

Hong Kong bookseller flees to Taipei

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Hong Kong bookseller Lam Wing-kei poses for a photograph at the Tonsan bookstore in Taipei yesterday.

Photo: Sam Yeh / AFP

A Hong Kong bookseller, who had disappeared into Chinese custody for half a year, yesterday said that he has fled to Taiwan after the financial hub announced plans to approve extraditions to China.

Lam Wing-kei (梁英基), the former manager of Hong Kong-based Causeway Bay Books (灣仔書店), was one of five publishers selling gossip-filled tomes on China's leaders who vanished in late 2015, resurfacing in Chinese custody and making televised confessions.

He was allowed back to Hong Kong in June 2016 on condition that he pick up a hard drive listing the bookstore's customers and return to China.

Instead, he skipped bail and went public with explosive testimony detailing how he was blindfolded by police after crossing the border into Shenzhen, China, and spent months being interrogated.

Following his ordeal, the 64-year-old had previously said that he wanted to move to Taiwan, which does not have an extradition agreement with China.

He yesterday said that his plans were sped up after Hong Kong's government this year announced controversial plans to allow extraditions to China.

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“Right now Hong Kong is not safe for me anymore,” he told reporters in Taipei, saying that he had flown to the capital the day before.

Lam said that he was “enjoying the air of freedom and reading some free books,” adding that he hopes to work for a friend and is in talks to open a bookstore in Taiwan.

Asked for comment, Mainland Affairs Council Deputy Minister Chiu Chui-cheng (邱國治) said that the government has approved Lam to stay a month in Taiwan, adding that he would need to apply in accordance with the law if he plans to stay long term.

As Lam skipped bail, he is still technically wanted in China. Hong Kong currently has no extradition agreement with China.

The territory has a separate legal system through the “one country, two systems” deal struck between Britain and China.

Historically, the territory has balked at Chinese extradition requests because of the opacity of China’s criminal justice system and its liberal use of the death penalty.

However, earlier this year Hong Kong’s government announced plans to overhaul its extradition rules, allowing the transfer of fugitives to China on a “case-by-case basis” for the first time.

The legislation has been winding its way through the Hong Kong Legislative Council.

Lam said that he felt he could not take the risk of staying.

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“You don’t know what kind of excuses or charges they will use to put you on the wanted list,” he said, adding that the extradition law “puts every Hong Konger in a very dangerous position.”

He said that he felt Taiwan was a safer bet, because it “really has rule of law.”

The planned extradition changes in Hong Kong have sparked large protests and mounting alarm within the territory’s business and legal communities, which fear that it would hammer the financial hub’s international appeal and tangle people up in China’s opaque courts.

A protest is planned for tomorrow in Hong Kong.

Additional reporting by staff writer

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