

Lydic: Welcome to Media at Risk, a podcast from the Center for Media at Risk at the Annenberg School for communication at the University of Pennsylvania. My name is Kirsten Lydic. I'm a doctoral student at the Annenberg School and a member of the steering committee at the Center for Media at Risk. Today, I am very honored to be joined by Melissa Chan and Badiucao, the creators of the graphic novel published earlier this year titled *You Must Take Part in Revolution*. Melissa Chan is an Emmy nominated journalist who has reported globally and in a number of countries from China to Cuba, Canada, the US and North and South Korea, to name only a few. Since her work as a correspondent with *Al Jazeera* until the mid 20 tens, her work as an independent journalist has been featured in *The New York Times*, *The Atlantic*, *The Washington Post*, *Politico*, *VICE*, *The Guardian* and more. Much of her journalism has covered repressive regimes, human rights and the rise of authoritarianism. Badiucao is a Chinese Australian artist and activist whose work focuses on authoritarianism, censorship, capitalism and the interplay of these phenomena. He is well known for his political cartooning and multimedia installations and is regarded as one of China's most prolific political cartoonists. He concealed his identity to protect himself and his family from backlash from the Chinese government until his identity was uncovered in 2019, leading to the cancellation of his exhibition in Hong Kong after his family received threats from the Chinese regime.

His art has been featured worldwide, from Australia to Italy to the US. This is his debut graphic novel and Chan's as well. The story of *You Must Take Part in Revolution* starts in Hong Kong amidst protests in 2019. Mirroring reality, it then diverts to an alternate reality from 2022 to 2035, where we follow the course of politics across Taiwan, Hong Kong, China and the US. Told through the narratives of three central individuals and their relationships to revolution and to each other. It is a deeply evocative and provocative graphic novel, and it raises questions that are timely and timeless about the role of violence in protest and revolution. So, as my first question, can you tell me about what it was like to work with the medium of the graphic novel as it is the first for both of you? What was the process like in putting this together?

Chan: Hi, thanks so much for having us. I'll start to say that this process was both wonderful and chaotic because we were newbies to the medium. Although speaking for both of us, we've engaged with the medium as readers and appreciators for a very long time. So I love the medium and I never thought I would ever produce a book, a graphic

novel, because I can't draw for the life of me. So this has been an amazing collaboration with Badiucão. As a result, it wouldn't have been able to happen without him. And frankly, the both of us, in terms of the actual process, it was extremely collaborative. I think it's somewhat unusual. Usually, it works one way or the other. You have somebody who produces a graphic novel who is both the writer and the artist in one, or it's often done in a standard sort of monthly comic series. It's like the writer takes the lead, they write things out and then the artist kind of executes. And I'm sure there's some back and forth. But the way we did it was we really collaborated on building the plot and gave each other feedback on the dialogue and the art. I can't draw, but I drew stick figures sometimes to express what I was imagining I would want to see on a page, and Badiucão would come back with me with a sketch, or say, no, it won't work the way that you envision it. Sometimes he'll be working on a page and I'll get a text message saying this dialogue doesn't work. So it was an extremely collaborative process and something that we spent four and a half years working on.

Badiucão: Well, thanks again for having us. Yeah. So for me, the form of graphic novel is something quite unique and impactful, especially giving my experience not really growing up with, you know, DC or Marvel comics, but rather more like Japanese manga. As a person born in the 80s in China, the Japanese manga played a very important role in shaping the whole identity and even the cultural influence for my generation who grew up in China during that time. So for me, I always feel, you know, the media of comics or graphic novel has this great magic to appeal to the younger generation. And that fitting into the subject of my art quite well, and actually tackling one of the major difficulties that I'm faced with because when we try to talk about human rights issues and social issues, you have a very limited audiences frankly. But the difficulty is, how can we as dissident artists or journalists that break these conventional circles of readers and audiences and discuss such topics and opening a window to new groups? Thus trying new media other than just conventional journalism political cartooning or gallery practice become very crucial and important.

And obviously graphic novels, just providing this great window for us to enter a new world, a new audience group who are not usually focused on those subjects that we have passion for. And the creating process, just like Melissa said, it's new to both of us. And even though I might be familiar with political cartooning as a form, but to have a narrative or a fictional narrative weaved into this unique way of expression is, is quite

new to me. Because primarily my focus on art is always about using one frame to tell all the stories, to tell segments of incidents, but never really trying to have time as a material itself, to be a force of storytelling and graphic novel definitely is giving a new life to my own expression and for the creating process. It's really a learning process for me as well. Because now I have more space to talk about the story, to have communication between frames on each page. And also having time as a material, like I mentioned earlier, is quite a challenge, but it does bring in new dimension of expression into it.

Lydic: Yeah. I love that you brought up the accessibility of this narrative form and of the graphic novel in particular. I'm very curious to hear more about how you imagine your audience, who is your target audience with this graphic novel? And I'm curious as well. If you can speak on the title. You must take part in Revolution and what that means.

Badiucao: I actually would like to introduce a little bit of our experiencing during the book talk in America. Several weeks ago we did quite a long book tour going through different cities in America and also trying to break into different circles, not just, you know, doing events in bookstore, but also going to events more fitting into the vibe of comic cons or mangas readers. And one of the events that we went to in New York is the one of the illustrated festivals. And through those events, we were really talking to people that we don't usually have the chance to particularly for audiences like US students, Chinese students who went to America and study illustration.

And we have some very unique but also touching encounters. I remember several Chinese students come approach to attend, but they're cautiously coming here because they are seeing the title of the book, seeing the art style of the book that they feel familiar with, because my art style is using this kind of Chinese ink wash or traditional Chinese painting style, but in the same time, it's quite a hardcore political content and discussing something that they cannot imagine to be done in China. Thus, I guess for them, it's kind of eye-opening experience and just seeing them curious, but also a little bit frightened to approach. Then eventually opening the topic with them is quite a great experience. I remember a lot of students came to us saying well, "I never knew you can use art or graphic novel to talk such things." And I mean, they probably will be familiar with political topics about, you know, LGBTQ rights, about the environment. But for them, it's like others' fight a lot of the time.

Or it's, it's more like universal, but not as that specific that only about China and extended to a concern on America's democracy decline as well. So for them, it's quite an interesting experience. And that's exactly how this new media was able to break the conventional circle.

Another incident I remember is actually there was this school student who came with her mother, and when she comes to our tent, she was like, "oh, I want to buy this book, but I actually don't want my mom to know about it because I think my mom, although she came from China some decades ago, and she goes through all the political purge and repression in China. So I feel like she would like to avoiding the topics". And then after a while, her mom actually wandered to the tent and I had a conversation with her mom, and her mom said to me that, "oh, this book is interesting, but I'm worried that if my daughter will actually be interested in such topics because I think now she's like a second generation of Chinese who grew up in the Western society. This is a remote experience for her, even though I grew up in this terror of politics. But I don't think she would be interested or willing to talk about it". Then they're both coming back and we had a conversation all together and kind of solved the puzzle. And in the end, I tell this girl that, you know, I think your mom has more to say about this topic than you expected. So why don't you read this book together? And incidents like that for me are just magical.

Chan: I'll step in and answer it in a less poetic and a bit more mundane, practical way. But the honest answer for me is that we don't have a target audience. We want this to be something that is extremely accessible across ages. So we've really emphasized that this is something that adults and teens can read. And in fact, what gives me joy has been a few photographs from my friends who bought the book to support me. And then it turned out that when it landed, you know, when it got mailed to their homes, their teenage kids actually grabbed the book first and started reading it. And that gives me joy. So for the audience, it's all ages. And again, as you said, it's for someone who has a lot of knowledge about China, someone who doesn't at all. And it's really just meant to be number one. It's a work of fiction, so it's meant to be entertaining. And number two we hope that it gets people thinking about resistance. And that leads to the title "you must take part in revolution" is actually a line from an essay by Mao Zedong. And it was a little bit tongue in cheek - sort of our attempt to reclaim that language from him. And also a way to sort of play with the idea of if this does get targeted by authorities in

China, it would be really funny if they banned a book that the title is something that Mao Zedong had written.

Lydic: Well, both of those answers are really insightful. And so the questions that are raised in this graphic novel are timely for me, and came at a moment that I really needed to be thinking about them more carefully in terms of the questions that it does raise. For me, the key questions are about the place that violence has in revolution against an oppressive and harmful state, as well as the decisions of harmful and powerful states. And for context, I'm an American. I am reading this in the middle of what I would call a rise of a fascist or authoritarian state in the US. And so these questions feel, as I said, very timely and appropriate in especially a time where hope in institutions is dwindling. As you mentioned, young people especially feel decreasing hope in democracy and feel like political figures and institutions do not represent them, do not have real power even. And we're seeing that in the way that what we believe to be a good system of checks and balances is not really holding up. And so I would love to hear about the way that you decided for these questions on violence. If you see these as the key questions, if you don't, I'd love to hear other key questions that you're raising. So, can you talk about how you came to focus on these particular questions and how you see the role of these questions, especially as I'm thinking about it in a US context?

Chan: Well, to quote Mao once again, political power comes from the barrel of a gun. I think about that a lot. It's clear that we are both thinking about violent versus nonviolent resistance. In this story, perhaps from different perspectives as a journalist, I've covered a lot of protests around the world. I covered parts of the Black Lives Matter protests. I've covered the earliest protests in Hong Kong shortly after the handover from the British. I've covered I don't even I can't even I don't even know where to begin. Just a lot of protests. And I've also observed protests over the last 20 years. And my takeaway is that they're not working as much as they used to. I remember the people Power movement of the Philippines in the 1980s and how that toppled a government, and I'm really trying to work through. I think basically 21st century authoritarianism. And I've talked about this before. They've learned the lessons from the 20th century. They've also developed and they have on their hands stronger tools for surveillance through technology to control people. And as these tools get stacked up against people power on the streets, is there a tipping point that justifies violence because there is no other alternative? That's a question I can't answer, but I think it's something that a lot of

people are questioning and asking that if you look at the actual research that's been done on nonviolent resistance, movements are becoming less and less efficacious and that's just how it's playing out. Those are the facts. And so I think that's something that's been swimming in my head for a very long time. I don't know the answer for that. I'm a journalist, but it's something I've observed in the people and the societies that I've reported on. And it's the struggle that individuals and organizations and opposition groups have to face.

Badiucao: I think for me, violence is an option that should not be easily taken and it's always coming with a consequence. I think when particularly now, in an environment in the West that the young people, this generation have quite a distant understanding from how the real authoritarian regime works to a point that they don't even know this society. I mean, America is slipping into this dark hole as well. And because of this distant understanding from what real authoritarian regime is, it makes people's judgment on violence too light. You know it's kind of like a pendulum swinging from two extremes, either people saying, "oh, we should, you know, do this. It's it's it's it's a last choice that we have. And and there's, there's nothing that we should regret. We should just do that versus that". Or, "this is absolutely not right. And and thus everyone who protests is is a riot". And and I guess our book is trying to find a nuance to, to diagonal people's choices in the most difficult situation that you can imagine, that basically in our world, there is no good guys or good regimes anymore. China is the same high-tech dictatorship, US is falling into fascism. There's no conventional society you can just take and say, this is just this. And there is also no good choice on the table because it seems like peaceful protest is simply not as efficient as it should be in a post authoritarian regime, with all the surveillance technology and the manipulation of the media and social media.

But in the same time that if you choose a violent way, that probably the most premature, but also you can say this is the last hope or or the power of powerless that people can say is is also not a good choice. And it comes with consequence as our character is suffering from that violent choice. So again, I will echo with Melissa's answer that we're not trying to give you an easy answer to say this is right and that is wrong. But what we want to do is mapping out all the possibility and clearly saying that everything comes with an outcome and it comes with a price. And before you make that choice, you have to think it through. And I'm not saying that there's only one way to be done. But every one way leading into a pass. That you will suffer from it. Or people around you will suffer

from it. Whether it's inaction or action or action in a violent way. I think those experiences are the ones that we can provide as a dissident artists who grow up in a total authoritarian regime like China, or a long time journalist who are expert on authoritarian regime like Melissa. But we are not they're here to to really provide a clear pass, but rather saying in the end of the day there are still choices, but it comes with a price.

Lydic: There is always a risk associated with critique of a powerful authoritarian regime. And I know you both are like very personally aware of that in the work that you have done. So I would like to ask you both to speak on how you make sense of that balance between being vocal about the realities of authoritarian regimes and protecting yourself and your own well-being. So how do you make sense of these trade-offs and how do you keep a sense of the scope of the impact of your work?

Chan: I'll start. Trade-offs and protecting yourself. Those are great questions. Well, let me let me talk about things I've observed as a journalist. I've met a lot of activists. And one thing you learn about resistance is that it's not for everyone, at least the stuff that you think of as classically being someone who's in opposition. Right. How many people can be as brave as Alexei Navalny of Russia? I sure as hell can't. And then there are people who look at the reporting I've done in China, the human rights reporting. Tracking down extralegal detention centers known as black jails. Finding them and reporting on them. And they will look at that and say, I could not do that. Some people feel as if they can do a big trade off that they're willing to sacrifice, in Navalny's case, their life. You ask about protecting yourself and your own well-being. There are people who've decided they will not protect themselves and their well-being, and that is their choice. There are people who think that they are going to make that choice and find out too late that that's not really what they signed up for. And they weren't mentally, emotionally ready for that. It's messy. Resistance is extremely messy. And I think my advice for people, as especially Americans right now, is that you should do what you feel you can and not feel inadequate. Don't compare yourself to others. That would be my advice. But I also understand that there will be people who make the choice not to be mentally. Well in terms of the choices they make and the costs that it's going to have on them, and they do that and make that choice deliberately.

Badiucao: I think for me as a dissident artist, that trying to hide myself and use anonymous identity for a long time and eventually got my identity compromised by the Chinese government and having been harassed and, you know, receiving death threats and harassment almost on a daily basis. It is not an easy choice to make. But in the end of the day, I guess it's depending on people's value system. Is their conventional life or material life that people are really looking after or try pursuing, or there's something more than just daily enjoyments. I think the easy sacrifice is when you only pay the price by yourself. By this, I mean it's easier if the Chinese government or maybe in the future, because my cartoon are creating satire against Trump, that I'll be the enemy of America as well, that they will be harassment to me in person. But the hard part is this sacrifice never stop. And your personal level. And that's how vicious an authoritarian regime would go far, which is go far beyond you, but to your family, to the people who might just by chance to know you. That's the real torture that people have to face.

Badiucao: The other thing for me as a political cartoonist is that I have this difficulty that I know in China, a lot of people cannot share their stories, and people like me who are overseas have this very unique position to tell a story for them. But when you do so, it seems like you, whether you're artist or journalist, that you're in a relatively safe space compared with the people inside of China or Iran, that you become this kind of celebrity activist, that you have all the credits, then one of the direction of the attack will always be that you're benefiting from other people's tragedy, and you're only doing it for your own, you know, reputation or for your own success as an artist. And then you would as as a political artist. I have to evaluate that as well. To what extent that I want to tell a story for the people who cannot tell, but in the same way to protect them or have their consent. To tell a story that will put them into danger more than me. And these are the difficulty that I have to keep balancing all the time.

Lydic: Thank you. Thank you both for those really excellent insights. I would love to end with a question that is more about imagination. I'd love to hear from each of you. What are the other ways that you can imagine escalation of resistance aside from protest, aside from violence? And what is the future that you can optimistically see resistance working towards right now?

Badiucao: I think it's a very hard time to be optimistic. I think if we have any hope that I'll be in the bottom of the Pandora's box, that we've seen the demon flying out, that's the



first step. And do not bury your head in the sand. Saying that you didn't see it like you mentioned earlier. Is the house really burning? I would say yeah, it's fucking burning. And don't deny it. Don't think that you can just, you know, close your eyes, plugging your ears and think. "After four years, everything will be normal". Because from my experience and this recent trip in America, I am really worried if there will be democracy at the same way that people experience in America. And if the most powerful economy and military power in this world is degenerated and slide into non-democratic society, then what does it say to the global freedom and democracy as a major narrative? It will fade away. And the hope will not just slip away from people in America, but also for the people globally. Thus, it's very important to take Trump's threat seriously and don't think it would just go away. And you have to fight it now, particularly for the people in America. And don't think that you can just hide it away. Or I would say further, you know, moving to Canada because Trump is going to get Canada as well. Or Europe because Trump is siding with Russia. So they will be no place safe or free if you don't fight domestically for your own democracy and only to accept this very dangerous and almost desperate moment, then maybe we'll find hope in the bottom of this dark hole.

Chan: Yeah, I would like to answer in some sort of nice way of talking about turning inward to your community, focusing on the little things, doing something small every day. But I'm kind of with you on this one. Things are really bad. And if I knew how best to resist, I would definitely pursue that and tell you. But I am stuck myself. And I don't have the answer that we all seek, but I think we should keep searching. We have no options. And I think that the odds are against us. But we have to keep trying. So that's the only thing I can say that's worth anything. Yeah. If I had known a way to fight back, that was totally effective and a guarantee, I would definitely say so, but I don't, I don't. We're searching. We got to continue the search. We don't have that much time. But I think if you're listening. Just think and search and try to do.

[Lydic: Yeah. And I'll add talk to people about it because the answers are not going to come from individuals. It's going to come from figuring out together. So with that, I want to thank you both so, so much for your insights on what is happening in the world right now, for your expertise, for describing your process and for this excellent graphic novel that you both have made together and for taking the time to talk with me today.

I am Kirsten Lydic in another episode of “Media at Risk”, a podcast from the Center for Media at Risk at the University of Pennsylvania. Thank you for listening in and don't forget to get a copy of You Must Take Part in Revolution by Melissa Chen and Badiucao. Thank you both so much.