Low-status employees drunk on power can be just as abusive as high-status grey suits, studies show, and may be found in work-crazed cities like Hong Kong.

Everyone knows the type: passive-aggressive, conniving, petty. Impotent kings of their own little fiefdoms, whether they're immigration officers determined to make your life miserable, security guards on a power trip or sadistic low-level supervisors.

Now it's scientific fact: It's not the big bosses in the corner office, but the mediocre tyrants with a taste for influence, who like to wield their power over others.

"The notion that absolute power corrupts absolutely is too simple," said University of Southern California researcher Nathanael Fast, one of the authors of "The destructive nature of power without status", soon to be published in the Journal of Experimental Social Psychology.

"People often assume that power and status are the same thing, but as soon as you realise they are two distinct variables, it allows you to make some new predictions."

The study runs on the premise that lacking status makes people feel disrespected and triggers an overcompensation to boost their self-worth. Having power, meanwhile, liberates people to pursue their aims. Put them together and you get pent-up chumps with the motive and the means to degrade others.

Fast, along with Nir Halevy of Stanford University and Adam Galinsky of Northwestern University, tested this by pairing up 213 undergraduates with high status ("idea producer") and low status ("worker") roles in a fictitious organisation. They were told that other students admired and respected the former role, and looked down on the latter.

Each participant then controlled the other's fate in qualifying for a draw for US$50. They could make them perform tasks ranging from the benign ("jump up and down 10 times on one leg") to the belittling ("say 'I am filthy' five times") in order to qualify. One group was told their partner had to do whatever they told them if they wanted to qualify for the money, thus giving them high power. The other group could also make their colleague jump through the hoops, but their partner could remove their name from the raffle if they disliked the tasks.

Eventually the low-status, high-power people were nearly twice as likely to choose demeaning chores than neutral ones.

But do the results hold up in Hong Kong, a city infamous for its obsession with work and traditionally rigid hierarchies?

Power distance - the extent to which subordinates perceive the chasm in equality between them and their superiors - is well known to be high in Hong Kong and even higher than the East Asian average.

The concept was pioneered by Dutch psychologist Geert Hofstede in the 1980s and the implication is that where power distance is high, people see each other as less equal, and that can justify abuse of influence towards others. Even people holding low-level yet powerful positions will perceive an inflated sense of worth over others below them.

"It's the arrogance of power, which is the precursor to the abuse of power (hellip) Because you think you can do anything," said Gilbert Wong Yao-ye, an associate business professor specialising in Chinese management at the University of Hong Kong.

In a hierarchical culture, those in power know those below can't do anything about abuse, and those being degraded are willing to endorse their own suffering. "It breeds a culture of acceptance," he said.

On top of that, this city is notorious for putting a high social value on work. The problem is that
when self-worth is exclusively derived from employment, people cling insecurely to status, opening up the potential for abuse of power.

Indeed, Hong Kong people work 48.7 hours per week (far above the International Labour Organisation's recommendation of 40 hours per week), with only 11.4 hours for personal activities, according to a survey by Community Business, a corporate social responsibility NGO, last year. And a recent study by consultants Towers Watson attributed to workplace pressure the fact that only 47 per cent of Hong Kong employees in mid- to large-sized firms said they were in good health, compared with 61 per cent globally.

"There's a large population in Hong Kong that derive their self-esteem from their work," said Larry Farh Jiing-lih, chair professor of management at the Hong Kong University of Science and Technology, and expert in Chinese organisations.

"So when they have low-status work, they are likely to have low self-esteem. And when they are given power, they are more likely to abuse it," he said.

However, he added that the culture of professionalism, clear codes of conduct and a strong rule of law in Hong Kong served as a check and balance on blatant abuse.

It is not surprising, then, that the remedy to mediocre people's power abuse, according to Fast's study, is "showering low-status power holders with flattery".

But there a lot of other reasons why people use their power to debase others. Researchers from Hong Kong Baptist University, the University of Canberra in Australia and Brunel University in Britain showed in 2007 - perhaps to the surprise of very few people - that abusive managers were likely to have authoritarian managers above their rank who treated them unfairly.

Other studies have found that everything from narcissism to self-perceived incompetence vexes people enough to act out against their fellow humans.

"I do think that there are numerous forces serving to corrupt those with high levels of power, but there are countless people who overcome those forces and use their power wisely and effectively," Fast said.

Indeed there were high-power "workers" in the experiment on undergraduates who did not choose to humiliate their partners.

Conversely, in the real world, examples of high-power and high-status people abusing their position are both frequent and blatant. Not all are enlightened despots.

Chicago Mayor Rahm Emanuel terrifies his staff, Italian Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi throws "bunga bunga" parties for girls half his age and Muammar Gaddafi is still being hunted for crimes against humanity.

That fits with Fast, Halevy and Galinsky's conception of power, not as leading to aggression and denigration per se, but "action facilitating".

Robert Caro, the Pulitzer-winning journalist and biographer of the famously short-tempered Lyndon Johnson, reached the same conclusion. He told Esquire: "Power doesn't always corrupt. What power always does is reveal. When a guy gets into a position where he doesn't have to worry anymore, then you see what he wanted to do all along."