

# HONG KONG

## CRIME

## Housewife swindled out of record HK\$65m by phone

Woman lost more than any other such scam victim this year, to fraudsters posing as officials

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A housewife has been swindled out of HK\$65 million by phone scammers accusing her of spreading fake news about the central government's measures to fight the coronavirus on the mainland.

The 40-year-old woman, who lives in Mei Foo Sun Chuen, a private housing estate in Lai Chi Kok, lost more than any other phone scam victim so far this year.

She forked over all of her savings, borrowed money from her mother and mortgaged her Cheung Sha Wan flat to pay the criminals, according to a police source.

The case came to light when the fraudsters approached her husband, a businessman, and tried to swindle money from him as well.

Detectives from the Sham Shui Po district crime squad launched an investigation after the husband filed a report to police on Sunday.

Posing as an employee from Beijing's liaison office in the city, one of the fraudsters called the woman in June last year and accused her of "breaking mainland laws by spreading false news about the anti-pandemic measures on the mainland".

The call was then transferred to a purported mainland official, who claimed he was a prosecutor in Beijing.

"The victim was told that an arrest warrant for her had been issued by the related authorities," the source said.

Senior Inspector Yeung Chun-yu from the Sham Shui Po district crime squad said yesterday that the victim was directed to a bogus website claiming to represent a mainland procuratorate and was asked to provide personal

information such as bank account details, including her bank password.

He added that the woman had also met four of the scammers in person in the city on five separate occasions between June and September last year, and was given a mobile phone to use when contacting them.

"According to our investigation, the victim was contacted by the culprit at least once a day and the culprit would report to her about the progress of the so-called investigation," he said.

Yeung added that the victim was then instructed to transfer money into a designated bank account in Hong Kong as a surety and for investigative purposes.

### 1,140

Number of phone scams that were reported last year, a decline of 53 per cent from 2020. But losses rose to HK\$810 million, up 41 per cent

Between June of 2021 and March of this year, the woman transferred HK\$46 million into the account and another HK\$19 million was taken out from her bank account by the scammers, according to the senior inspector.

Yeung said she was also given a copy of a fake business deal in one of the five meetings with the con artists, and was told to tell bank staff that the transferred money was part of the business deal.

The victim was asked to put her SIM card into a mobile phone belonging to the scammers during the meetings, according to the police.

Senior Inspector Luk Hung-kei from the Anti-Deception Coordination Centre said the main purpose of this move was to intercept the one-time password (OTP) of the victim's e-banking account through malicious applications installed on the device.

"Very often these OTPs are forwarded to the scammer, which means that if the scammer receives the OTPs, they can completely control the victim's account and transfer all the balance into another account," he said.

He stressed that genuine law enforcement agents would never ask people to provide e-banking passwords over the phone and that members of the public should not put their SIM cards into mobile phones provided by others.

According to the police, no arrests have been made. An investigation by the Sham Shui Po district crime squad is under way.

Last month, a 26-year-old mainland student in Hong Kong lost nearly HK\$15 million in a phone scam in which con artists posing as government officials accused him of smuggling Covid-19 vaccines.

Though the number of reported phone scams fell by 53 cases to 1,140 last year, the financial losses involved rose by 41 per cent, to HK\$810 million, with close to 90 per cent of the swindled money being taken by fraudsters pretending to be officials.

A 90-year-old woman living in a mansion on The Peak was conned out of HK\$250 million between August 2020 and January 2021 by fraudsters who told her that her identity had been used in a serious criminal case on the mainland, making her the biggest known victim of a phone scam in the city.

She called police in March last year, who were able to recover HK\$9 million from bank accounts used by the swindlers. A 19-year-old man was arrested in connection with the case.

## Uplifting experience



A passenger takes a photo while riding the first lift built on the hill at Kwai Chung Estate yesterday, its first day of public operation. The system consists of two coaches that can hold up to 24 people

for the 40-metre, one-minute ride that connects Tai Wo Hau Road and Wo Tong Tsui Street. The lift saves residents from navigating more than a hundred steps each trip. Photo: K.Y. Cheng

## COURTS

## 13 JAILED OVER RIOT NEAR LIAISON OFFICE IN 2019

Two out of 15 defendants spared prison time as presiding judge attributes cause of violence to incitement by 'opinion leaders with ulterior motives'

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Thirteen people have been jailed for up to four years for rioting near Beijing's liaison office during the city's social unrest in 2019, with the presiding judge attributing the cause of the violence to incitement by "key opinion leaders with ulterior motives".

The 13 were among 15 defendants sentenced at West Kowloon Court yesterday for their role in the incident, which occurred in Sheung Wan on July 28, 2019, more than a month after protests broke out over a contentious extradition bill.

The two other defendants were spared jail time and sentenced to either correctional training or hard labour given their relatively young age and remorse for the offence.

The proposed legislation, which would have enabled the transfer of fugitives to the mainland, was stalled in mid-June in 2019 following a series of large-scale demonstrations, with Chief Executive Carrie Lam Cheng Yuet-ning opting to fully withdraw the bill three months later.

District Judge Ernest Lin Kam-hung called the July 28 protest a "gory carnival", adding participants had no real reason to be involved as the bill had already been suspended at the time of the clashes.

"I understand there were forces and key opinion leaders with ulterior motives who professed themselves as young people's tutors and offered them material and ethical support ... prompting them to take part in this gory carnival," the judge said.

"Most of them can avoid paying the price. Those who do pay the price are the many hot-blooded people who were more brave than wise."

Lin also expressed sympathy for grievances from the public regarding the police's handling of the protests and the government's reaction to opposing voices.

"As an ordinary citizen, I also take the view that there is room for improvement for both [police and government]," the judge said, but stressed "they are not excuses for blocking roads, disturbing people's lives and damaging

public and private property. Social change should be a gradual process achieved via continuous endeavours. It cannot be achieved in the blink of an eye."

The 10 men and five women, aged between 20 and 34, were accused of taking part in the riot that stretched several blocks from Morrison Street to Rumsey Street, about 1km away from the liaison office and Western Police Station.

The District Court-level trial, held at the more spacious West Kowloon Court, heard the defendants had engaged in a guerilla-style battle with police that lasted nearly six hours before they were arrested on Man Wa Lane at around 9.47pm.

MTR part-time worker Ho Pak-yiu, 20, pleaded guilty to rioting before the trial began in June last year. Half a year later, the judge convicted the rest of the



Protesters throw tear gas canisters back at riot police as they march towards Beijing's liaison Office on July 28, 2019. Photo: Sam Tsang

suspects as he ruled they had "participatory intent" based on their black clothes and protest equipment found in their possession.

Eight of the accused, consisting of part-time waiter Chan Chak-fung, 25, kindergarten teacher Po Tsz-ching, 27, student Leung Chi-pang, 22, airport worker Lau Yiu-chuen, 30, engineering assistant Lam Ho-ching, 24, freelancer Liu Tsz-tung, 21, IT technician Li Shu-wah, 24, and jobless Cheung Man-hei, 22, were jailed for four years yesterday.

Lin said Cheung deserved 51 months in jail as she was also found guilty of possessing an offensive weapon and unlicensed radio apparatus, but he decided to knock three months off on "humanitarian grounds", noting she was a single mother with a five-year-old daughter and was only 19 at the time of her arrest.

The judge also reduced the four-year sentences of five others by two to six months, citing their good character. The five consisted of cooks Chan Wai-lam and Yeung Wai-sing, aged 24 and 34 respectively, assistant florist Pang Yu-tung, 22, former pilot Liu Chung-yin, 33, and nurse Vicky Chan Wing-ki, 30.

Ho, who pleaded guilty, was sentenced to Cape Collinson Correctional Institution where he will undergo up to three years of educational and vocational training.

Student Wu Ka-chun, 24, received up to one year of hard labour at Sha Tsui Correctional Institution.

## EDUCATION

## High rate of native-speaking English teachers quitting jobs

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The turnover rate for native-speaking English teachers working in secondary schools over the last academic year has reached its highest level in eight years at 13 per cent, according to the Education Bureau.

The figure was revealed yesterday in a written reply from the bureau to lawmaker Michael Tien Puk-sun.

The legislator had previously asked if native-speaking English teachers were leaving Hong Kong because of the city's strict anti-epidemic measures.

The education authority said turnover rates for native-speaking English teachers at primary and secondary schools were 11 per cent and 13 per cent respectively during the academic year 2020/21.

The 13 per cent attrition rate among native-speaking English educators working at secondary schools showed a marked increase from the 9 per cent turnover level in 2019/20.

Among primary schools, the turnover rate for such teachers in 2019/20 was 16 per cent, indicating a double-digit loss over the past five years.

According to the bureau, the city's primary and secondary schools employ about 852 educators under the Native-speaking English Teacher Scheme as of February 2022.

However, Tien's question to the education authority cited several schools that had attributed the departure of native-speaking English staff to the strict quarantine requirements for arrivals.

But Secretary for Education Kevin Yeung Yun-hung said in the same reply to the legislator such teachers had been willing to comply with anti-epidemic restrictions to prevent the import of coronavirus cases from overseas.

"There are no substantive grounds for attributing the depart-

ture of [native-speaking English teachers] or their decision to or not to come to teach in Hong Kong to our compulsory quarantine measures," he said.

Yeung said some educators might have resigned because of retirement plans, family reunions or an interest in working in other countries, adding the potential reasons were "personal".

He said the bureau still retained a sufficient number of native-speaking English teachers to fill vacancies and could maintain a stable team of such educators in the coming academic year.

The pay package offered to such teachers was "very attractive", Yeung said, with the potential to encourage them to continue in their current positions.

"Apart from the basic salary, eligible [native-speaking English teachers] are entitled to various fringe benefits including special

allowance, passage, baggage allowance, medical allowance, gratuity and cash retention incentive," he said.

The current starting salary level for such teachers is HK\$31,750, with wages capped at HK\$61,415 for primary schools and HK\$73,775 for secondary schools.

Passage, baggage, medical allowances and a special allowance of HK\$20,989 per month are also provided for educators whose normal place of residence is not in Hong Kong.

Teachers receive a 15 per cent gratuity upon finishing a contract, with a cash retention incentive of 15 to 10 per cent of base salary for those who work for two years or more, according to the bureau.

But New Territories School Heads Association vice-chairman Chu Wai-lam said some native-speaking English teachers had given up their lucrative jobs in Hong Kong over the past year to return to their home countries for family reasons, with many uncertain about how long the city's strict quarantine measures would last.

"After all, they could apply for the job again even if they quit, their resignations do not affect the chances of getting the jobs in Hong Kong again," Chu said.

He added many schools had advised their staff to take the opportunity to travel to their home countries right after the government brought forward the summer holidays last month.

Wong Ching-yung, principal of Scientia Secondary School in Ho Man Tin, said some native-speaking English teachers had developed misconceptions about Hong Kong's political and social situation after the national security law was imposed in 2020, further driving up the turnover rate.

"Some foreigners even think working in Hong Kong is so dangerous under the national security law and it makes them quit."

CHU WAI-LAM, NEW TERRITORIES SCHOOL HEADS ASSOCIATION VICE-CHAIRMAN



Many English teachers have left secondary schools. Photo: May Tse

## ECONOMY

## Eateries hope for voucher boost when restrictions eased

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More than 6.3 million Hongkongers have received the first half of the government's consumption vouchers worth HK\$5,000, but restaurants have offered fewer perks compared with last year's scheme due to social-distancing curbs affecting dining establishments.

Major brands and retailers have offered promotions ahead of the scheme's launch today, such as free gifts, spending coupons and discounts.

The spending vouchers totalling HK\$10,000 per person are double last year's amount. The latest scheme, which cost the government HK\$66.4 billion, aims to boost sales for businesses affected by the fifth wave of infections and is expected to boost the economy by 1.2 per cent.

Simon Wong Ka-wo, president of the Hong Kong Federation of

Restaurants and Related Trades, encouraged residents to save some of their vouchers for the dining sector once restrictions were eased.

"We are concerned that people will use up their vouchers very soon, but we are hoping they will take into consideration that more offers [from the catering sector] will be available in the coming months," he said.

Chief Executive Carrie Lam Cheng Yuet-ning has said social-distancing restrictions would be eased in three phases over a period of three months starting on April 21, provided there was no rebound in cases.

The cap on groups in restaurants and most other establishments will be raised to eight people and dine-in services will be extended to midnight in the second phase.

Ray Chui Man-wai, chairman of catering industry body Institute of Dining Art, predicted that the catering sector would see busi-

ness shoot up by 30 per cent this month, noting many restaurants had prepared an array of promotions to woo diners.

As well as eateries, developers are offering incentives. Swire Properties has announced a collaboration with Octopus and will offer up to a total of HK\$5 million in vouchers for customers at Cityplaza in Tai Koo, Pacific Place in Admiralty and Citygate Outlets in Tung Chung.

Sun Hung Kai Properties will also launch promotions in 12 of its shopping centres. Members of The Point, its customer loyalty programme, can receive up to HK\$12,000 in gift certificates and prizes if they spend a minimum amount in places such as supermarkets and department stores.

Customers can also enjoy flash offers and up to 64 per cent in discounts for selected items in more than 60 retail outlets at Tsim Sha Tsui's Harbour City, including at beauty, fashion, sports and jewellery shops.

Eligible residents using AlipayHK, Tap & Go or WeChat Pay HK as their designated digital payment platform for the hand-out will receive the first HK\$5,000 in one instalment.

Residents who opted to receive the voucher through their Octopus cards will receive two batches of HK\$4,000 and HK\$1,000 due to a stored value limit on the cards. The second instalment will be disbursed as early as June 16.

Resident Justin Lo, 26, said he would use his voucher to buy an Apple gift card for a new iPhone.

Lo added that he believed promotions offered by businesses during the previous voucher scheme "sounded like scams" as regular prices had been marked up.

"I guess it's because they thought customers won't mind the price as [they are] paying by vouchers. But this time [I haven't seen] prices marked up yet," he said.