

## Stimmen aus Asien

# An Interview with Hu Ching Fang

Thilo Diefenbach

Hu Ching Fang 胡晴舫, also known as Lolita Hu, is a writer of novels, essays and short stories, who was born in 1969 in Taipei. Currently, she is the director of Kwang Hwa Information and Culture Center in Hong Kong, whose term usually lasts three years. Our conversation took place in late November 2017 in Taipei; the final version of the text was proofread and approved by the author via mail in February 2018.

One of Hu's short stories was recently published as a German translation: "Die Welt 世界"; in Thilo Diefenbach (ed./transl.): *Kriegsrecht. Neue Literatur aus Taiwan*. München: iudicium 2017, pp. 426–434.

On the 16th September 2017, the South China Morning Post published an extensive interview with her, which is still available online. It covers both her personal life and her work as a writer, therefore I excluded these topics from my questionnaire. Additionally, numerous interviews with her can be found online in Chinese.

### Figure 1: Hu Ching Fang



***Since late 2016, you are the director of Kwang Hwa Information and Culture Center 光華新聞文化中心 (<http://www.taiwanculture-hk.org>), which is dubbed “Taiwan’s cultural hub in Hong Kong”. Could you please introduce your institution to us, including its history?***

Kwang Hwa Information and Culture Center was officially set up in 1991 when the British still ruled Hong Kong. Given the complexity of geopolitics and history, Hong Kong and Taiwan could not have an official relationship in the classical definition of diplomacy. However, these two societies have had strong ties in many aspects for decades, especially culturally. Hong Kong’s pop music and commercial films impacted the Taiwanese public, while literature and art films from Taiwan influenced generations of the creative community in Hong Kong. Both societies use the same traditional Chinese characters to write. Thus, the logic behind setting up Kwang Hwa as Taiwan institution in Hong Kong was to acknowledge the deep intersection of these two societies despite the complexity of political reality.

Kwang Hwa is considered an extension of the Taiwan government; however, it is also a private-sector entity in Hong Kong, which gives it more flexibility to carry activities outside the political arena. In light of this hybrid status, traditionally, the Taiwan government has always appointed a writer as head of Kwang Hwa. His/her role is more like a cultural ambassador, who seeks to deepen the cultural exchanges between the two societies.

When Kwang Hwa was established in 1991, it was under the Government Information Office of the government of Taiwan. As a result, the center was more passive and low key. After the Ministry of Culture was established in Taiwan in 2012, Kwang Hwa became a part of the new Ministry of Culture. Its role and mission became clearer. Since taking over as head of Kwang Hwa in 2016, to my surprise, I have been working day and night, 7 days a week, without breaks. Weekends are particularly busy as most cultural events happen on weekends.

Currently, Hong Kong society welcomes and embraces Taiwanese culture. They cherish the values expressed by Taiwanese art and literature. Demand for Taiwan’s culture in this town is beyond what I could imagine. I cherish this blossoming of Taiwanese culture in Hong Kong.

***Does your institute cooperate with other cultural or academic institutions in Hong Kong? If not, who would be your favorite cooperation partner?***

So far, Kwang Hwa has not had a chance to work directly with German institutions like the Goethe-Institut. However, both Kwang Hwa and the Goethe-Institut share some common platforms, such as the Hong Kong International Film Festival. Both Kwang Hwa and Goethe-Institut participate every year in this event, to celebrate outstanding film makers from different countries, including German and Taiwanese ones.

Kwang Hwa also works with many artistic and educational institutions in Hong Kong. In addition to the Hong Kong International Film Festival, our regular partners include the Hong Kong Arts Centre, Hong Kong International Arts Festival, Asia Film Festival, Chinese-Language Documentary Festival, Hong Kong Book Fair, Art Basel, etc. We actively participate in major cultural events in Hong Kong and help promote Taiwanese artists. Many universities work with us to present Taiwanese films and literary works on campus. We help schools to organize concerts and lectures on different topics.

I really enjoy working with our Hong Kong partners. When we share our culture and art with them, I feel we learn so much from them at the same time. In the process, I also believe we create something together: a sense of community. We feel we are not alone in the world. Art makes people less lonely.

***How were you chosen for your current position? Is it difficult for you to adjust to this kind of job, as you are used to being a “free writer”?***

Honestly, I don't know why I was chosen. I have been an independent writer all my life, without any political affiliation. I guess I was “chosen” because of my deep connection with Hong Kong society. I lived in Hong Kong for 11 years, from 1998 to 2009. During my “Hong Kong period,” so to speak, from 2000-2005, for five years in total, I also lived and worked in Shanghai and Beijing. For two decades, I've published books and written columns for newspapers and magazines in Hong Kong and China, in addition to Taiwan and Singapore. Being a Taiwanese writer who has lived and worked in all those different Chinese societies puts me in a unique position. I have an insider-like perspective on all these societies; meanwhile, I sympathize with them, too, because I know them personally.

I must admit it is not easy for me to be a “bureaucrat.” This is not a comment on rules or the system, versus being a free spirit as a writer. Rather, it's more about the mentality of people who work within an official institution. I believe institutions are very important to sustain a society. If institutions do not function, society will collapse. I believe it's a great opportunity to obtain an inside knowledge about how a government functions. It is important for a writer to truly understand where the real issues are. I regard my experiences here as educational.

***Are you able to keep on writing in spite of your job responsibilities?***

Yes, I am able to continue to write. Because writing is the only way to keep me sane in this world. I don't want to say a cliché but, yes, writing is my life. Period. Since my work is very demanding in terms of time and labor, I try to get up early in the morning to write a little bit before I go to office.

***You have lived in many different cities all over the world – what are your feelings towards Hong Kong?***

Hong Kong occupies a very special place in my heart, always. It is because when I came to live in Hong Kong, I was quite young and this city swiftly grabbed me. Whether I like Hong Kong or not, it became a very important part of my life. It's like one's childhood. It does not matter whether is miserable or sweet. It is YOUR childhood. So, Hong Kong IS my youth. When I recall my youth, it's unavoidable that I think of Hong Kong. And I do love Hong Kong because it's cruel, it's glamorous, it's miserable, it's enchanting, it's beautiful, it's ugly, it's rewarding, it's depriving, it's fast, it's rich, it's poor, it's abundant, it's void, it's vain, it's the future, it's the past, it's now, it's everything! Everything, but also nothing, because everything will be gone before tomorrow. Nothing is certain in this city, where people claim to live on borrowed time. Hong Kong taught me about the essence of life. Plus, for a long time, Hong Kong was like Casablanca in the second world war. No matter how the world was turning or collapsing around it, this city remained an independent island floating above the world. Somehow, by living in this city, I developed my way of thinking as an independent human being, free of nationalities, free of boundaries, free of races, free of ideologies. I cherish this freedom of thinking very much. I believe Hong Kong helped me to reach it.

***What are your experiences as a Taiwanese living in Hong Kong; what are people's feelings toward Taiwan and the Taiwanese?***

For a long time, Taiwan used to mean nothing to Hong Kong – only a poor society with ugly buildings and without laws. In old Hong Kong movies, when fugitives wanted to escape from the authorities, they took a boat and fled to Taiwan where they would live happily ever after, without worries. However, a new impression developed, especially since the 1990s, as Taiwan became richer, progressive, and modern. At this particular moment in the history, Hong Kong people probably have the best impression of Taiwanese society and culture. In the mind of many Hong Kong people, Taiwan is a free society with a proper democratic system where people can elect their president, feel free to express any opinions in public or private without any hesitation, are allowed to pursue personal interests in life and to cultivate an aesthetic attitude towards life. This is what Hong Kong people miss in their own city. Because of unreasonable property prices and air pollution, in addition to the worsening political atmosphere, Hong Kong people are now envious of the quality of life in Taiwan.

Taiwan as a society enjoys different cultures, and as a democracy welcomes different voices, which has an appeal for many Hong Kong people.

***What kind of events did you organize until now?***

Although the new year has just begun, we are already in the thick of cultural activities! In March alone, we will co-host with Hong Kong University a music lecture with Taiwanese musicians and will participate in the Hong Kong International Film and TV Market, Hong Kong International Film Festival, and Art Basel. For example, at the Hong Kong International Film Festival, there will be a special program focusing on Ms. Brigitte Lin 林青霞, a movie star from Taiwan who has appeared in more than 100 films in Taiwan and Hong Kong. With our sponsorship and assistance, the festival will screen 15 of her films, and Ms. Lin will also give a talk about her acting career. We are very excited about this event.

In June, we will have a Taiwanese indie music festival called “Taiwan Unplugged,” and work with Renaissance Foundation Hong Kong to organize an international independent music forum. In July, we will participate in Hong Kong Book Fair and have many Taiwanese publishers and writers coming. I personally also got invited to give a lecture. In October, we will start our annual Taiwan Month. Then, the year will be finished! As I said, I’ve been surprised by how demanding this job is!

***Recently, your institute staged a “Taiwan month” in Hong Kong – could you please explain the details?***

Taiwan Month is the most important event annually curated by Kwang Hwa. It is THE Taiwanese Arts Festival, similar to The French May, and usually runs from mid-October to the end of November. This at-least-one-month-long festival covers every area of culture, including visual arts, theater, dance, music, cinema, literature, and so on. Among all the Taiwanese culture centers globally, including Berlin, Kwang Hwa is the only one which curates its own Taiwanese art festival. Right now, we are preparing the 13th year of Taiwan Month. In the beginning, Taiwan Month had only some simple programs, which majorly served the Taiwanese community in Hong Kong. However, as time has gone by, Taiwan Month grew bigger and bigger. Now it is a proper art festival, open to the local Hong Kong society. All the tickets are for sale and the box office income goes to the artists. In addition to ticket sales, it is not only sponsored by the Taiwanese government but also by the Taiwanese community in Hong Kong. We are lucky to have some very generous sponsors who have lived in Hong Kong for a long time and still care for Taiwan very much, and believe we should bring Taiwan culture to Hong Kong.

Last year, 2017, was my first Taiwan Month. I chose the theme of “Colorful.” In Chinese, the word “colorful” (艷, pronounced as “yàn”) consists of two characters “abundant” (豐) and “color” (色). I chose this character to describe the cultural impression of Taiwan – full of energy, colors, even noises. Also, by using this

character, I wanted to point out that Taiwan is a place which harbors different values and cultures. I invited the Deutsche Oper am Rhein-based conductor Wen-Pin Chien 簡文彬 together with the Kaohsiung Orchestra to play at Hong Kong University. The program showcased the works of Taiwanese composers. I also invited the Contemporary Legend Theater, which staged “Waiting for Godot” by Samuel Beckett in the form of Peking Opera. The Hakka-language song writer and singer Lin Sheng Xian 林生祥 and his band, which includes three Japanese members, also came to play on the stage of the Chinese University of Hong Kong. Their songs, full of environmental conscience and a love for homeland, truly inspired many young people in Hong Kong. We also had a photo exhibition of “stage cars” (part of Taiwanese rural culture) at our center. We worked with the Eslite Bookstore 誠品書店 in Hong Kong to have a “nuit blanche,” a weekend night full of poets reciting poetry, singers singing songs, writers giving lectures in every corner of their bookstore till the small hours. We worked with the West Kowloon Cultural District on two outdoors concerts featuring aboriginal singers from Taiwan. I invited the prominent Taiwanese female choreographer Ms. Ho Hsiao Mei 何曉玫 to bring her latest dance works to Hong Kong.

As you can see, I have tried to present the different “colors” of Taiwanese cultures by presenting different art forms, in the hope that the values of Taiwan, such as pluralism, will shine through these programs.

***Who is among the typical audience of your center?***

Our audience includes the local Taiwanese community and the general public in Hong Kong. As I lived in many cities before, I recognize that Hong Kong is an international city and a melting pot of cultures, and hope that in the future we can attract more members of the expatriate communities, such as Germans living in Hong Kong.

I have noticed a new group that is joining our existing audience, namely new immigrants from China. As Hong Kong has become a part of China, there are more and more mainland Chinese who come to Hong Kong to study and work. Since we use Mandarin at our events, naturally they don’t find any language barriers. Quite a large proportion of the mainland Chinese audience is familiar with Taiwanese culture, and they genuinely appreciate it. This is a very happy surprise. We welcome their participation.

***Thank you very much for this interview, Ms Hu. All the best for your future and for Kwang Hua!***