

Q &amp; A

## Louisa Lim on the Erosion of Democracy in Hong Kong

The journalist and author talks about the uncertainty of Hong Kong's political red lines; what it's like to report there now; the lack of possibility for resistance; and the 'King of Kowloon.'

BY JORDYN HAIME — SEPTEMBER 4, 2022

*Louisa Lim is an award-winning journalist who grew up in Hong Kong and reported for local media, the BBC, NPR, and more for more than two decades. She is the author of [The People's Republic of Amnesia](#) (2014). Her latest book, [Indelible City: Dispossession and Defiance in Hong Kong](#) (2022), and podcast, [The King of Kowloon](#), explore the history and identity of Hong Kong through the lens of Tsang Tsou-choi, the mysterious artist known as the 'King of Kowloon.' She teaches audio journalism and podcasting as a senior lecturer at the University of Melbourne.*



Louisa Lim.

Illustration by Kate Copeland

### Q: When was the last time you were in Hong Kong?

A: The last time I was there was January 2020, right before COVID. It's really difficult to go back to Hong Kong because you need to do COVID quarantine. But I also wouldn't go back because of the national security legislation. The U.S. recently issued a [warning](#) telling all U.S. citizens not to travel to Hong Kong. It's in the same category as North Korea, as places that you shouldn't visit due to the risk of arbitrary COVID quarantine, but also the risk of arbitrary detention. So I wouldn't go back, I just don't know if it would be a good idea.

### Do you think the situation in Hong Kong is more repressive than in some parts of mainland China right now? And could this level out eventually?

At the moment, it is a less predictable environment than in mainland China, particularly with regard to

where the political red lines are. The kind of convictions and arrests that we've seen in recent weeks have been really extraordinary. We saw people who were accused of sedition for [clapping at a court hearing](#). [In late July], there was someone who was given [seven months](#) in prison for shouting, "the police are all rubbish" at policemen during a protest. Another guy was given four months after he dragged down three Chinese national flags and threw them in the bin. Someone is facing three years in jail for [inciting other people](#) to cast blank votes.

So the red lines are very unpredictable. They're moving all the time. And the fact that the former security chief, John Lee, has just taken over as chief executive with a really explicit national security focus means that this is going to continue. I don't see any sign of any kind of leveling off. If anything, there's an intensification of these campaigns. And we're also seeing the state-run media targeting lawyers who've worked with protesters.

**What does the future of Hong Kong look like under John Lee? Does his leadership represent a new stage in Hong Kong's history?**

I think so. We're going to see, as I said, an intensification of that national security focus. There's talk of a 'fake news' law. The press is increasingly under pressure, and the education sector as well. If you were to do a comparison with mainland China, in China the red lines

have always been quite clear. People, especially activists, know when they're crossing those red lines and doing something that might put them in jeopardy. For example, staging a protest on Tiananmen Square, that's gonna get you in trouble.

But in Hong Kong, the red lines aren't clear at all, and they're moving very fast. And the fact that you can get retrospectively targeted for things that you might have done two or three or four years ago, even before the national security legislation was imposed on Hong Kong, means that there's no way of protecting yourself. So it is a new stage. I see it as a sort of national security purge that is still rolling through Hong Kong society with all kinds of ramifications, particularly for the press, the legal sector, education, and civil society, all those groups that were quite active and instrumental in the 2019 movement. Now we're seeing the dismantling of all the old infrastructure from Hong Kong's civil society.

**As a journalist, is it easier now to report from outside of Hong Kong?**



John Lee celebrates with his wife after being elected as the Chief Executive of Hong Kong, Sunday, May 8, 2022. Credit: Kin Cheung via [AP Photo](#)

**“ There are still some independent news outlets and we should be really thankful that they’re continuing. They’re treading a really delicate line in their reporting in order to continue to operate, and we just have to hope that they’ll continue to tread that line. ”**

It's really hard to report inside Hong Kong, particularly if you are from Hong Kong and you have an SAR passport or BNO [British National (Overseas)] passport, and you have family there. The closure of *Apple Daily* and of *Stand News* really show how hard it is to operate and to report with any kind of critical eye. You could report from outside Hong Kong, but you're never going to be able to really articulate what the mood is like. And when I speak to people who are still inside Hong Kong, there's just a great deal of anxiety. People say that their friends, even their really good friends, no longer really want to talk about politics. One example is legislator Claudia Mo, who was [denied bail](#) because journalists tried to interview her. Those kinds of moves mean that people are very unwilling to talk to journalists. Even the act of contacting someone to say, 'can we do an interview?' could really be dangerous. So it means that reporting about Hong Kong from anywhere in the world is really, really hard. And it's even harder if you're in Hong Kong itself. It's not coincidental. One of the aims of these moves is to shut down reporting and discussion of Hong Kong and to that extent, it's probably achieved those aims. It's really difficult now to get a really accurate sense of what the mood is like inside Hong Kong.



Claudia Mo (in white) at a rally held on October 1, 2018, the National Day of China. The march began in Causeway Bay and ended at the Central Office, Hong Kong. Credit: Etan Liam via [Flickr](#)

### **How are outlets like the *Hong Kong Free Press* still operating?**

A lot of outlets, over the years, have moved towards a more pro-government position, outlets like the *South China Morning Post*, and so their stories are less and less critical. And if you read their front pages and headlines, they're pretty much echoing government positions. There are still some independent news outlets and we should be really thankful that they're continuing. They're treading a really delicate line in their reporting in order to continue to operate, and we just have to hope that they'll continue to tread that line.

### **So do you think it's some form of self-censorship that's allowing these independent outlets to continue operating?**

It's been a really steady trend in the Hong Kong media, this move to self-censor in order to survive, and even a couple of years ago, in the Hong Kong Journalists Association [surveys](#), there were journalists who were talking about how they would not report on independence movements and autonomy because they knew that it wasn't acceptable from a government perspective, or their editorial leaders wouldn't allow it. But now in certain cases, in order to survive, they need to be careful about the stories they do; how they cover [them], and who they speak to. And not just for that, but also to protect their sources because in the current climate it could be really treacherous.

### **Between the time that you were last in Hong Kong, when you were covering the protests, and today, do you think that protesters' fears have been borne out by Beijing's actions?**





Yeah, I do. I've got a podcast coming out called [the King of Kowloon](#). And I was just thinking about that question when I was listening back to episode 5, about how all these 15-year-olds at the time of the protests were talking about how this is Hong Kong's endgame. Another interviewee was saying that it's a war on culture and that if we lose, we lose everything. And those fears have absolutely played out. What we are seeing now is the end game. Those values that people cherished about Hong Kong, the freedom of the press, freedom to protest, freedom of association and academic inquiry, an independent civil service, an independent judiciary, all those things are gone. So unfortunately, the things that people were worrying about, many of them have come to pass.

**What does the future holds for the generation of Hong Kong protesters who**

**have been arrested, some of whom are now getting out of prison? Is there any possibility for a rebirth of the movement?**

I don't think Hong Kongers necessarily have abandoned their values, but the space for resistance or protest has narrowed to almost nothing. Those really tiny expressions of protest, for example, visiting those 'yellow shops' that were pro-democracy, even those are now being targeted and forced to close down. We're seeing day after day these kinds of headlines. So I'm not really seeing any possibility for resistance inside Hong Kong.

The flip side of that is that we are now seeing the birth of these exiled Hong Kong communities overseas, which are explicitly quite political communities. And those Hong Kongers, many people are trying to leave. Often it's not so much a question of whether they'll leave, but when and where to.

**Is the future of Hong Kong now in these diaspora communities around the world?**

If you're looking at the numbers, more than 100,000 people have gone to the U.K. just in recent months. So that's certainly one possibility. You have to look at the strategy of the government and the central government in Hong Kong and wonder what their vision is for the future, because the policies that are being used in Hong Kong, particularly zero-Covid

policies, are really not making it an attractive place for international businesses. It seems like Hong Kong's role as an international business center is withering away. A lot of those



People say goodbye to friends and families departing for the UK, at Hong Kong International Airport, July 20, 2021. Credit: Sipa USA via [AP](#)



talented and principled Hong Kongers are leaving because they don't want to live under such constraints, and they certainly don't want to bring up their children in an educational system which seems to be heavily focused on ideological and patriotic education. There is definitely a shift going on.

**One of John Lee's goals is to maintain Hong Kong's competitive economic status. But as you just mentioned, all of these crackdowns are making Hong Kong a pretty unattractive place for foreigners. How do you see the future of Hong Kong economically?**

One of Hong Kong's huge advantages for international business has been its predictability. From a legal perspective, the fact that there's a rule of law was very predictable, with a common law legal system where precedent was important. An independent judiciary is really important for business. And those 'predictabilities' are now gone. You've got, effectively, two competing court systems: the Common Law system and the National Security courts, which is a separate system that overrides common law judgments. So that does a lot of damage to Hong Kong from a business perspective. And that's without thinking about the zero-Covid policy and the difficulty of traveling inside and out of Hong Kong. China has also for a very long time signaled that it sees Hong Kong as part of the Greater Bay Area, one city among many along China's southern coast. And all of those things are cutting away at its economic advantages, and its attractiveness as a place for international business.

“ There's nothing that's safe. It's impossible to judge what could be safe and what isn't safe anymore. ”

**Are there any remaining possibilities at the moment for pro-democracy lawmakers or representatives to have some power? Is there any hope for the political system in Hong Kong?**

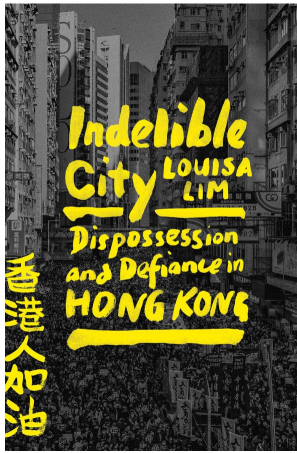
If you look at the results of the last legislative election, I'd say almost none. I mean, now there's only one pro-democracy campaigning group left, the League of Social Democrats. They have been targeted by the pro-Beijing press in the last couple of days. And often the moment people or groups are targeted by the pro-Beijing press, by the state-run media, that's often the attack dogs signaling that they're about to face more action against them. So that phase of Hong Kong politics, and that type of pro-democratic Hong Kong politics really seem to have been entirely shut down by the current generation of political leaders. If you were a young Hong Konger and looking at the situation, you saw those [47 politicians in jail](#), and the trial hasn't even really begun and they're [holding primary polls](#). That's just such a warning to others not to get involved in democratic politics. They've been there quite explicitly saying politics should be patriots only, which really means no opposition in any way. I've written in my book that 'politics is over in Hong Kong.' And I feel that way, that the sort of party politics and political dissent is over.

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*[Louisa Lim's newest book was featured in Alec Ash's books column, Getting China Right.](#)*

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**Are you seeing any small pockets of dissent continuing to appear in Hong Kong, maybe online or elsewhere?**



Louisa Lim's newest book, *Indelible City*.

Published April 19, 2022.

Credit: [Penguin Random House](#)

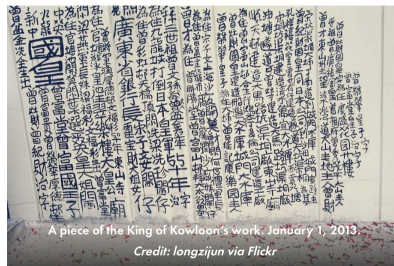
If there's resistance it's coming in exile communities only. We're seeing that just through small things like film festivals. On April 1 there was a coordinated showing of [Revolution of Our Times](#) in around 50 cities around the world. But the risks are simply too high in Hong Kong. If you can get charged with sedition for clapping in court, what's safe? There's nothing that's safe. It's impossible to judge what could be safe and what isn't safe anymore.

**Your newest book is called *Indelible City: Dispossession and Defiance in Hong Kong*. Why did you call it that?**

The 'dispossession and defiance' part is kind of self-explanatory. But I like the idea of 'indelible city' because in one sense it's such a contrast from [The People's Republic of Amnesia](#).<sup>1</sup> And one of the real differences is that China has succeeded in exorcizing the memory of 1989 in the population. Hong Kong is quite a different proposition. No matter how many attempts are made to

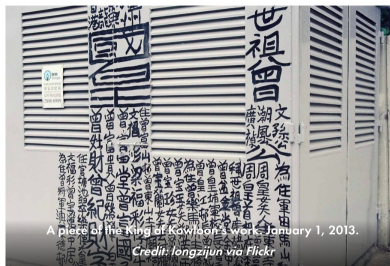
force people to stop talking about things, Hong Kongers are just not so easy to reformat, and we see that in the fact that people are leaving instead of submitting to the kind of constraints that the national security legislation would demand of them. So things inside the city might change. But Hong Kongers themselves and the memories they hold are indelible. I also wanted to set that down on paper to be part of that indelibility, so to speak.

**In the book, you keep coming back to the story of the King of Kowloon [a street calligraphy artist who only painted on government property and claimed his ancestors were the rightful owners of Kowloon]. Can you tell me why he resonated so much with you and other Hong Kongers?**



A piece of the King of Kowloon's work, January 1, 2013.

Credit: longziyun via Flickr



A piece of the King of Kowloon's work, January 1, 2013.

Credit: longziyun via Flickr

When I was growing up in Hong Kong, his work was everywhere. It was all over the streets, the walls, the curbs, the lampposts, the post boxes and flyover structures. And it was so much a feature of the city that we never really noticed it because it was just there all the time. And it was only after he became really old and went into an old person's home and his work started disappearing from the streets that we started to notice that it wasn't there. In 2011, I went to an exhibition of his work and I was struck by this sense of loss and of how much these words had been part of my childhood. And I could tell that other people were having the same kind of reaction. It's not as if I knew this person personally. But somehow there was a corner of my brain that wasn't always colonized or occupied. And I started to try and figure out why that was. And for me, one of the reasons he was so interesting was that he was writing about territory and sovereignty and dispossession and loss. And he was doing it so much earlier than anybody else, so long ago that people thought he was mad. And yet, these questions really have always been at the heart of Hong Kong's political crisis. Also, the journalistic lure of the impossible story was also quite attractive. He was such an unusual person and nobody seemed to know anything about him. So on different levels he's an interesting character, but also a symbol as well.

There are only a few pieces of his work left 'in the wild'. There's one pillar at Star ferry pier, which has a shield on top, and that's the most well-known piece of his work left because it's even got a little plaque. Then there's another lamppost in Kowloon that has been preserved. So there is a bit of his work out there, but not very much, probably less than 10 pieces.



The preserved pillar at Star Ferry Pier, March 21, 2011.

Credit: Joybat via [Flickr](#)

**Why haven't these pieces that have been preserved been seen as a form of resistance from the government?**

Local Hong Kong government officials have never been fans of his work. They don't even regard it as artwork. In all the government documents, they refuse to call it calligraphy, they call it 'ink writing.' And they have been very, very slow to preserve it. When he died in 2007, there were immediately a lot of calls for the government to preserve his existing work on the streets. And they really didn't do anything about it: Their argument then was that they didn't think it had artistic value. And it's actually an argument they've continued to articulate. I don't think it's that they're worried about any kind of potentially subversive message, they simply don't think it's very artistic.



"Free Hong Kong. Democracy Now" signs being held at a protest, June 26, 2019.

Credit: Etan Liam via [Flickr](#)

**You've also talked about generational divides in Hong Kong regarding Beijing and the protest movement. Are these divides still present?**

Definitely. There are huge and really painful divisions in Hong Kong, often amongst families. I met young people who have been disowned by their parents because of their roles in the protests in 2019. And I know of friends who simply cannot talk to their parents about anything political. So the whole question of politics has opened up this massive rift in their relationship, which is something that I don't think can be healed, where the parents and the children have completely different opposing political opinions. So it is often generational, but not necessarily. There were all kinds of rifts in society.

**Are there still pockets of support for Beijing in Hong Kong?**

There is some support for Beijing. It depends on which portions of the population that you're looking at. There is support particularly amongst new migrants from China who've moved to Hong Kong — around 150 mainland migrants a day have been moving to Hong Kong since 1997. Those people have really reaped the benefits of Beijing's strategies. There have been lots of payments to groups that have really benefited new mainland migrants in Hong Kong. So they will be very sympathetic to the way that Hong Kong has been run.

“ It just doesn't feel like a global city anymore. ”

I think older migrants from China are also sympathetic, and business people as well. Amongst some sections of society, there's definitely many people who thought the protesters



had gone too far, had been too violent, that the protests had continued for too long and that they were incredibly damaging for Hong Kong. And there are people who do believe that the national security legislation will stabilize Hong Kong. So amongst those types of people, maybe also some of those living in the New Territories have support for Beijing, but amongst the younger, more educated populations, there's less support. The COVID policy is also undermining some of that support amongst business communities because they just don't see Hong Kong as a place where it's possible to function as an international business center. It's almost impossible to go on when you can't travel in and out without doing seven days of quarantine and there are no flights. It just doesn't feel like a global city anymore.



Jordyn Haime is a Taiwan-based freelance journalist who writes about religion, culture, and geopolitics. She is a graduate of the University of New Hampshire, where she studied journalism and international affairs. As a Fulbright fellow, she researched Judaism and philosemitism in Taiwan. [@jordynhaime](#)

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