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THE YOUNG REP•RTER magazine

June 2014



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- The call for a new law to protect children from psychological abuse

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One of the cover stories in the last issue examined the problem of child poverty being neglected in Hong Kong and its way out, while another offered a glimpse into how the nightlife industry paid foreign exchange students despite breaching the law.

Letter from the Editor

THE YOUNG REPORTER magazine

In this June issue, our cover story features the problem of child abuse – not on the physical or sexual levels but psychological abuse – and the possibility introducing a “Cinderella Law” in Hong Kong after Britain.

You will also see a wide range of stories on different issues, including the shortage of public services workers, pitfalls of special education in Hong Kong, local religious culture of freeing captive animals and more.

Last but not least, this issue of The Young Reporter brings you to the mysterious nations of North Korea and Myanmar with pictures of bits of the local lives – taken by our team who visited the countries in April and May.

This is the new team’s first issue and we are thrilled to explore new story ideas. Please write to us or leave us some comments on our website and stay tuned for more in the coming fall. Until then, enjoy your summer!

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One Moment

Thousands gather at Tamar Park on June 15th for the city's first Pink Dot carnival, an annual gay rights event that originated in Singapore. Both the straight and gay dress in pink to form a big pink dot, which symbolises acceptance and an equal right to love.

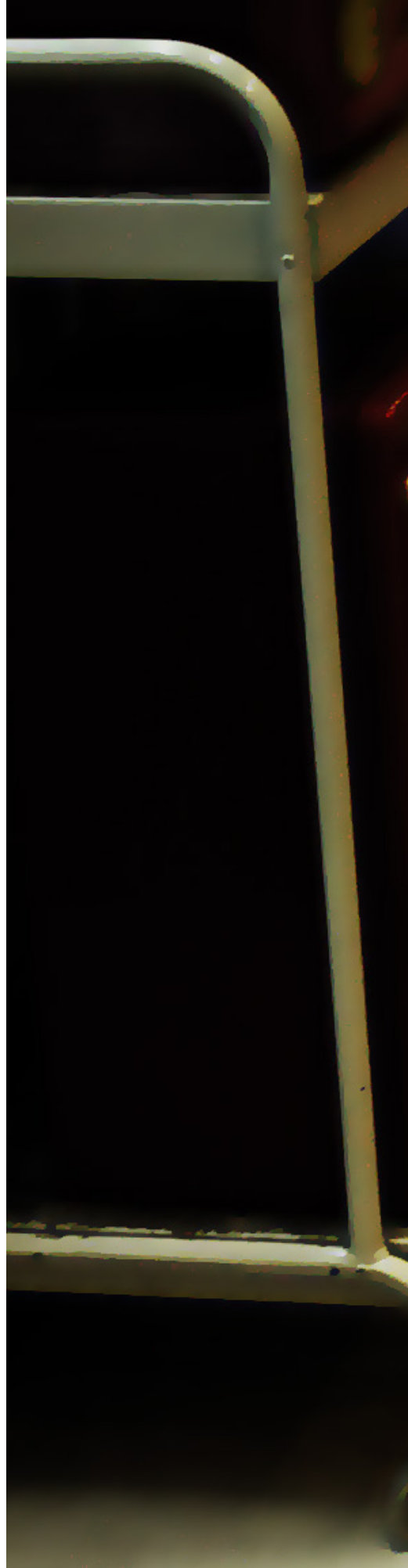
By The Young Reporter





Most parents blind to psychological abuse

Legislator Mr Fernando Cheung Chiu-hung suggests introducing Britain's 'Cinderella Law' in Hong Kong







Every child has the right to be protected from being hurt and maltreated, in body or mind, by UN Convention on the Rights of the Child

SEVEN-YEAR-OLD Ricky (not his real name) was heavily beaten with a hanger by his mother. Despite his learning difficulty and reading disorder, she forced him to study and demanded good grades from him.

“No matter what I do, my mother still scolds me,” said Ricky.

Feeling fearful and inferior, he was angry at the same time. He hid his negative emotions at home but later exploded at school by yelling at classmates and behaving rudely, according to Ms Suki Chui Shuk-yee, his primary school counsellor.

Ricky’s is only one of many cases of child abuse in Hong Kong, where people are more aware of physical and sexual abuse, but not psychological abuse.

Statistics showed that psychological

abuse only accounted for around two per cent of child abuse cases, according to the Social Welfare Department.

“Hong Kong has over 100,000 children but only about 16 cases were reported annually as psychological abuse,” said Ms Jessica Ho Oi-chu, Director of Against Child Abuse. “This is impossible.”

Dr Chan Yuk-chung, a professor at the Department of Applied Social Sciences of Hong Kong Polytechnic University, also doubted if such a small number of cases reflected the reality.

According to a 2005 study by the Department of Social Work and Social Administration of The University of Hong Kong, about 58 per cent of child respondents encountered psychological aggression by their parents.

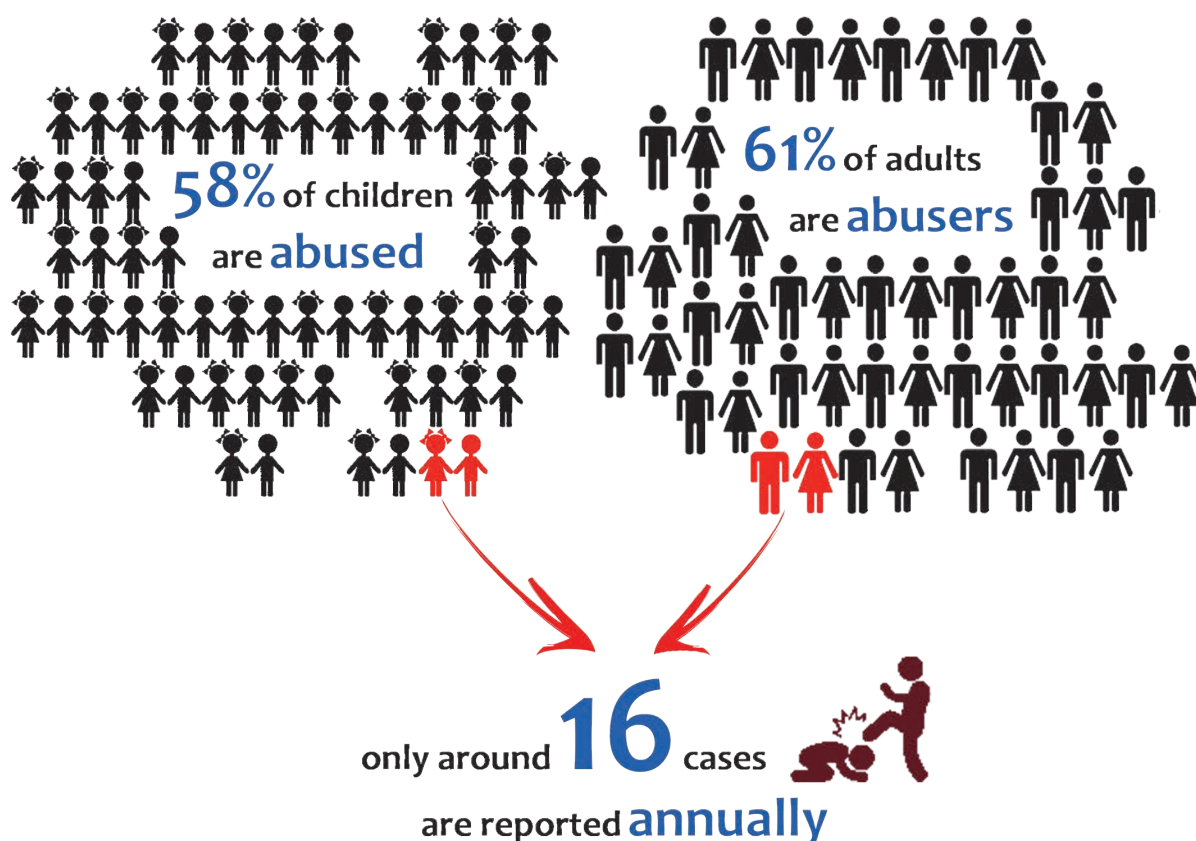
The study also found that about 61

per cent of adult respondents admitted that they had engaged in acts of psychological aggressions on their children.

Mr Fernando Cheung Chiu-hung, legislator who represents the social welfare functional constituency, said many cases of psychological aggression went unreported.

There might have been cases in which the police and the social workers were conservative and reluctant in defining a case as psychological abuse due to insufficient evidence and invisible harm.

Britain recently introduced a law that aims at protecting children’s intellectual, emotional, social and behavioural well-being. It is first brought to discussion in the country as the crimi-



Source : Department of Social Work and Social Administration of the University of Hong Kong

nal law does not protect children from emotional sufferings. Lawmakers said some children might have experienced psychological abuse, like Cinderella, but the “wicked stepmother” could have got away scot-free.

Under this law, “wicked stepmothers” who starve their children of love and care may face jail. It is widely understood as “Cinderella Law” in Britain.

Mr Cheung said Hong Kong should consider introducing such a law.

He said many children in Hong Kong were deprived of basic living requirements, love, respect and freedom. They were mentally injured, but the current child protection laws were not enough to protect and safeguard their psychological health, he said.

The Social Welfare Department

defines psychological abuse as a repeated pattern of behaviour and attitudes towards a child or an extreme incident that endangers or impairs the child’s emotional or intellectual development.

“‘Cinderella’ is not solely a fairy tale; it is happening in Hong Kong,” said Ms Chui.

A recent report on child abuse by Caritas Youth and Community Service and City University of Hong Kong found that six in ten children aged between 8 and 13 interviewed said that they had been abused psychologically, such as being yelled at or described as “stupid” or “slob”.

In Hong Kong, the Protection of Children and Juveniles Ordinance and Offences Against the Person Ordinance contain provisions that protect children

from abuse.

Dr Chan said these ordinances already protected children from psychological abuse in respect of their growth, health and development.

However, Mr Cheung disagreed. He said Hong Kong had no law specifically protecting children from emotional cruelty. “The current law should be updated. The government should consult the ‘Cinderella Law’ in Britain.”

Social workers believe that the new law would offer a clearer framework enabling the police to collect evidence against any suspected acts of child cruelty.

“The effect of psychological abuse cannot be seen immediately; it can only be seen over the long term,” said Ms Ho. “We should look at the act itself but not



“No matter what I do, my mother still scolds me.”

7-year-old Ricky

the effect on the child.”

She said enacting a Cinderella Law would be good, but the most pressing task would be to review the current law.

She has once raised the problem with the government but officials did not seem to be listening.

To ensure effectiveness in tackling psychological abuse, it would be best if legislative amendment went side by side with education to raise public awareness of the issue, Ms Ho said.

“This problem does not only affect children, but also the future of society.”

By **Joanna Wong**
Edited by **Karen Leung**



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POLITICS

Public services compromised by manpower shortage, say unions

Legislators and scholars call for reassessment of manning ratios

LAWMAKERS and scholars have urged the government to recalculate the number of workers needed for maintaining the operation of public services, after the sudden closure of the Victoria Park Swimming Pool due to a shortage of lifeguards on a typical day.

The swimming pool closed in the morning of April 21 and was not reopened until the afternoon because the number of lifeguards on duty was not enough to cover the normal operation of the pool.

Some lifeguards had staged a strike by calling in sick to protest against the Department's refusal to hire more lifeguards.

According to the current Swimming Pools Regulation, three lifeguards should be on duty for every 50 metres of a swimming pool.

But Mr Ricky Tsang Ling-fung, a lifesaving coach and staff member of

Hong Kong Lifeguard and Lifesaver Professional Alliance, said it "only fulfils the most basic needs."

He said three lifeguards were not enough to cover all areas in a swimming pool centre. Where a swimmer suffers from cervical fractures or dislocations, more than two lifeguards are needed to move him.

"One case of injury has exhausted all the lifeguards, thus the rest of swimming pool is in potential danger."

The Leisure and Cultural Services Department has hired 160 lifeguards over the past two years. The Department said it would adjust the manpower according to the usage rates and operational needs of different swimming pools in the city.

But Mr Tsang pointed out that lifeguards would be compelled to sit on the watchtower and keep observ-

ing for three or four hours without a break due to the insufficient numbers of rescuers.

"We are in urgent need of lifeguards, no matter experienced or not," he said. "Regular breaks and rotations are necessary for them to remain constantly vigilant," Mr Tsang said.

Under the current ordinance, a lifeguard can be employed only after he has obtained four certificates, which cost about \$4,000, excluding fees of preliminary training. An extra certificate for beach duties costing \$2,000 is needed for marine lifeguards. All certificates need to be renewed every three years.

Mr Tsang said the complex procedures to become a lifeguard and the unattractive salary would discourage people from entering the industry.



Lifeguards need to pay close attention to high risk swimmer including children and senior citizens.

Photo courtesy of Matthew Au

“One case of injury has exhausted all the lifeguards, thus the rest of the swimming pool is in potential danger.”

Mr Ricky Tsang Ling-fung,
a lifesaving coach and staff member of Hong Kong Lifeguard
and Lifesaver Professional Alliance

“Compared to the considerable upfront costs and training time of more than three months, the salary, \$13,000 at most for a part-time worker, is not attractive enough,” he explained.

The requirements were enacted

in 2005 and have not been updated since then. The skills to operate the latest apparatus is not included in the Regulations while the salary is based on skill requirements of 10 years ago.

Legislative Councillor Mr Poon Siu-ping, who represents the labour



constituency, urged the government to review the Regulations immediately. “Lifeguard, as a public service provider, is a respectful occupation about saving lives,” he said. “The shortage shouldn’t be neglected.”

He also pointed out that the

public service was not just short of lifeguards. Other public servants like customs officers and cleaner are also facing the same problem. In the last 10 years the population boomed but the number of public workers has remained unchanged.

Last year, about 100 frontline staff of the Buildings Department staged a strike to protest against the government's ignorance of the shortage of manpower of the Department. They said it would slow down the process of inspecting the old buildings in the city.

Dr Chan Sze-chi, a senior lecturer of Hong Kong Baptist University who specializes in Hong Kong's social policy, said the labour shortage in public servicing occupations could be regarded as an "inevitable result" of the conservative administrative policies of the government.

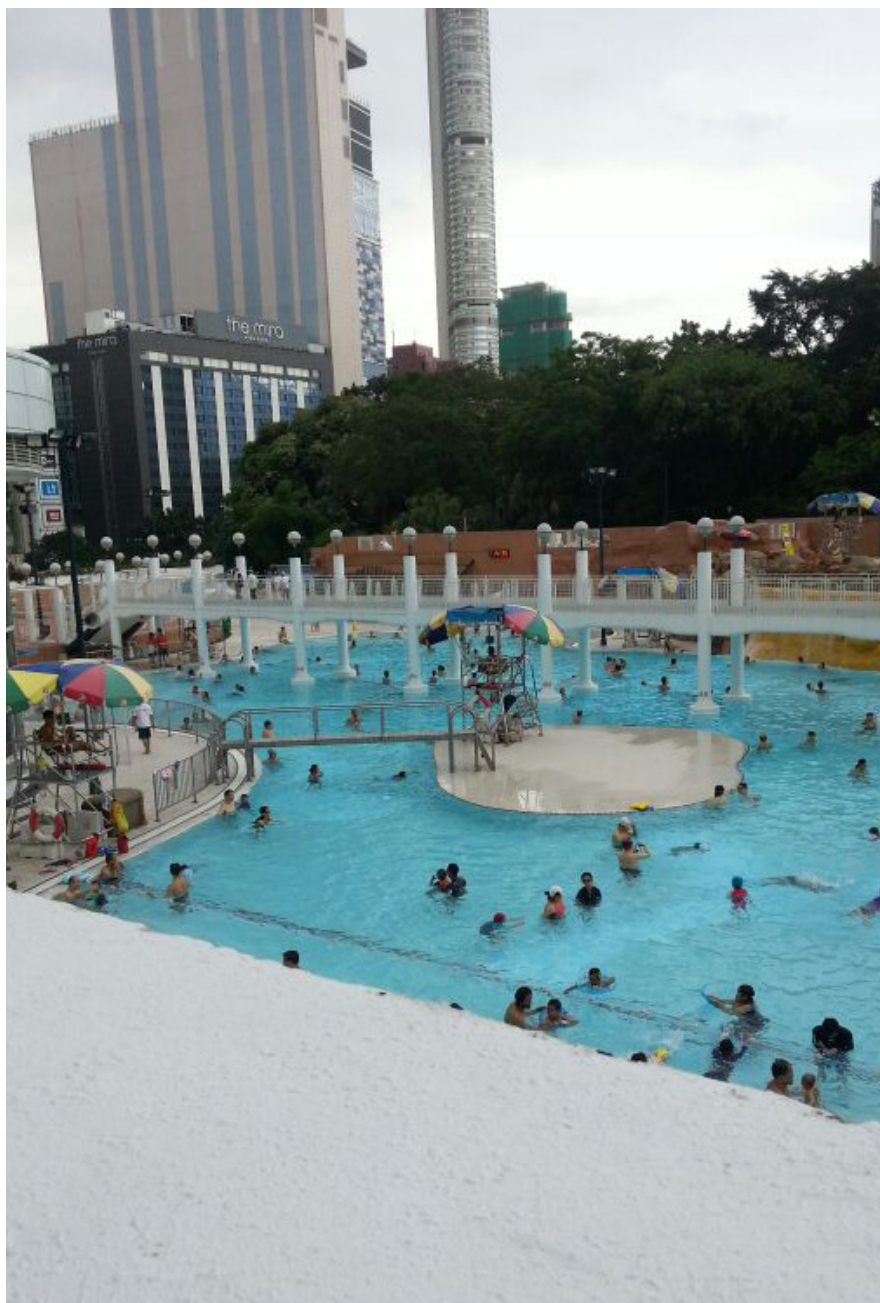
He said the government had been cautious about increasing public expenditure since the financial crisis in 2008.

"To make ends meet, the government cuts down all the 'unnecessary' costs," Dr Chan explained. "They are too cautious in deal with the requests to boost manpower and won't do anything until they experience heavy losses."

Mr Poon also urged the government to alleviate the tight manpower of public service workers.

"It is government's job to ensure the public services," he said. "The concerned departments should sit down and have a talk."

By **Catherine Chen**
Edited by **Tiffany Lee**



No less than three lifeguards who possess valid certificate of life saving skills are needed for every 50 metres of swimming pool.

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like us, too.*

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SOCIETY

Let down by integrated education

Students with special education needs struggle to learn in mainstream schools

AH Tim, a 25-year-old blind musician, will not forget the time when he was teased at school, where he was put in a class of students with no disabilities.

“My teachers sometimes intentionally or unintentionally hurt my self-esteem,” he recalled. “I was often bullied by fellow students. The teachers had no idea how to handle that.”

Ah Tim is one of many students with special education needs who are unhappy with being forced to learn alongside normal students under the so-called integrated education policy.

The chairman of the Association for the Rights of Hearing Impaired Students, Mr Lau King-tak, said his niece was another victim.

She could understand only about 50 per cent of what was taught in class as the pace of the class and the speed of the teachers’ speech were too fast for hearing impaired children, he said. As a result, he had to spend hours tutoring her at home every day.

Indeed, more than ten years since 1997, when the policy of placing students with special educational needs in mainstream schools was introduced, complaints over the merits of integrated education have failed to subside and teachers are often the focus of criticisms.

Currently 15 per cent of primary and secondary school teachers in Hong Kong

have received special education training at the Hong Kong Institute of Education. But most of them have only completed a basic course which lasts for 30 hours.

“I was often bullied by fellow students. The teachers had no idea how to handle that.”

Ah Tim,
a blind musician

According to Professor Sin Kuen-fung, director of Centre for Special Educational Needs and Inclusive Education at HKIEd, the basic course includes an overview of all eight types of special educational needs along with the support needed by special educational needs students.

He explains that the basic course

may not be sufficient in equipping teachers with the skills to handle students with special education needs, “The five-day course is too rush,” he said.

Currently, about 72,000 students with special education needs are studying in mainstream schools in Hong Kong and among them about half are in primary school.

In order to encourage more teachers to take the basic and advanced courses, government grants trainees a paid study leave. Schools are provided with supply teachers or subsidies to pay for supply teachers’ salaries.

Principal David Yu Tai-wai at Yan Chai Hospital No. 2 Secondary School said that he encouraged his teachers to attend the courses, but every year the number of teachers both willing and available to be trained still failed to match the school’s needs.

“Some teachers are reluctant to leave their classes behind. And it can be very troublesome to take over work from supply teachers,” Principal Yu said.

Presently, the school has a total of 15 teachers who have gone through the training, but this number accounts for only 19 per cent of the school’s teaching staff. Since special education needs students are scattered in different classes, there is no guarantee they can be taught by trained teachers.



Prof Sin believes that the addition of a special education needs coordinator at each school would greatly enhance the efficiency in training teachers.

He added that these coordinators could be more professionally trained to a bachelor's degree level so that they could launch staff development training programmes within the schools.

Principal Yu agrees that the coordinators may be better at handling diverse situations and helping different types of students, but he doubts the idea of peer training.

"Now there are few special education experts in Hong Kong," he said. "If a coordinator himself is a teacher who is still learning, it remains a question whether he can train other teachers."

To Prof Sin, another solution lies in strengthening training in special education cultivating our future teachers.

Presently, aspiring teachers who want to obtain a diploma in education in Hong Kong are required to complete a core course in special education.

However, according to Prof Sin, this course, which lasts for 39 hours, is very superficial because it includes no hands-on practice or in-depth exposure.

"HKIED should provide more training courses," he said. "If we can launch a master's programme in special education, we can attract more teachers



Serving teachers can voluntarily take Basic, Advanced and Thematic Courses on special education at the Hong Kong Institute of Education.

to come to learn as the degree will benefit their career development."

According to a study by the Equal Opportunities Commission in 2012, 30 per cent of special education needs students cannot grasp a range of learning skills compared to 17 per cent of regular students.

Among the parents of special education needs students, 46 per cent indicate that the academic performance of their children does not meet their

expectations.

Mr Lau thinks the current system of integrated education has a lot of problems. "Besides the experts who make the policies, the government should listen to parents' advice more," he said.

Undersecretary for Education, Ms Betty Ip Tsang Chui-hing said in a Legco meeting that the Education Bureau would send people to mainstream schools to evaluate the effectiveness of special education training of teacher.

BUSINESS

Struggling in the shadow of big companies

Young businessmen find their way to survive in this competitive business environment

THE enforced closures of many small shops because of surging rents show how difficult it is to maintain, not to mention start, a business in this challenging business environment.

Still it does not mean having a business is a distant dream, as shown by the participants of a TVB programme called “I am Boss”, which provides a platform for prospective businessman to get funding for their businesses.

Mr Zhang Chao and Mr Mak Wing-ho are among the lucky participants who have received HK\$200,000 from the programme to carry out their idea of selling typical Yunnan rice noodle by founding Dou Hua Mei Noodles Shop a few months ago.

“Rent in Hong Kong is incredibly high. That’s why we do not open

our shop on main streets,” said Mr Zhang.

At HK\$33,596 per square foot per year in the fourth quarter last year, the average rent in prime shopping areas of Hong Kong was well above second-placed New York’s HK\$25,580. Paris came in third at HK\$11,255 per square foot, according to CBRE Group, a US-based commercial real estate company.

Even with a starting fund for their business, the two novice businessmen have found that the most expensive retail market gives them few choices.

The duo have had to open their noodle shop in Sham Shui Po, a working class district.

The small shop on a secondary street only allows Mr Zhang to sell take-away rice-noodle, which, however, manages to attract as many as

20 customers queuing for the food.

“It is worth getting here if the food is good,” said customer Mrs Vicky Ho, who came even late at night to try the shop’s famous rice noodle with tofu.

Besides quality, another key to the success of Mr Zhang and Mr Mak can perhaps be explained by their slogan for the competition: “reasonable ambition”.

With most of their shop’s offering priced around HK\$20, they promise to cap their profit at HK\$700 every day. Discounts will be offered if the profit exceeds the target, so that more people could enjoy food at lower prices.

It is not easy to find a suitable ground shop and many businesses have to open their shops upstairs.

Mr Danny Ip Shing-fung, 28, chooses the 20th floor of a com-



The time and effort spent by Mr Zhang Chao to learn how to make authentic Yunnan noodle in his birthplace has paid off.

mercial building in Mong Kok for his shop Selfies, a new kind of photo studio allowing customers to take photos on their own.

“The environment is pretty good, spacious and decent – and at least the rent is affordable,” said Mr Ip.

The unit is divided into different studios with different themes, allowing customers to enjoy the fun of taking photos with professional cameras within a period of time.

To overcome the problem of location, Mr Ip has to put more effort on advertising as shops in a commercial building tend to have fewer customers than ground shops.

Unlike large firms which can advertise in different news media, Selfies targets teenagers by advertising through social media platforms like Facebook and Instagram, which are browsed by many young people every

day.

With the nearly zero cost in advertising, Mr Ip can spare the promotion expenditure for other uses, such as buying costumes and backdrops, which are crucial to attracting customers.

For two customers, for example, they can use any costumes, backdrops or equipment in the room to do the shooting in an hour by paying HK\$ 162 per person.

Although the market share and scale of Selfies can hardly be compared with those of the large corporations, Mr Ip believes Selfies has something that the large firms do not have.

“Convenience and a friendly staff are our biggest selling points,” said Mr Ip, whose employees have built up friendship with customers.

Perhaps Hong Kong’s business

environment may be more challenging than in similar cities such as Singapore, where urban planning provides room for the survival of hawkers even in the ritziest districts, allowing people to buy local food at a reasonable price.

Still the successes of Mr Zhang and Mr Ip have demonstrated a silver lining for that still small businesses could stay afloat in this cut-throat business environment.

“One of the advantages of running a business in Hong Kong is its high population, which means there are always business opportunities everywhere and you can find customers everywhere,” said Mr Ip.

PEOPLE

Tough job for baker-businesswoman

The owner of Pumpernickel says it takes her years to come up with the right recipe for running her bread business

EVERY Pumpernickel cafeteria keeps a memo which lists the names of all its directors. The name Joan Yuen stands out not only because it is at the top of the list, but also because she has two titles — “Director” and “Head Baker”.

Miss Joan Yuen Wai-chung admitted that it took her a long time to come to grips with managing her dual roles as Director and Head Baker as she used to only indulge in the craft of baking.

Making crispy bread as the Head Baker is easy but running a business is another story, the owner of six cafes which produce bread eschewing additives and coloring agent said.

She said running a business is difficult as a director has to oversee the operation of business which includes managing the staff, keeping costs down and maintaining the standard of food.

“A craftsman is different from a director,” the café owner in her 40s explained. “You can just pay full attention to what you do and chase endlessly for enhancement of techniques.”

Years before she stepped into the industry, she had never even touched flour. It was a big loaf of pumpkin bread which she bought while studying in Australia that stimulated her interest in learning how to bake.

The sheer joy of sharing grape walnut bread and white bread with friends in a ceramic class overwhelmed the self-taught baker.

“I felt so happy when people come and taste my bread. It’s different from being a chef,” she said. “Bakers use simple and cheap ingredients to produce bread

that ordinary people can afford to buy.”

The idea of starting a cafe germinated in her mind during an excursion to Pakistan when she faced a crossroad in her career. On a snowy mountain, her boyfriend told her that she could try to be a baker — when she was torn between becoming a teacher or furthering her studies.

“I am not the type of person who is satisfied with just being somebody’s wife,” she explained. “I need to excel in something in life.”

“I am not the type of person who is satisfied with just being somebody’s wife,” she explained. “I need to excel in something in life.”

After devoting much efforts to enhance her skills, she faced hard realities of not knowing how to run a business when she founded the first café in 2000.

Describing herself as a person who used to be self-centered and thought too little, she said her way of managing the cafe was not always in line with that of her business partners or employees.

“I did not even have a cell phone until I started my business,” she said with a

laugh, adding that this was an issue for her partners, who eventually parted company with her.

As she had only been a teacher and had little experience working with others, she found it daunting to mingle with her employees until she hired managers who taught her how to manage her staff.

This nudged her to re-examine her roles and see things from the perspectives of her employees. Her persistence in making bread with natural ingredients sometimes troubled them. After spending time with them, she realized that chefs treat themselves as craftsmen at heart like she does.

“I think that management is all about give and take. You can’t stand in the same position as your employee do,” she said.

All she does now is to make everyone in her café happy and every product affordable. “Always have a big heart for the employees,” she said.

Ms Yuen hopes that she can persist in using natural ingredients and selling at affordable prices for all walks of life.

“There are two extremes in the bread industry. One is that shops put too much stuffing into bread and lift the price sharply,” she lamented. “Another is that they make bread very cheap but with many artificial food additives.”

Though the going is rough, she has heartfelt gratitude towards bread that enables her to learn and grow to be a better person. “I am so happy that I can do something suitable for me and I can play with it,” she said.



Ms Yuen enjoys being a craftsman in baking as she can pursue personal improvement and satisfaction.

PEOPLE

Love is where the heart is

A single mother struggles to raise her autistic son with love and strength

KEEPING a firm hold of her son at all times when they are in the street, apologizing to people when he screams in a restaurant, teaching him the basic steps of daily routine such as brushing teeth and putting clothes on are just some of the common struggles for Ms Lau Hiu-Ha.

Ms Lau is a single mother of two boys. One of them, Hang, who was diagnosed as autistic when he was three, is the source of her family's tough life.

"I was so confused and mad when the doctor told me the diagnosis. My son was different from other kids. He could stand there and stare out of the window for a very long time, but sometimes he was a bundle of energy," said Ms Lau. "But I was hoping that he was just an average child with a unique personality."

She sought help from doctors and social workers. However none of them could provide her with a satisfactory answer or guarantee her son's full recovery.

Autism is a spectrum disorder, which means the degree of disability varies among individuals, each of whom may display different behaviours.

With little language ability, Hang suffers one of the most severe forms of autism.

Ms Liu said the hardest part in handling her son was that she could never truly be sure of his needs.

"You don't even know what will set him off. It just did and what you can do is

"He is my son. He never calls me 'mama' like other kids, but he kisses me on the cheek when he goes to bed and hugs me gingerly when he has done something wrong."

Ms Lau Hiu-ha

to try to calm him down," said Ms Lau.

She remembers a time when she took her eyes off Hang for a few seconds in the playground. When she turned to see him again, he

was standing still on top of a jungle gym. She was terrified and pulled him down immediately.

Like other parents with autistic kids, she hopes that there could be understanding of the apparently strange behavior of autistic children from other people.

"People are afraid of a screaming child who might be having a little outburst. I heard people muttering behind us and children asking their parents what's wrong with him," she said. "And it is lucky that Hang could not understand it."

Hang's situation is apparently getting worse as he gets stronger and taller. Ms Lau said she could barely get hold of him when he has a sudden outburst. But still, maternal love enables her to plough on despite all the adversities.

"Frankly, I have thought of giving up several times," Ms Lau admitted.

But what she is really concerned about is her son's future.

"Who will take care of the children after I die," she asked worriedly.

Ms Liu Xiao-Yan, her former colleague at Song Tao Hotel, said Ms Lau was a strong and contented woman, who enjoys exchanging banters with her friends.

"I never hear her groaning





Slapjack is a simple deck card game often used to train autistic children. Requiring the children to listen to spoken commands and act accordingly, it seeks to treat the children's problems of inattention and social withdrawal.

“Even students who cannot speak have language.”

Ms Connie Tsang,
director of development and
supervisor of Aoi Pui School



Aoi Pui School organizes regular field trips to integrate students with the community and to train their independent living skills.

about the difficulties in her life,” said Ms Liu.

As the sole breadwinner of the family, Ms Lau works from 6 pm till midnight at a Chinese restaurant. Her son used to stay in boarding school but has been transferred to the Lung On Lutheran Day Activity Centre.

She prepares a meal for the two brothers before leaving for work. When she comes home, she will take off the boy's headphones. He has been listening to the same song “It's a small world” for years, she added, with a chuckle.

Despite the hardship she endures, what Ms Lau wants is not pity from the society. She is tired because of Hang's disorder but she is still happy for having them in her life.

“He is my son. He never calls me ‘mama’ like other kids, but he kisses me on the cheek when he goes to bed and hugs me gingerly when he has done something wrong,” she said.

“Even students who cannot speak have language,” said Ms Connie Tsang, director of development and supervisor of Aoi Pui School, which provides au-

tism-specific education for students aged 4 and over and individualized learning programmes catering for children of different abilities.

“Their language is just not expressive like others,” she added.

Ms Tsang said treating autistic children was about choosing the right teaching method based on the individual's functioning level and cognitive ability.

“It's about the collaboration of the teachers, parents, children and everybody if you want the treatment to work,” said Ms Tsang.



Mr. Sum Pat-lit selects piers where few people fish to free marine animals.

FREEING captive animals is an established tradition in Chinese societies where the Buddhist ritual is considered a good deed. The Birthday of the Buddha in May is a popular date for followers to “free lives”. Yet, the goodwill ritual could become a business tool and a threat to the environment if not practiced properly.

Sabah giant groupers believed to have been freed by people were reported to have attacked swimmers in early May this year. The aggressive species is also a peril to local marine ecosystem according to environmentalists.

Mr Sum Pat-lit, president of Keyura Hong Kong, a local Buddhist communion, suggested that there could be other less destructive ways of “freeing lives”.

He said animal protection and minimising slaughters were possible ways of saving lives.

“Releasing captive animals is a highly venerated practice that we encourage people to follow, but only when all things are done correctly,” added the organizer who conducts the religious ritual every two weeks.

He suggested people became vegetarians to save lives as it would decrease the demand for meat and in turn save more animals from being slaughtered.

Some animal rights activists doubt if the release of animals have any merits at all.

“I see no point in releasing animals,” said Miss Ho Shu-ping, welfare research and development officer of the Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals. “The animals won’t survive anyway; they will die,” she said.

Miss Rebecca Ngan, public relations and communication manager of SPCA, said parties which free captive animals should educate the public to cut down on meat consumption to save lives, rather than buying the animals and freeing them afterwards.

Freeing captive animals seems to remain a prevalent worshipping custom for many Buddhists. A survey published on the SPCA website stated that 48 religious groups, 90 per cent of them being Buddhists, hold bird-freeing rituals in Hong Kong.

Although both Miss Ho and Mr Sum said fewer people chose to release birds after the outbreak of avian flu, about 680,000 to 1,050,000 birds were still being freed annually in Hong Kong.

The high demand for animals to be used for religious release has created a market for suppliers to cage animals and sell them for such, which is contrary to the very idea of saving lives



ARTS&CULTURE

Caged to be freed

The practice of freeing captive animals might kill more animals and harm the environment

from imprisonment and torture.

Religious groups sometimes might have bought caged animals from vendors who have smuggled or imported them in poor conditions from other countries, Miss Ho said.

She added that virus transmission among caged animals was serious and many animals died during transportation. There could be up to 10 deaths for every one life released, according to a report released by the Environment and Animal Society of Taiwan.

“When animals are released to a new habitat, they might either die of incompetence in a new environment or jeopardise the ecology there because they are too strong,” Miss Ho said.

Mr Sum recalled a few large-scale religious releases in Guangdong where drifters followed a ship carrying Buddhists, and caught the fish the Buddhists had just poured into sea.

He said he also had similar experience of fishermen casting nets to capture the marine animals which he and his Buddhist fellows had freed at Tsuen Wan Pier.

Despite the unfair treatment of captive animals, these animals are not protected under any law in Hong Kong, unless they are proven to be pets.

Under the Rabies Ordinance, any owner who abandons

their pet with invalid reasons breaks the law and faces up to six months imprisonment and a maximum fine of \$10,000.

Mr Sum added that clear instructions about the practice were needed, such as which, and where species could be released in such activities.

However, he is not optimistic about legalising the release of captive animals in the near future. “There are only a few thousand people who perform this custom. Why would the government bother to introduce regulations?” he said.

Miss Ho said Hong Kong should follow Taiwan, where religious groups consulted stakeholders of the release events, including Buddhists, scientists, ecologists, rehabilitation specialists and animal welfare officers, to review the custom, and come up with a consensual and practical solution.

As a result, religious groups need to register for permits from the government for every release of animals. If a person is found to have released protected species, he is liable to a maximum of five years imprisonment and a fine of TWD 771,615 (about \$385,807).

HEALTH&BEAUTY

Eye drop may stop myopia progression

500 children are being recruited to test the efficiency of atropine



A study conducted by the Hong Kong Polytechnic University found that 70 per cent of Hong Kong children aged 12 or above are myopic.

THERE is good news for children in Hong Kong, where over 50 per cent of those aged below 12 are short-sighted — the development of myopia could be slowed down by using atropine eye drops regularly.

Atropine is a drug normally used in the eye to enlarge the pupil and prevent it from changing the focus.

But research has shown that if its side effects of making the eye sensitive to bright light and causing blurred visions could be reduced, then it might be deployed as an effective tool to combat myopia.

The Chinese University's medical school is recruiting 500 children aged between four and 12 to take part in a study aimed at evaluating the efficacy of atropine eye drop as a means of slowing down myopia progression.

Participants, who are aged four to 12, are required to wear glasses as well as use atropine eye drops for the experiment.

"Atropine can enable more ultra violet (UV) light enter the eyes," said Dr Yam Cheuk-sing, an assistant professor of the department "this could help produce hormones to inhibit eyeball growth as well as delay the progress of myopia,"

Phase one of the research has found that atropine eye drops stop the development of myopia by stopping children's eyeballs from getting longer, which is a common cause of myopia.

However, atropine is only effective on children as the growth of eyeballs stop at the age of 18, which means the medicine does not work for adults, according to Dr Yam.

Side effects include difficulties of seeing near objects and discomfort from dilated pupil and glare.

Children are required to use it every night for a year, which may also be a long commitment to them.

The research also found that the average degree of 12-year-old children's short-sightedness has increased

“Atropine can enable more ultra violet (UV) light enter the eyes... this could help produce hormones to inhibit eyeball growth as well as delaying the progress of myopia.”

Dr Yam Cheuk-sing, a Chinese University assistant professor

by 45 per cent over the past 20 years, from 145 degrees to 211, mainly because of the younger generation has become digital-native.

Ms Ho Wai-ching, a 30-year-old mother of a son who's obsessed with gadgets said: “I will let my child use atropine as it is easy to administer every day. It is only in the form of eye drops and it's painless.”

But she agrees that prevention is better than cure.

Sharing her views, Mr Yip Chi-wah, a 40-year-old father of a myopic son, said non-medical solutions were easier to perform.

“I can tell my son to keep a certain distance when he is using a computer or watching TV and rest his eyes regularly,” he said.

He recognises the cost of the eye drops might be huge and its possible side effects. However, the price of atropine eye drops has not yet been decided, as the experiment will

continue until next year in the earliest.

People with myopia have a higher chance of developing other complications affecting eyesight, such as retinal detachment, glaucoma and cataracts or even becoming blind.

Although some of them may resort to refractive surgery, Dr Yam said it could not remove the risks of such complications.

To effectively slow down myopia progression, he suggests parents encourage children to engage in outdoor activities instead of staring at screens.

Dr Yam stresses that “myopia is public health issue as all the people who develop visual complications due to myopia are at working age,”

“It will impose more socio-economic burden on the society, which has to use a lot more resources to cure myopia complications,” he warned.

By **Jackson Ho**
Edited by **Yupina Ng**

PHOTO ESSAY

Nothing could go wrong for tourists in Kim's kingdom

NORTH Korea is one of the safest countries in the world, at least for tourists, if only because they are so closely monitored and protected that nothing could go wrong for them.

On a recent trip to the hermit kingdom ruled by the Kim family, the TYR have found that the nice and welcoming tour guides and the locals allowed to meet tourists all tried to make sure the visitors would not get lost.

All guests followed a standard itinerary set by the only travel agency in the country. Tourist spots included numerous towers and sculptures named after the Kims and the country's official ideology Juche. Literally meaning "self-reliance", Juche, in the words of a tour guide, is an idea that "you will never understand if you look at it with your capitalist thoughts".

People appeared to live a simple life there. No Internet. No mobile phones. Locals either watched television programmes broadcast by state media or "go out and play", said the guides. At many places, newly wedded brides and brooms were seen dedicating flowers to their great leaders and they were keen to invite tourists to pose with them for photographs.

Locals said they respected and adored the Kims, who had made great sacrifices in defending the nation against the contamination of the western world's evil capitalist ideas and had a plan for each and every citizen. North Koreans, at least those we were allowed to talk to, seem to be the most carefree and grateful people.



By The TYR Team





PHOTO ESSAY

Healing charm of Yangon's gilded temples

AFTER years of seclusion, Myanmar has opened up to the outside world in recent years after its military rulers embarked on a programme of liberalization. The country that borders with China to the north, India to the west and Thailand to the east is once again welcoming foreign tourists.

In Yangon, the country's largest city and former capital, the most iconic structure is the 99-metre high Shwedagon Pagoda, or Great Dragon Pagoda, which is

covered with an estimated half a ton of gold plates and decorated with 83,000 pieces of jewellery and about 4,000 gold bells.

As 80 per cent of the country's population is Buddhist, there is no lack of worshippers coming to pay their respect to Buddha by walking around the stupa and making offerings. Beneath the temple's glittering roofs, monks and lay Buddhists pray as giant bells are rung, creating a holy atmosphere that is calm and

vibrant at the same time. Locals say they feel relieved just by sitting at the temple for several hours to allow its natural rehabilitating power to heal them.

Reflecting Myanmar's history as a British colony, the tree-lined boulevards of Yangon feature colonial style architecture. In fact, because of years of underdevelopment, Yangon now has the largest number of colonial buildings in Southeast Asia, although many of them are in a state of disrepair.

By The TYR Team





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