



the MAN of the HOUSE

by Chan Ka-yan and Piano Ho

When Albert Wong decided to become a stay-at-home dad, he soon found himself a man in a woman's world. Hong Kong may pride itself on being a modern and cosmopolitan society but for three years, Wong endured the ridicule of strangers, neighbours and even his own parents.

Still, the 42-year-old Wong has no regrets about the precious time he has shared with his young son and has published a book about the experience.

Although Wong's choice appears rather unusual, it is no longer that rare

in Hong Kong. Perceptions towards men staying at home are changing gradually. When men lose their jobs, it is not uncommon for their wives to take up the role of breadwinner for the family. Last summer's statistics on the database of the Personal Growth Centre for Men, show the number of househusbands in Hong Kong increased from 6,300 in 1996 to 9,700 in 2008.

Before becoming a full-time dad, Wong worked as a purchasing manager in a trading department while his wife was a full-time nurse in a public hospital and earned a steady income. After he

was laid off, the couple found it difficult to find a suitable domestic helper for the family's young son, so Wong agreed to become the child's main caregiver.

At the beginning, it was tough going. Apart from the tighter financial situation, which meant cutting down on daily expenses, Wong had to shrug off the prejudice from outsiders as well. But what was harder to bear was the pressure from his own parents. "People of the previous generation are bonded to the tradition that a man should be the breadwinner. My parents also felt that being a full-time dad was something

to be ashamed of. Sometimes, this did hurt me."

Despite that, he still believes his decision was the right one for his own family. He and his wife agree it is better for children to be cared for by their own parents rather than a domestic helper. He also finds that the satisfaction raising his own child gave him could replace any career achievement.

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Isabella Ng Fung-sheung, a lecturer at the Department of Social Science of City University of Hong Kong, who specialises in gender and society, agrees there are more househusbands because of the economic crisis. Although the problems men face are similar to women's in terms of juggling family and career, she says men may encounter a great social burden.

"Hong Kong society is quite conservative and the expectation on men is higher than that of women," she says.



Jacob Yu Kwok-kin guides his son's homework.

Nonetheless, not all fathers are househusbands for economic reasons. Some have voluntarily quit their jobs to become househusbands.

"If I hadn't stayed at home to look after the family, there could have been a crisis for my children," says 47-year-old Raymond Wong Wai-ming. The former programme manager of a welfare institution decided to give up his career and become a full-time father in 2003, after both his daughter and son were diagnosed with dyslexia.

Both children had difficulties with reading and writing. His son also displayed impatience and anger to the family's domestic helper. To avoid a worsening of the situation, Wong chose to stay at home to take better care of his children. His wife, a public primary school teacher became the family's sole source of income.

He does the housework every day after driving the children to school. When time allows, he does part-time writing work from home to help the family's finances.

Like other househusbands, Wong also feels the stress caused by others who think that being a househusband is the same as being unemployed. He recalls that once when he filled in "full-time father" in the space for "occupation" on a form, a nurse asked if he meant he was unemployed.

"I was a bit embarrassed at that moment," says Wong, but he soon let go of that feeling. He does not care what others think and is sure of himself and his role in the family. At home, he provides support for all the family members.

Wong actually enjoys much about being a househusband, though the housework is tedious and demanding. "I have drawn closer to my children and I have learnt how to communicate with them for example, I am more aware of the words I use with them."

His contribution to the family is recognised by his children. "I think my



Raymond Wong Wai-ming gets dinner ready for the family as usual.



Albert Wong enjoys observing the growth of his little son.

father is a great man, who sacrifices his own career for the family," says his 15-year-old daughter, Joyce.

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Being a househusband does not mean he is only concerned with domestic matters. Since the children started to attend secondary school, he has taken on more work from home. "I have some home jobs right now for example, writing

“You have to devote all your time to them. There is no freedom, no private life.”

columns and biographies because I want to have some influence on society and keep myself updated about the market,” he says.

Such sentiments are shared by other househusbands. Jacob Yu Kwok-kin, 46, a former social worker, was a househusband for five years after the birth of his first son. “It is better for parents to be the primary caregivers of their own children,” says Yu. He believes parents should be responsible for nurturing and educating children in the first years of their lives, and that only household chores should be “outsourced” to domestic helpers.

Given that belief, Yu was determined to put his own career on hold. He was confident that he could look after his children as well as a mother can.

“But it is really hard and exhausting, especially when they are infants. You have to devote all your time to them. There is no freedom, no private life. The pressure is huge, far more than you could ever have imagined.”

Yu’s decision also caused financial difficulties to the family, whose savings were wiped out after he gave up his job.

Despite his very conscious choice to become a househusband, he too felt constrained by social norms. “It was quite embarrassing to drive the children to the kindergarten and hang around with the mothers.”

He admits it is hard for a househusband to find someone to talk to about the hardships and difficulties, making the support from his wife even more important to him. “Her trust gives me courage to continue,” he says.

Yu’s wife, Ma Yuen-kwan, appreciates his efforts for the family. “Some of our elders have criticised him as useless but I know how much he sacrifices for the family and that he



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Yu believes taking care of his children improves family relations.

faces pressures. What I can do is listen to him,” she says.

Yu says there have been times when he wanted to give up. At one point he wanted to look for a job and asked his wife to quit hers. But the idea soon disappeared because he still gave his family priority.

He has learnt much from his time as a full-time dad and cherishes all the irreplaceable memories he has of his children’s precious years. He believes the time he has spent with his kids has made it easier to build up better relations, as they can face problems together and share a common language. But he makes it clear that he will not be a stay-at-home dad his whole life. “Men need a concrete identity. They still want to pursue some achievement in other fields,” he says. “And so do I.”

Recently, Yu has set up an organisation for training and parent education. He now works three to four days a week while his wife has cut down on her work as a teacher to two mornings a week. However, Yu does not regard himself as a part-time father. He still drops off the children at school before he goes to work, and most of the time he is at home when they come back.



Wong is usually at home when his daughter and son return from school.

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Yu joins in his children’s skipping game.

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Mario Liong Chan-ching, a lecturer at City University’s Department of Social Science who has also carried out research into gender issues in Hong Kong, thinks that earning money is the duty of men in a traditional society. He says that a job was very important to men in the past. Although most househusbands exist in society today because of economic crises and divorce, it is still reasonable to experience a sense of inferiority.

“But, at the same time, there is a change in the attitude of fathers nowadays,” says Liong. “They are eager to put more emphasis on the family even though it is unlikely for a dad to sacrifice his career due to economic considerations.”

Many people think househusbands are just stuck with their kids, that they are often unemployed and thus useless. But Liong suggests a clearer definition of a househusband.

“Househusbands are dads who still care about their careers but place family at the top of their priorities.”

