



PODCAST

Ep. 17: Lau Yee-Wa on Hong Kong Fiction

We talked to the author of "Tongueless" about how Cantonese is disappearing from Hong Kong schools, and what literature can do to raise awareness.

EDITORS — FEBRUARY 4, 2025

FICTION

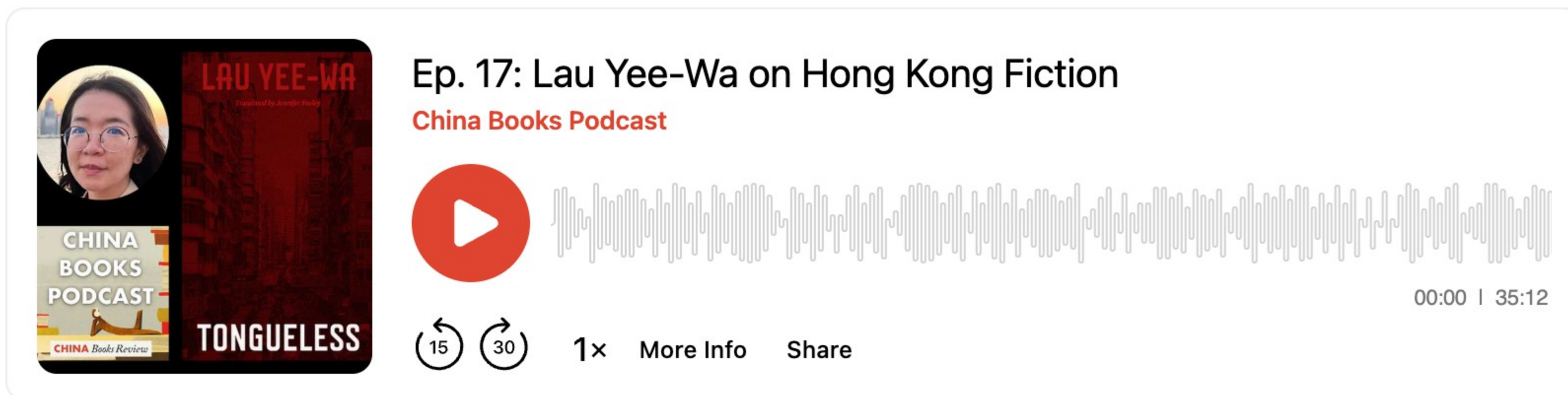
HONG KONG



This is an episode of the [China Books Podcast](#), from *China Books Review*. Follow the podcast to listen to this on your favorite platform, including [Apple Podcasts](#) and [Spotify](#), where a new episode lands early each month. Or listen to this episode right here, and browse our [archive](#) of past episodes.

When we talk about China, we're using a very imperfect shorthand for the greater Sinophone world, including Taiwan and the greater Chinese diaspora — and of course Hong Kong, which while part of the People's Republic of China has always had its own unique identity and culture, first under dynastial China, then under the British, and now under the Chinese Communist Party. "Sinophone" is the key word here, because language is a such a key marker of identity, and there are many different forms of Chinese (not to mention non-Sinitic language inside China's border). Cantonese, spoken by some 85 million speakers worldwide, is of course Hong Kong's native language, and language is at very the heart of the book we're discussing today — in this case a novel, as we very much like to include fiction in our remit at the China Books Podcast.

Our guest this month is Lau Yee-Wa, one of Hong Kong's most exciting emerging fiction writers, whose debut novel [Tongueless](#) (The Feminist Press, 2024) was published in 2019 in Chinese and came out in English last summer, translated by Jennifer Feeley. We were delighted to be joined by Lau Yee-wa to talk about the novel, Hong Kong identity, language and education, and the changes that has been undergoing in recent years:



Ep. 17: Lau Yee-Wa on Hong Kong Fiction
China Books Podcast

00:00 | 35:12

15 30 1x More Info Share

Guest



Lau Yee-Wa is a fiction writer from Hong Kong. She studied literature and then philosophy at the Chinese University of Hong Kong, where she also started writing poetry, and previously worked as an editor in a publishing house. Her 2016 short story ‘The Shark’ won the Hong Kong Champion Award for Creative Writing. Lau’s debut novel is [Tongueless](#) (The Feminist Press, 2024).

“ Even though in Hong Kong a majority of people speak Cantonese, we still think that it is an inferior language. It is not an official language. And I think, ‘Why can’t we be proud of our language?’ ”

— *Lau Yee-Wa*

Transcript

Alec Ash: Can you talk us through how you got into fiction writing and what inspired you to write *Tongueless*?

Lau Yee-Wa: It is my debut novel. Before writing *Tongueless*, I have written several short stories, which were also about Hong Kong, but it is not about language. But I want to talk about language because I think that I’m not confident in myself. I always have a kind of inferior feeling when I lived in Hong Kong. I studied Chinese language in the university. After my undergraduate, I studied an education master. That means I’m qualified to be a Chinese teacher in primary or secondary school. But because I haven’t passed the *putonghua* [standard Mandarin] requirement exam, so it is very difficult for you to find a teacher job.

In Hong Kong, many schools require Chinese teachers to pass this exam. And because I don’t like *putonghua* and I hate the *pinyin* [romanized standard Mandarin], so I haven’t passed the exam and I have been an editor instead. Even though I still love the job of being an editor, I still think that, “Oh, I’m not as good as my classmates.”

And as well in English. In Hong Kong, if you are not in good English, people may think that: “Oh, you are from a grassroots family. You are not very educated.” But if your English is good, especially if your English can speak as well as the U.S. people or the British, then people may think that: “Oh, you may be doctor. You may be lawyer. You may have very good education and in good social status.”

In Hong Kong, language defines who you are. If your English and *putonghua* is good, then you can have many job opportunities. Your competitiveness is high. But if your language is not good—you only know your mother tongue—then I think many people feel inferior with their language.

***Tongueless* really seems like quite an autobiographical novel in that respect. Indeed, one of your characters, Wai, says directly, “Whether studying English or Mandarin, Hong Kong people are always in an inferior position.” So firstly, you really should feel confident because you’re such a talented writer. I absolutely love this book. It weaves together the themes so smartly and just is a really gripping read. Thank you for coming out of your language comfort zone to talk about it with us.**

Let’s just give the readers a little bit of a grip on the book itself. It’s set inside a Hong Kong school, the Sing Din Secondary School, where these two teachers, Ling and Wai, are struggling to get by. They’re struggling to get ahead. One of them meets a tragic end and, in particular, they struggled because midway through the book the principal of the school issues an edict that Chinese classes will now be taught in Mandarin instead of Cantonese and, of course, both of these teachers are Cantonese.

Can you talk a little bit about this setup, which is quite close to real events that are happening in Hong Kong. Why did you choose education and Mandarin language teaching as the main plot line?

I think it is very close to Hong Kong situation because after the handover of 1997, the chief executive has imposed a policy that the Chinese subject should be taught by Putonghua.

I think that it is a very bad policy. Even though I haven’t been an official staff in the school, I have been a tutorial teacher teaching Chinese and I’ve got a lot of students who suffered from this policy. Chinese is a very important subject to all the Hong Kong people because we use Chinese to think, we use Chinese to express ourselves. But if you use Mandarin to teach, you use Mandarin to learn. For those students who don’t have very good ability in language, they may mix up Mandarin and also Cantonese. They may mix up and they don’t know how to express themselves. They even don’t know how to think. And so I want to express my concern about the policy, as well as I want to talk about the identity of Hong Kong people because, you know, language relates to our identity so much.

If we can use our mother tongue to learn the Chinese subject, it may affect our identity as well. And because, in Hong Kong, *putonghua* is a very official language and Cantonese is just like a dialect. Even though in Hong Kong a majority of people speak Cantonese, but we still think that it is also an inferior language. It is not an official language. And I think, “Oh, why? Why can’t we be proud of our language?” And that’s why I write it based on the real events of Hong Kong.

The very title, *Tongueless*. Could you say that title in Cantonese for our listeners?

Sat Jyu.

Which means lost language, right?

Yes.

And, of course, this is at the frontline of the war over Hong Kong’s identity, which is a very mixed identity both under the British, where Cantonese was officially only a second language of Hong Kong up until 1974. But then, of course, more recently under the PRC. Joshua Wong’s early activism was about national education curricula. There are real pushes in Hong Kong schools to teach in Mandarin, not Cantonese. There’s real pressure on teachers to take the Mandarin Language Proficiency Assessment for teachers, the LPAT, which is a major plot point of your book because the two teachers, Cantonese teachers, are under pressure to take this exam and perform well in Mandarin, otherwise they might lose their jobs.

For our listeners, can you tell us a little bit more about the differences between Cantonese and Mandarin? Cantonese is sometimes called a dialect but it really is a language. Indeed, there was a phrase I rather like: “A language is a dialect with an army.” So it really relates to power. Indeed, Cantonese is closer to ancient Chinese in many ways. It has a different pronunciation and tones, but also the grammar in written form, while using the same script, deviates from standard written Chinese to match spoken Cantonese. Can you educate us, and educate me, a little bit more about just how different the two are?

I think it is different from the tone because Cantonese has nine tones and Mandarin has only four tones. So, Cantonese is difficult to learn because it has a lot of tones. And if you’re speaking Cantonese, some people may

think that “oh, we are just like singing” because we have nine tones up and down and also we have different words. And for Mandarin, when you speak it people may think that “oh, you are much [more] tender” because in Cantonese we have some pronunciation which is very short. It’s just like that you scold someone. But in Mandarin, we don’t have that kind of tone. That means it is not short, so it’s just like, “Oh you are more polite when you speak Mandarin,” but Cantonese it’s just you are scolding. There is a lot of foul language in Cantonese. When you speak the foul language, you’ll think, “Oh, it’s so powerful.” I also know that in Mandarin there is foul language, but in Hong Kong, I think that foul language of Cantonese is very powerful.

It certainly is. I think we heard a fair amount of it in the 2019 protests directed towards the chief executive. So the narrative of your book was, in the original, written in standard written Chinese because, of course, it’s the same script but a different spoken language. But then the dialogue, as I understand it, of your original novel was written in a form which is closer to spoken Cantonese.

And this is where the skill of the translator, Jennifer Feeley, really shone through because you describe these teachers, Ling, and, especially, Wai, struggling to practice their Mandarin in order to keep their jobs. And the translator uses various tricks to show Wai is struggling with that. For example, she rather cleverly uses U.K. and U.S. English as a parallel. I might say “aubergine” and “courgette” instead of “eggplant” and “zucchini” to sort of indicate the difference in vocabulary between the two. But she also doesn’t speak Mandarin very well, which is conveyed through various malapropisms like saying that learning Mandarin is “horde lurk” instead of “hard work.”

I thought that was just a smart way of showing the pressure that she was under. Is that something you wanted to really draw out — the financial pressure and career pressure of a lot of people in Hong Kong to learn Mandarin, in order to survive?

I think Hong Kong people have been facing this pressure for a very long time. When I was young, I was forced to learn English. I put a lot of money to learn English, even though my English is not good. When I studied Chinese language, even though I don’t like *putonghua*, I still had a *putonghua* class in my undergraduate school, and I still pay some effort on that. I have even bought the book to study *pinyin*.

I think for Hong Kong people because Mandarin is more easy to learn, you can learn it from YouTube or from TV drama, it is not so hard. They need to put money on *putonghua* learning. Maybe people just like me, for example, teachers, they need to put a lot of money to learn Mandarin in order to be qualified.

But English, we still need to put a lot of money on that. In Hong Kong, it is a trend to learn English. My friends who are teachers, even though up to my age — I’m about 40s — some of them still haven’t passed the exam. They are teachers. Because the exam has four papers, they only pass three papers. They struggle to pass the last paper, which is using Mandarin to teach in a class. It is the most difficult paper and they still struggle to pass this paper in order to sustain the job. So for teachers in Hong Kong, they really get this pressure. But I still think that if compared with others, if someone can speak very good Mandarin, which means Beijing’s tongue, if they speak very fluently, we still think that, “Oh, you can get a good job in tourism or other parts.” We still think, “Oh, you’re so great. How can you learn it?” We still get this kind of feeling.

I see it. It really is a hierarchy, language, isn’t it? And even inside of *putonghua* or standard Chinese, as you’ve mentioned, that hierarchy also exists with Beijing dialect at the top, so to speak — you know, Oxford English or whatever the equivalent would be.

Do you think that this issue is getting worse? Your novel was published right before the 2019 protests. Since then, and since the 2020 security law, and also just the demographic shift of more mainlanders in Hong Kong, how has that changed the pressure on Hong Kongers to learn Mandarin? Do you think the situation is accelerating and was the book a response to increasing influence from the mainland since the handover?

If you said, what the authorities [have done]? Then, of course, it is much worse. Because my book was published before 2019. Before 2019, I really think that the Hong Kong people, they don’t have their identity and they just want to spend their money and buy what they want, eat what they want. Their focus is just earning money. So I want to write this book to analyze the identity of Hong Kong people to criticize them. And then, after 2019, some people think that my book is outdated because Hong Kong people just, like, awoke.

You know, in 2014, only a few people joined the Umbrella Revolution. At that time, the majority of Hong Kong people think, “Oh, these kinds of radical people, they make Hong Kong a mess. They just do something bad on Hong Kong.” Many Hong Kong people think that, “Oh, I want to go to work. I just want to have my normal life. Why that kind of people do something like that?”

But in 2019, 2 million Hong Kong people walked on the streets, which has never happened before. That 2 million Hong Kong people means the majority of Hong Kong people — because Hong Kong only has 7 million [people total] and then 2 million people on the street — which means they want to protest something. At that moment, people think that, “Oh, we are going to lose Hong Kong. So we need to protect it and we need to do something to protest the Hong Kong.”

But after that, because of the pandemic and also because of the increasing pressure from the government, I think that Hong Kong people just like returning back to the past, because we can't do anything. So we don't think anymore. We don't act anymore. We just think, “Oh, we have money then we can enjoy our life. We buy what we want. We play.” Before 2019, a lot of people didn't like mainland China and they [avoided] going to mainland China. But now, every weekend, a lot of Hong Kong people go to mainland China to spend their money, to enjoy the service. They think that it is cheap and they still have good quality.

I think the change is so bad. In 2019, we were so angry and we wanted to avoid anything from the government, but now it doesn't matter, we just enjoy our life.

I still think that my book can answer the questions of Hong Kong now because Hong Kong people are political, and they have been awake for a short period of time and then we return to normal now. Even though we can't do anything now, can we still do a little bit more? Perhaps we [can] think about who we are, what we can still do now. Maybe we can study Hong Kong history, which has very few people [studying] it. Or maybe we can study our language. We can build up our culture, not just spend money and then forget everything.

I have a friend who is a parent and she told me that she doesn't want to talk about the 2019 protest to her child because she doesn't want her child to be radical and do something very radical in the future and be arrested. I think that it's such a pity, even though I know that it is so scary, but it's still history. It still happened! But in Hong Kong, I think that we just return to normal, we return to our personality before 2019, and I think it is such a pity, and I think the book is still valid at this moment.

Yes. The book itself is also such a sharp satire of that apathy and capitalism, especially in the character of Ling, this teacher who's very adept at office politics. She's quite shallow and superficial in many ways. She loves to buy designer clothes and bags and gifts for her principal to try and get promoted and pursues beauty treatment.

At the very end of the book — I hope it's not too big of a spoiler, so slight spoiler warning — but this character, Ling, does, in the end, literally change her face with plastic surgery. I was wondering, am I reaching if I feel that's almost a comment on the fate of Hong Kong? That it feels this need to change, or lose, its original face to keep up with the times and survive?

Yes, I just think that it is the normal Hong Kong personality [to] totally fit in the environment and don't know your [underlying] core values. In the 80s, Hong Kong was about to be handed over to China and at that moment, people were confused about their identity: whether I am a British or Chinese or I'm a Hong Konger?

People may think that “I'm a Hong Konger” but it's still a vague identity. We are not very sure. Even though, at that moment, Hong Kong Pop culture was very well-developed, we never talked about Hong Kong culture or Hong Kong history. We just think that we are living in a place borrowed from England.

Then, after the handover, it was not borrowed anymore, but we still think that, “Oh, in that place, we can enjoy our life just like before and then we earn money.” We fit in the environment. We shifted the government only, but we still can earn money and get what we want. I think [that] is a normal Hong Kong personality: We have very high efficiency, we know how to benefit ourselves, and then we are very smart. But what else?

If this kind of personality, when we face challenges, from outside — for example, overseas or from authority — then what will happen? I think it is a disaster if we don't have our identity. We just want to fit [in]. Then what else we can fit if the pressure is so bad? If we can't fit, then we just need to destroy ourselves.

Does it work? I want to ask this question. But, of course, in 2019, Hong Kong people gave me a very good answer: they don't just fit. But I think it's still something underlying the personality of Hong Kong people.

Because Hong Kong has lived under the shadow of these two great empires for so long, another Hong Kong writer I admire, Jason Ng, once put it: "It's as if a foster child was suddenly returned to its biological parents with the handover." But, of course, Hong Kong identity is unique. It can't be defined just by either parent.

Of course, the difference between Hong Kongers and Mainlanders has caused friction before. One thing I liked about your book is that as well as talking about mainland influence and Mandarin and Cantonese, I felt the book was also critical about prejudice against mainlanders among Hong Kongers, as that's been a problem with derogatory nicknames like "cockroaches" and so on. Is that intentional? Is that something you wanted to talk about as well?

Yeah, it is intentional. I think it's a very strange dilemma. Because we are facing pressure from the mainland. Before 2019, a lot of mainland tourists came to Hong Kong. It made Hong Kong very crowded. A lot of mainlanders come to Hong Kong to give birth to a baby. Our resources are limited and they squeeze our resources. So, many people were very angry about the mainlanders before 2019. We don't like mainlanders so we have prejudice towards them, and it is normal.

But at the same time, I think it is a way to build up our identity. We don't build up our identity from our culture or history, but we build up the identity of looking down on the mainland because they're rude, they do some things very bad, and they have bad manners.

In Hong Kong newspapers, we always have some news that the mainlanders are not polite, [that] they do something against the Hong Kong manner. We just laugh at that: "Oh, so bad." We use this kind of way to push up our identity: "Oh, I'm good. I'm better than you." But at the same time, we are facing the pressure. I think it is a dilemma. I think it is very strange. I want to highlight that in this book.

That makes me think of Ling's mom, who has some of that prejudice talking about these mainlanders renting her apartments. But she herself is from mainland China, presumably Guangdong. There's this very affecting scene when she talks about her experiences in the Cultural Revolution. So it's even more complex when in living memory, there are generations of those migrants.

Ling's mother is just like my father. My father came from Mainland China. He suffered from the Cultural Revolution but when he came to Hong Kong, he still thinks, "Oh, I'm better than the people from Mainland China." Even though they have a Mainland China background, they still think that "I'm better than them."

But, at the same time, because they come from Mainland China, they think that, "Oh, my English is not good. So I am not as good as them." And they will think that, "Oh, I need to struggle a lot in order to prove that I'm a Hong Kong people." That's my parents' story. Hong Kong has a lot of hierarchy. Even though you see that it is just metropolitan, I think there is a lot of hierarchy.

It seems like you've been drawing on a lot of autobiographical details in the novel. I have to ask, do you personally identify more with Ling or with Wai?

I think both. Because it is a book about office politics and I just write what I experienced when I was an editor in the past. When I was an editor, I faced a very bad boss and then Ling is just like my boss. When I write it, I just like revenge because in real life, I can't do anything. Then when I write, I can [take] revenge. So I identified with Wai at that time. But also, I identify with Ling because now that I am grown up, I reflect [upon] myself and I think that I still have the general Hong Kong personality, which means I want to fit in the environment. Even though I lose myself, I have this kind of tendency, even though I would remind myself don't do that.

So I think I identify with both characters.

Well, I hope that your boss read the book and felt duly burnt by it. I love how the book is also about female friendships, office politics, and workplace rivalry. So, putting politics aside, it's just a very fun and funny read. It's also quite tragic though, because — I don't think it's a spoiler to say as it comes very early in the book — that Wai, this other teacher who really struggles to learn Mandarin and struggles with her job security as a contract teacher, she kills herself.

Did you intend the novel to be about suicide, as well, or other mental health issues?

It is not my intention. It is just a plot. Why suicide is that I want to show people go [to the] extreme. What will happen if I want to only fit in the environment? I totally change myself then I will lose my life. I just showed that. Because I write this suicide theme, the publisher market my book as a psychological thriller. It is still a good thing.

You know, I felt that there was some sort of parallel there between Ling getting plastic surgery to change her face and then Wai, just before she kills herself, says that she feels like she needs to change her mind to fit in and, trigger warning to listeners for suicide, but Wai kills herself with an electric drill.

It's very graphic, as if she's literally trying to change her mind. So, what you said made me think about that feeling of being pushed to such an extreme to feel that you have to change yourself to fit in.

Yes, I deliberately make it parallel. Because Wai, she seems to use stupid ways to fit in the environment, and then she fails and then she uses a very extreme way to hope that she can fit in the environment. Then, for Ling, she uses a ridiculous thing to fit in the environment; she changed her face.

I intend to make it parallel. Even though Ling, she won't lose her life, but she will lose herself. And then I want to show that if you go extreme, what will happen. She has plastic surgery and then she has a large debt because she uses a free credit card in order to have the plastic surgery. And even though she changed her face, she still can't face the real problem. I want to show this is ridiculous.

So what's the main lesson here? What's the main impact you hope the book makes for readers in Hong Kong and foreign readers?

I don't want to give an easy answer because in my book I haven't given any answer to that. I just show the situation: if this goes extreme, what will happen? I hope that if Hong Kong readers read this, they can reflect on themselves and understand who they are. To see, what we can do? Even though we can only do a little, can we do a little? Just do a little. For foreign readers, of course, I really hope that they understand Hong Kong more, also to understand that language has a different hierarchy.

Well, that's the beauty of literature, that it makes us think by asking the questions instead of giving simple answers.

Just as a final question, how easy was it to publish this book in Hong Kong? I understand there is also an edition that came out in Taiwan a couple of years later. I assume there isn't a version in mainland China. In Hong Kong in particular, did you worry about censorship or consequences of publishing quite a political novel?

Of course I'm afraid but because this book was written before 2019, I haven't experienced any censorship.

It is still difficult to publish this book because at that moment I was not famous. I had just written several short stories, and then I have written a long story after that. I applied for the ADC fund, which is the government fund, to publish. At that moment, after I finished *Tongueless*, I asked for a small publisher to apply for the funding. Then the small publisher told me that, "Oh, this is just a long story. You can't successfully apply for the fund. In Hong Kong, people are not patient enough to read a long story. They just read short stories."

At that moment, I feel upset because I used a lot of time to write it and then I can't apply for the fund and no one liked it. But finally I get the fund and then I published it. But because when I published it in 2019, and two months later the protest happened, and then after that, Hong Kong people are very busy, so no one read my book. Because at that moment, Hong Kong people read the books about politics, about news. They don't care about the literature, and you know the literature is a slow burn.

In 2019, my book just sold about 10 or 20 copies, I think. Maybe in the whole of Hong Kong, 50 books were sold. So, at that moment, I really want to give up because I just think, "Oh, no one admires me." But after that, I was very lucky. I met my agent and also I met Chan Ho-Kei, who is a very famous author. He introduced me to a Taiwan publisher to publish it. Taiwan was still difficult because my book is about Cantonese, but in Taiwan they're speaking *putonghua*. It seems that it is none of their business.

So, I think it is very difficult to translate into English because it is something so far from you. But I'm so happy that I get some noise from it. In Hong Kong, it is difficult to publish. There's still a book market. You can still

publish, but, of course, you need to be very careful and for the government fund it will be difficult to apply if you write something not good — I mean, not up to the government standard. I think in Hong Kong many authors choose to publish their book in Taiwan because you have more freedom to publish.

So what is the state of Hong Kong literature and publishing today? In your view, are enough brave and true books being published or are they all being pushed out to Taiwan?

Actually, the bravest or truest authors are all not in Hong Kong. They publish books in Taiwan. They only publish books in Taiwan and they all moved out. I'm the only one who stayed here. If you want to publish a book in Hong Kong, actually you can still publish the truest—which is true to yourself. Of course, not about politics. But I still think that it is a dilemma for Hong Kong authors because if you leave Hong Kong, you lose the roots. If you live overseas for a long time you lose the sense of Hong Kong. Even though you still write Hong Kong but you're far away. You're just reading news from Hong Kong.

I've got the censorship. I have the red lines. But I still live in Hong Kong, and I'm near Hong Kong, and I know Hong Kong. So I think it is a dilemma. Even though if you leave Hong Kong, you can write what you want, but, finally, you may lose Hong Kong. I live here, and I face the red lines, but I still can write about Hong Kong and it is really Hong Kong and I think it is a difficulty that authors face.

That is a real dilemma and it's a paradox that also faces mainland Chinese authors at home and in exile. Well, we're very glad that you've stayed in Hong Kong to preserve your own very powerful voice. Are you working on a new novel as my final question?

Yes. I'm working on the second novel which is a sci-fi theme.

Sci-fi, wonderful. Well, we very much look forward to reading that one. Literature is such a wonderful way to preserve the unique identity and language of Hong Kong. We're thrilled to have you on the podcast. Thank you so much.

Thank you. Nice to meet you. ■