

Hong Kong bookseller defies orders, leads protest

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Lam Wing-kei, center, participates in a protest march with pro-democracy lawmakers and supporters in Hong Kong yesterday.

Photo: Reuters

A Hong Kong bookseller who said he was blindfolded, interrogated and detained in China led a protest march yesterday defying Beijing as pressure grows for authorities to answer questions over the case.

Lam Wing-kei (梁文道) is one of five booksellers who went missing last year — all worked for a publisher known for salacious titles about leading Chinese politicians.

The case heightened fears that Beijing was tightening its grip on semi-autonomous Hong Kong, with Lam's explosive revelations earlier this week about how he had been detained in China further fanning many residents' concerns.

Lam yesterday told reporters that he did not feel afraid after breaking bail, refusing to return to the mainland and breaking silence on his detention.

"I don't feel scared, because there are so many people here," said Lam, surrounded by more than 1,000 supporters who had gathered in Hong Kong to protest against his detention and to demand answers from the city's authorities over the booksellers' case.

"I'm happy to be back in Hong Kong," he said.

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He added that he had been contacted by the city's police, but had not yet responded to them.

He would give no details about where he was now living.

Leading the rally, he shouted slogans including: "Say no to authority" and "Hong Kong has a bottom line."

The protesters, carrying banners that read: "Fight until the very end," marched from Causeway Bay Books, the business at the center of the controversy, to China's liaison office in the territory.

Pro-democracy lawmakers are demanding to know what Hong Kong authorities have done to help the booksellers, accusing officials of being puppets of Beijing.

They said China has violated the semi-autonomous system under which the city is ruled.

Protester Simon Chan, 60, said that it was time for people to speak up.

"If we don't voice out, then this will just continue and we will be very scared," he told reporters.

Beijing has refused to be drawn on Lam's accusations, saying only that it is entitled to pursue the case as he broke mainland Chinese laws.

Hong Kong authorities have expressed "concern," saying they are attempting to speak to Lam.

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Pro-democracy lawmakers are urging the Hong Kong government to admit what it knows about the case.

“I request that the government clearly explain what they have done to help Lam or the other Causeway Bay bookstore workers in these past eight months. If they don't, then they're not our government,” Hong Kong Legislator Frederick Fung (馮國強) said.

In an editorial yesterday, the *South China Morning Post*, which has recently been criticized for being too Beijing-friendly, also demanded that both sides “come clean.”

Lam said he was allowed to return to Hong Kong on Tuesday last week on condition that he go back over the border on Thursday, bringing with him a hard disk listing the bookstore's clients.

He said he did not want to hand over the records and decided to speak out instead.

Lam is one of four Hong Kong booksellers under investigation in mainland China for trading books banned by Beijing.

The fifth, Lee Bo (李保), the only bookseller to disappear on Hong Kong soil, has said he is simply helping with inquiries and is currently back in the city.

He has rejected Lam's claims that Lee told him he had been taken to the mainland against his will.

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