

ON AIR

“I find it fun and I am grateful (for being a volunteer worker); the praise I get from the blind is my encouragement.”



## The Reader

by Winnie Tse

Before recording, she adjusted the levels on the audio mixer, cleared her throat, and said “Testing, testing, one two three.”

She pressed the “record” button, sat upright straight away and raised her voice. Every word she uttered was loud, clear and pronounced correctly. Whenever she made a mistake, she clicked the “pause” button and rewound the tape without any hesitation.

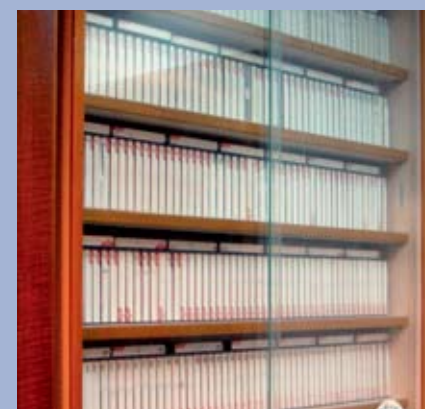
And so the routine has been repeated over 18 years for 65-year-old Lee Kin-choi, who volunteers her time to record books and magazines for the blind.

She became a volunteer reader after her retirement from factory work in the early 1990s. “People earn money to spend. I am not a person who spends a lot, so what’s the point of making money without spending it?” said Lee. “Therefore I look for volunteer work, look for things I enjoy doing.”

She came across a newspaper advertisement looking for volunteers for the Hong Kong Society for the Blind. Lee applied and has been a recording artist for almost two decades. Her recordings can be accessed by blind people through the organisation.

To date, she has recorded over 300 books and 800 magazine issues. On average, a recorded book plays for about 15 hours and each magazine issue plays for one and a half hours. In total, her recorded material can be played for more than 5,700 hours or more than 200 days non-stop.

Lee enjoys recording books for the blind because she gains satisfaction every time she finishes recording a book or magazine. “It is great sharing



Numerous cassette tapes of the magazine issues that Lee Kin-choi has recorded down the years.

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project her own emotions carefully without changing the original meanings of the sentences.

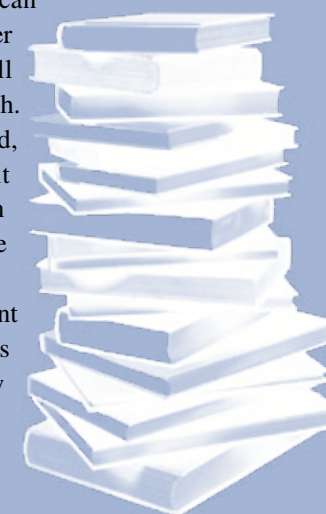
On the contrary, people who are new to recording tend to read the books in a relatively straightforward manner. They enunciate each word carefully without adding their own emotions, leaving the audience to interpret the authors’ meaning themselves.

One of Lee’s main concerns is to protect her own eyes as she wants to keep on serving the blind. Being in her 60s, she is lucky enough to have relatively good eyesight. But from time to time, when the printed words are too small, she needs the help of a magnifying glass even when she is wearing glasses.

Although Lee faces difficulties and stress at times, she very much enjoys being a volunteer. Through reading and recording Chinese literature, she has learnt more about history and expanded her own knowledge.

The genuine side of human nature is revealed in certain books. “From (classic historical novel) *The Taiping Rebellion*, you can see that power corrupts since all men are selfish. Once gained, they keep it for their own indulgence,” she said.

Also, different writers’ points of view allow her to think from different perspectives.







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Lee said the content of the books enriches her life.

For instance, Lee agrees with mainland scholar, Yi Zhongtian's views on the second century warlord, Cao Cao. Yi's book, *Pin San Guo*, is an analysis of the ancient classic *Romance of the Three Kingdoms* and became a bestseller in China two years ago.

Most people think of Cao Cao as a villain but both Lee and Yi believe that he was qualified to be a great leader. They consider Cao Cao to be better than his rival Liu Bei, who could only lead with the help of other talents like the super-strategist Zhuge Liang.

"The content of the books I read enrich my life; the world within books is very broad. Whenever I work, I get to set aside all my worries," said Lee.

Lee has also improved her Chinese language skills. She graduated with a Chinese language level of form three but during the course of her voluntary work she has developed a reading habit and has even fallen in love with books. She is now aware of the grammar, structure and use of vocabulary in every article she reads, even when she is not working.

Lee considers this to be a kind of occupational hazard. "Reading a passage should be a simple process, but every time I come across an article, I dig into the way it is written, including the vocabulary and punctuation. I guess this is a sort of disease," she joked.

**"Whenever I work, I get to set aside all my worries."**

On top of the benefits and happiness she gains from work, the positive response from her audience has turned out to be her greatest motivation to carry on.

Lee often works alone in the recording studio and does not get to participate in the activities held by the organisation, but some of her listeners still express their praise and gratitude, sometimes with a thank you note.

What's more, some of her fans, who are in their 20s to 30s, tell Lee that they have been listening to her recordings since they were young. The audio books, brought to vivid life by Lee's readings were their childhood companions.

This kind of recognition of Lee's hard work means more to her than any official acknowledgement, including the volunteer award she received from the Hong Kong Society for the Blind earlier this year.

In addition to recording books for the blind, Lee used to make hospital visits and recommended books to patients.

That stopped after the SARS outbreak in 2003, when visitors were no longer allowed to enter hospital wards due to fears about infection.

Before technology made it possible for blind people to type on computers, Lee used to type their homework in Chinese characters for them. But due to advancement in technology, blind people can now type by themselves.

Nowadays, Lee still hosts performances and concerts by blind people who sing and play musical instruments.

"I have lots of free time after retirement but I don't have specific hobbies like shopping or travelling. Staying at home all day long is not the retirement life I want," she said. "When you help others, you benefit from it. I find sustenance in volunteer work." ▼



COURTESY OF LEE KIN-CHOI

In 2008, Lee was the host of a performance by the blind.