

# Jason Gagliardi meets the man in charge of Hong Kong's only adult women's prison

**T**he job description reads like every lecher's dream — one man with total control over more than 500 captive women.

But for Cheung Ming-leung, this is no fantasy.

He is the superintendent in charge of the Tai Lam Centre for Women, a bleak outpost cowering behind soaring concrete walls on a lonely hill near Tuen Mun.

Cheung is one of a handful of men at the prison — the territory's only centre for adult female prisoners.

His charges range from multiple murderers to illegal immigrants.

His every move is governed by stringent regulations, necessary to protect him from even the hint of impropriety.

Once he sets foot inside the prison proper, Cheung must at all times be shadowed by at least one female colleague.

"I would never, never see or interview an inmate by myself," Cheung said, reclining behind his desk in a modest office — one of the few parts of the prison where he can seek solitude.

"You really do have to be very careful when you are a man running a women's prison."

But the cheery and affable Cheung quickly dispels images of women's prisons as seedy hotbeds of violence, politics, corruption and lesbianism conjured up by television dramas like the Australian-made *Prisoner (Cell Block H)* in Britain, where the butch and burly "Queen Bea" conducted her reign of terror.

Perhaps the closest his centre has to a figure of fear is convicted child murderer Chan Ching-fung, who incinerated her two step-daughters by locking them in a flat and lighting a can of kerosene while they slept.

The prison also recently became home for Lee Chen Mao-zhen, who was jailed for 13 years after drenching her lover's wife with concentrated acid in an horrific attack that melted her victim's face.

Cheung says female inmates are generally far better

# A captive audience

behaved than their male equivalents, who he encountered during stints running the Lai Chi Kok and Pik Uk prisons.

"In male prisons, there can be problems with triads and violence. Here, in general the discipline and obedience is quite acceptable."

During his 18 months in charge, Cheung says there has been no problem with violence between inmates or with prison staff.

Under his control are 361 convicted prisoners, 78 on remand awaiting trial, and 78 inmates of the jail's drug addiction treatment centre.

A fatherly twinkle lights up his eye when he speaks of his cutest charges - eight "prison babies" who live with their mothers in a special section of the centre.

"They belong to women who

were convicted and had no close relatives or friends in Hong Kong to look after their babies," he said.

"None of the women are jailed for very serious crimes, mostly immigration offences, that type of thing. They are mainly Vietnamese, Filipinos, mainlanders and one or two locals."

While motherhood is the full-time job for these women, the other inmates work at least six hours a day in the centre's commercial laundry or running up uniforms for government workers.

At first glance the garment factory looks more like a high school home economics class - a sea of brown-checked uniforms and young faces, creased with concentration as their needles whizz over bright strips of fabric.

But on closer inspection,

there are none of the giggles and chit-chat of the classroom; rather, the workers move like robots, silent, eyes often glazed by despairing stares.

Barred and padlocked double doors rear up in each entrance and exit.

A pressing problem for Cheung is the overcrowding of the prison, exacerbated by the surge in arrests of foreign prostitutes following a police crackdown on the vice trade.

Tai Lam's certified accommodation capacity is 261 but it houses 517 women, as well as the eight babies.

Some women are being transferred to a newly renovated section of Lantau's Sha Tsui centre, which usually houses young male offenders and illegal immigrants.

Sexually transmitted diseases among jailed prostitutes have sharply increased the

workload of Tai Lam's medical staff.

Cheung says high-security prisoners share cells in pairs and do not receive any comforts denied their male counterparts.

Less serious offenders are kept in dormitory-style accommodation. After a gruelling day behind the sewing machine or in the steamy laundry where industrial-size washers and driers groan and tumble, inmates can relax in front of television and enjoy a simple but filling dinner.

They are locked in their cells at 7.30pm, where they amuse themselves reading, writing letters and listening to the radio until lights out.

It would not seem unreasonable to assume boredom, libido and loneliness might send some cellmates into each other's arms and beds.

But mention lesbianism to Cheung, and the shutters come down.

"I have not seen any such activity in this centre," he said.

"The cells are open-grille style and the staff can see inside to check what is going on. The inmates are always under direct staff supervision.

"We cannot allow prisoners to engage in any sort of lesbian activities."

Tai Lam houses five "category eight" prisoners - those who have more than 12 years of their sentence to serve.

Cheung says it is more than 15 years since anyone tried to escape.

He looks up at the sheer, towering concrete wall that surrounds the centre, and the viciously coiled barbed wire running alongside, and muses: "It seems to be a very good deterrent."

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