

As seen in

THE WALL STREET JOURNAL.

WEEKEND JOURNAL.

Copyright 2009 Dow Jones Company. All Rights Reserved

THE WALL STREET JOURNAL.

Friday, January 9, 2009 W1

JUST ASKING | Janice Y. K. Lee

Playing for Time

The debut author talks about her novel set in World War II



Growing up in a Korean household in Hong Kong, Janice Y. K. Lee says she felt out of place. "To be a local in Hong Kong, you have to be a local

Chinese or English and I was neither of those things," she says. The two protagonists of her sweeping World War II romance, "The Piano Teacher," share Ms. Lee's outsider status—Claire Pendleton is a timid English piano teacher working for a Chinese family, and Trudy Liang is a Eurasian beauty who is caught between sides when the Japanese invade the city. Ms. Lee, a 36-year-old mother of four, spoke with The Wall Street Journal from her home in Hong Kong about her debut novel. —Lauren Mechling

WSJ: You grew up in Hong Kong but you lived in the United States from high school through your early thirties. When did you know you wanted to write a book about Hong Kong?

Ms. Lee: I never thought I would. And I'm as surprised as



anyone that I wrote a historical romance. It's not the type of book I tend to read. When I was in my twenties, I was writing stories about twenty-somethings in New York or Koreans in 1970s Hong Kong. And then I wrote a short story about a young Chinese girl and her English piano teacher and I knew that was something I didn't want to stop thinking about. And then I decided to move it back to the war. That really opened up a lot of possibilities for the story.

Do you feel the ghost of the occupation in Hong Kong today?

I didn't even feel it in the '70s. I was vaguely aware the war had happened but that's about it. This isn't a history book, it's a novel, and I probably don't have everything right. When I read the history books it was for dates and then I filled in what would have happened to my characters. It's hard when you read these history books because they don't tell you what people were eating. They don't tell you how much a ferry cost. Or they say, "So and so came over from England on the boat," but they don't tell you how long the boat trip took or what people were talking about on the journey.

The book's depiction of Hong Kong's occupiers is pretty brutal. Have you sold foreign rights in Japan?

No, I don't think that would happen. I was told they don't sell that much World War II literature there. But Germany bought it.

► Read an excerpt from 'The Piano Teacher' at WSJ.com/Lifestyle.