



BY CARA CHAN AND TERENCE LI

Christophe Tong Yui, a 27-year-old writer, never imagined his debut, the autobiographical *Footnotes* would create quite the splash it did. Mr Tong got his big break when he won the inaugural Young Writers' Debut Competition in 2006 and bagged a publishing contract. The competition, co-organised by local developer Sun Hung Kai Properties and publishing giant Joint Publishing, aimed to identify potential young writers in the city and give them a chance to publish their creations.

In *Footnotes*, Mr Tong had just wanted to touch readers with his account of a childhood spent in the now demolished Shek Kip Mei slums. But the book launched to massive media attention.

"I was very lucky to have my book published with so much buzz," he said. "It was the first year they launched the competition, so the organisers took it particularly seriously and put a lot of effort into the promotion."

Many local young writers, such as Mr Tong, are encouraged by greater support from the business sector in recent years. The support has made it easier to publish new works.

"It was the first year they launched the competition, so the organisers took it particularly seriously and put a lot of effort into the promotion."

However, the writers say more publications do not necessarily mean more readers. So far, the private sector's support has had little effect on promoting literature education in Hong Kong.

Mr Tong developed his passion for writing while studying at the Hong

Kong Institute of Education. It was there he met the famous local poet, Wong Leung-wo and together they later formed the Xinchuan Literary Association. The group shared their literary works as well as insights on the works of others.

"The writing atmosphere is actually quite positive in the educational institutions in Hong Kong," Mr Tong said. "But it becomes inadequate and difficult when we try to promote literature to the general public outside the institutions."

Although editors at several of the quality literary magazines in the city love to publish works from potential young writers, Mr Tong said it is still hard for young writers to publish their first book. He considers his own experience as quite exceptional.

"From the experience of some of my friends, I know that getting your books published, especially the first one, is a pretty lonely experience in Hong Kong," he said.

Eric Lui Wing-kai is another award-winning young writer who shared similar views. "Most people in Hong Kong are not familiar with literature. (They think) it is something that belongs to and can only be appreciated by small groups of people."

Mr Lui said it is expected that most Hong Kong people are more concerned about the economy than the city's culture, because it is a highly commercial place.

"If I wanted to make money, I wouldn't have chosen literature," Mr Lui said. "I write for interest. To me, writing is a kind of instinct, a need. It is a channel for me to read the world and to let the world read me."

Mr Lui said he does not find many readers in Hong Kong, but thinks the city has many favourable conditions that writers dream of.

"Hong Kong is an affluent city and usually writers can earn a living very easily. We have much freedom in writing and we can read articles from all over the world. The point is we don't make good use of these advantages and our vision of cultural policy is narrow."

Mr Lui added that what Hong Kong lacks is the quality appreciation and criticism of literary works. "Instead of



Hong Kong Reader is one of the bookstores which puts *Platform* on their selves.

"Most of the literary magazines back then were more traditional... We wanted to introduce literature that is more relevant to the daily lives of common people."

promoting literature to the masses, I think it is much more important to promote interaction among small groups of writers," he said. "Now we have too many writers but not enough readers."

Mr Lui is now completing his doctorate degree in Chinese Studies at the Baptist University of Hong Kong. He plans to teach literature at a university or secondary school after his graduation.

He is currently one of the editors of *Platform*, a local bi-monthly magazine founded in 2005 by a group of young literature enthusiasts studying at the Baptist University of Hong Kong. *Platform* positions itself as a relatively "lighter" literary magazine.

"Most of the literary magazines back then were more traditional... We wanted to introduce literature that is more relevant to the daily lives of common people. We wanted *Platform* to be an easier-to-read and younger magazine that gives young people a real platform to publish their works," Mr Lui added.

Compared with *Fleurs des Lettres*, another literary magazine with a more experimental bent, *Platform* is more



Eric Lui Wing-kai, an award-winning young writer, said he would not have chosen literature if he wanted to make money.

conventional in style and and more suitable for teenagers.

However, large book stores usually refuse to distribute magazines that do not have book spines and are merely bound by staples. That rules out *Platform* which is printed and put together by the editors themselves to save money.

“But if they learn something they didn’t know after reading your magazine, they will start reading and generating demand.”

The editors personally deliver the magazines to various bookstores in town. They have to haul the magazines all the way to the second-floor book stores themselves. While the bookstores get 40 per cent of the profits from sales, the editors get the other 60 per cent.

About 500 copies of *Platform* are sold per month. Mr Lui described this as “quite good”, despite the fact that they have to rent a mini-warehouse this year to store piles of unsold copies.

Like many other literary magazines, *Platform* was funded by the Literary Arts Magazine Scheme of Hong Kong Arts Development Council (HKADC) in its first two years. But after that, the editors decided to fund *Platform* themselves, because of the scheme’s complicated application procedure.

As required by HKADC, *Platform* had to register as a limited company, establish a board of directors, and submit annual financial reports. The magazine’s editors found these regulations to be their biggest burden.

“All the editors work part-time and we all have our own work to deal

with. The responsibility is too much for us.” Mr Lui said. In Taiwan, he said, some literary magazines do not have a rigid schedule of publishing.

Instead of relying on public funding through the HKADC, Carmen Kwong Wing-Hyun, a writer who specialises in animal literature and the president of two small publishing companies, tries to contribute to the promotion of literature in another way.

She is now the chief editor of a literary magazine called *Books4you*, a free publication sponsored by Sun Hung Kei Properties.

She agrees with Mr Lui, that it is important for a literary magazine to be easy-to-read.

“If you make your magazine too highbrow, too pretentious and aloof, people will not read it,” Ms Kwong said.

“But if they learn something they didn’t know after reading your magazine, they will start reading and generating demand.”

Books4you also disseminates news about young local writers who have had their books published through the Young Writers’ Debut Competition organised by Sun Hung Kai Properties.

However, Ms Kwong said these competitions may not be an effective way of promoting literature, because participation is only confined to a small circle.

“Certain groups repeatedly participated in these competitions. They cannot attract new talents,” Ms Kwong said. “They could actually hold some interscholastic competitions, and then others at district level.”



TERENCE LI

Carmen Kwong Wing-Hyun thinks that literary magazines should be easy-to-read.

“It is pointless to just present a certificate to the winners, after which they would never be heard again,” she added.

She also suggested the government should include some well-written literary works by young writers to the school curriculum, instead of focusing only on famous mainland authors and classical writers.

The Frankfurt Book Fair, which is described as the “Olympics of the publishing industry”, attracting more than 3000 publishers worldwide, was held in October. With China as the Guest of Honour for the first time, it was a golden chance to promote Chinese literature and writers to the world.

But Ms Kwong was disappointed with how the Hong Kong government reacted. “At the Frankfurt Book Fair, Taiwan had about 180 publishers. We had less than 10 from Hong Kong... from mainland China, they (the publishers joining the event) were led by Xi Jinping, our national leader,” Ms Kwong said.

“The Hong Kong government didn’t sponsor us anything. Obviously they didn’t take it seriously,” said Ms Kwong. “They did not even issue a press release.”