

Wilfred Wong Ying-wai

From hosting a radio talk show and managing a golf club to public service, life is a non-stop juggling act for the former civil servant, he tells Yvonne Lai.

“A typical day starts at 6am. I shower and shave, and make sure I look good for the day [laughs]. I’m out of the door by 7am. Until recently, I’d go to Metro Radio, where I was hosting a talk show [*Info Bravo*] thrice a week. I had two co-hosts and we commented on the latest news.

Morning talk shows are too heavy these days; people talk about politics and direct elections and all that. Life should be fun. I digest information and apply my personal experience and the way I look at things, my philosophy. I try to make it lively. A while back we talked about The Peninsula celebrating its 80th anniversary. I have fond memories of the hotel. We chatted about how it used to be, what makes it a great hotel. The morning banter is cut with reports on the financial market and advertising. The show ended at 9am.

Other days, I have breakfast meetings, typically at 8am, at the Hong Kong Club or China Club. Then, if I need to go to my offices at the Mission Hills Golf Club [where Wong is chief executive and executive vice-chairman], I take the car and I am in Shenzhen by 10.30am. Lunch is business – meetings in the club house with clients, Chinese government officials or staff. I hardly have time for breaks. I have meetings non-stop throughout the day and finish typically around 6pm.

If we have dinner meetings, I host them at 6pm and come back to Hong Kong by 7.30pm for public engagements. If not, I come back to Hong Kong for dinner.

I have three assistants and I’m getting a fourth. I have a PA and a PS [personal secretary] in Shenzhen. I have a secretary in the Hong Kong offices who organises all my appointments and co-ordinates papers. The new assistant will handle all the speech-engagement requests, which I have been doing on my own until now.

I graduated from the University of Hong Kong in 1975 and began a 17-year career as a civil servant. For about seven years in the 1970s I was a district commissioner [for Kwun Tong] with the Home Affairs Department. At one stage, Kwun Tong was the largest district in Hong Kong, sub-divided into 12 areas. Each area has a committee and these committees are made up of working-class people, who could only attend meetings after work and dinner – around 8.30pm. I was the first commissioner to attend every meeting.

My staff said, ‘What? All 12 nights, every month?’ I said, ‘Yes, how else will I know what I can do for my people?’ Of course, I was not married then.

When I was the district commissioner, I introduced electricity to the squatter huts on the Kwun Tong hillside.



At the time, the government did not provide electricity as the huts were classified as illegal. I had children bringing candles to my office, to show that they had to do home-work by candlelight. I thought, ‘OK, that’s a problem.’

I told the squatters, ‘You want electricity but you are not organised. I want a committee set up.’ Then I identified areas where I could erect poles for electricity cables. I had to relocate three or four families but I made sure they got government housing.

Then I went to China, Light & Power and told them they could collect money from the committee. Then, I went to the government officials and told them my plan. They said, ‘OK, try it.’ When you have problems, there are ways to solve them without a big budget.

I had risen through the ranks of the civil service at a relatively young age. In 1992, five years before the hand-over, I was contemplating what to do for the rest of my life. I saw China as this growing economic force and I knew if I remained in the civil service I couldn’t be part of it. At the time, Hong Kong government officials were not allowed to meet or interact with the Chinese as we were still under British rule. I decided to join the private sector and was fortunate to be asked to become the chief executive of different companies.

I didn’t get to where I am now on my own; I benefited from Hong Kong: I went to university here, the government sent me to Harvard and Oxford [universities]. That’s why I’ve always wanted to give back – and the best way to do

that is to do as much as you can. I’m now the council chairman at the Baptist University and chairman of the Hong Kong International Film Festival. I’m on the Welfare Advisory Committee, the Airport Authority board, the Hong Kong Tourism Board and the Film Development Council.

People ask me why I don’t say no [to new appointments]. I don’t know how to. Many who approach me for help are former colleagues. They trust me, and if I can squeeze in the time, I try to accommodate them. My wife says I’m living three lives in one.

The only meal I have at home is probably Sunday brunch. My two kids live in the US, so my wife is on her own. A few months ago we went to the Shun Hing company’s 50th anniversary, which was a [pianist] Lang Lang concert at the Hong Kong Coliseum. When we got home, around 10pm, because it was my National People’s Congress election period, I had to sign hundreds of letters to my voters – I don’t like chops, they don’t give people a good feeling. So, I was not in bed until 2am.

On weekends, if I have time, I play golf or go to the movies with my wife; she’s a movie buff. I have one of the best home theatre systems, with a Blu-ray player and the works. I love music. I buy CDs but there are piles of them I have never opened.

It’s a sense of commitment that keeps me going. Every morning, when I wake up, I think it’s so good to be alive. It means I can do one more day’s work. Service is what life is all about. ”