#### The new Chan Chi-chuen

How he transforms from a DJ to the first openly gay legislative councillor **p18** 

#### **Forced labour camp**

The future of the system under the new Chinese leadership **p14** 

#### Food crisis of the poors

Low-income families are hungrier than ever as food prices surge **p12** 



# THE YOUNG REPORTER Magazine

# In This Issue

#### 4 One Moment

#### 7 View

FRONT

The sixth must-do in university: applying for public housing

#### 9 Journalism Matters

The case for paywalls • A Q&A with Mike Chinoy



#### 12 Poor and hungry

Surging food prices mean low-income families are hungrier than ever

#### **14 Forced labour camps** Prominent lawyer says new leadership hints at reform of controversial labour reeducation system

#### **15 Housing subsidy to N-nothings** Why another round of housing subsidy giveaway does not help them much

**18 The new life of Chan Chi-chuen** The DJ-turned-legislator talks about his new identity

#### 20 Algae saves the world

Microalgae may be the answer to energy shortage, water pollution and more

#### 22 Wierd is cool

How Internet has helped to spread non-mainstream songs



**26 Marrying him or her** The rugged road to homosexual engagement

FEATURE

**29 God loves homosexuals** Gay Christians find new meaning of religion in church

**30 The rainbow after rain** Same-sex marriage legalisation is under the spotlight again





In our previous issue, we talked to the losers in the 2012 Legislative Councils elections. Check out tyr.hk for the stories and more.









Editor-in-Chief Alan Wong

Deputy Chief Editors *Alvina Hung Rev Hui* 

Web Editors Ada Yeung Dennis Lee

Art Director **Beth Liu** 

Public Relation Officers *Clarie Lee Johnny Lo* 

Distribution Officer Joyce Cheung

Advisers CK Lau Robin Ewing

Publisher **Steve Guo** 

Printer Department of Journalism School of Communication Hong Kong Baptist University

Printer address Dept of Journalism, HK Baptist University, Kowloon Tong, Kln

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#### Editors

Abigail Khoo Coco Zheng Fechon Wong Guannan Li Helen Yu Jackie Yin Jim Wong Kris Lui Kristine Basilio Melody Chan Peyton Guan Remus Wei Roy Chan Sophia Fu

#### Reporters

Andrew Wan Brian Yap Catherine Lim Celine Ge **Cheng Song** Cleo Tse **Eunice Leung** Giselle Chan Joy Huo Jessica Lee Kasim Chan Katheleen Wong Lavinia Mo **Ruby** Leung Ching Liu Lawrence Mak Natasha Chan Rachel Leung Thibault Bluy Vanessa Piao Venus Ho

E M A I L editors@tyr.hk FACEBOOK t y r m a g WEBSITE t y r . h k 4 • FRONT

# **One Moment**

A father and daugther in the annual gay parade, themed "Dare to love" this year, on November 10. **Photograph by Joy Huo** 

Photograph by Joy Huo

港同志擴行2012 ang Kong Pride Parade 2012

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## View

# University graduates should not compete with the needy for public housing

T<sup>O</sup> many soon-to-be graduates, property prices in Hong Kong these days are pretty scary.

High prices, and probably the scare, translate into a whopping 19,822 public rental housing applicants who have received tertiary education or above. The figure is more than double the 9,036 applicants in the same category in 2010.

Rhetoric aside, high property prices hardly justify university graduates applying for public housing. In fact, as few as ten percent of some 93,000 non-elderly one-person applicants attribute their application to the city's unaffordable rent, according to statistics released by the Housing Authority.

There is no doubt that people, including the university-educated, want a place of their own. The real questions are who need and deserve public housing most.

In his Budget speech in February, Financial Secretary Mr John Tsang Chunwah articulated the goal of government's public housing programmes. The government's policy, he said, was to provide public rental housing "for low-income families who cannot afford private rental accommodation." He pledged to maintain the average waiting time for general applicants, excluding non-elderly oneperson applicants, at around three years.

Among the more than 200,000 applicants on the waiting list, there are lowincome families that struggle to make ends meet amidst rising living costs; people who are forced out of their homes; couples who hope to build a family; and people who are living in dire conditions or downright homeless.

While the underprivileged spends on average three years waiting for the government to put an end to their housing plight, the 18 percent of students who have access to university education have the same, if not more, time to prepare themselves for their future careers.

It is unlikely that they need public housing because they are incapable. Hong Kong's education system is, to some extent, still elitist. Less than one out of five young people from the age of 17 to 20 have the chance to receive a university education. Compared to students of the same age group, they are de facto the most capable ones, at least academically, and those who do not have good grades must perform exceptionally well in other areas.

The universities in Hong Kong do not disappoint either. They are among the best in Asia and often attract the best teachers and students from abroad and the mainland. The price tag that comes with the education is not small. The four-year tertiary education programme, previously three-year, costs taxpayers approximately \$200,000 a year per student. Students pay only a fraction of the amount.

The result is that, in monetary terms, fresh university graduates earn a mean monthly salary of \$11,823, 38 per cent higher than secondary school graduates who have finished Advanced Level Examination (\$8,590), according to survey released by Hong Kong Baptist University School of Business and the Hong Kong People Management Association in October.

To top it all, the Housing Authority statistics also show that 92 percent of non-elderly one-person applicants live with their parents. And the most important reason they apply for public housing, the statistics show, is that they wish to live alone.

When land supply for public housing is meagre and demand high, it is unjustifiable to allow capable and employable university graduates whose higher education is largely paid for by the taxpayers to join the same waiting list for a subsidised home with those who have more pressing needs.

While the government has tightened the allocation of PRH to non-elderly oneperson applicants since the introduction of the Quota and Points System in 2005, it is not turning a blind eye to young people's housing need, especially when social mobility is key to economic prosperity.

The resumed Home Ownership Scheme will offer flats with an optimum size to families with a monthly household income of less than \$30,000. Families with a higher income, who are left out under current policy, are not forgotten either. In collaboration with the Hong Kong Housing Society, the government is set to continue to implement the My Home Purchase Plan to provide small- and medium-sized rental flats for families with a monthly income of about \$40,000. The programme allows them to save money, and move on to own the flat they rent or a flat from the private market.

Truth be told, there is no such thing as cheap, decent private housing choices that do not involve a long bus ride, or a tedious combination of train and bus rides, away from the city. It is also hard to imagine how fresh university graduates earning modest wages can afford even the smallest flats in the private market.

But adversity has always been a catalyst that has driven Hong Kong to where it stands today. If even the higher-educated pack is not confident enough to shoulder the pressure, Hong Kong may as well start saving to prepare for demands for more welfare in the near future.

by Alan Wong

## Write to us. We will publish your letters in the magazine and on our website.

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The Young Reporter run by HKBU journalism students since 1969

## Journalism Matters



#### Free press What? I have to pay for news?

**N**OBODY enjoys hitting a wall, especially one that asks you to pay before you can read an article online. But despite how much you hate paywalls, they will be either here to stay or gone with the newspapers altogether.

"How many of you bought a newspaper in the last week? Raise your hand if you bought a newspaper," asked Mr Clifford J. Levy, a Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist at the New York Times, the audience at a forum in Hong Kong Baptist University.

There were few hands in the air. Soon enough, laughters from the tens of journalism students and professionals filled the auditorium.

"You are much more accustomed to reading online, and also much more accustomed to getting your news for free. That's terrifying for people in the business of journalism," he said.

Part of that explains why the New York Times has taken the unpopular path of putting up a paywall. The reception has been mixed – some people were downright turned off, some accepts the fact that quality journalism is worth a few bucks (monthly fee for the New York Times is actually cheaper than a few cups of latte).

However desperate the newspaper wants you to pay, its paywall is not invincible at all – sometimes intentionally so.

Readers who click on links through Twitter, Facebook or Google News will be able to read the articles even after they have reached the limit of ten free articles on nytimes.com.

"We want to have a paywall but we do not want to wall ourselves off from the web as a whole," he said, adding that newspapers that had tough paywalls often faced great business challenges.

Another Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist Ms Paige St. John said the Los Angeles Times, which she now works for, was struggling with implementing a paywall on its website.

"The website is losing people at the moment. It's a difficult transition for them," she said. "The LA Times is rolling out new products on the webpages to try to bring people in."

No matter what businesses people are in, the only way to go seems to be "social". To news organisations, that means finding ways to make their articles appear on people's social media feed.

"We need to have a major presence on something like Twitter or Facebook, we have to be there because the eyeballs are there," said Mr Levy.

He added that the New York Times was trying to figure out how to survive in these ecosystems which it did not control. "Ultimately, we want the traffic to come to our website."

"We're all struggling to find the right balance between opening ourselves up to the web and closing ourselves just enough to preserve our business model," Mr Levy said, on how news aggregators affect the traffic to the newspaper's website.

"There are different kinds of aggregators. Google News is an aggregator where they'll just feature the first paragraph of the story. Huffington Post is not exactly an aggregator, they are more actually taking your work, and repackaging it. They'll link to you, so they'll say it's okay. But in effect they're really taking the heart of your work." **by Alan Wong** 



#### Journalists Interviewed Mike Chinoy



Mike Chinoy is a Senior Fellow at the US-China Institute of University of Southern California and a former Asia bureau chief at CNN. He has covered China since 1975 and published multiple books on the country. I interviewed him on the US election day in the U.S. Consulate General Hong Kong & Macau, where he gave a speech on the election and US politics.

#### We've heard a lot about China during the US presidential election, what about Hong Kong in particular – what does the election result mean to Hong Kong?

I think across the board, America has an interest in seeing "one country two systems" work. Obviously there are general tensions in their relationship and part of that is suspicion by some elements of the Chinese government and Party that the US is meddling in Hong Kong. That could become a source of tension. But I think that is part of the broader dynamic in Hong Kong is that China has become increasing upset at the political development here or suspicious about what some opposition people are doing here. There's a tendency it always looks for outsiders to blame. And they've already targeted at the consulate a little bit and obviously I think that's not true, it's internally generated. Hong Kong is valuable to China and valuable to the US, it's ultimately in the interest of both countries to make it work. So hopefully those kinds of tension would be minimal and not get out of hand. But that depends on what happens here and it depends on the dynamic in China too.

#### What do you think is the biggest change of the coverage of the 2012 election comparing to that four years ago?

My biggest criticism of the coverage is the degree to which it's stunt as a horse race. This one ahead, that one's ahead. This poll shows this way and this poll shows that way. There's much less discussion about the issues themselves. It's probably the fault of the media and probably the fault of the candidates. Because candidates themselves tend to avoid hard discussion on complicated issues. They're looking to appeal to the broadest number of people to get the most number of votes. So they don't, for example, in foreign policies debate, neither Obama nor Romney mentioned climate change. It's a huge issue. It's a combination of factors.

The other thing here is that because of the social media and the internet, the news cycle, which was a 24-hour news cycle, is now one-minute news cycle. The moment things happen they're being posted on Twitter. And that I think is exciting in many ways, but also makes it harder to get any thoughtful discussion if everything is boiled down to a tweet. There's a lot of coverage of which i haven't really learnt that much from a lot out of it.



#### Social media partly causes the sort of bad coverage of the election as well as people's knowledge of the election. What do you think is the bright side of social media?

Social media is very fast. It's empowering. It allows everybody to have an equal voice. If you have something to say. You can tweet, you can put it on your Facebook page. It democratises the whole experience of sharing information. That's very good and exciting. It forces the established media organisations to be responsive to the public in a way it's never been before. So it creates a kind of a dynamic of a conversation rather than a one way thing and that's good. At the same time, it sort of opens up space for stuff that's not true, for inaccuracy, for opinions masquerading as facts. So it's kind of a mixed bag. But obviously it's fundamentally changed the dynamics.



## How does the local coverage compare to the international coverage of the election?

Local coverage here has largely been wired service reports about the horse race and occasional feature piece. Having some distance is good, taking a little step back and have some perspective that sometimes you may not be able to in the middle of campaign in Ohio or something.

#### What is the point of news organisations having their own foreign correspondents these days when you can simply buy news from the ever more influential newswires?

Foreign correspondents still have real value. Good correspondents are both deeply knowledgeable about the place they're covering but able to step back and explain it to people who are not familiar with it. They're able to collect a lot of information and digest it, present it in a way that the consumers of news back home can understand it. If you're interested in the US election you can spend 24 hours a day, go to website, every blog, follow every pundit. You wouldn't get anything done and end up with so much. They can do a service for me of presenting a thousand words in a four-minute TV piece. And then I can decide what more. It also works in reverse. In China now, you can read the Chinese media, you can follow people on Weibo. It's valuable to have somebody who's knowledgeable and sort of able to step back and also who's not susceptible to local pressures to help explain it to a broader audience.

## What do you think is the biggest challenge reporting in China?

China is a very interesting, complicated place. One of the problems in China is that there's so much information that it's very hard to put it all together. It's very hard to generalise. If something's happening in Guangdong it doesn't mean it's happening in Hebei. So one issue is just figuring out all these pieces and figuring out how much you can generalise in a specific situation.

It's much much more open especially if you can speak the language. At the top leadership level is very very close still, so it's still a challenge to trying to figure that out. In that respect it's not so different from what I did twenty five or thirty years ago.

But it's also much more open and accessible country. You can travel, talk to a lot of people. The social media in China is a very good was to judge what a certain part of the population is concerned about, talking about. But it's so big that generalising becomes very tricky. The size of China itself becomes a very big challenge.

#### Newspapers like the New York Times often have people speaking who are called "people with knowledge". How does a novice reporter get that kind of connections?

If you're there a part of the job being a correspondent is to meet as many people as you can and follow up every contact you get, anybody you interview. As you do work, people will know who you are. It doesn't happen automatically.

The New York Times is the New York Times, people want to talk to it because people know it'll have a big impact, which is not necessarily true if you're from a small outlet. But it's just a question of taking advantage of every contact you have, asking a lot of questions, asking for advice, asking for help, slowly build up you network of connections. **by Alan Wong** 

## Poor and hungry

Surging global and local food prices means low-income families are hungrier than ever

HONG Kong has never lacked options when it comes to dining. The many restaurants and food choices, available around the clock, have even become a problem to people who are not adept at choosing. But this has never bothered Ms Lee Chan, a single mother of a six-yearold boy and an eight-year-old girl, because she simply has no money.

Her fridge, like her bank account, is almost empty, but she has three mouths to feed. She routinely skips breakfast or lunch to save money for food for her two kids, who look somewhat slighter than their peers at school.

Her case is neither extreme nor rare among poor households in Hong Kong. In fact, in Asia's second wealthiest metropolis, one in six children from low-income families frequently go hungry, an Oxfam survey reveals last August.

The report estimates that one third of some 144,400 impoverished households with children aged 15 or under do not acquire adequate food and are uncertain of future food sufficiency. These poverty-stricken children, the survey reports, have to eat leftovers or even expired food every now and then.

Some poor households turn to cheaper alternatives to combat ris-

ing food prices. Ms Luk Sung-fei, who lives in a walk-up building in Sham Shui Po, has switched to frozen instead of fresh meat over the years. Fruits are a luxury to her. "You will never die of not eating fruits, but you can't survive without rice," she said.

The Oxfam survey shows that food accounts for more than 40 per cent of the total expenditure for families that earn less than half of the median household income. For a three-person family, that means its total monthly income is less than \$10,000. Also, nearly 80 per cent of those families spend a quarter more on food than they did in the previous year.

"The fact is, I'm paying more, but getting less," Ms Chan said. Food was not her top concern until the prices of meat and eggs doubled in recent years, she added. "I don't know why the government subsidies remain the same."

High food prices have even prompt-



ed Ms Chan and Ms Luk to buy groceries in Shenzhen. But thanks to rising food prices there and the appreciation of the renminbi, it is no longer a viable alternative. "The prices in Shenzhen are just as high as those in Hong Kong if you convert the Hong Kong dollar to the renminbi," said Ms Luk.

A more expensive renminbi has also affected the import prices of food to Hong Kong, which imports over 17 per cent of its agricultural and food products from China, followed by the United States (16 per cent), according to Census and Statistics Department.

Hong Kong's heavy reliance on imports has made the city's food prices the ninth most vulnerable in the world, according to the Nomura Food Vulnerability Index, compiled by Japanese investment bank Nomura.

To make things worse, a renewed global food crisis is likely to drive local

food prices higher in the near future. Prices of corn, wheat, and soybeans have gone up dramatically due to the worst ever droughts last summer in the United States and Russia, two of the largest crop producing countries in the world. Global food prices are reaching a dangerous level, which is as worst as that during the 2008 global food crisis, leading to riots in more than a dozen African and Asian countries, according to reports by the United Nations Food Agency released in early October.

Hong Kong University economics professor Xu Chenggang said the city would be drawn into the vortex of global food inflation, with meat prices going up most dramatically.

A former consultant for the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund, Prof Xu said local meat prices would be driven up by the low supply of soybean and corn, which are main ingredients in pig and cattle feeds, in the

United States. "The situation will probably last until the arrival of the next harvest season," he said. Dr Sandra Tsang Kit-man, the head

Dr Sandra Tsang Kit-man, the head of the Department of Social Work and Social Administration at the University of Hong Kong, said food insecurity would bring about a vicious cycle of poverty. Workers' health had an impact on their work performance and their employment, she said.

What is more, food insecurity may lead to social unrest if the young working poor could not get enough food, she added.

And it seems that Hong Kong's economic prowess does not help the poor tackle food inflation. According to the Nomura Food Vulnerability Index, Hong Kong, with the highest GDP per capita out of the top 25 most vulnerable economies, is even more likely to be hard-hit by food shock than Libya, Pakistan and Kenya, while Singapore ranks 49th out of 80.

"Singapore is relatively safer since it has some farmlands to grow crops within the city-state," said Dr Tsang. However, there was scarcely any land for agricultural production in Hong Kong, where many farmlands have been turned to property development, she added.

The Singaporean government has launched a concern group to keep a close eye on price spikes of daily necessities. Its central bank is also trying to curb inflation by adjusting the exchange rate of its cur-

rency. "Obviously, the SAR government has the ability but no intention to cushion the impacts of surging food prices," Dr Tsang said.

Prof Xu said the government was absolutely capable of bringing an end to current urban food insecurity with its financial strength. "Food subsidy will definitely help, and it will not cost the government too much," he said. The government could dispense food stamps to needy families like what the US government has done for decades, and it would have an immediate effect on the hungerstricken citizens, he said.

Since 2009, the Social Welfare Department has commissioned five nongovernmental organisations to operate five short-term food assistance services. Eligible users will receive food assistance, mainly in the form of dry rations, for a maximum of six weeks.



However, the Oxfam survey reveals that nearly 60 per cent of respondents did not know about food banks and those who have heard of it did not apply for the aid. For those who had received food aids, the majority thought the food offered was neither fresh nor nourishing and the maximum collection period was too short.

Dr Tsang said collecting food directly from food banks could make people feel ashamed. Also, the food provided by food banks can be poor in nutrition or even expired, which could deter potential applicants, she said. Dr Tsang suggests that the government provides more hot meal assistances and take beneficiaries' self-esteem into consideration. "Say, the needy ones could exchange their labour for the subsidised food," she said.

Operated by Baptist Oi Kwan Soeial Serve Centre, "Hotmeal Canteen" in

Serve Centre, "Hotmeal Canteen" in Sham Shui Po is a programme that provides hot meals for low-income residents in the neighbourhood. Eligible participants like Ms Chan and her two children only need to pay \$10 for a meal with rice, soup and a dish every weekday evening.

"My kids can now have meat for dinner every day," Ms Chan smiled.

Ms Connie Fung Chong-shuk, the Marketing Executive at the centre, said the weekly menu was supervised by dieticians and changed daily, enabling beneficiaries to enjoy a healthy, enjoyable diet at a lower price. The fact that they have to pay for the meals helps boost their selfesteem, she said.

An increasing number of people are flocking to the canteen since its inception last September. However, the operation is stymied by food

costs, which have increased 20 to 30 per cent over the years, said Mr Raymond Chiu Hon-man, the coordinator of the service.

In face of soaring food prices, single mother Ms Chan does not know what more she can do.

"Perhaps I will turn to more organisations for help," she said. "Anyway, I will do whatever I can to make sure my children don't go hungry."

## Forced labour camps: Is it finally coming to an end?

Prominent lawyer says new leadership hints at reforming system of re-education through labour

In mainland China, sometimes it takes little more than a few words to get a trip to the country's labour camp.

In April 2011, Mr Huang Chengcheng posted this message on his Weibo microblog: "Friends, I'll make a pot of jasmine tea and wait for you at the McDonald's next to the Chongqing Liberation Monument at 2 pm this Sunday."

Amid heated discussion of the Jasmine Revolution and the Arab Spring, the friendly invitation struck a sensitive nerve. The authority "awarded" him two years of "re-education through labour", also known as forced labour camp.

Three months later, another Chongqing blogger Mr Ren Jianyu fared just as badly. The authorities sent him to the camp because he had copied, forwarded and commented on "more than 100 negative postings". An evidence the police submitted to court was a t-shirt that reads "give me liberty or give me death".

Many faced a similar fate when Mr Bo Xilai was Chongqing's Party chief and his trusted ally Mr Wang Lijun the police chief. Some defendants were sent to the camp even though they plead not guilty.

Now that the powerful Politburo member and police chief are ousted, some of the victims of political prosecution are trying to appeal to reverse their convictions.

> Civil rights lawyer Mr Pu Zhiqiang, who represents many dissidents, including artist Mr Ai Weiwei, is trying to put pressure on the authorities to

dismantle the corrupt system altogether.

Introduced in the 1950s, re-education through labour is a system used to detain people who committed minor crimes and force them work in labour camps. The system was the authority's handy tool to punish the opposition without lawyers or judges getting in the way.

Mr Pu said criticisms of the system had been rising in the last few years, and he believed the system would be abolished within six months.

Part of the reason was the new leadership needed to win over the people immediately, he said.

A report released recently by Communist Party mouthpiece Xinhua said the Central Legal Reform Committee acknowledged several procedural defects in the system and it should be reformed.

In June 2012, he helped Mr Fang Hong, who got one year of labour reeducation in mid-2011 for satirising Mr Bo and Mr Wang, reverse his conviction of disturbing social order, although Mr Fang had already served his sentence.

Mr Pu said the cases were then allowed to be heard and that the political inertia of vice-premier Mr Zhang Dejiang, a contender for a seat on the Politburo Standing Committee, might help. Mr Zhang was appointed as acting chief of Chongqing after Mr Bo's downfall and his performance there would determine whether he could secure the seat.

"Vice-premier Zhang doesn't want to do anything; he wants no trouble," Mr Pu said. "Chongqing is the safest place in the country now, because nobody in public security, the procuratorate, or the courts wants any trouble." According to Mr Xie Su-ming, the police has business deals with a variety of companies and uses the detainees as cheap labour. They are required to work about 13 hours a day, manufacturing products like straws and automobile parts. They would receive physical punishment if they can-

not finish the assignments of the day.

Mr Xie was sentenced to one year of labour re-education in December 2009 for his criticism of Mr Wang Hongju, former mayor of Chongqing. Since his

release a year ago, he has suffered from psychological problems and only recently dared to return to the municipal.

"It was not a big deal how much I suffered physically. Losing freedom was the most painful thing," Mr Xie said. "A day in the camp felt like a year."

According to Mr Pu, since nobody audits the accounts, the money made from the businesses flows right into police officers' pockets. Though abolishing the system will damage some officials' interests, Mr Pu thinks it is still easy for the central government to do so, and he expects the next premier, Mr Li Keqiang, to give the order.

"Li doesn't care whether local officials are making money or not. He just considers whether abolishing the system would give him credit," said Mr Pu. IOTOS: THIS PAGE: LAVINIA MO: OPPOSITE PAGE: BETH I





## N-nothings: Only urban public housing can pull us out of rental abyss



TUCKED away among an array of fluorescent-lit garages and hardware stores, a narrow steel door left ajar opens to a gloomy, draughty stairwell of a dilapidated tenement building in Kowloon City.

Inside, a plethora of interwoven power cables writhes across the ceiling and down the complex's tightly-confined walls, with a curved flight of stairs leading to a run-down 100-square-foot apartment occupied by a three-person family.

The cubicle interior lies strewn with jumbled piles of clothing, toys and bags of all sizes, above which heaps of eating and cooking utensils sit haphazardly on plate racks.

This is where Ms Wong Tsai-hung, 44, and her husband and five-year-old son start and end their every day. Falling outside the social safety net, the low-income family has resigned to living in a decrepit tenement cubicle.

And they are not alone. Known as the N-nothings class, they are not covered by the \$80 billion relief package introduced in the latest budget, which targeted Comprehensive Social Security Assistance (CSSA) recipients, taxpayers and public housing tenants.

"It's been four years since I applied for public housing in

Apartments in old walk-up buidlings are popular housing choices among N-nothings. the urban areas," said Ms Wong. "But all I've been told to do is wait unless I'm willing to move to units in newly developed areas."

Their waiting time for public housing is longer than three years – the period within

which the government has promised to assign a flat to general applicants. But she said she could not accept the flats allocated to her as moving away would make it difficult for her husband to continue to work as a bus driver in the district.

Then, there came a move to lift many agonising spirits, including Ms Wong, in early October, when the Community Care Fund, a trust fund co-financed by the government and the business sector, launched a new \$91-million housing subsidy scheme aimed at the N-nothing group.

The Fund, which operates under the trusteeship of the Secretary of Home Affairs, offers a one-off payment of up to \$8,000 to people who are renting cubicles, cocklofts or bed spaces in private buildings.

To be eligible for the hand-out, the corresponding monthly income for one-, two- and three-person households must not exceed \$17,060, \$13,410 and \$17,060 and their monthly rent not higher than \$4,370, \$6,705, and \$8,530 respectively. The grants will be equivalent to about two months' rent.

Having some extra cash on top of meagre salaries may come as a relief for some, but Ms Wong said the high rent – around \$4,000 a month – was too heavy a burden for them anyway.

She thinks more public housing should be built as being housed in a public flat is what will really alleviate her difficulties and improve her living environment.

The scheme has also drawn criticism from district councillors and aid groups, who doubt its effectiveness in addressing housing and poverty problems amid the city's skyrocketing property prices and rising unemployment rate.

Although there is not yet an official poverty line set by the Hong Kong government, Oxfam adopts the definition of Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) that households living under a monthly income less than or equal to half of the median income of all other households of equal size.

There are currently more than 451,000 households (1,177,000 people) who fall into this category.

With reference to the Census and Statistics Department's general household survey from 2003 to the second-quarter of 2012, Oxfam also found that there are 194,000 working poor households in the city, and over 90 per cent of them are non-CSSA recipients.

That is, there are more than 170,000 working poor households that are concurrently non-CSSA recipients. But according to the Fund, only around 30,000 low-income people are to benefit.

Mr Peace Wong, social security and employment policy officer of Hong Kong Council of Social Service, pointed out that the eligibility criteria for the subsidy were too strict and could limit its coverage significantly.

For instance, Nam Cheong West district councillor Mr Wai Woon-nam questioned

people living under the poverty line







why tenants of non-subdivided flats – who may be low-income individuals or households that do not own any properties or benefit from any utility subsidies – were not covered by the new subsidy scheme.

"Some low-income families living in squalid, cramped tenement units in Cha Kwo Ling have been disqualified from the scheme for having individual bathrooms and a main entrance door," said Mr Tse Suk-chun, the district councillor of Chui Cheung.

While the effectiveness of our city's new housing subsidy scheme is shrouded in doubt, our sister city Macau is set to witness an increase in the rental subsidy for lowincome families on waiting lists for social housing.

Marking a stark contrast between the two schmes, there are no rental limits imposed on Macau applicants, who enjoy greater ease of application as households in the queue for public housing will automatically be granted the new subsidies.

More remarkably, eligible applicants are offered with monthly, instead of one-off, payments of up to \$21,786, which is adjusted according to the inflation rate and property prices.

As affordability of housing has long been a nagging issue in Hong Kong and something elusive to many of the city's lowincome families, Mr Peace Wong has called for the restoration of rent control, which was abolished in 1998.

"It's worth discussing a rent control policy that could benefit the city's underprivileged without further reducing the number of available housing units," he said, adding that many countries in the West had rent regulation in place.

In New York's Manhattan borough, for example, nearly 50 per cent of rented residences are rent-regulated, where landlords are only permitted to raise the rent by a few percentage points.



## **The new life of Chan Chi-chuen** The former DJ and Hong Kong's first openly gay legislator talks

about his new identity and why he goes into politics

WHEN he was a DJ at Commercial Radio, Mr Raymond Chan Chi-chuen, popularly known as "Slow Beat", did not know he would become a legislator, let alone getting more votes than Democratic Party heavyweight Ms Emily Lau Wai-hing.

In his first foray into the Legislative Council, Mr Chan won a seat in the New Territories East Constitu-

ency in September's election with 38,042 votes, some 1,000 votes more than that of Ms Lau, acting chairman of the Democratic Party, whose forceful character, he said, intimidated him when they first met in 2010.

"I was invited by Green Radio (an internet radio station) to interview her and I really wanted to scold her for betraying Hong Kong people," he said. "But I did not dare to do so at that time."

Mr Chan was referring to the

Democratic Party's decision to put forward a compromise proposal on constitutional reform.

Instead of continuing to push for direct elections of the chief executive and all legislators immediately, the party supported the proposal to create five new seats that represented district council functional constituencies from this year.

While these seats are basically returned by direct elections, with everyone who is not already a voter in other trade-based functional constituencies getting a vote, the new arrangement is seen by champions of democracy as a backward move for "entrenching" functional constituencies.

With the support of the Democratic Party in the LegCo, the reform proposals were passed, to the dismay of other members of the pro-democracy camp and the accolade of those who felt the move would be a step forward for democracy.

Looking back, Mr Chan is still angry with the incident, which he regards as a betrayal of the cause of democracy by the Democratic Party.

"Look at the votes. Ms Lau (who took part in the direct negotiations between the Democratic Party and the liaison office officials) lost to a newcomer. Maybe it is time for her to repent her sins," he said. "The people no longer trust her because of her past actions."

Outraged by the 2010 incident, Mr Chan established Power Voters, which would later become part of People Power, with other social activists such as Ms Erica Yuen Mi-ming and Mr Jeff Au Yeung Ying-kit.

Although many thinks he is a radical, he prefers to be called an "aggressive democrat", which he defines as a democracy seeker who walks a slightly more confrontational path. But what drove Mr Chan to decide to plunge into electoral politics was another incident.

In 2010, Commercial Radio received sponsorship from the Democratic Alliance for the Betterment and Progress of Hong Kong to produce a series of programmes that promoted the party's work in the districts, said Mr Chan.



Mr Chan Chi-chuen (right) was known as DJ Slow Beat when he worked at the Metro Radio with Mr Tam Tat-chi, Fast Beat.

"Commercial Radio has always been anti-communist, but \$600,000 was enough to change that. I was speechless," he said.

When he first announced that he would run for People Power, many people did not take him seriously and continued to take him as the DJ who gossiped about celebrities on radio every day, said Mr Chan.

But he has since been regarded as having taken a new persona by speaking out and targeting Ms Lau in the election.

Mr Chan rejects the notion that People Power had divided the pro-democracy camp. "We are only using our own methods to protect the democratic progression of Hong Kong," he said.

Speaking of the aggressive behaviour of his People Power peers in the past, Mr Chan said he respected their strive for righteousness and he might soon follow in their footsteps.

"At the moment I will not be too aggressive. But I can't be too sure if something that really irks me happens, such as the Democratic Party's decision two years ago," he said.

Mr Chan is the first homosexual to have become a legislator and has taken some flak recently for not revealing his sexual orientation during the election.

But he said his close friends knew he was a homosexual, and he had told a journalist about his sexual orientation three days before he was elected. Unfortunately for him, the story was published only after the election.

"I could not control when the news story would be published," Mr Chan said. "I have nothing to hide and everyone knows it."

# Three birds, one stone

Microalgae are the answer to energy shortage, water pollution and global warming

WITHIN a bright yellowish circle, hundreds of green dots move around freely at a seemingly consistent tempo, despite being trapped by a thin piece of flat rectangular glass.

Purifies water

This is how microalgae look under the microscope. There is little to suggest that these single-celled, photosynthetic creatures typically found in freshwater and marine systems could be the answer to humanity's three major challenges in the contemporary world – energy shortage, water pollution and global warming.

"Killing three birds with one stone" is how Dr Ho Kin-chung, science and technology professor at the Open University of Hong Kong, describes scientific breakthroughs in using genome-based biotechnology to harness the special qualities of microalgae to help save the environment.

Anti-ageing

The most renowned sub-species of microalgae may be Spirulina, which is popular among consumers as a health supplement that increases protein intake and removes body toxins.

Usually advertised as an ideal antiaging food and weight-loss product, it is among thousands of sub-species of microalgae that have caught researchers' attention in recent years.

The National Aeronautics and Space Administration, the American agency responsible for space exploration, describes Spirulina as the "super food" essential for survival, with its considerable nutrient value helping to preserve astronauts' physical strength while they are in space.

Apart from their dietary value, microalgae's significant value to the sustainability of our living environment has yet to be realised by the public.

Well-known for their rapid growth and high energy content, these tiny greenish organisms can serve as an ideal source of biofuels. Meanwhile, they can also contribute to alleviating water pollution and global warming.

With soaring global energy demands, scientists are actively searching for substitutes for fossil fuels.

Microalgae can be an excellent

Super food for astronauts

Produces biofuels such as biodiesel, green diesel and green jet fuel

Alleviates global warming

source of sustainable biofuels, with other examples including liquid and gaseous fuels derived from agricultural products and animal wastes.

Through photosynthesis, microalgae absorb energy from the sun, carbon dioxide, as well as nutrients in the water to produce biomass, which can be converted into biofuels like biodiesel, green diesel and green jet fuel.

Statistics from the Department of Energy

## "Attracting people to invest in this technology is the major challenge."

–DR. HO KIN-CHUNG, PROFESSOR OF SCIENCE AND TECHNOLOGY AT OPEN UNIVERSITY OF HONG KONG

> in US show that microalgae have the potential to yield 100 times more oil per acre than soybeans or other terrestrial oil-producing crops.

> Two breeds of microalgae, diatoms and dinoflagellates, are found in Hong Kong territorial waters, such as Deep Bay, Victoria Harbour and Tolo Harbour.

> With more than one third of their body weight containing oil, these two breeds are expected to generate significant economic value. "On average, one ton of microalgae could generate four kilograms of oil," Professor Ho said.

> In addition to their high productivity in bio-oils, microalgae are effective in removing pollutants, thus purifying water.

> Professor Ho expressed optimism about the future application of microalgae technology at sewage treatment plants to improve water quality.

> For instance, microalgae technology can be used to purify 80 per cent of the sea water in Tolo Harbour, a sheltered harbour in northeast New Territories that is more contaminated compared to other harbours in Hong Kong.

> Microalgae can not only reduce pollutants in the water, but also absorb greenhouse gases in the air during the process of photosynthesis.

> A power plant in southern Taiwan confirmed that one hectare of microalgae was able to take in 74 metric tons of carbon dioxide annually, which was three times more than the

capacity of the same hectare of trees.

With great success in other places, putting microalgae biotechnology into practice is inevitable in Hong Kong.

After five years of research, the School of Science and Technology of OUHK decided to collaborate with the Shenzhen Jawkai Bioengineering Research and Development Centre in mainland China to produce oil with microalgae.

Last year, researchers were happy to record that these green cells generated 400 tons of oil, , which was seen as the preliminary step for the industrialisation of microalgae technology.

Compared to other biofuel species that require certain arable lands, microalgae demonstrate flexibility.

Yet, flexibility does not necessarily entail intrusion.

Microalgae are actually non-competitive with the agricultural farming, as the cultivation requires only large open ponds or in closed photo bioreactors located on non-arable land in a variety of climates, even including deserts.

In spite of a small geographic area, Hong Kong has some obvious merits to adopt microalgae technology, Professor Ho said. Relatively long seashore lines and suitable temperatures create optimal conditions for the growth of microalgae throughout the year.

However, applying microalgae technology does have some technical constraints at this stage in Hong Kong.

Many worry about microalgae's potential threats to the entire ecosystem, such as suppress other species, when people artificially increase their quantity.

"The large-scale growth of microalgae may lower the oxygen level in the sea for the survival of other marine species," said Prof Leung Yiu-cheong, energy and pollution professor at the University of Hong Kong.

He added that other limitations included the relatively insufficient area for growing microalgae and high cost associated with removing the moisture in microalgae.

"It's not economical compared to other renewable resources, such as wind and solar," he said, adding that further research had to be done to put the biotechnology into effect, and that it would be difficult to attract investment.



Apart from their dietary value, people have hardly realised microalgae's significant value to our living environment.

## Weird is cool

Non-mainstream performances are no longer seen as "strange" as the Internet fans growing acceptance of weird stuff





WITH more than 500 million views racked up on YouTube, UN Secretary General Mr Ban Ki-moon and Chinese dissident artist Mr Ai Weiwei riding the invisible pony, the weird horse-riding dance brought by Korean rapper PSY with his great hit Gangnam Style has become cool.

Perhaps no one has expected the weird dance to go international, but netizens has made it so popular that you cannot deny the Gangnam Style is something.

From the strange dance of Bad Romance to the infectious Gangnam Style, people have become more open to this kind of style; some are even addicted to it.

Experts think the internet has helped make weird things popular. "Young adults tend to be online a lot. That's why many of the bizarre trends are able to go viral in recent years," says Mr Leung Hon-chu, principal lecturer in sociology at Hong Kong Baptist University.

Music producer Mr Ben Chong Tung-yan, who rose to fame because of his weird songs, such as "Eating Ice Cream", notices the non-mainstream is making its way across the internet.

"(There are) huge changes in the past five years because of the Internet, particularly the video-sharing website YouTube. People now have the ability to explore new things on their own," he says. "This has made the local industry

accept more new stuff."

Record company executives now check the click ratings and

views as proof of popularity of songs, he adds.

But the internet is not the only spot where strange styles like that get widely circulated.

Mr Abe Kwok Chun-kei, 30, former president of the Wuhua Hall Student Association of Hong Kong Polytechnic University, has witnessed how weird street performances turn into a trend.

From miming while walking on a tightrope to jiggling tennis balls while dancing, each of the executive member of the association has to come up with an act to perform. They do not mind if people think they are weird because they are performing to please themselves.

Mr Kwok says that odd performances, trends, music or dance moves are



popular because people find them funny despite their quirkiness.

"It was hard when we first started juggling on the street because street performances weren't as popular as they are nowadays," Mr Kwok says. "We had policemen asking to check our identity cards and shopkeepers telling us we were scaring away their customers. It wasn't until about three years ago when people started to accept us as performers. Now even the older generations are starting to appreciate our talent."

Though some of these performers do not care about what others have to say about them, some passers-by indeed enjoy street performances of strange styles.

"I think some of the acts are hilarious. I enjoy watching those odd street performances because they allow me to have a good laugh. It is a good way to spend time in this busy city," says Mr Lai Kim-ming, a spectator on Sai Yeung Choi Street in Mong Kok.

Meanwhile, the fear of not catching up with the trend and what society thinks is popular may also lead to a growing acceptance of weirdness.

"Most people watching the video on YouTube are expected to like it, since it is accompanied by a glowing recommendation," says Ms Lily Chau See-wah, a psychology student at New York University.

"There is a sense of conformational bias which confirms our existing beliefs that it is a good song because of how big of a hit it is," Ms Chau says, "The same thing goes with all kinds of weird things that have gained prevailing power in the world." She says some people pretend to like popular culture because they do not want to "look like a loser" or go against the "misperceived social norm".

"I don't tell people I dislike Gangnam Style. I keep my comments to myself. It feels like others will attack me if I post them on my Facebook," says Mr Lai.

But more weird things are expected to show up in the world even though some people are not into them. "I think people are just scared to admit they like this non-mainstream trend which is taking the world by storm. Since the internet plays a

big role in society nowadays, people will be more open to new ideas," music producer Mr Chong says.



# Dare to love

A THE NEW YORK

By Song Cheng, Cleo Tse and Katheleen Wong Edited by Jim Wong, Dennis Lee and Helen Yu

## **Disoriented** A gay couple's long and winding road to marriage



ith their wedding banquet due to be held in December, Ms Macie Yuen and Ms Joey She Sze-nga are busy spreading their joy to their families and friends that their nineyear relationship is entering a new stage.

While their relationship has flourished, the law and the society are not on their side.

"It's not a matter of gender; it's about with whom," says Ms Yuen, a boyish looking 35-year-old woman. "I won't say I've switched from being heterosexual to homosexual. I'd just say the one who makes me happy is a woman," says Ms She, 34, shares the same thought with her "husband".

However, marriage is not only a union between two persons but also two families.

Ms She's parents do not agree with her choice at the very beginning, but after years and years of repeated persuasions, their love for their daughter has prevailed over traditional views towards homosexuality.

"It took me some time to accept the fact that my daughter is going to spend the rest of her life with a woman," says Mr She Yuk-wah, father of Ms She, who adds that he immediately questioned his daughter's choice when he was told about the decision. He admits that his dissent popped out from time to time when the couple proceeded to a further stage.

"My father said I was crazy when I told him that I was going to marry a woman," Ms She recalls with a smile on her face. "But I know he loves me so much, so I talked to him again and again. He changed his attitude eventually, and has become very supportive now," she says. "He even helps me arrange the wedding."

Contrast to her husband, Mrs Lisa She Lai Man-hing, mother of Ms She, did not react strongly initially, but admitted that things had developed out of her expectation.

"I thought she was young and immature," Mrs She said. "I didn't realize she is homosexual until I found out that she started dating Macie with a serious attitude." It was not until her daughter's sister-in-law, Miss Fung Suet-yan, took action to convince the parents that Mrs She began to accept the fact.

"I told them they're going to lose their daughter if they don't agree. Moreover, what is more important than their daughter's happiness?" Miss Fung recalls what she told her parents.

Ms She's parents unwillingly accepted the reality, secretly wishing she would like men again one day.

"We just don't know why she would choose this path [of being homosexual]," the parents say. "But if this is what she wants and she is happy about it, we have no reasons to reject. You may say we are 'forced to accept'." After a number of family gatherings, they now treat Ms Yuen as a member of their family.

On Ms Yuen's side, things has become smooth after her mother's death.

"My mum kept pressuring me as she wanted me to get married and have a child in the future, I gave Even so, back in Hong Kong, they will still be disadvantaged in many ways compared with heterosexual couples. For example, they cannot write their partner's name as the beneficiary of their insurance policies; claim tax allowance as a couple or apply for public housing. They simply cannot enjoy anything a heterosexual couple are entitled to in this city.

Facing different kinds of social constraints, Ms She expresses her doubts.

"I have to be singled out because I am homosexual. Why can't I enjoy the rights of being a citizen in this city just because I'm not getting married with a man?" she says, stressing that society is actually discriminating against homosexuals.

"What we can do is to guarantee ourselves a life with a better condition and we do not disturb anyone," Ms Yuen says. "It is too difficult for us to change society and the social norms. We are not abnormal but just choosing our desired ways to live, so does



my promise at that time," Ms Yuen explains. "But after her death, I had no reason to convince myself that I should stay heterosexual."

She thinks her family has an open attitude towards her sexual orientation as long as she is happy.

Nonetheless, families that are as open-minded as the couple's are a minority in Hong Kong. According to the study Public Opinion Towards Homosexuality,

# Why can't I enjoy the rights of being a citizen in this city just because I'm not getting married with a man?

conducted by the Home Affairs Bureau and Market Research and Transport Planning in 2006, 24.7 per cent of interviewees were "extremely opposed" to family members who were homosexual, while only 34.3 per cent of them found it acceptable.

Apart from objection from their families, homosexual couples also face other challenges.

In Hong Kong, same-sex marriage is not recognised and there was a time when it was even illegal during the colonial period before 1997.

The issue had not been addressed after Hong Kong's return to China, but hopes were lighted in June 2009 when the Hong Kong government recognised same-sex cohabitation under the Domestic Violence Ordinance in order to protect people who are victims of same-sex domestic violence.

That's why Ms Yuen and Ms She will get married in Vancouver, Canada, where the government embraces same-sex marriage.











# **For the love of God** A church for lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender Christians

N exotic small church in Hong Kong has opened its doors to embrace non-heterosexual Christians who are still marginalised by mainstream churches.

Founded by a number of gay Christians, the Blessed Minority Christian Fellowship (BMCF) serves lesbians, gays, bisexuals and transgenders (LGBT) at large, accounting for 95 per cent of its total members.

"They (LGBT) usually hide themselves in the closet, as they fear people will turn away from them. Our church is important as an outlet for their emotions," church spokesman Pastor Silas Wong Kwokyou said.

Mr Leo Chan, 28, is one of the church's followers, who would reveal their sexual orientation to fellow members only.

"The priest at my old church always says it [homosexuality] is wrong," said Mr Chan, who has been in love with another male for a number of years. "So, I dare not spill a word about my lover."

But having attended the BMCF for six months, Leo and his partner have not only found it a place where they can feel relaxed about their sexuality, but also where God witnesses the growth of their relationship.

"Here, I have found new meaning of God's love, that it also blesses gay lovers," the gay Christian said.

Nevertheless, mainstream churches and Christian organisations such as The Society for Truth and Light remain adamant that homosexuality is a violation of God's order in creating humans – that man should wed with woman.



The society's spokesman, Ms Helen Fu Dan-mui, stresses that homosexuality is not allowed according to the Genesis, the first chapter of the Old Testament.

"If one cares about one's own religion, he/she will be willing to suppress lust for the God," she said.

However, BMCF regards the other Christian organisations as being "too sensitive" over homosexuality, especially when they rejected proposed legislation that tried to outlaw discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation in 2005.

"The Bible does not blame homosexuals," Pastor Wong said, adding that homosexuality existed when Jesus Christ was alive.

"God's love is not confined by one's sexual orientation" – and that was why the church was open to non-heterosexual Christians, he said.

According to government statistics, only a few of Hong Kong's 1,400-plus local Christian congregations welcome non-heterosexual followers. They include St. John's Cathedral, Kowloon Union Church and One Body in Christ.

"If society was open enough to diversity, no church would be labeled as a 'gay church'," says Pastor Wong.



## The rainbow after rain? Same-sex marriage legalisation is under the spotlight again

WHEN Mr Ice finally mustered up his courage to walk down the dimly lit passage of an old building on Nathan Road and into its worn out lift, he had lost count of the number of times he had strolled past it without stepping inside.

Even after he had got out of the lift on reaching the seventh floor, he was still filled with trepidation, pausing to make sure that no one was watching him before pressing the bell next to a door on which a rainbow has been painted.

Recounting his first visit to Rainbow of Hong Kong, Mr Ice, not his real name, is glad that he had made that crucial decision to join one of a few clubs set up by members of the lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender community in the city.

He said it was beyond his wildest expectation that he had since found his Mr Right and other friends with the same sexual orientation at the club.

He said that the organisation had coloured his life and he no longer felt ashamed of his homosexuality. He now even feels natural when walking hand in hand with the boy he loves, although he seldom mentions the relationship to his family to avoid endless quarrels.

When it comes to the issue of marriage, Mr Ice was hoping to form a family with his boyfriend, if the latter also wished to do so.

According to Mr Stephen Palmquist, philosophy professor at Hong Kong Baptist University, Mr Ice would encounter no problem if he marries his boyfriend in a "spiritual sense". However, if they want to officially register as "husband and wife", enormous obstacles can be foreseen due to a lack of "social acceptability".

"The nature of marriage is trying to combine or maximise sexuality and friendship between two people, which has no distinction between homosexual or heterosexual relationship," Mr Palamuist said.

He believed the biggest difference only lay in the fact that homosexual couples could not reproduce in a natural way, which left them with no way other than adoption.

"It was of no good to the growth of the adoptees, since the children cannot fully understand the concept of family," said Ms Priscilla Leung Mei-fun, the newly-elected chairperson of the legal services panel in the Legislative Council.

The lawmaker did not think the time was ripe to legalise same-sex marriage, echoing the reservations of Mr Raymond Tam Chi-yuen, Secretary for Constitutional and Mainland Affairs, who said the recognition would involve "fundamental values" and "complicated matters" months ago.

Neither of them could see any possibility of the society reaching a consensus on the issue in the near future.

"The mainstream values of society do not encourage people to become homosexual," Ms Leung said.

She added that the legalisation of same-sex marriage had nothing to do with human rights, since the topic was not covered by the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights or the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Instead, both documents suggested the issue be handled in accordance with local conditions.

Mr Jimmy Sham Tsz-kit, executive officer of Rainbow of Hong Kong, said his prime concern was to call for a law against discrimination on the ground of sexuality, whereas same-sex marriage legalisation was not on his agenda.

He thought that the fairness brought by an anti-discrimination law was much more valuable and necessary than giving homosexual couples the same privileges of heterosexual couples. "We are urging the elimination of those radical, irrational prejudices, such as unemployment simply due to sexual orientation," he added.

"We are helping ourselves indeed," said the officer who is a transgender, and a volunteer who helps the LGBT members to apply for public housing and Comprehensive Social Security Assistance, and contact lawyers with expertise in dealing with sexuality discrimination.

Although Mr Ice's marriage dream might be too far to reach for now, he was quite satisfied with the increasing acceptance of different sexualities among Hong Kong people.

"When I first distributed rainbow leaflets, I could always hear some people murmuring the F word, after they found that the content inside is against their belief. Now, there are people who still do not buy our idea, and reject our leaflets by saying 'No, thanks'. But at least some say 'thanks' or simply smile to me, which make me feel warm," said Mr Ice, with tears in his eyes. Place Your AD Here and Be Seen by People Like You and Us and those who like us, too.

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