

## FEATURES

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# 'Rent-a-dog' pleases some canine lovers, has others barking mad

*Enthusiasts say renting dogs helps people learn how to treat canines better, but many animal lovers deride the concept as cruel*

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**Coco** is a golden retriever with soft, silky honey-colored fur and bright black eyes who wags her tail when you call her name. She is smart enough to add and subtract, or at least give the impression that she can do basic arithmetic, and will shake hands with you or fetch a Frisbee. Coco is a dog that any dog lover would be happy to call his or her own — and for NT\$1,000 a year, they can, one weekend at a time.

Coco's owner is Jack Zhu (朱寶生), a dog trainer who has run the Golden Retriever Club (黃金拾獵犬俱樂部) in Taipei for six years. The club's 1,023 members can join Zhu and his dogs for group trips to the park, or they can take the dogs home for three days to a week at a time.

The rent-a-pet concept has grown in popularity worldwide, even as many animal advocates voice their disapproval. Some canine lovers who long for a faithful companion but are short on time or space say that renting dogs is a good solution until they can raise a pet of their own. Zhu is also adamant that letting members borrow his golden retrievers helps them better understand dogs and, in turn, learn how to treat them properly.

"The main purpose of the Golden Retriever Club is to rescue dogs *and* people. A lot of people just don't understand dogs," says Zhu.

Ten years ago, Zhu, who originally trained seeing-eye dogs, saw golden retrievers for the first time during a trip to the US. Impressed by their easygoing nature and trainability, Zhu brought back two dogs with him. Now he has a total of 20 golden retrievers (and one Jack Russell terrier, named Jack), who live with him and his wife in Taipei's Xinyi District. On a recent visit, half of them were out with group members. When the dogs aren't with their temporary owners, they spend their days hanging around the hobby shop Zhu runs on the ground floor of his building.

Zhu founded the Golden Retriever Club in 2002 after several dogless friends asked if they could take one of his golden retrievers home with them for a few days. The group's members come from as far away as Taichung and Kaohsiung and are allowed to take dogs home for three days to a week, depending on their commute time to Taipei City. Zhu and his dogs also occasionally hold informal performances at the Xinyi District's Shin Kong Mitsukoshi (新光三越) complex, during which the golden retrievers demonstrate how adroit they are at catching Frisbees and following commands.

Jiang Li-rui (姜禮瑞) became a member in July after his wife read about Zhu in a newspaper and says that his family plans to borrow a golden retriever once every two months or so. Both he and his wife work full-time and don't feel like they have time to care for or train a dog properly.

Renting a dog is a compromise that works for his family, says Jiang, who adds that he feels safe letting his three young children play with Zhu's highly trained golden retrievers and take them for walks in the park.

"We have a room that we wanted to keep off-limits to the dogs, and they just seemed to sense that. When they are indoors, they are very calm and they don't run around or bark," says Jiang.

Jiang says his family had adopted a dog from a wild dog rescue organization, but once home they found that the dog had not been properly housebroken and had a difficult time adjusting to living inside a city apartment.

"Our dog needed a lot of training and it was very difficult for us, because we both work full-time and didn't have the time we needed to spend with him," says Jiang. Jiang's mother-in-law, who lives in the countryside, eventually adopted their dog.

Zhu himself complains that many people are inspired to adopt a dog without considering the amount of work that goes into caring for and training one. He hopes that his members, who he teaches

how to treat dogs, learn from their experience with his rental dogs.

"They might see someone out playing with their dog and think how beautiful it is, how fun, without considering the amount of work it takes to raise one," says Zhu. "I've seen people out walking their dogs who just can't handle them. They struggle and the dogs

struggle, and it's hard on both of them."

Potential members are screened by Zhu, who estimates that over the past six years he has accepted just one out of every 10 applications he's received. As part of the process, Zhu interviews applicants about their household, income and general knowledge of dogs, visits their homes and calls personal and professional references.

More important, says Zhu, is his "gut instinct" about a person, which he explains is based in part on how they interact with the golden retrievers, as well with Zhu himself.

"When they play with my dogs, I can tell if they are OK or not," he says. "When they enter my store, I can sense if they are OK or not."

Zhu is willing to admit that his instincts failed him once before, recounting an incident in which a former member in Taichung refused to return one of his dogs after taking him home with her for the second time. Zhu drove down and attempted to retrieve the dog, Bad Boy, but he was unsuccessful and Bad Boy still lives with the woman. All Zhu has left of the golden retriever is a giant studio headshot, which is framed and displayed prominently in his store.

"I don't understand why she wouldn't give me my dog back. It's really extremely rude," says Zhu, shaking his head. While he has learned from the experience, Zhu concedes that it could happen again and that if it did, he might get very little help from the police. In Taichung, Zhu explains, local police officers refused to believe that the woman had stolen the dog from him because they were incredulous when Zhu said that he runs an organization that rents dogs.

While the idea of borrowing a pet was alien to the police officers Zhu dealt with, the rent-a-pet concept is quickly gaining traction all over the world. Within Taiwan, there are pet stores in Taoyuan and Taitung that lend dogs, cats and other pets.

Globally, stores have opened in cities like Tokyo and New York that market similar services to busy professionals who are squeezed for space and time but still want to spend an afternoon or a weekend romping with a dog. Some animal rescue organizations have also adopted the concept. Stray Rescue of St Louis, for instance, started its Rent-A-Pet program, which allows families to take home a dog or cat from its shelter for the weekend, in a bid to increase pet adoptions.

Many animal lovers, however, deride the practice as cruel. Flexpetz, a pet-rental company that has opened branches in San Diego, Los Angeles and New York City, had a wrench thrown into their expansion plans this summer when news that they were planning to open in Boston prompted the city council to vote in favor of banning pet rentals.

Even Zhu scoffs at the idea of lending dogs as a business proposition, saying that he has never made a profit from running the Golden Retriever Club and didn't start raising golden retrievers to rent them. "A lot of those people keep their dogs in cages and spend a limited amount of time with them," Zhu says. "I am always with my dogs, 24 hours a day. All day."

But many animal advocates say that being treated like rental DVDs has a negative psychological effect on pets. Amy Zhang (張美), the head of Dog CHD (犬體關節病友會), a Taipei-based advocacy group for dogs with genetic disabilities, says that the stress of living with new households all the time hurts dogs in the long term.

"Dogs are loyal animals and they grow attached to their families. Renting them out has a negative effect on their personalities," says Zhang. She suggests an alternative for canine fans who are unsure of their ability to make a full-time commitment to a pet.

"Instead of renting, we would advise people to volunteer at a shelter or rescue organization and help them take care of their animals or take their dogs out for walks. Those dogs could really benefit from receiving some warmth and affection from people," says Zhang.

Jiang says that he hopes his family can have a dog of their own again someday, but because of their first experience, he doesn't feel that they are ready to take on the responsibility again of training a dog again.

"We need to see if our family is ready for another dog. For now, renting a dog from time to time is enough for us," says Jiang. "I know not everyone agrees with this concept. If we could adopt another dog, we would."

Jack Zhu, founder of the Golden Retriever Club, at his hobby shop in Taipei last month with a few of his golden retrievers, his Jack Russell terrier and a mixed-breed dog he was training.

PHOTOS: RON BROWNLOW, TAIPEI TIMES