

Amid the frenzy and madness, a love letter to Hong Kong

by Kimberly Johans

Mohammad Cohen's novel 'Hong Kong On Air' has been described as "the great American Hong Kong handover novel."

Which is rather ironic when you consider that Cohen wasn't even present at the ceremony and, indeed, had not watched it televised either until after his book had been published.

Yet, for all that, it's a book that manages to encapsulate everything that was Hong Kong during that crucial time. And immediately afterwards, in the case of the Asian economic crisis.

Asked the reasons behind putting pen to paper, Cohen responds with: "I think anybody whose worked in television for long enough thinks about ten times a day, 'oh my God, I've got to write a book.'"

He added that Hong Kong during that period was "an extraordinarily exciting time, so there were plenty of things to write about".

The third reason was a little closer to home, the need to point out the misunderstood nature of the media and how, in some ways, "it's all a vehicle to show people what really goes on at a television station and why things you see are the way they are".

In fact, Cohen has so much to say, a follow-up could be in the works.

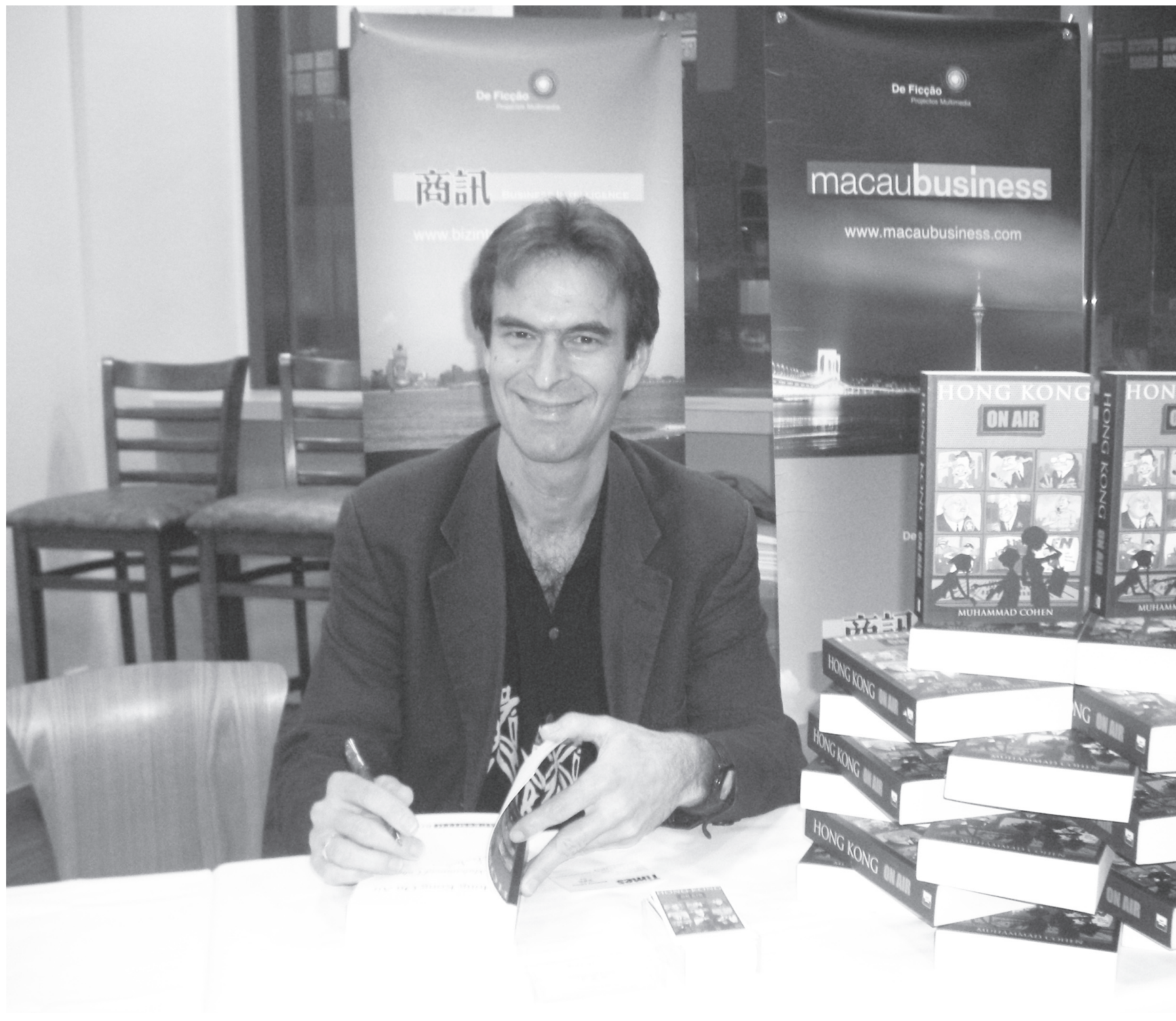
"I sure hope so!" he said, adding that, "A very small percentage of novels are published. A very small percentage of those get any kind of notice at all, but so far so good with Hong Kong On Air."

The book, he points out, offers readers an insight into "frenzy and madness that took over HK in the year before the handover, and all the excitement, the growth, the money and people."

And how quickly it all went away, come the economic crisis.

"Suddenly property prices that couldn't possibly go down, went down 40-50 per cent," he said.

"Suddenly the world's attention was focused elsewhere. In Hong Kong On Air, we talk about how everybody wanted to know



Mohammad Cohen provides a unique insight into the media world in his latest novel

the story of the Asian boom, and when the Asian bust came along, nobody wanted to hear that," he added.

He wanted readers to understand what that time was like and "how quickly things can change because of things we don't foresee".

And he feels there's a lesson to be learnt for Macau, which is going through the same kind of frenzy now, according to Cohen.

"Right now it feels like the centre of the universe. Maybe it's a smaller centre of the universe but still...I just want people to understand that something you didn't foresee can change all that," he said.

And one example of that is China's economic growth as

a result of the crisis that followed the handover.

"Before the economic crisis, China was an emerging economic power.

"After the crisis, it became an essential part of the global economy.

"The investment that had gone into other parts of Asia, was now looking for a new home and more importantly, for a new model," he said, adding, "so far so good, but as I say, things can change."

And how things have changed for Cohen himself.

He began working for CNN in 1991, and then CNBC in 1995, moving from his native New York to Hong Kong to assist with the start-up. He ended up staying and has worked on a variety of outlets since, including The

Standard and Bloomberg News.

"So I have a pretty good idea how the media operates and I think it's different from the way people see it," he said.

He added that a lot of what readers consume have more to do with the individual journalist than the person being interviewed.

"Yes, you should be looking for agendas and bias in the news, but that's not necessarily the bias of the owner. It may be of the journalist," he added.

He stresses that while a good journalist can separate fact from fiction, "that doesn't mean that journalists should only tell the facts".

"Part of a journalist's job is to interpret facts, to put

them in context, and as a news consumer, you have to understand that what you're reading, is someone's interpretation of events," he added.

Having questioned Cohen on how his interpretation of Hong Kong's events came about, he recalls starting a book in 1996, that didn't turn into the published one, although that one has been published in the Asia Literary Review, something Cohen refers to as "the prequel".

He started Hong Kong On Air in 1998, where one good night or week would be lost in one bad month.

About three years ago, the strength of mind to finish returned, where Cohen spent almost a year doing so.

"Your characters and stories take on a life of their own, in directions you didn't expect," he said.

With a ready draft nine months later, this was offered for criticism and reworking which took place over a further six months, which created a draft ready for publishers.

"From there it took about another nine months until I found a publisher," he said, adding that "It's really funny; I found a publisher but I never found an agent."

So Hong Kong On Air boils down to a story about "TV news, love betrayal, high finance and cheap lingerie.

"In many ways it's a love letter to Hong Kong," said Cohen.