

## **10 Dr. William Fan of the Hong Kong Animal Therapy Foundation, Dr. Paul Wong and Dr. Rose Yu of the University of Hong Kong, and Steven Lai and Fanny Leung of the Chinese Evangelical Zion Church**

I (CKC) was invited to Hong Kong by Dr. Paul Wong to make presentations at the Animal-Assisted Therapy Conference sponsored by the Department of Social Work and Social Administration of the University of Hong Kong. I presented a preconference seminar and a keynote address and participated in a panel discussion with Dr. William Fan and Dr. Paul Wong. Additionally, I copresented a postconference workshop with the assistance of Tiffany Otting. During our stay, we were able to interview professionals who practice animal-assisted therapy in Hong Kong. There is very little ongoing, formal training programs in Hong Kong for professional application of animal-assisted interventions. Practitioners of animal-assisted interventions in Hong Kong have mostly obtained their training from experts in other countries. They then share information with each other. However, as interest in animal-assisted interventions increases in Hong Kong, existing experts there are assuming more responsibility for training professionals in that region who wish to incorporate this modality in service of clients.

Animal-assisted interventions is in its very early stages of development in this region of the world. Thus, the work that is being done is certainly pioneering. The household pet is not nearly as common in Hong Kong as it is in the U.S. mostly, because much of the housing consists of small apartments, mostly in tall buildings, where pet dogs or cats are not permitted. Also, the primary mode of transportation is the metro system or a taxi, neither of which allow dogs. A personal car is not common. These inconveniences make it somewhat difficult for the animal-assisted therapists who practice in Hong Kong. Additionally, the idea of a dog or cat for therapy is very new to Hong Kong culture. Though the application of animal-assisted interventions in Hong Kong is in its early stages of development, it was interesting to learn about the various services.

A key figure in the field of animal-assisted interventions for emotional and mental health in Hong Kong is Dr. William Fan. I was very fortunate to be

able to interview him. He is one of the first in his country to consider human-animal interaction as a form of therapy for the elderly and the mentally or emotionally disabled. He is also a leading advocate for animal welfare in Hong Kong. The interview with Dr. William Fan took place on June 3, 2015.

### **Interview with Dr. William Fan**

*Cynthia:* Dr. William Fan is a psychiatrist and president of the Hong Kong Animal Therapy Foundation. Thank you for joining us today, Dr. Fan.

*William:* It's nice to meet you.

*Cynthia:* Tell me about the work that you do in animal-assisted therapy, the history behind that, and how it has evolved.

*William:* It all started about ten years ago. I and my wife have an organization for the welfare of stray cats. And then with all the welfare works, the idea came that why shouldn't I be putting my professional experience and skills into the animal welfare. We started thinking about whether we can apply some animal-assisted therapy in some of the population. Actually, the first program we started is a program called Elderly and Cat Scheme. The idea is to support some elderly citizens. Some of them may be living alone. We support them in both the resources, including the vet fees and the expenses for living with the cats, and then also other help such as getting the cat sent to their homes by our volunteers with the aim to support them to adopt a cat. You see, when you are trying to adopt older and adult cats, it might be quite difficult. We think that, if we can support the elderly, then the cat will have a home, and then the elderly will have a life companion. So we create a kind of balanced situation. As an animal welfare organization, we have some cases which are quite impressive. People get much healthier, and they are more engaged and lively after they adopt a cat. A merit of the program is that we keep visiting them because we have to check on how they are getting on with the cats. One barrier an elderly citizen would consider for adopting a cat is whether in the future their health or their situation might change and then they may not be able to take care of the cat anymore. That would make them hesitate. We guarantee that if they are unable to take care of the cat in the future, we will take the cat back and look for another adoption for that cat. We give the elderly a kind of reassurance.

Another good thing about sending volunteers to visit them is that they get to be a friend with our volunteer. The volunteers would come along and work with the elderly, and then we'd talk with them and then they would share their common interests in the animal. It's getting to be very successful.

Then we think that, if we can promote the idea of AAT [animal-assisted therapy] more to the Hong Kong public, that maybe more animals would be helping people. Then they would indirectly enhance the image of animals among the citizens. It's kind of indirectly promoting animal welfare too. Back in 2005, we had been giving some talks to students at City University. At that time, we promoted mostly the concept of the Elderly and Cat Scheme. That was how we started off back in 2005.

*Cynthia:* How successful has the program been in your viewpoint?

*William:* Far from very satisfactory. In Hong Kong, many of the elderly are quite hesitant in adopting a cat because [restrictive residence] policies are not very supportive. Even in some private residences, they would not allow the residents to keep the animal at home. That would be a main drawback. Despite all our promotion, I think the number of elderly and cat adoptions are still not very optimal.

*Cynthia:* Because of the barriers? The housing barriers, the hesitancy of the elderly to adopt a cat?

*William:* Yes, and then because we need to have local volunteers who come in contact with the elderly. If elderly people adopt a cat from us, we need to send our volunteer to keep up the contact. But the ideal situation actually would be collaborating with an elderly service so that people who come into contact on a daily basis would inform us if the elderly person fell sick and was hospitalized. Then we would know that we need to take back the cat. That's how we planned the scheme to be working, but it's not easy to engage a collaborating agency in this way. That is actually the main barrier. We need to collaborate with some other elderly service to make it successful. Up to now, we are only doing sporadic cases.

*Cynthia:* But in those cases, you have seen it making quite a difference in the lives of some elderly persons.

*William:* Yes, actually, one interesting thing is that you invite them to become an advocate for our program. They would do interviews, sometimes appear on television programs. One of the elderly we pointed at, her grandson, her grandchildren, actually became much more warm with her after seeing her appearing on the TV program. They were only visiting her once in a month or so. But since she's become so famous, that actually induced a kind of intimacy between her and the grandchildren.

*Cynthia:* She became a celebrity to her own grandchildren.

*William:* Yes. They probably think it was actually very impressive. That elderly woman, actually she was feeding some stray cat around this residence. She lived, at that time, in a kind of elderly unit where they share a kitchen but have their own apartment. She'd been feeding this stray cat for some time. Then she came to us and said,



"Well, okay, I really want to help that cat." We wrote a letter to the warden in her unit promising that we'll take care of the cat if anytime in the future she cannot take care of the cat herself. Then they allowed her to take the cat into her unit. She would live there with that cat. And then she became our advocate. She enjoys telling how more positive things can happen to you if you can live with a cat. Actually, because not only does she have a companion but actually it helps her to relieve her concern about this stray cat.

*Cynthia:* It helped her anxiety because she really wanted to help the cat.

*William:* Actually, the mechanical term, it empowers her that she feels that she can do something for the cat.

*Cynthia:* It gave her a sense of meaning and purpose.

*William:* Yes, and then the cat became a focus for her in real life.

*Cynthia:* Is there anything else that you would like people to understand about your program and how effective you think it has been?

*William:* I have been promoting AAT in different media, and I've been giving talks to different university students and hoping more people would buy into this idea. Then in 2010, I was approached by Social Welfare and Social Services. They have some funding for doing some AAT for socially withdrawn youth. I was invited to provide some supervision and consultation for them. Then at that time, we really engaged in a more structured program for AAT. It's a social service with focus for the socially withdrawn youth. What they've been doing is, they would have some case manager visiting the case, building up rapport and a relationship with the clients, and hopefully they would support them, then provide some vocational training, and then some coaching for getting a job or returning to school. Pretty much, they're social workers. For that program, the initial idea is to have some pet grooming training for them so that they would be able to consider whether they would be interested in doing something about animal grooming and so on. Then what we did, we introduced a dog we rescued on the street. The dog became a therapeutic dog in the center. Actually, the dog lived six days in the center and only returned to us on Sunday and public holidays. I think it's a breakthrough because that service was housed in a public estate and probably would have forbidden the dog to live there but for the AAT program. We engaged the district office of the social work department, and we got more high profile. We had a press conference, asked the media to come in to cover the program and report on how this dog would be very instrumental in helping socially withdrawn youth. Then Paul Wong did research on that program.

*Cynthia:* Dr. Paul Wong of the University Hong Kong?

*William:* Yes.



*Cynthia:* They went and researched the social services program with the youth and the residential therapy dog?

*William:* Yes. The results showed that taking care of the dog in the center actually was the most important point about having the therapy take effect. Because the socially withdrawn youth, they were responsible for taking care of the therapy dog, and then they would be taking him out for walks, giving him food, cleaning him up, and more important, when there were visitors to the center or newcomers, then that service user will be responsible for introducing the therapy dog to the newcomer and visitors. This was their duty, and that gave them a chance to communicate with strangers, presenting the dog and the role for the therapy dog in the center. I think that is an important issue, when you think that you have something greater than yourself, you have to do it for the therapy dog. They would not shy off from telling people, and then of course, they would have some material [instruction] and some role-play [practice] before they do that. Then gradually, they build up their confidence. So many of these socially withdrawn youth have the problem of very low self-esteem or a social anxiety, withdrawal and avoidance of social context. With this program, by introducing the therapy dog and by caring for the therapy dog, they improve and can overcome many of their obstacles. That explains why the AAT program worked very well for this group.

*Cynthia:* It became worthwhile for them to overcome their anxiety because they wanted to do something for the dog?

*William:* Yes.

*Cynthia:* By feeling like they were doing something for the dog, by taking care of it, introducing it to new people in the center, they became empowered themselves.

*William:* Yes.

*Cynthia:* Because they were socially withdrawn, but then became more socially interactive, more socially confident.

*William:* Yeah, because actually, they would be oversensitive to others who have comments or a response, so [before, they] actually avoided social situations. Some of them have actually been housebound for several years, so it's quite a breakthrough if they can talk to strangers. As you said, you are not so aware of yourself; you're thinking of how to present the dog, the therapy dog, to strangers. Then actually you wouldn't be so anxious. With success of course, the social worker will be giving them positive reinforcement; they would be giving compliments to them. Not all the service users are given the honor of taking care of the therapy dog. Actually, you have to build a relationship with the dog, and then the dog will trust you. And then you learn how to give small commands and then get the cooperation of the therapy dog. Then you know how

to interact with other people, and then you must be responsible. After all this, then you would become the care [person] for the therapy dog. It's really an honor and an achievement just becoming appointed as the care [person].

*Cynthia:* And they're motivated to really work on the skills they need to gain because they want to become the caregiver of the animal.

*William:* Yes. I think the important thing is that, because of the interest of taking care of the dog, it's named Fat-fat, they all are made to go through several challenges. Once they achieve one step, they gain more confidence. So actually, far before they advance to the stage of talking to strangers, they have all these small steps of advances in which, all the time, is bringing up their confidence.

*Cynthia:* Well, thank you very much for joining us today, and I really enjoyed hearing about the work that you do: the welfare work with the cats and placing them with the elderly, and helping to bring the stray dog into the residential unit with the socially withdrawn individuals, and the tremendous progress that has been made there. It sounds like some wonderful programs.

*William:* Yes, nice to meet you. And we hope that we can do more for AAT here.

*Cynthia:* That would be great.

*William:* Thank you.

I interviewed Dr. Paul Wong (Wong, Wai-Ching) (Wong et al., 2015), who performed pioneering research that established clinical efficacy for the residential therapy dog program developed by Dr. Fan at the Social Welfare and Social Services. Dr. Paul Wong is an associate professor in the Department of Social Work and Social Administration at the University of Hong Kong (see Figure 10.2). We also interviewed Dr. Rose Yu (Yu, Wai Man), who at the time of our interview, was a doctoral student performing pioneering research on animal-assisted therapy. She was advised by Dr. Paul Wong. Since our interview, Rose has successfully completed her doctoral studies (Yu, 2017). The interview with Dr. Paul Wong and Dr. Rose Yu took place on June 5, 2015.

### **Interview with Dr. Paul Wong and Dr. Rose Yu**

*Cynthia:* Dr. Wong, introduce yourself, and we'll have Rose do the same.

*Paul:* Sure. Thank you for the invitation to participate in this interview. I am a clinical psychologist by training, and I am assistant professor at the Department of Social Work and Social Administration at the University of Hong Kong.

*Rose:* My name is Rose Yu and my background is in social work, and I'm now working as a senior research assistant in the department.

*Cynthia:* You're at the University of Hong Kong?

*Rose:* Yes.

*Cynthia:* Okay. And as you know, this interview is to share with other people around the world things that are happening here in Hong Kong that are related to animal-assisted therapy. I know as researchers, you're very interested in furthering the field of animal-assisted therapy in Hong Kong. So tell me how you're involved in the activities of animal-assisted therapy here?

*Paul:* Maybe Rose start first?

*Rose:* Well, my involvement I think comes from my experience, first of all. I started to have animals as companions when I was very young, but I didn't have the great feelings for it. At that time, usually, if in a traditional Chinese or Hong Kong Chinese family, sometimes they took a puppy back home for a certain function, such as a guide dog, or protection against theft, or something like that. So we didn't actually develop a very strong bond with the dog at that time. And then when I grew older, I just felt like I like them. I like to see them, but I haven't had one who lived with me. Not until I am more than ten years old actually. At more than ten years old, I started to have my own companion animal, and then my relationship and my bonding started to actually develop at that time. I had both dogs and cats at that time. It's my personal feeling that I have gained a lot from the relationship myself as well. And at that time at my work, my supervisor was asking me was I interested to further my study, and I told him that as long as I found something I'm interested in. Then I don't know why, but just suddenly one day, I thought, "Well, maybe this is a topic that can sustain me through the study." Animal-assisted therapy, at that time, I knew very little about it. I just got interested in animals, just got interested in why I'm interested in them. That's about it as well. Once I start to talk about animals, I tend to be long-winded. Sorry.

*Paul:* Well, I had my first dog in 1993, and that was on the Gold Coast. I had a really big dog. I had a Rottweiler. He was 75 kilograms when he was four years old. Then that was the time I started to like dogs. I really love dogs, especially big dogs. Then I came back to Hong Kong, and then I lived with my current wife. She had four little dogs from the same family. The last one died in 2009. That was the exact year that my son was born, so it was a really tough time for me, for my wife, not so much for my son. He was too young. Then I thought, "I want to do something for the animals in Hong Kong."

Then in 2010, I first met Rose. and I found out that she was interested about doing something with animals too, so I told her my story. Then, probably not until 2011 or 2012, she came to me and said, well, she met someone who is using AAT. That was the first time I had heard about AAT in Hong Kong, so that's how we started to work together.



*Cynthia:* And you're a PhD candidate, and Dr. Wong is your major professor.

*Rose:* Cosupervisor.

*Cynthia:* Cosupervisor, okay. And he supervises your research efforts, and both of you do research program evaluation of animal-assisted therapy programs.

*Rose:* Yes. I got accepted by the graduate school, and I got stuck because at that time, there was actually very little or, as far as I know, no AAT program in Hong Kong, except, of course, Animals Asia, but they do visits, not therapy. They do AAA [animal-assisted activities]. So I was very frustrated. Actually, no one knows what AAT is. And then one day, I noticed from the newspaper that one of the youth centers in Hong Kong, actually it's the Zion Center started to work with animals, to work with animals in helping the client. So I initiated a contact and said, "Well, can I come and talk? I want to do some study."

*Cynthia:* You wanted to go talk to them.

*Rose:* Yes, because I know very little about research. I'm not confident, and I know that Paul is interested so I said, "Well, Paul, help me to do proper research." So that started our working together as a team and then started work with other projects as well.

*Cynthia:* What did you find about their program at Zion?

*Paul:* Well, the major project that they did since 2011, I think, their major target was to help what they call socially withdrawn youth. There was a term in Japanese called hikikomori [means pulling inward or acute social withdrawal]. It's a really recent phenomenon that young people at the age of 15, they start losing interest in going to school. They start losing interest in going out. They start losing interest in finding jobs. So they just seclude themselves in their homes and play with the Internet and play video games and whatnot. It can last for months to years. So this is a really interesting phenomenon in Asia, especially a bit more wealthy Asian societies. So then I look at the literature. I couldn't find any intervention that could help these kind of people. There are some in Japan. They actually build housing; there are housing areas for a bunch of young people that like to seclude themselves, and they have different apartments in the same area. The rationale was if they put similar youth together in the same building, then hopefully, they might talk to each other, but there are no evaluations, no scientific study on that at all. So because of that too, I'm so interested in that particular type of client and the intervention that they do. So we did an evaluation with similar youth here in Hong Kong.

The unemployment rate, as guessed, was really high before they do the intervention. Ninety percent of them were unemployed before they start the AAT intervention, and after that, probably about 12 months afterward, the unemployment rate dropped

almost 85 to 90 percent to like 30-something. So even though the sample size wasn't that large, there was 69.

*Rose:* For the first phase, those who consented and completed the pre- and postassessment was only 56.

*Paul:* Yeah, 56 people. And even though the sample size wasn't that big, it's really encouraging because 50 percent of reduction in unemployment rate is really amazing.

*Cynthia:* So certainly, by those standards, it's quite a successful program.

*Paul:* It is.

*Rose:* It is, yes. And also because I also attended some of the prep sessions and talked to some of the young people, and what I found is actually, some of the young people, who really are quite withdrawn, they do not have eye contact with you. They seem to, when you talk to them, they just lower their head and said very little when I first met them. And then eventually, they started to come out because at that time, they started to have the onset of interaction with the dog Fat-fat. So Fat-fat was always around, so that helped a lot. I can actually see the young people start to build up their confidence and let people assist them in learning because they take responsibility, take care of Fat-fat in the center.

They also use other approaches as well. In part one is multi-intervention model. So apart from having the resident dog and using the resident dog as therapy adjunct, they also have this pet-warming training. They train the young people in how to take care of cats so the cats can be adopted by elderly and then to take care of the residential dog. Actually, it is a formal training we're funding from Hong Kong. In Hong Kong, there's a statutory board that provide funding, formal training for young people on various job skills, so that is part of it. And also, there is group activities with the handlers, together with them, and talking with the young people in the group. So it's a multi-intervention model. But anyway, what I observed is, all this and the young people talking about how they build up their confidence because before that, people told them "You couldn't even take care of yourself." Now, they feel that they can take care of Fat-fat, and he feels very good about it. So in that sense, I can observe, and then from our pre- and postresearch findings, I can also see that especially, as I mentioned, the self-esteem aspect, there's a lot of changes in them.

*Cynthia:* That's wonderful news to hear. Your department here at your university has provided enough interest in animal-assisted therapy that you've had a wonderful conference here this week, and you've brought in different speakers. They've presented on the work that they're doing in animal-assisted therapy. It tells me that you have an interest in furthering that. How much animal-assisted therapy

is actually occurring here in Hong Kong, what types of animal-assisted therapy and who is doing that?

*Paul:* Well, we had a one-day conference and a one-day workshop. During the conference, there were five, I think, if I'm not wrong; there were five organizations. They came and presented about their work. Some of them were AAT, animal-assisted therapy. Some were animal-assisted activities. We had the Animals Asia. We have the Mongrel Club. We had the Zion presentation by Steven Lai and Fanny Leung. And then we had the Hong Kong Hong Chi Center. They generally help the people with autism, physical disabilities. And then we have the Hong Kong Institute of Animal-Assisted Therapy; they were using AAT to help people with autism as well.

*Cynthia:* Since animal-assisted therapy is fairly new in Hong Kong and it's not very commonplace, what is your perspective of how well it is being received? And is there much resistance?

*Rose:* My feeling is that, yes, it is very young, I feel, in Hong Kong. And people who practice it actually are trying to explore how to go forward, what are the skills that can be used, etcetera. And it's well-received in a small group of professionals, but it's not mainstream because in the mainstream, there's bound to be a lot of resistance, I'm sure. Of those who practice animal-assisted therapies, most of them are small organizations. For big organizations, they are more bureaucratic, and it's more difficult because they think more technically. And you have to have a therapy animal going into the facilities, which in itself in Hong Kong, sometimes it's not easy. And then also because living with a companion animal is still not very common in Hong Kong, both limited by space and limited by a lot of the housing. In both private and public housing, there are policies of not allowing animals.

A lot of people look at AAT with caution. In terms of like a person, maybe they don't feel the animal will be able to help. I think the common feeling about animals is that they have to depend on humans for their well-being and survival, which of course is true in a way, but I think a lot of people in Hong Kong see the animal like an object, as something of a plaything.

*Cynthia:* Instead of a friend or a family member or a companion, as a sort of distant object that has to take my time away from other things.

*Rose:* Or an object that's like a wonderful handbag.

*Cynthia:* A handbag?

*Rose:* Yes. A pretty little thing that you can show off to your friends.

*Cynthia:* As opposed to a living being that you can have a relationship with.

*Rose:* Yes, but I'm very happy that I think we have more people having interest, developing interest in using AAT in their professional practice, which I think is very positive because it's not just people



who love animals. They want to work with the animal professionally and trying to understand, trying to come to workshops, go for trainings themselves, to learn more about it. I feel that there is more and more professional people in Hong Kong becoming interested in it.

*Cynthia:* And that was reflected, I think, in the conference attendance. There were a lot of individuals there that are practicing and some that were not practicing but were very curious and interested in possibly practicing, and they came to learn more about it. That's very promising for the field here, I think.

*Paul:* It is, and I want to add something on top of Rose's comments. We have a lot of socioenvironmental difficulties when we talk about AAT. I remember when I was maybe still five. That was like in the 1970s or 80s. People keep saying, if when you become rich, you live in Western-style houses just like the high-rise building, and then you possess purebreds, which is a really common thinking, as a symbol of wealth. So that was very common since I was born and probably until even now, maybe. So that's why some people see having a purebred as a possession like a handbag. Then we have mongrels; those are the dogs that they adopt and are being put in a construction site and then look after the security. And then when the site is closed, then they leave the dogs there.

*Cynthia:* Just abandon them, the dogs. They don't understand or appreciate these mongrels, these mixed breeds.

*Paul:* Right. So that's how quite a fair amount of Hong Kong people still see purebreds and mongrels, like that. And when we talk about mongrels and using mongrels as AAT partners, people are so skeptical. People are scared that mongrels are dirty, they have germs, they are . . .

*Rose:* They're unpredictable. They will bite.

*Paul:* They're aggressive and not normal. Those are the most difficult and the major obstacles that we have to change or to break through, the mentality of the local people of how they see different types of dogs, regardless of whether it's AAA or AAT or even animal-assisted education. If you bring a small purebred to a school, it might be more welcome than bringing a whole bunch of mongrels to the school.

*Cynthia:* Because of the cultural bias against the mixed breeds, that is, these mongrels.

*Paul:* Yeah. That's one of the things I think is very hard to break through.

*Cynthia:* What are some other difficulties for people who want the field of animal-assisted therapy to grow in Hong Kong? Are there other barriers that you also think might be there?

*Paul:* Definitely funding because Hong Kong doesn't have a lot of expenditure in our GDP [gross domestic product] for health care.

We have a really small amount of GDP compared with other wealthy societies. We have the small amount of GDP for health care, and this is even more true for the so-called mental health or psychological health. So with a small amount of funding available, this kind of funding will probably distribute to other more advanced types of therapy or interventions that have advocates, for example, cognitive behavioral therapy. Whenever there's a new intervention or new modality that comes along, people are skeptical. But the point is we have a really small amount of pot [money] from the government and I don't think the government is willing nor is happy to fund innovative research.

And then we have to rely on private funders, funding from private people, and it's getting harder and harder because the private funders or the private funding, they're probably influenced by the mentality of the government. They look for evidence. If you don't have evidence, they'd rather not fund it.

*Cynthia:* And that's one of the reasons you're so interested in the research and the program evaluation, to try to build up the evidence here in Hong Kong of why these programs are effective. Then that also may help you eventually convince someone to give more funding.

*Paul:* Absolutely. So Rose and I talk about this; we really want to help not just the client. We want to help the animals too, so it's not just the clients. And if we don't help by building up the evidence on that, there might be animals still in the streets. They are not adopted. They are not helping other people. So as a researcher too, that's how we can contribute. Myself, I don't practice AAT. I don't think I have the skills. I don't think I have the ability yet, but I can contribute immediately as a researcher. So that's how we got involved.

*Rose:* I want to add on what Paul said about difficulties of developing AAT in Hong Kong, and another thing, of course, is training. For me, especially at the beginning, I found it very difficult to identify what is a typical training for me because we do not have many people who know about AAT in Hong Kong. I think now it is better. People are more aware of what training resources are available, maybe not in Hong Kong locally.

And also another thing which I think would be a barrier in developing AAT in Hong Kong is there are not a lot of therapists who may be interested in AAT, or they do not have their own therapy animal. I think that could be a barrier, if every time you have to borrow someone else's animal; it takes a lot of arrangement, especially in Hong Kong. Not a lot of people have their own private cars. Hong Kong is not a suitable place to drive your private car, and animals cannot go on public transport. So just physically making arrangement to get the borrowed therapy animal to the

place where you work is difficult. So I think this is another barrier that we have to deal with in developing AAT in Hong Kong as well.

*Cynthia:* You're both invested in this. You see the potential of how it can help people, how it can help the dogs. So what are your hopes and dreams for the development of animal-assisted therapy in Hong Kong?

*Paul:* I wish that we can build up the evidence for AAT as an evidence-based practice for helping people in need, especially among Asians. This is what I think and I hope that we can do.

*Rose:* I share with Paul, and also as more like a dream that, by showing evidence that AAT actually helps human life, we give the animal their proper honor and value in the world we live in. My dream is that through this kind of work that we do that bit by bit if we'll build up evidence. People realize that the beings on Earth actually share the same environment. So that's my dream.

*Cynthia:* Animals are something to be honored. They're much more than an object. They're a being.

*Rose:* Yes.

*Cynthia:* A lovely being that can nurture and love. All right, I want to give you the final word. Any last thoughts on your mind that you would like to share with the rest of the world about animal-assisted therapy in Hong Kong?

*Paul:* There are many obstacles because of the unique situation in Hong Kong, and I'm very happy that we had the conference. We have you with us, and you met a lot of people who are interested about AAT. And this group of people, if we work hard, we work together, we can make such a really difficult place to practice AAT as one of the easiest places to practice AAT in the world.

Hong Kong is a small place. I always call Hong Kong a public laboratory. If we test out something in a particular region or area in Hong Kong, that would affect at least 600,000 people because we have 7 million people total in Hong Kong. If we have one particular district and make it really user-friendly, environment-friendly, animal-friendly, we can act out our dream about doing AAT, and then we can use that as the showcase for the whole world. That if something changes mentally, sociologically, politically, environmentally, then 600,000 in one district, at least, will benefit from it.

*Cynthia:* So, Rose, what would you like to say, final thoughts to the rest of the world about animal-assisted therapy in Hong Kong, where you'd like to see it grow?

*Rose:* I haven't really thought about that, like long-term vision. What I want to say is, my belief is, that AAT is just one means, one of the means to let us understand or to let us see the life of every being



needs our respect. AAT is a means for us to understand living things around us better and show respect to other beings who share the world with us.

*Cynthia:* Well, thank you so much. I appreciate that you've taken some time to be with us today. You've had a very busy weekend. You've worked very hard bringing together people for the conference over the past three days, and this was a nice culminating event for us. I appreciate the opportunity to come to Hong Kong and meet with you and visit with you and share this time with you. It's been very valuable for me and for my graduate assistant, Tiffany Otting. We're honored to be here.

*Paul:* Thank you very much.

*Rose:* Thank you very much, and thank you for coming.

Dr. Wong and Rose Yu were both involved in researching the efficacy of the animal-assisted intervention (AAI) service at the Chinese Evangelical Zion Church (n.d.) – a program directed by Steven Lai and Fanny Leung. Steven and Fanny had presented at the Animal-Assisted Therapy Conference that was sponsored by the University of Hong Kong. I interviewed with Steven Lai and Fanny Leung on June 5, 2015.

### Interview with Steven Lai and Fanny Leung

*Cynthia:* I understand that animal-assisted interventions are practiced at the Chinese Evangelical Zion Church. Please share what you do, the population that you work with, and how you incorporate animal-assisted therapy in helping the population that you work with, the kind of animals, and the type of activities.

*Steven:* We have two programs to use AAT to serve people. One of the programs, the name is Regain Momentum program, and the service target is hidden youth in Hong Kong. This is one of the programs that we run by using casework and also AAT to help them. And another program is the Touch program, where we use AAT to help elderly people in our society. And the details, maybe Fanny can talk more about.

*Fanny:* Because the socially withdrawn youth are usually so shy or afraid to connect with people, we use an animal to make a connection with them. We may make a home visit, and we would counsel the youth together with the animal, with the participation of an animal. We would have some animal activities, AAT activities, such as pet grooming, skill training, and some thought gathering. The youth can participate in those activities; in other words, they are connecting with other people as well.

*Cynthia:* And the animals. Are they limited to dogs, or are there other types of species that participate?

- Fanny:* Most of our animals are dogs because dogs are more sociable. We have two cats in our center also, as some of our youth are more keen on cats than dogs. They would be afraid of a dog but love a cat.
- Steven:* In Hong Kong, cats and dogs are the most available animals or pets that we have. There is no other kind of animal that can be accepted in a domestic unit. Some people like goldfish or turtles, but they are not very suitable for our intervention means. So we use dogs and cats. Most people know dogs and cats, and they have a familiar impression about them. So that's what we use to provide our AAT.
- Cynthia:* The culture of Hong Kong is familiar with dogs and cats, and so it's accepted to have them integrated into a social services program. You say that the youth, when they spend time with the animals, petting the animals, grooming the animals, they're also engaging with other humans. So the animals serve as a catalyst for practicing social skills. How effective do you think it's working?
- Steven:* We've done the research, two research projects. Hong Kong youth help us to do two research projects. The research shows that our intervention has a positive change.
- Fanny:* Yes, mainly three things: low self-esteem, social anxiety, and perceived employability. And the outcomes are very inspiring and remarkable.
- Cynthia:* That's great. We heard that University of Hong Kong researchers assisted you by coming in and doing a formal program evaluation and they have found statistically significant changes in the withdrawn youth who interact with the therapy dogs in these three areas of social anxiety, self-esteem, and perceived employability.
- Okay, tell me about the other program. You said that there is work with the elderly?
- Fanny:* Yes. We launched a one-year AAT project with the elderly in Wong Tai Sin. Wong Tai Sin in Hong Kong is the district having the highest population of elderly. We want to use our animal and our youth also as volunteers to visit them and to give them joy because they are all living by themselves and they feel lonely and depressed. So we want to give them joy and give them some warmth from the youth and the animal.
- Cynthia:* The youth that visit the elderly with the animals, are those the same youth that are in your withdrawn youth program?
- Fanny:* Yes, some of them are. We want them to get more improvement by helping others, to go from one being helped to one who can help.
- Cynthia:* I can see how you would get the increased scores in the self-esteem and perceived capability, or employability, because they can see how they can make a difference in other people's lives. So it's nice how you've merged the two programs, helping the elderly

feel less lonely and helping the youth practice their social skills at the same time by sharing the animals with the elderly.

*Fanny:* Yeah, and it is very interesting, as the youth also told me that they will be speechless when they visit the elderly without the animal. But if there is an animal with them that they are very familiar with, like Fat-fat, our therapy dog, they feel so secure and so confident in introducing the dog.

*Cynthia:* So they actually tell you that, if they didn't have the dog there and they were asked to visit with an elderly person, they wouldn't be able to do it. They would be speechless; they couldn't find the words.

*Fanny:* Yeah.

*Cynthia:* But having the dog there, they have the confidence. So the dog is serving as a social bridge, providing them with that self-esteem, that confidence, that perceived capability to socially engage.

*Fanny:* And also, responsibility because they promised to visit the elderly and they don't want to disappoint them. So even if there is a day with heavy raining, they feel like they still need to take the therapy dog to the home visit with the elder. They may think of not going, but then they think the elder will be disappointed, will be unhappy, and then they try.

*Steven:* Keep their promise.

*Fanny:* They are very fast to take the dog to the home, to the elder's home. But all of them are wet.

*Steven:* That's the reason that we think, we believe, that AAT is useful to people. Our aim is to serve hidden youth, and we think that we show that there is something meaningful for animal to help people. Then we start another program to help elderly, still by using animal, AAT, to help them. We want to know more about how far AAT can go to help people.

*Cynthia:* One of your animals is a dog named Fat-fat? What breed, or is it a mixed breed?

*Steven:* Hard to say.

*Fanny:* I'm not sure.

*Steven:* We have to tell this little dog's story first, okay? He's abandoned before, so we just check his species by looking how he looks. We believe it is Pug.

*Steven:* Yeah, and it is maybe a little bit crossbreeding, right?

*Fanny:* We're not sure.

*Cynthia:* The dog has found a home serving in this program.

*Steven:* Yes, yes.

*Cynthia:* Do you have any other dogs serving in your program?

*Steven:* We have many dog organizations. They help us too.

*Fanny:* Dog partners.

*Steven:* Dog partners. They provide the handler and their dogs that help us.



*Fanny:* And we have also recruited some pet owners and their dogs.

*Steven:* In the local area.

*Fanny:* Yes.

*Cynthia:* So you rely a lot on volunteers?

*Steven:* Mm-hmm (affirmative).

*Fanny:* Yeah.

*Cynthia:* Pet owners who will bring their dogs and pet handlers who provide the dogs to come in.

*Cynthia:* Well, it sounds like you feel you've had a great deal of success in helping the withdrawn youth develop social skills and confidence, a sense of responsibility, and lower anxiety and have assisted the elderly to not feel so lonely. And all of this is because they get an opportunity to spend time with the dogs, grooming the dogs, sharing the friendliness of the dogs. Is there anything else that you would like to share about your program that would help people understand how good you feel about your program, why you think it's important, and why it works? Any final comments?

*Fanny:* I think AAT gives us a unique and exciting way of serving our youth, which we haven't thought of before. We have worked on these two projects for four years. So our teams have been very excited in doing them, but at the same time, there is some frustration because there are some limitations in bringing a pet. You need to coordinate so many things, not only just your client, but the animal and the pet owners. So yes, we also need much support from our organizations and our clients to work on this continuously.

*Cynthia:* It's sometimes very difficult to manage having the dogs available, having the pet owners take the time to bring the dogs in.

*Fanny:* Yes.

*Cynthia:* It is a challenge to have volunteers available to help the youth interact with the dogs. It's a great deal to manage because you rely so much on outside support.

*Steven:* Yes.

*Cynthia:* That can be very frustrating. It's worth it. It's worthwhile, but it's hard to keep it going.

*Steven:* It means this can be a very chaotic situation, okay. But it's not a large problem. We just keep going. It's good.

*Cynthia:* It's worthwhile. It's worth keeping going. It's worth the frustration. And I love the name of your withdrawn youth program, which is Regain Momentum. You have seen that this does give the youth momentum, not only in the short term, but it has a long-term impact.

What has been some of the long-term benefits for these withdrawn youth who have participated in the program? Do you see that it carries over to maybe getting employment or being

able to socially interact? Is there any long-term benefits that come from it?

*Fanny:* I see there is a kind of feeling of belongingness to our organization. Whatever or whenever they are frustrated or failed in their job or any relationships, they will come back. Compared to the work without the dog, they may just get stuck in their home and then can't seek any help. But because of the dog, they have built up their relationship here. So whenever they are depressed and unhappy, they will think, "There is a dog here," and they will come back.

*Cynthia:* They have a place they can reach out to, to go back to and get help for their depression so they don't feel like they can't ever go back if they struggle.

*Fanny:* Yes. Even when a social worker is not here anymore, they changed their job or quit, they, the social worker, will come back also, because the dog is still here.

*Cynthia:* That must feel good, to know that it is a place that is so meaningful to social workers and service users that they come back and visit the dog from time to time. Sometimes when they're struggling in life or maybe just because they miss the dog and want to visit with the dog.

*Fanny:* Yes. Just miss the dog is okay.

*Steven:* I think the dog is one reason that they come back easily. Because it is hard for Chinese people to say, "I have problem" or "Can you get me help?" I don't know, maybe in Western world it's easier to get counseling, to get therapy.

*Fanny:* Here it is a stigmatization.

*Steven:* But in Chinese people, even if they think, "Oh, I come to see social worker. Oh, okay, I get help." Most of them get okay and then get out, but if they have problem again, it's even harder for them to get back for help. But in our center, where we have dogs and cats, it just seems normal to get back. They feel, "Okay, I say hi to the dogs. Who cares? At the same time, I can see the social workers." We have check-ins. We communicate about their recent situation, "Oh, what's up and down?" We can easily chat together and find out information, or maybe we can start over. We can start again, and it is an alternative way for us to keep in touch, an alternative way for them to show us they are okay or they are not okay.

*Cynthia:* That's very powerful. What you're saying is that it's very typical for the culture that people don't reach out to the resources. Even if they do reach out to the resources one time, they're not likely to repeat it, and that's too bad because they're limiting themselves to resources that could be very helpful. The presence of the dog and the cat gives them an excuse though. It gives them a motivation to get back if they need to and use a resource that can be very

helpful to them. Because in their mind, they're like, "Oh, I'm just going to go visit the dog or the cat." But they also know they probably need to go back because they are depressed, because they're anxious. It helps them get over their own barrier, maybe a cultural barrier. They can take advantage of a resource that they might not be willing to do if it didn't have an opportunity to visit with a dog or a cat. That's very powerful, isn't it?

*Fanny:* Mm-hmm [affirmative].

*Steven:* It's good.

*Cynthia:* Very, very powerful. So you would say you're pretty happy with your work?

*Fanny:* It's also very hard.

*Steven:* It's hard, but it's worth it to do it. And we seem to have proved that we have some steps that are good, effective.

*Fanny:* There are lot of things we need to learn also.

*Steven:* Yeah.

*Fanny:* Especially therapy skills, how to do the interventions. Our team also has some frustration. "Am I doing AAT, or am I a social worker?"

*Steven:* "Am I a farmer? To train dogs?"

*Fanny:* "What I am doing?"

*Cynthia:* "What am I?"

*Fanny:* Yes. "What am I? What I am doing now? Is it really what I need to do?" Sometimes, when there are so many dog activities, they question, "Am I still a social worker?"

*Steven:* We have to explain to the public, and we explain to the client, "Oh, what we are doing, that is a social work element." Something like that. We are not just pet grooming or just coming with a dog.

*Cynthia:* You have to educate the public about the benefits of spending time with an animal. You say they might just say, "Why are you teaching my child to groom a dog?" You have to explain it's because it makes them feel better. Their self-esteem goes up. So you have to explain that it actually has emotional benefits that help them and give them social practice skills that they so desperately need. Constantly explaining can be tiring at times but very useful to educate the public about how beneficial the animals can be.

*Steven:* Yes.

*Fanny:* Yeah.

*Steven:* Honestly, we are so excited when we claim to the public that we use AAT to help youth and elderly because we think of it as work. Not from only our viewpoint but also by client feedback. It's good. I mean, in different parts of the world there's AAT. In Hong Kong, there's AAT. We know how to make it work in Hong Kong. It is happening, and it is really important.



*Cynthia:* You say sometimes you ask yourself, "How do I define myself?" I think, because you're doing so many different activities with the dogs. But the bottom line, what I hear you saying is, the outcome is there. You see that it helps the people that you serve. It helps the youth. It helps the elderly. Even the researchers who have come in to measure your program and evaluate it are saying, "Yes, we see that there are measurable effects that are happening." You have to assume that you are being therapeutic if people are getting better. And if you are being therapeutic because people are getting better in the ways that they need to, with social skills and decreased loneliness and decreased anxiety, that does make you a social worker. That does make you a therapist, and you've incorporated the animals to assist you. That makes you an animal-assisted therapist also.

So good work. I attended the conference here, and I was very impressed with the program when you presented it at the conference today. I'm very excited that you agreed to be a part of this interview because I wanted you to share your program with the rest of the world about what was happening here in Hong Kong. Because wouldn't you say animal-assisted therapy is not very common here? It's new and it's not very common, and it seems to me that your program is one of the few programs that exist and also that is therapeutic, because it's run by social workers, and it's very effective. I think, in my opinion, your program really stands out there as an exceptional program. Would you agree with that?

*Steven:* Yes. It is really an exceptional program that proves AAT and social work can combine together.

*Fanny:* Yeah.

*Cynthia:* Do you feel that in some ways, even though it's not perfect and you have your frustrations, that you can be a model to encourage other programs similar to yours to develop?

*Steven:* Yes.

*Fanny:* Yes. I think it somehow is a pilot.

*Steven:* Yeah, pilot.

*Fanny:* In Hong Kong, no other program or organization is doing AAT in this structure.

*Steven:* And in such depth.

*Fanny:* And on this scale, so we are kind of a pilot. We are happy to see other organizations that are also doing AAT in their own style.

*Steven:* In Hong Kong, there's some limitation of social service development or social therapeutic service development because all our money, funding, comes from the government. They have strict guidelines or general practice of how to provide social service. We had a really harsh time to finish all the designed work. It is really challenging.

*Fanny:* You start from zero, nearly.

*Steven:* Yeah, to start from zero and to bring up another new intervention. At the very beginning, we just read books.

*Fanny:* We also learn from some distant courses.

*Steven:* From the very beginning, just the ideas. Then try to work out something.

*Fanny:* Yes, the pilot of the pilot.

*Steven:* After we read books and we apply for funding, we make a good start. Then we try learning by doing. But we have to learn more, to study via a distant program from different places, such as your university, and where there be gatherings of people, social workers, with the same ideas. Then we get the animals and live with them and train them. Then we have the confidence, and we have information about how to apply our skill. And then we try to use our experiences to help our clients. It is a process that we have to get through. It is very true that before that, no such organization have such kind of . . .

*Fanny:* Guts.

*Steven:* Guts, yeah, to plan it. We planned it on an organizational scale. We apply for funding, and then we get dogs and cats and all the equipment. Before that we just have pet grooming from tutor to come here, just case by case. After that, we build up all the things that we need from a social worker perspective to make it work. Then we show that it is a success. Other organizations will be able to learn more from our local experience and not just by books or distant learning. They can know what we do is good here in Hong Kong, and then they can try to modify and make it in their own style. Our program is just like a . . .

*Fanny:* Spark.

*Steven:* Yeah, a spark.

*Cynthia:* That's a great journey. You had to learn from scratch, from pretty much nothing except reading books and some distant training. You had to figure out what this meant for the population you want to serve. Getting the dogs, experimenting, practicing, and wondering, "Did that work? Okay, let's do that. Did that not work? Okay, let's not do that." You did all the trial-and-error learning, and it took courage and perseverance and strength. You paved the way, and you found a way to make it work, to have successes. Now, you've accomplished that and proven that it's successful so people who may come after you and create new programs won't have all of the hardships, as many hardships, as you were willing to go through with your guts and your courage. Because you found out what worked and now they can learn from your successes.

I really appreciate your efforts, and I think other people will appreciate that very much too. Because you didn't know it was

going to work. You just hoped it would, and it did, and you proved it, and now you have a wonderful model for people to follow after. It has a chance to grow at a much faster rate. Thank you for your efforts. It's wonderful. And thank you for participating in the interview here today.

*Fanny:* Thank you.

*Steven:* Thank you.

## **Editors' Commentary for Chapter 10**

There are many challenges to integrating animal-assisted interventions into social services in Hong Kong. Hong Kong is among the most densely populated countries in the world with the smallest average living space (Yu, 2017). Thus, pet ownership is among the lowest in the world. Most public and many private housing units do not allow pets. Space for walking or exercising a dog is greatly limited. Personal car ownership is inconvenient, and public transportation prohibits pets. Given that animal-assisted intervention most commonly involves work with domesticated pets, limited pet ownership directly results in reduced availability of qualified therapy animals (Yu, 2017). Because of many environmental and cultural barriers, it is remarkable that animal-assisted intervention is gradually gaining in popularity among social and educational service providers in Hong Kong.

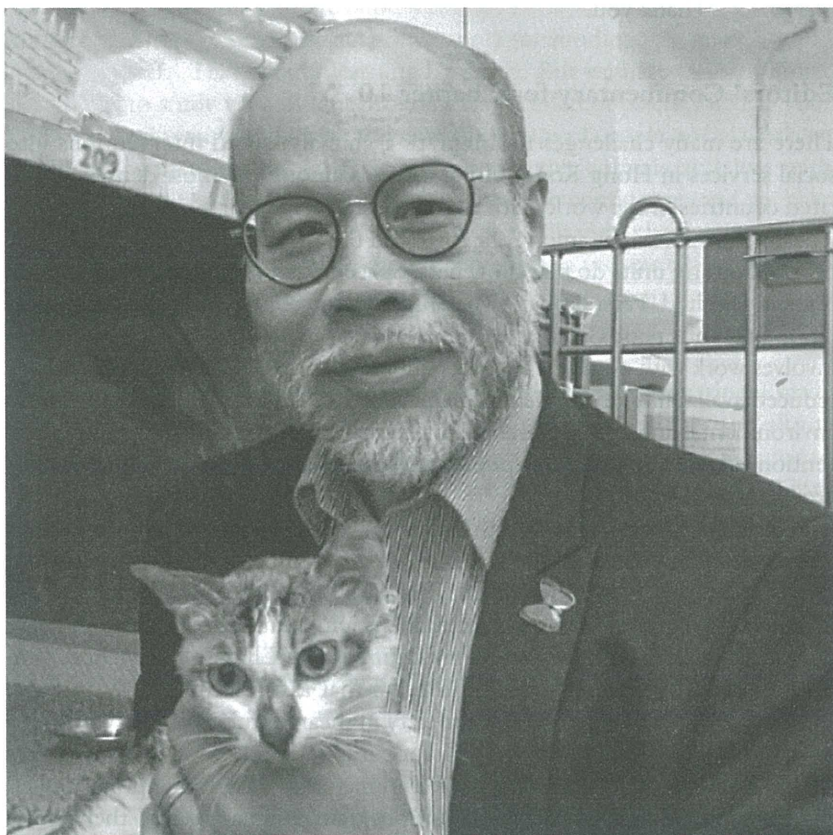
People we interviewed for this chapter represent some of the earliest practitioners and researchers in Hong Kong of animal-assisted interventions for emotional and mental health. Dr. Fan, with his dual concern for animal and human welfare, developed ways for humans and animals to support and care for one another. Steven Lai and Fanny Leung of the Chinese Evangelical Zion Church integrated animals into a program that assisted the elderly and also withdrawn youth to reengage with society in meaningful ways. Dr. Wong and Rose Yu provided credibility for the work at Zion Church with research that reflected significant clinical efficacy for animal-assisted interventions applied within the framework of a social service program. Animal-assisted therapy is a relatively novel approach to social services in Hong Kong. The individuals in this chapter collaborated to provide scientific evidence that animal-assisted interventions are a viable form of therapy for this culture (Yu, 2017). It was their expressed hope that their practice and research will attract the publicity and financial resources needed to continue their work and to open doors for additional animal-assisted social services in Hong Kong.

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*Figure 10.1* Dr. William Fan is a psychiatrist and the president of the Hong Kong Animal Therapy Foundation. Photo copyright of Dr. William Fan (used with permission); photographer unknown.



*Figure 10.2* Dr. Wong, Wai-Ching Paul is an associate professor in the Department of Social Work and Social Administration at the University of Hong Kong. Photo copyright of Dr. Paul Wong (used with permission); photographer unknown.

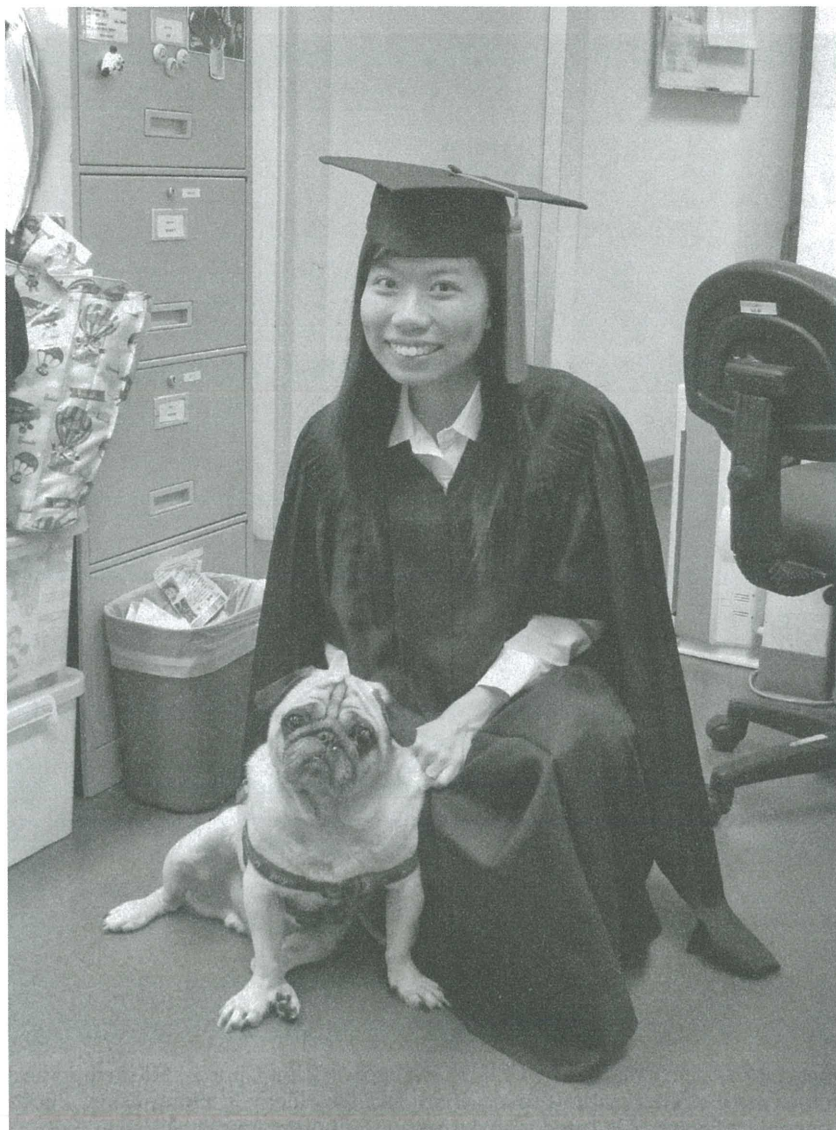


*Figure 10.3* Yu, Wai Man Rose. At the time of our interview, she was a researcher of animal-assisted therapy and a doctoral student in the Department of Social Work and Social Administration at the University of Hong Kong; she has since completed her doctoral studies. Photo copyright of Rose Yu (used with permission); photographer unknown.





*Figure 10.4* Steven Lai of the Chinese Evangelical Zion Church. He incorporates animal-assisted interventions to aid youth and the elderly in Hong Kong. Photo copyright of Steven Lai (used with permission); photographer unknown.



*Figure 10.5* Fanny Leung of the Chinese Evangelical Zion Church. She incorporates animal-assisted interventions to aid youth and the elderly in Hong Kong. Photo copyright of Fanny Leung (used with permission); photographer unknown.