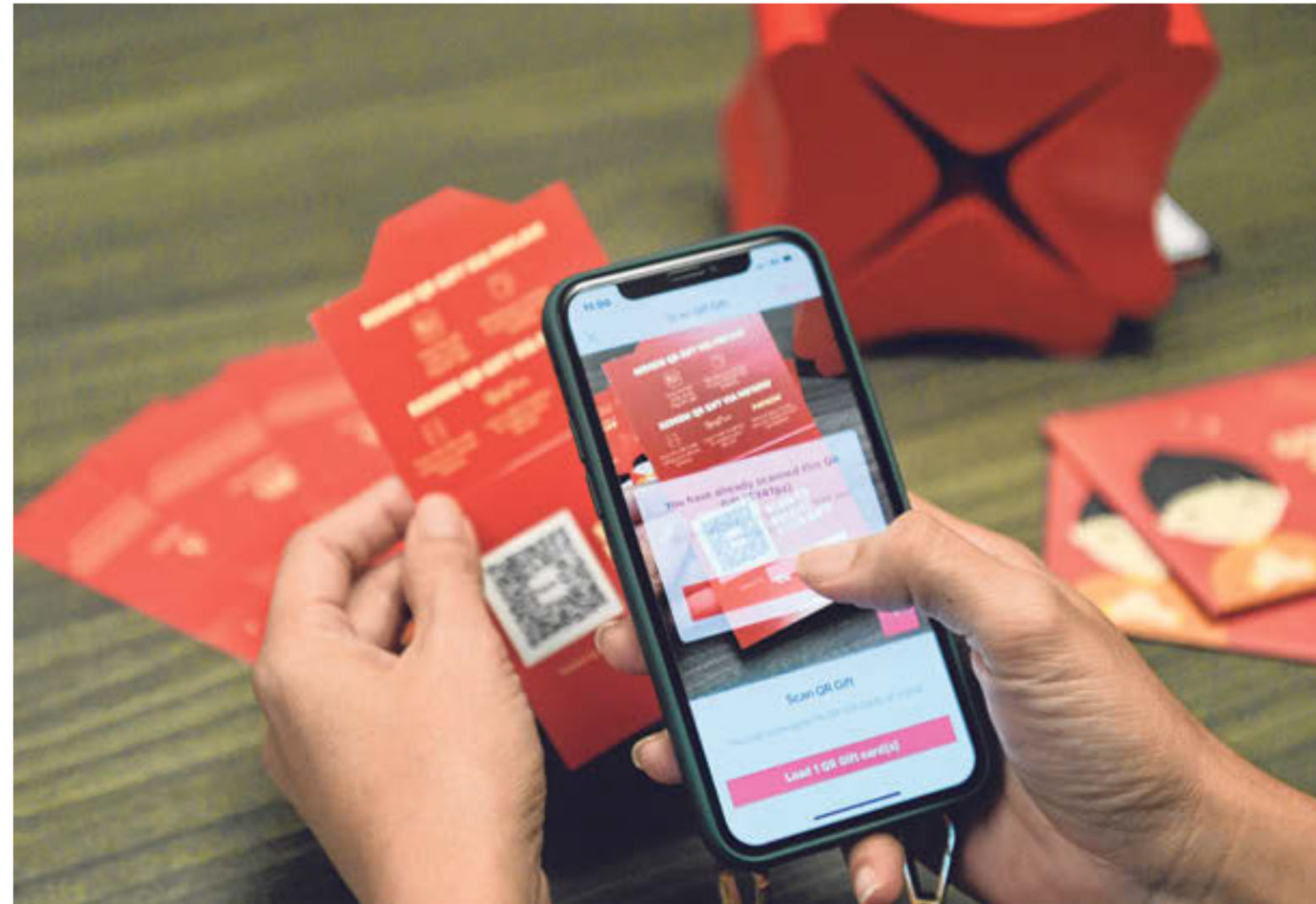
be at the expense of leaving an inhospitable Earth for future generations, or endangering the health of the community, and, by extension, loved ones?

## TIMELY MOVE

The Monetary Authority of Singapore (MAS) and the Association of Banks in Singapore last month encouraged the public to use e-hongbao, otherwise known as e-red packets. MAS has also been working with banks in Singapore to promote the use of recirculated notes instead of new notes for Chinese New Year.

This is a timely move amid the Covid-19 pandemic, when it is socially responsible to avoid crowds and queues where possible. On top of the new regulations that restrict visiting during the New Year, it may seem like the hallmarks of the festive season are being eroded.

But this would not be the first time that traditions have evolved to better address current needs. For example, few would argue that using reusable, rather than real



A DBS Bank customer using the e-hongbao function on a mobile phone. E-hongbao allow people to gift blessings with greater ease and safety, providing peace of mind for givers, say the writers. ST PHOTO: ALPHONSUS CHERN

trees, for Christmas hurts the Christmas spirit, or that customary handshakes should still continue during these Covid-19 times.

The use of e-hongbao has already gained tremendous traction in China, with WeChat reporting a record 823 million users sending and receiving e-hongbao in the first six days of the 2019 Chinese New Year. E-hongbao allow people to gift blessings with greater ease

and safety, providing peace of mind for givers.

Each year, banks, retailers and various organisations print millions of red packets to feed public demand. Most of the paper used to manufacture red packets is produced by paper mills.

The paper used is likely to contribute to deforestation, which removes wildlife habitats, and creates unnatural proximity between humans and wildlife.

Forest loss has consistently led to more incidences in the spillover of viruses, such as Covid-19 and Sars (severe acute respiratory syndrome), from animal hosts to humans.

According to a 2017 study, 320 million new red packets are produced in Hong Kong every year, which translates into 16,300 trees cut down to make them.

There are no specific numbers reported for Singapore, but it is

easy to extrapolate that, as a city with a similar population to Hong Kong's.

Most, if not all, red packets are used once and thrown away.

It is true that some of these red packets can be recycled, but the reality is that a significant portion put in recycle bins will not actually be recycled. This is because red packets that are printed with large amounts of red ink, gold ink or glitter, or made from mixed materials, cannot be recycled.

Recycling is also not a panacea for sustainability problems, as the recycling process itself is extremely resource-intensive. It is prudent, therefore, to start considering digital alternatives to complement current traditional practices.

Similar to the role e-payments play, there is no need to completely abandon the use of cash in order to embrace e-payment options.

E-hongbao are simple to use, and allow givers to send their blessings to anyone safely. It also eliminates the need to travel to and queue at banks to deposit physical cash.

It is time for Singapore to embrace digital technology and e-gifting. It is a way of protecting health and traditions in these Covid-19 times, while teaching the next generation the importance of caring for Mother Earth, the source of their future prosperity.

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