

The Big Smog

Edited by Jake Hamilton



THE BURNING ISSUE

The high price of 'compensated dating'

Once the realm of cash-strapped teenage students, Shirley Zhou meets an educated 24-year old woman who continues to sell sexual favours in order to improve her family's financial stability

When people talk about 'compensated dating' in Hong Kong, they usually mean teenage students providing companionship or, in most cases, sexual favours in exchange for money or gifts that help improve their standard of living. But there are a number of so-called 'compensated daters' who do it just to survive. And many of them are now adults striving for a career in a cut-throat society.

"Given other options, I would never have chosen this way." So speaks Ms Wong, a 24-year-old unemployed mother-of-two, who is separated from her husband and is, to all intents and purposes, a 'compensated dater'. Sitting in the small offices of Zi Teng, a non-government organisation which focuses on helping female sex workers and improving women's rights, Wong – nicknamed Mui Mui – fidgets nervously with her cell phone while talking to *Time Out*. Dressed in a neat white T-shirt and designer jeans, Mui Mui finally admits: "I've been selling my soul every day. Now I'm too numb to feel anything any more."

Mui Mui's story has, over time, become a sad one. Yet if it wasn't for her father's million-dollar gambling debts, could her life have turned out differently, we ask?

Her family used to be wealthy. In the 1980s, her parents owned three apartments – two at the Mid-Levels and the other at Repulse Bay – as well as two luxury cars. She agrees that she was born 'with a silver spoon' but says her birth had never been 'taken as a gift'. Both her parents were serious gambling addicts. Soon after she was born, the chronic gambling started to take its toll and their wealth evaporated. "My parents always say I'm a jinx to the family," says Mui Mui. "Dad cared for nothing but poker and mahjong. Mum beat me up when she got upset. The only one able to stop her from beating me was my sister, because she beat me even worse, and that made my mum kind of sympathetic about me."

"We still fight often, me and my sister, but she can't beat me any more, because I'm taller and stronger than her. She's such a tiny little thing," says Mui Mui grinning.

In the early 90s, her father owed his gamblers HK\$8million. The houses and cars were taken away – but the gambling continued. By the time Mui Mui was 20 years old, her father had racked up a further debt of more than HK\$1m to usurers. Soon afterwards she started working to support her family. Mui Mui says she did this out of her 'blind loyalty and devotion' to her parents. "What choice did I have, born into such a family?" she asks.

Mui Mui worked in the finance industry, but got laid off last year. Desperately in need of money, she turned to 'compensated dating' last June for what she calls 'quick cash'.

"The first time I went dating, I almost got canned by the client, surnamed Li. He wanted to have sex with me without paying first. Then

I remembered some experienced daters told me not to agree with anything until you get the money, so I rejected him. Finally he got cranky and upset, and did nasty things with me before he walked out of the hotel room. But we didn't have sex." Later, she found that Li was a swindler who only preyed on less-experienced compensated daters.

Mui Mui told *Time Out* that the 'price' of many daters is around \$1,000 an hour, and \$20,000 if the client wants to pay by the month. Her own price, at present, is \$1,300 an hour. "Sometimes there are clients who will do nothing but sit in a room watching TV or chatting with me. One such client once paid me \$3,500 an hour just to complain how miserable his life is. These people always made me wonder how much pressure people in Hong Kong are under."

In total, Mui Mui is making more than \$30,000 a month by compensated dating – well enough for her and her two kids – but she is not happy. "I'm afraid that my kids may find out," she says. "I'm afraid that my parents may find out. If they found out, they would cry and blame themselves for this, and it may be true, but I really don't want to see that."

Mui Mui's estranged husband already knows her business. "At first he said nothing, even becoming more caring towards me. I guess it was because he knew my difficulties and that I'd gone through enough

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Risk versus reward At least 34 percent of Hong Kong students in a recent survey said they would 'consider' compensated dating



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government should integrate and reorganise all the available resources for women into a clear system with easy access. She also promotes a 'gender budget', where the government distributes financial support in accordance with the specific needs of each gender.

Mui Mui, however, sees younger students who do compensated dating as financially secure. "I don't think most of those students would be left without a choice if they did not do compensated dating," she says. "Many of them may be from well-off families. They may be doing this just because they don't have enough allowance to buy an LV handbag."

Viewing unemployment as another reason why women resort to trading sex for financial gain, Bowie Lam Po-ye, the project officer of Teens Key, a non-government organisation for teenage sex workers, says the current job market is highly focused on positions in the finance and property industries for college graduates, while for those with lower education, choices are few.

"We can't simply tongue-lash those who participate in compensated dating on moral grounds," says Lam. "We need to consider what they have to face in life. Compensated dating is an embodiment of the structural problems of the local society."

All the gloom and fear aside, a new life is slowly dawning for Wong. She has found a new job back in the finance industry, and in two months' time will start working again. "I can't wait to get back to normal life," she says. "My salary should then be enough to raise myself and my two children while paying the debts. And I'm about to pay them off!" Her voice suddenly rises with confidence. "Once I walk out, I'll never let myself fall again."



Mui Mui, August 2011
"I will never fall again"

with my clients outside. But I think it was still too awkward for both of us, and then we were gradually estranged. Now maybe we still have something between us, since neither of us ever suggests that we sign the divorce papers. But it's impossible to go back any more."

According to Mui Mui, there are 'quite a lot of women' around her age doing compensated dating. "Almost all of us have our own difficulties whereby we can't go on and have to find another way out. I know a woman making more than \$100,000 a month by doing this, but still she is not living in a decent place and never buys luxuries. I don't know what she's doing with all that money. Which woman doesn't like luxury bags or jewellery?"

Rita Ching, associate director of the Women's Foundation, has many concerns. "Women are the poorest group in the society," says Ching. "They tend to give their money to, or save for, their families." Ching also warns that the social resources for women in Hong Kong are too scattered and not comprehensive enough: "When women encounter difficulties, they often don't know which organisations or which government departments they can turn to. Sometimes even government officials themselves don't know that either. So it's not too hard to understand why some of them will see compensated dating as an easier way out."

Ching suggests that the

* The younger face of the compensated dating issue...



Recent research shows that more teenagers are likely to participate in (or have no problem with) compensated dating in Hong Kong. Last month, local police arrested 26 youths for soliciting and conducting prostitution and cautioned them. The youngest among them were just 14 years old – and, for the first time, one was a boy, also 14.

Recent statistics have shown that, from the ages of 12 to 20, more than 34 percent of those interviewed showed an inclination towards 'considering' compensated dating as a means to a financial end.

The number of teenagers and young adults participating in this practice has been increasing year on year, according to Queena Chan Hiu-ying, a social worker for a project started by the non-government organisation Yang Memorial Methodist Social Service to protect youths from compensated dating. She says the project has been working on almost 60 cases – and about half of them are teenagers (with the youngest being only 11).

"A number of them are boys," adds Chan. According to Chan, most male compensated daters are either homosexuals looking for boyfriends, or those who are not sure about their sexual orientation and want to find out.

There are various reasons for teenagers to trade sex for money or gifts – including self-esteem, desire for social status, an open attitude toward sex, a lack of love and care from the family, a lack of self-confidence, or poor knowledge on the subject of compensated dating. They often look for clients, or contacts, online or through friends who have already tried compensated dating before.

"Most teenagers don't have the ability to make sound judgements," says Chan. "They don't know the dangers compensated dating can cause and tend to find an easy way out in the face of challenges and difficulties. Families, teachers and professionals should take the responsibilities of educating them and help them come to a healthy attitude toward sexual relationships." Shirley Zhou