



David Cheung, founder of David Cheung Professional Detective, at his Tsuen Wan offices. PHOTO: OLIVER TSANG

SECRET SERVICES

An increasingly mistrustful society means brisk business for a growing band of private investigators, writes Winnie Yeung

SHORT, SLIGHTLY BUILT and in his late 20s, Ah Wai doesn't stand out in a crowd. The young woman he's been following for the past two hours hasn't noticed him either, which is good for Ah Wai. It's his job to be inconspicuous.

Ah Wai works for a detective agency that has been hired by the woman's boyfriend to check on her movements – he wants to marry her, but suspects she's cheating on him. Tailing her into a *cha chan teng*, or neighbourhood teahouse, on Nathan Road, he mulls over his client's rationale as the woman sips a cup of tea. "I don't understand why he wants to marry her if he doesn't trust her in the first place," he says.

It's a good point. Still, Ah Wai knows that if it wasn't for a lack of trust between couples, he'd probably be out of a job. David Cheung Tai-wai, his boss at David Cheung Professional Detective, estimates that cheating partners account for half his business.

Breakdowns in relationships have become more common in recent years, boosting the private investigations business in Hong Kong, Cheung says. "There has

adultery during the past three years has boosted the number of Hong Kong detective agencies to about 60, an increase of about a third. More than 70 per cent of his cases involve problematic relationships. "It's obviously because of the increased number of Hong Kong men looking for mistresses on the mainland," says So. "I think it shows how bad personal relationships have become."

One relationship deteriorated to a point where So was asked to arrange a killing. "We found evidence of a woman's husband having an affair in Canada, and she asked us to get her a hitman to kill the mistress," So says. "We told the woman to back down and think carefully, and she finally understood that it wasn't a solution she should be considering."

Sometimes, however, spouses can get too mistrustful. Cheung recalls a client who suspected her husband of adultery. "He was always getting into a female colleague's car and his whereabouts were sometimes unknown. But we had all been paranoid – the colleague was just being kind by giving him rides home."

eo cameras, camera phones, intercoms and hands-free devices. These are essential not only for monitoring targets, but also for communicating with colleagues. In the *cha chan teng*, Ah Wai is in regular mobile contact with a team member sitting at a nearby table, while two others wait outside. When the girl makes a move to leave, he calls his colleague to remind him to quickly pay the bill.

Investigators typically work in teams during surveillance work. Cheung says at least four people are needed at the same time, to ensure they don't lose track of the target's movements and to avoid raising suspicion. "If the target feels something is wrong, you can always swap the positions of the team members," he says.

"Some counterparts do the tailing alone and that's risky because the target might sense a problem," Cheung says. "Our principle is to drop the surveillance instead of getting ourselves exposed."

Ah Wai and his colleagues sometimes get help from an unlikely source during stakeouts: former clients. Cheung started tapping their services a few years ago in areas where his professional team is of limited help. Clients who are professionals, such as doctors and lawyers, allow Cheung to carry out surveillance in places such as private members' facilities. And female clients can shadow women into places where men can't go (men dominate the industry by a ratio of six to one). The results have been pleasantly surprising, Cheung says. "You can't imagine how good housewives are when it comes to surveillance," Cheung says. "They are good at memorising details because they are usually very attentive to them."

Ah Wai, who earns about \$12,000 a month, sometimes takes his girlfriend on stakeouts. It gives him good cover and also allows him to spend time with her during public holidays when work is busiest. "I can't be with my girlfriend then, so sometimes I'll bring her along if it's just surveillance," he says.

Having seen so many adultery cases, Ah Wai can't help but wonder about his girlfriend. "I become doubtful and start to question her when she goes out," he says, as he prepares to leave the teahouse. The operation is coming to an end because the subject is due to meet her boyfriend, and he doesn't want Cheung's team around. "After I realise what I've done, I feel bad about it," Ah Wai says. "Luckily, my girlfriend understands."

"WE FOUND EVIDENCE OF A HUSBAND HAVING AN AFFAIR IN CANADA, AND SHE ASKED US TO GET HER A HITMAN TO KILL THE MISTRESS" Kelvin So Asia World Investigation Bureau

been an increase, especially in the past three years. The obvious reason is that the economy has improved. But also there are more people needing help or proof in order to trust others."

The clientele is apparently more diverse, too. Despite the high costs involved, it isn't just the wealthy who hire private investigators, Cheung says. His agency – which employs about 30 people at its offices in Tsuen Wan, Mongkok and Causeway Bay – charges \$1,000 an hour for surveillance work. It takes on only cases requiring at least five hours' work a day, so the smallest job will cost \$5,000. His clients include housewives, jealous boyfriends, suspicious mothers and even schoolchildren. But most calls come from wives doubting their husbands' fidelity. And they generally have reason to be suspicious, he says. "Their instincts about these things are usually right."

Kelvin So, who runs the Asia World Investigation Bureau in Central, says a rise in cross-border

An electronics buff, Cheung used to sell such equipment. The 51-year-old got into the investigations business about 30 years ago when a friend in the police force took him on raids of red-light districts. Cheung saw how the two lines of work could be combined. "It aroused my interest in investigation," he says. "Plus, I had been dealing with electronics, which is crucial to this business."

Cheung's fondness for electronics hasn't diminished, and he maintains a collection of the equipment his detectives have used over the years. A James Bond-style pinhole camera in a cigarette packet is one of his favourites. Such gadgets still come in useful, for instance, when assigned to investigate a company employee suspected of leaking confidential information to competitors. Cheung's staff installed a number of pin-hole cameras and recording devices near the suspect's desk and eventually caught him red-handed.

On the street, private detectives such as Ah Wai are armed with vid-

PEOPLE

PHOTOS: REUTERS/AP

Supreme Court sides with Smith

Former Playmate of the Year Anna Nicole Smith has won a unanimous Supreme Court ruling giving her a new chance to collect millions of dollars she says her late Texas oil tycoon husband promised her.

The court overturned a ruling that the former topless dancer and *Playboy* centrefold wasn't entitled to anything because federal courts lacked jurisdiction to hear claims that are also involved in state court hearings.

The high court said Smith (right) can pursue her disputed inheritance case in federal court, giving her a second chance to contest the will of her late husband J. Howard Marshall II. It didn't address the merits of her arguments about the money.

"She's extremely excited that we got this ruling," said Smith's lawyer Kent Richland. He expressed confidence that the appeals court would rule in her favour on the remaining issues. *Reuters*



Going, going, gown

A custom-made gown worn by Keira Knightley to this year's Oscars ceremony sold for US\$7,855 in an online auction to fund relief work in East Africa.

The burgundy silk-taffeta one-shoulder gown, designed by Vera Wang for the 21-year-old actress, was bought by a bidder based in Chicago.

Knightley (right), who was nominated for a best actress Oscar for *Pride & Prejudice*, said she had wanted to support Oxfam's efforts to provide food and clean drinking water in East Africa. "It's brilliant that

this dress has raised this much," Knightley said. "I know it will go a long way to help the people facing this food crisis in East Africa."

Wang supported the decision to put the dress – a US size two – up for sale. She displayed it at her Manhattan store while the online auction took place last month.

"All of us can do something to support this fantastic work and it will make a real difference," Knightley said.

Oxfam spokeswoman Katie Abbotts said 79 bidders competed for the gown on eBay. *AP*



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