

KINO LORBER

presents

Denise Ho - Becoming the Song

A FILM BY SUE WILLIAMS



USA- 83 MIN - COLOR

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Short:

Denise Ho – Becoming the Song profiles the openly gay Hong Kong singer and human rights activist Denise Ho. Drawing on unprecedented, years-long access, the film explores her remarkable journey from commercial Cantopop superstar to outspoken political activist, an artist who has put her life and career on the line in support of the determined struggle of Hong Kong citizens to maintain their identity and freedom.

Long:

Denise Ho – Becoming the Song profiles the openly gay Hong Kong singer and human rights activist Denise Ho. Drawing on unprecedented, years-long access, the film explores her remarkable journey from commercial Cantopop superstar to outspoken political activist, an artist who has put her life and career on the line to support the determined struggle of Hong Kong citizens to maintain their identity and freedom.

Denise's story mirrors almost perfectly the last three decades of Hong Kong's uneasy relationship with China. A top international recording artist in Hong Kong and across China and other Asian nations, the turning point in her career came during the seminal moment of change for Hong Kong, the Umbrella Movement of 2014. Her public support of students who demanded free elections and occupied central Hong Kong for nearly three months had immediate and lasting consequences: she was arrested and then blacklisted by China.

Under pressure, sponsors dropped Denise and venues refused to let her perform. The film follows Denise on the road as she tours the U.S., Canada and UK and prepares to release a new hit song, attempting to rebuild her career. But it soon became clear she is also reflecting on her life's trajectory. In June 2019, Hong Kong exploded in anti-extradition law protests with millions taking to the streets, and Denise once again faced a turning point. She has been in the streets with the tear gas and water cannons. She has tried to mediate for and protect the protesters. She has addressed the United Nations and U.S. Congress to explain the crisis and plead for international help, making it clear that Hong Kong's struggle is a desperate fight for basic freedom and democracy around the world.

As the film draws to a close, the fight for Hong Kong continues...

Now, as the 23rd anniversary of the UK's handover of Hong Kong to China approaches on July 1, China is cracking down on Hong Kong's democracy movement harder than ever before.

See a summary of recent developments here New York Times, June 9, 2020:

[“Hong Kong Protests, One Year Later”](#)

Director's Statement

When I was introduced to Denise Ho in the summer of 2017, she told me she hoped I would make a film about her and Hong Kong's eroding freedoms. The documentaries I've made in the past have been about China ([China - A Century of Revolution](#); [Young and Restless in China](#); [China in the Red](#)). But while I've spent extensive time there and Hong Kong, I'd never heard of Denise and I knew next to nothing about Cantopop, the particular genre of music for which she is famous. In my first meeting with her, I had difficulty imagining the rather quiet, unassuming woman I met as a major Asian pop star, gay rights activist and determined defender of Hong Kong's civil society.

Something happens, however, when Denise goes on stage. It was when I watched her perform live in London a few months later that I saw the bold, charismatic star of her legendary stadium concerts -- and I knew I wanted to make a film about her.

We began production in 2018. Having been arrested and then blacklisted by China for her participation in the 2014 Umbrella Movement, Denise was trying to build a new career. We followed her as she wrote music, went on tour, and began to speak at international human rights forums. As we were editing, the protests of 2019 exploded and she returned to the streets with the protestors, pleading for calm and justice, addressing the United Nations, the US Congress and of course, making music.

As I discovered, her life is a quintessentially Hong Kong story, mirroring the territory's political ups and downs and the ever-tightening grip of China's Communist Party. What sets her apart from her fellow HongKongers is her firm faith in democratic principles, values she says she absorbed during her teenage years living in Montreal. These beliefs have given her the strength to do what most cannot -- put their career and fortune on the line, to risk and be arrested, to lose your commercial sponsors, those you thought were friends, and to become a rare public voice for the millions of Hong Kong citizens fighting for freedom and democracy.

Denise Ho - Becoming the Song tells her story.

-- Sue Williams



Sue Williams (Producer/Director)

Sue Williams is the founder of [Ambrica Productions](#) and has been making documentaries for three decades. *Death by Design*, produced with Impact Partners, investigated the environmental impact of the electronics industry. It screened globally on Al Jazeera in 2016, at over 30 festivals and is available on most on-demand platforms. Previous films include the highly acclaimed *CHINA* Trilogy (*China in Revolution*, *The Mao Years*, and *Born under the Red Flag*) as well as *China in the Red* and *Young & Restless in China* – all premiered on *PBS/Frontline*. Sue also directed two highly praised biographies -- *Eleanor Roosevelt* and *Mary Pickford* -- for the PBS series, *American Experience*. Awards include the 2016 Boston Globe Filmmaker of the Year Award, Cine Golden Eagles, International Film & Video Festival Awards, Chris Awards, and Edgar Dale Awards for Best Screenwriting.

Jerry Risius (Director of Photography)

Credits include: *Muskrat Lovely*, *The Devil Came on Horseback* (also Field Producer), *A Walk to Beautiful* for which he won an Emmy Award, *The Price of Sugar*, *Our Brand Is Crisis*, *The Last Mountain*, *The Zipper*, *Unzipped*. In 2018 he recently was nominated for another Emmy for his work on numerous episodes of Anthony Bourdain's CNN series *Parts Unknown*. His work has appeared on PBS: *Nova*, *Nature*, *Wide Angle*, *Independent Lens*, *POV*, *HBO*, *Showtime*, *National Geographic*.

Emma Morris (Editor)

Emma Morris is an Academy Award and Emmy Award winning editor whose films have been released theatrically, on PBS, BBC, HBO and VH1. Recent films include *Humanity on the Move* for *POV/PBS*; *The Talk*, a special for PBS on communities of color and the police; *The Stand-bys*, a feature documentary on Broadway standbys and understudies; *Shut-up & Sing*, the acclaimed feature documentary on the Dixie Chicks; *Outside Looking In* about a young man exploring his interracial adoption; *Voices of Sarafina!* a feature documentary made for Lincoln Center Theater, Emmy nomination for best editing; *Close Harmony*, the story of and intergenerational chorus and winner of the Academy Award for Best Documentary Short; *A Stitch for Time*, explores the worldwide peace activities of Idaho women, Academy Award Nominee.

CREDITS

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Produced by
Sue Williams

Edited by
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Cinematography by
Jerry Risius

KINO LORBER

With a library of over 2,800 titles, Kino Lorber Inc. has been a leader in independent art house distribution for 35 years, releasing 30 films per year theatrically under its Kino Lorber, Kino Repertory and Alive Mind Cinema banners, garnering seven Academy Award® nominations in nine years. Recent theatrical releases include Cannes-winners Kantemir Balagov's *Beanpole*, Jean-Pierre Dardenne & Luc Dardenne's *Young Ahmed*, and Kleber Mendonça Filho & Juliano Dornelles's *Bacurau*. In addition, the company brings over 350 titles yearly to the home entertainment and educational markets through physical and digital media releases. With an expanding family of distributed labels, Kino Lorber handles releases in ancillary media for Zeitgeist Films, Carlotta USA, Adopt Films, Greenwich Entertainment, Raro Video, and others, placing physical titles through all wholesale, retail, and direct to consumer channels, as well as direct digital distribution through over 40 OTT services including all major TVOD and SVOD platforms. In 2019, the company launched its new art house digital channel Kino Now which features over 1000 titles from the acclaimed Kino Lorber library.

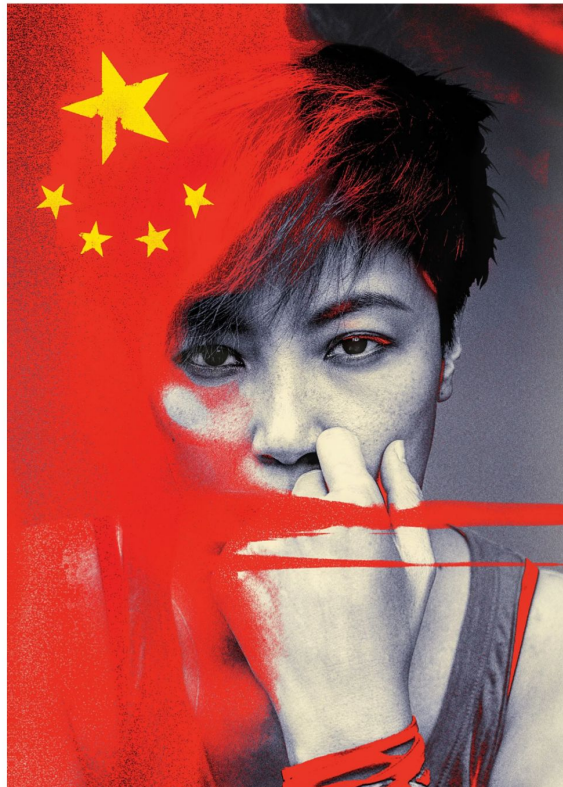
A REPORTER AT LARGE JANUARY 21, 2019 ISSUE

DENISE HO CONFRONTS HONG KONG'S NEW POLITICAL REALITY

*As Beijing chips away at the territory's freedoms, the
Cantopop singer has become its emblematic figure—
embattled, emboldened, and un beholden.*

By Jiayang Fan

January 14, 2019



On a spring morning at a concert hall in Toronto, Denise Ho, a queen of the Hong Kong genre known as Cantopop, prepared to appease the gods. Posters on either side of the

stage door advertised her tour through Canada, where she spent her formative years, and California. An entourage of assistants and stagehands scurried around unloading speakers, costume bags, and equipment cases. Ho, a lean, athletic-looking woman of forty-one, wore a green bomber jacket and hiking boots. Her face was set in a steely expression of self-possession and purposefulness, which gave her the appearance of a cross between a soldier and a minor Buddhist deity.

Ho walked to a table, just outside the door, that was covered with a bright-red cloth. She ignited a few sticks of incense and bowed her head. The practice was a pre-performance custom common in Cantonese opera, a vernacular music tradition that is one of Cantopop's precursors: artists call on the heavens for protection and appeal to the local spirits to forgive any disturbance that the performance might cause.

Ho said that she doesn't believe in God, but that the spiritual element of life is important to her. "Rituals are different from belief," she told me, and this ceremony was "an homage to the past, and performed out of respect rather than fear." Since meeting the Dalai Lama, in 2016, she has taken to burning sage to "purify the energy" around her. The acrid scent follows her wherever she goes.

If a sense of the spiritual anchors Ho's personal life, it is her political convictions that have come to define her public persona. Six years ago, she became the first major female star in Hong Kong to come out as gay, a significant move in a society that remains culturally conservative. Then, in 2014, during what became known as the Umbrella Revolution—protesters held up umbrellas as a protection against teargas—she joined thousands of people demonstrating against Beijing's encroachments on the autonomy of Hong Kong. (In 1842, China ceded Hong Kong Island to the British, who gave it back with additional territory in 1997, in an agreement that secures certain privileges of self-governance for the territory.)

At the protests, Ho and a number of other Cantopop singers performed a song, "Raise the Umbrella," that became the anthem of the movement. In the third month of demonstrations, she was arrested. The footage of her being led away by police furnished one of the enduring images of the protests. On the Chinese mainland, where Ho had been a burgeoning star, and where most of her income came from, she became persona non grata. State media outlets called her "a poison of Hong Kong," and one editorial warned that the mainland sales Ho depended on were far from guaranteed: "Don't think you can eat our food and smash our pots at the same time." Since then, her music has been rigorously purged from streaming platforms in China, and she is banned from having a social-media presence there. As Beijing chips away at Hong Kong's freedoms, Ho has become an emblematic figure of the territory—embattled, emboldened, and unbeholden.

In person, Ho can be pensive, introverted, even awkward, but something inside her is released once she walks onstage. At the Toronto concert, when the stage lights came up,

the outline of her silhouette materialized, to feral applause and hoots. Her slender frame, clad in a khaki trenchcoat and shiny black ankle boots, seemed to fill the stage, as she pranced around her microphone stand, the drums, and the backup vocalists, like a mischievous child hamming it up and pretending not to know that she's being watched.

Cantopop is often dismissed as mass-produced pabulum. Many of the genre's songs, slickly manufactured for a swooning teen audience, lean heavily on idealized, treacly romance—a litany of bad breakups and hopeless crushes. The performers are often Bambi-eyed maidens and clean-cut swains who have not necessarily been recruited for their vocal gifts. But the music can be almost lethally catchy, and perfecting the genre's blend of Western-style melodic lines, Eastern-style pentatonic ones, and electronic disco beats requires skill. Songwriting in Cantonese, the dominant language of Hong Kong and Guangdong Province, presents particular challenges. Chinese languages are tonal—the same phoneme has different meanings depending on how it rises or falls—and Cantonese has many more tones than Mandarin, the dominant language of the mainland. Writing a melody that fits the contour of a sentence, or finding words to fit a preëxisting melody, is notoriously difficult.

Cantopop's influence extends far beyond Hong Kong. For a generation or more, it was a leading pop genre across Asia—with sizable followings not only on the mainland but also in Korea, Japan, and Southeast Asia. And, in spite of the music's more formulaic features, its greatest stars have managed to shape striking personas and produce songs of real expressive power. Denise Ho is one of them. Her songs often twist Cantopop's formulas in audacious ways, and her voice, though agile in the silvery high register favored by female performers, can shift within a few beats to a forceful, earthy contralto that seems to issue straight from her solar plexus.

At the end of the Toronto performance, Ho stood at the edge of the stage and addressed her fans. This was the first time she had performed in North America since her politics had derailed her career. “In the past three years, a lot of things happened,” she said. The mood in the hall shifted, and the people next to me set down their beers and hunched forward. “I can no longer be a simple singer like I was in the past,” Ho continued. “I actually took a pause in writing. But, at the beginning of this year, I suddenly felt that it was time to re-start the creative process.” She cleared her throat. Her eyes shone. “I believe in the power of creation—even in times as dire as these.”

In “Seeking,” a memoir Ho wrote just before she turned forty, she considers the distinction between “home” and “roots,” and suggests that the latter are more malleable than most people assume. “Like resilient plants, people's roots regenerate over time,” she said. But the place that feels to her most like home is a stone-façade house in a suburb of Montreal, where her family lived after moving from Hong Kong, in 1988, when she was eleven. Her parents eventually sold the house and moved back to Hong

Kong, in order to be closer to her, but she has vowed that she will buy it the next time it comes on the market, regardless of where she happens to be living.

“I make a pilgrimage every time I’m in Montreal,” she told me as we stood outside the house, the morning after she performed a concert in the city. The branches of a Japanese lilac swayed in the front yard, and Ho pointed to her bedroom window. Her parents and her brother, who had come from Hong Kong for the tour, were making the pilgrimage, too. Ho’s mother, Janny, wore jeans covered in street-art-style designs; her father, Henry, whom Ho closely resembles, made a clown face when she held up her phone to take a picture. A young woman pushing a stroller passed, and then an older couple, hand in hand. A few yards past the house, the man turned around and called out, “Henry, is that you?”

The man, a retired lawyer named Hugues Nadon, was the father of a childhood friend of Ho’s who had lived a couple of doors down. There were hugs and recollections of holidays and hockey practices, and Ho slipped in and out of French, the Nadons’ first language. She mentioned that her concert the night before had been at the assembly hall of a Catholic school, the same place where, at fifteen, she performed for the first time. She had ended her program with “Montreal,” a song that celebrates the city that taught her “how to be a person.” “My values, my sense of independence, my principles, my penchant for rebellion—they all took root here,” she said.

The Nadons had heard about Ho’s arrest. “We were worried about you,” Hugues said. “Are you doing O.K.?”

“It’s better now,” Ho replied, and then became mock-serious: “But if I ever have to take refuge in Montreal—”

“I don’t have my law license anymore, but I am always happy to advise and help,” he said with a broad smile.

Ho’s parents, both educators, were born in Hong Kong, to families who had come from China prior to the Communist takeover. After Mao Zedong took power, in 1949, Hong Kong’s proximity made it a popular destination for refugees. For a while, some hundred thousand people were arriving each month. The population more than doubled, and by the early sixties fewer than half of Hong Kong’s residents had been born there. As that generation came of age, growing up in the shadow of famine and Maoist purges occurring as close as a few miles away, the island transformed itself into a financial hub. A distinctive Hong Kong culture emerged: hybridized, outward-looking, and entrepreneurial. Resentment of the British colonial presence persisted, but was increasingly overtaken by apprehension about the return to Chinese rule, which was dictated by the terms of a lease that Britain signed with China in 1898. Like many of

their Cantonese-speaking peers, Henry and Janny were more fluent in English than in Mandarin, and harbored a deep-seated distrust of the Chinese government.

Denise was born in 1977, and for much of her youth it seemed that she would always be eclipsed by her brother, Harris, who is two years older. Harris, a conservatory-trained musician who now writes music for his sister and other Hong Kong performers, was playing the piano at the age of four; when Denise tried the piano, around the same age, she couldn't even sit still for her first lesson. Just before the family emigrated—"We didn't want to live in a place where the future is ominous and uncertain," Henry told me—they took their first vacation to the mainland, to visit the Great Wall and other historical landmarks. "The purpose of the trip was so that we could be acquainted with our roots, so we could find a point of connection to the place we came from," Ho said. But to her nine-year-old eyes the mainland cities were grim spectacles of poverty and backwardness. Her main memory is of sitting on a tour bus as a shirtless man hawked pork buns on the side of the road. "There was so much dirt and car exhaust. I could see the layers of dust just settling on those buns, which had no covering, and people bought them and ate them all the same. I remember thinking then, What does dust taste like? And why did these people, people who looked so sensible—grandparents, mothers and fathers with their young children—why didn't they mind?"

Another excursion shortly before the move to the West was to a concert by Anita Mui, a Cantopop diva known as the Madonna of the East. For Ho, seeing Mui perform was life-changing. "I was obsessed with her," she said, and recalled that every week in Montreal she would write fan letters and take a bus for an hour and a half to Chinatown to flip through entertainment magazines for news of her idol. Ho learned to sing Mui's songs and other Cantopop hits, and started performing regularly, sometimes with her brother.

In 1996, when she was about to go to college, she entered Hong Kong's New Talent Singing Awards, an annual televised contest on TVB, Hong Kong's equivalent of the BBC. She'd discovered that Mui was to be a judge that year and hoped to meet her. Mui had been the first-ever winner, fourteen years before, and since then the show had become a powerful engine in TVB's star factory. Ho ended up winning first prize and then faced a decision: stay in the liberal atmosphere of Canada or pursue a career in Hong Kong, on the eve of the handover to China. "I knew that, with a face like mine, I couldn't be a mainstream star in Canada or America," she told me. "But in Hong Kong I knew I had a chance."

Like Ho, I fell in love with Anita Mui in the late eighties, when I glimpsed her on the cover of a cassette that my mother had borrowed from a co-worker. We were living in the sooty mainland city of Chongqing, where dust was a condition of life, even inside the Army hospital where my mother worked as a pulmonologist.

My mother did not quite approve of Mui, whose minidresses and hip gyrations onstage violated her sense of female propriety; this was the sort of thing that the Communist Party deemed “spiritually polluting.” But, of course, that was also what made Mui so tantalizing to a citizenry fed a diet of *aiguo gequ* (“patriotic songs”), which played ceaselessly on the radio and over public loudspeakers.

When I was three, there was one I especially loved, “Bloodstained Glory.” It had been written to commemorate the Chinese soldiers who died during the Sino-Vietnamese War, but I had no sense of this at the time. I knew only one line—“Grieve not, the soil of our Republic contains the love we have given!”—and warbled it repeatedly in front of adults who had long grown tired of the song. (One prominent performer who sang it, Peng Liyuan, had recently married a vice-mayor named Xi Jinping.)

Anita Mui was someone you listened to at home—not quite secretly but discreetly. She embodied our private dream of a land where people were indisputably Chinese but lived a life that we could barely imagine. Hong Kong—literally, “fragrant harbor”—connoted less a physical place than a way of being. When I listened to Cantopop, I daydreamed about being a starlet swathed in mink, riding in a polished convertible past soaring glass buildings. The Hong Kong movies that we watched on television had the effect of making us suddenly aware of our raggedness. Seeing other Chinese people enjoy the kind of modernity that we had come to associate with foreigners (also from television), we could no longer tell ourselves that Chinese people could not live that way. And yet none of us would ever get to go there. Cantopop was a luxurious, impossible fantasy—something you wanted not just to sing along to but somehow to possess and swim inside.

If, as a child, I had been able to visit Ho’s office in Hong Kong, on a block of sagging gray warehouses in one of the city’s industrial zones, I might have been less impressed. When I arrived one June morning, a few weeks after her North American tour, Ho was examining herself with detached objectivity in a floor-to-ceiling mirror, wearing what appeared to be an haute-couture hemp sack—a prospective costume for the video of a new song. She conferred with two women—a film director and a costume designer—while her girlfriend scurried around with a camera.

Ho nodded briefly in my direction, smiling, then quickly resumed her rapid-fire critique of the costume options. She has three full-time employees, but likes to have a hand in every aspect of her projects. Later, when she was distractedly rummaging through the office to find one of her older albums for me, I asked if there was someone else I could bother. “There’s no point,” she said. “Things have to go through me anyway.”

Ho learned to do everything on her own out of necessity. When she first returned to Hong Kong, her career languished. TVB’s stable of rising stars was dominated by beauty queens, and Ho, though attractive, already had a somewhat androgynous edge that didn’t fit the mold. “I was all, like, O.K., here I am, I’m ready to make a record! But

nobody really knew what to do with me,” she said. To get by, she took jobs hosting television shows and playing minor roles in serial dramas. “I wanted to be taken seriously as a singer, and they were putting me on these side gigs,” she continued. “Finally, they gave me a song, and it ended up being a kids’ song based on a cartoon character. I was so angry I ended up singing it as if it was hardcore rock.” Released in 1997, the song became a surprise hit.

Encouraged, she sent a demo tape to Mui, who was impressed enough to take her on as an apprentice. Working as Mui’s songwriter and performing with her onstage raised Ho’s profile, and she absorbed something of her mentor’s fearlessness. Mui, an unconventional-looking but deeply sensual performer, from a hardscrabble background, was also an ardent pro-democracy campaigner. After the Tiananmen Square crackdown, in 1989, she had spoken in support of the protesters and given money to a covert network smuggling dissidents to safety.

The years with Mui shaped the way that Ho was seen, even after Mui died of cancer, in 2003, at the age of forty—a loss that for Hong Kongers was like the deaths of Princess Diana and of Michael Jackson rolled into one. Critics were quick to label Ho’s style as *linglei*, meaning “alternative,” a designation that she finds wryly amusing. “It only goes to show how narrow Hong Kong’s music offerings are,” she said. “Only in an environment where everyone is so nice and alike do I stand out so glaringly.”

Ho quickly became one of the most prominent figures on the Hong Kong music scene, winning awards and releasing chart-topping songs with a succession of major record companies. She also established herself as one of a growing number of Cantopop artists experimenting with the form. One of the songs that she sang in Toronto was “Louis and Lawrence,” a ballad with a haunted, melancholic melody that was written for a rock musical that Ho produced in 2005, based on a legend of the Jin dynasty, the Butterfly Lovers—China’s “Romeo and Juliet,” more or less. Ho’s version plays up the gender-bending themes of the classic tale: the heroine dresses as a man in order to gain access to an imperial school, from which women are barred, and falls in love with a fellow-scholar. He reciprocates her feelings, without realizing that she is a woman. “To me, China’s most famous love story is also a gay story,” Ho told me.

In 2008, she set up her own studio, in part to have the freedom to take on commercially risky projects that addressed social issues. Her album from the same year, “Ten Days in the Madhouse,” was intended to highlight the issue of mental illness, still a somewhat taboo subject in Hong Kong. And although she also courted fame on the mainland, she refused to soft-pedal her convictions. When she released her first album in Mandarin, one of the songs, “Wintersweet Blossoms in Siberia,” was dedicated to the imprisoned dissident Liu Xiaobo.

When Ho and I talked about her career, I asked how Beijing’s displeasure had affected her professional life. “People thought that I couldn’t make it after what happened,” she

said. “They came up to my parents and asked if I could survive.” It hadn’t been easy, she admitted, but she’d learned to approach managing her own career as a creative challenge. Unable to find a corporate backer for a concert series at the Hong Kong Coliseum, she launched a campaign to get local businesses to sponsor the event. Three hundred companies signed on, and all fifty thousand tickets sold out within hours. The loyalty of her fans had a political dimension. In 2016, after the cosmetics company Lancôme cancelled a concert featuring Ho, Hong Kongers boycotted its products, furious that a major corporation would “kowtow” to Beijing. Protesters marched on Lancôme’s stores, forcing every outlet in Hong Kong to temporarily close.

I wondered if becoming an avatar of the Umbrella Movement had made Ho contemplate going into politics. She drew a deep breath. “For a while, I really thought about it,” she said. “I bought books about politics and the way the political system worked. I studied, evaluated, and analyzed myself. But the more I learned about politics the more aggravated I became.” She seemed unsatisfied with how she’d expressed the idea, and switched from English to Mandarin. “It’s like this: it’s the job of politicians to learn to think inside certain constraints and do moral calculations,” she said. “I realized that I was not suited to that game.”

“We have always been defined by our utility to greater powers,” Benny Tai, one of the leaders of the 2014 protests, told me. Tai, a law professor at the University of Hong Kong, explained that Hong Kong had been nothing more than a sparsely populated fishing village until its geographic position became strategically important to nineteenth-century British traders eager to access the vast Chinese market. After defeating the enfeebled Qing dynasty in the First Opium War, Britain took over the island and made it a crown colony. The British set up free markets, a free press, a legislature, independent courts, and a stock market. Over time, the native population absorbed many of the colonizers’ customs. “We were essentially raised British but would not be of British stock,” Tai said. Hong Kong, born of this unusual colonial encounter, was never expected to grow up into something that might want to shape itself. In that sense, the democracy movement was a necessary development that had arrived at an unfavorable time. “From a semi-democratic state, Hong Kong has transformed into a semi-authoritarian state,” he observed.

While I was in Hong Kong, I met with Joshua Wong and Nathan Law, who had emerged as leaders in the protests when they were eighteen and twenty-one, respectively. Both of them later served jail time for their involvement. We went to a bistro next to Hong Kong’s Central Government Complex, where the protests began and the fiercest clashes between police and demonstrators occurred. From our table, I could see the flags of the People’s Republic of China and of the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region, as the territory is officially known, flying side by side at the building that houses Hong Kong’s parliamentary body, the Legislative Council.

Two years after the protests, Wong and Law founded a new political party, Demosistō. In the Legislative Council elections that year, Law became the youngest candidate ever to win a seat, but he was disqualified from serving after he used the oath-taking ceremony to protest Beijing's influence. Demosistō's main goals, they told me, were to insure Hong Kong's right to self-determination and to push for democratic reform establishing "one person, one vote." Currently, only half the Legislative Council's members are elected by individual voters; the other half are elected mostly by business and trade associations. In every election, the system has produced a majority for pro-Beijing parties, although most of the population votes for pro-democracy parties. "Hong Kong has never been allowed to be a real democracy, before or after 1997," Wong said. "What we want is for the people of Hong Kong to figure out for themselves how they want to live."

Most of Hong Kong's political disputes involve the idea of "one country, two systems," a principle devised by Deng Xiaoping in the eighties. As the end of British rule approached, it was used as a way of harmonizing the Communist mainland with capitalist, multiparty Hong Kong. In negotiations with the British, the concept was formalized into specific stipulations, eventually enshrined in the Basic Law, Hong Kong's mini-constitution. The Basic Law guarantees "a high degree of autonomy" to Hong Kong's legislature, judiciary, and executive branch, as well as freedom of speech, association, the press, and demonstration. But it also states that Hong Kong is an "inalienable" part of the People's Republic, and it grants the right to interpret the Basic Law not only to Hong Kong's courts but also to Beijing—a potential back door to more direct control.

Wong and Law said that their greatest current concern is Article 23 of the Basic Law, which says that Hong Kong must enact laws to "prohibit any act of treason, secession, sedition, subversion against the Central People's Government." Democracy activists worry that the article will be used to outlaw important areas of free speech and political expression. Last fall, the Hong Kong government formally banned a fringe pro-independence party on the ground that it threatened national security and spread "hatred and discrimination against mainland Chinese." There has been long-standing pressure from Beijing for Hong Kong to pass national-security laws, which democracy campaigners see as symptomatic of China's resolve to suppress separatism in territories such as Xinjiang and Tibet. Half a million people protested on the streets when such a bill was proposed in 2003. Wong and Law believe that there will be another attempt in the next three to five years.

"In the short term, it's hard not to be pessimistic, to feel a real helplessness," Law said. "But in the long term I am an optimist. It's an optimism born out of something akin to religious faith that Hong Kong will one day decide its own fate." Both men mentioned a generational aspect to people's changing attitudes. "In terms of identity, our parents feel Chinese in their blood, but, for us, declaring our Chineseness has unavoidable political associations," Wong said. "We don't recognize ourselves to be Chinese in that way, because we have no loyalty to the Communist Party." Law called his parents "very

traditional, old-school Chinese” and said that they’d initially objected to his political activism: “Hong Kong never felt fully theirs the way it feels like it is ours.”

If you grew up in mainland China, there’s something disorienting about being in Hong Kong. At first, it seems like you’re in just another big Chinese city: all the signs are in Chinese characters, the food stalls hawk familiar fare, and the streets are full of people who look like you. But then you notice the lancet windows of the city’s Victorian-gothic cathedral, and the British street names: Chancery Lane, Bristol Avenue, Fenwick Street. The people you meet have names like Audrey, Arthur, and Henry. To be someone of Chinese descent who speaks Mandarin and English but not Cantonese is to experience a double foreignness, and two subtly different kinds of suspicion: if I spoke English, I was assumed to be a Westerner, which meant being treated with wary deference but also being outrageously overcharged; speaking Mandarin was worse, eliciting a distrust that bordered on contempt.

China’s economic power has led to a huge influx of mainlanders—not just tourists but people who come to buy real estate, study, give birth, or have medical procedures. Given China’s vast consumer base, locals increasingly fear being outspent. They also complain that their orderly, law-abiding culture is being eroded by uncouth, rapacious visitors. When arguments break out, Hong Kongers call the mainlanders locusts, and the mainlanders dismiss the locals as lapdogs of the British. A few years ago, there was a scuffle in a shopping district after a toddler from the mainland urinated in the street and, along with his parents, was surrounded by an angry crowd. The incident became an online sensation, with commenters polarized over whether it was the parents or the crowd who had behaved unacceptably.

Twice, after getting into a cab and speaking in Mandarin, I was berated for not putting on my seat belt, even though I’d already done so. The second time, the driver yelled at me every few minutes, ignoring my assurance that the belt was on. When he eventually looked around and checked, he uttered a long “oh” but stopped short of an apology. “Mainlanders usually don’t like to put on seat belts,” he said, adding pointedly, “But here in Hong Kong we do it, because it’s the law.”

It was true that in Beijing or Shanghai I’d rarely seen anyone wearing a seat belt. It was also likely that my drivers had suffered their fair share of peremptory mainlanders who brazenly defied regulations. Truth be told, it had felt slightly odd to me to be in a city full of Chinese people where you nonetheless never saw anyone walking against a red light. Still, it was a shock to realize that simply speaking Mandarin was enough to mark me out as trouble.

I mentioned this to Helen Siu, a Hong Kong native who is an anthropology professor at Yale, as we ambled along Hollywood Road, the second-oldest street on the island. She pointed to a short, broad tree whose branches of butterfly-shaped leaves drooped to form a rounded canopy. “The bauhinia is Hong Kong’s emblem,” she told me—not only

because of the magnificence of its magenta blossoms in the spring but because it is a hybrid. All twenty-five thousand trees in the city are believed to have come from a single specimen discovered by a French Catholic missionary. The tree is not capable of propagating itself, and owes its continued existence to a process of cultivation: cutting, layering, and grafting. Siu grinned at the almost too neat analogy and said, “No one here could ever claim very deep roots.”

The topic of Hong Kong’s identity—what it consists of, how it is changing—came up in almost every conversation I had there. Siu spoke of the island as a multiethnic space that had been improvised and reinvented throughout its history. She believes that southern China, being coastal, has always been culturally porous. By contrast, the political center in the landlocked north has consistently striven to unify and homogenize—from the late third century B.C., when a former Qin-dynasty general conquered the region and founded the Kingdom of Nanyue, to President Xi Jinping’s current “sinicization” drive in the country’s ethnic regions.

We reached Man Mo Temple, one of the oldest buildings on the island, whose low, green-tiled roof and ornate granite columns looked strange amid the surrounding crush of skyscrapers. The temple was built in 1847, and in the ensuing decades the site, low-lying and prone to epidemics, became the heart of Hong Kong’s Chinese community. “Hong Kong was a very vertical city,” Siu said as we climbed a hill. “The Europeans lived up there”—she pointed—“and the Chinese were working by the waterfront. Imagine if this was a summer day in the late nineteenth century. We’d see the rich passing us by, sitting in sedan chairs, being carried by barebacked laborers to their posh residence.” The hierarchy remains: the incalculably expensive neighborhoods up the hill are occupied by the international rich, including many wealthy mainlanders; when we walked back down the hill, we saw a large group of Filipino and Indonesian maids on their day off, eating and playing cards on mats improvised from cardboard boxes.

Shortly before the Hong Kong handover, in 1997, my mother and I took a trip back to the mainland, which we’d left for America a few years earlier. Anticipation of the territory’s return “to the bosom of the motherland” was palpable. Party leaders had long made a point of referring to Hong Kong as *tongbao*—born of “the same womb” as the rest of China. Now a commemorative song, “A.D. 1997,” performed by some of the mainland’s biggest stars, played incessantly on the radio. In the song, Hong Kong is cast as a lost loved one: “A hundred years ago, I watched, helpless, as you slipped away / A hundred years later, I wait anxiously for you to return to my side.”

But what happens if you are actually reunited with a lost relative? How well will you know each other and how happy will you be? The “pained parting” that the song mourned had a special resonance in my family. My father was born to peasants in Shanxi, one of the poorest provinces in China, and was the fourth of six surviving children. By the time my grandmother gave birth to the sixth, China was in the middle

of the Great Famine, which killed some thirty million people, and the family was eating tree bark to survive. Fortuitously, a well-off couple in the village, both schoolteachers, had just found out that they could not have children, so a mutually beneficial solution suggested itself. The teachers received the child they had longed for, and my father's parents received two bushels of grain.

The fact that the child, a girl, had effectively been sold was a source of shame in a culture where blood ties and ancestry are sacred. The remaining children understood that they were fortunate to have been “kept,” but they wondered what exactly this good fortune consisted of. What was so lucky about toiling in the fields with hardly anything to fill your stomach while your youngest sister ate three meals a day and got to stay in school? They viewed her with a curious mixture of envy and pity—envy of her material comfort, pity for her lack of legitimacy. Once, when things were particularly desperate, my father asked if he, too, could be sold.

I met my youngest aunt when I was seven. I called her Xiao Gugu—“little aunt”—but it was obvious that she was different. She had pale skin unmarked by the sun, smelled faintly of scented soap, and had a soft-spoken manner that made my other two aunts seem coarse. Xiao Gugu never hid her connection to the Fan family, but, three decades on, she had grown into a person with new allegiances that she refused to hide. She didn't consider herself part of the clan, and saw no reason to observe the rituals of filial piety, such as visiting the ancestral home on holidays and kowtowing to my grandmother. My aunts and uncles felt slighted by her indifference to the family bond: perhaps she'd been spoiled by her life of plenty and lacked the moral fibre that tougher lives had bred in them.

We mainlanders had a similar reaction to the Hong Kong that we saw in the movies and music videos of the eighties. A life so pampered, while enviable and thrilling, was also morally suspect, reeking of bourgeois individualism and other Western frivolities, such as democracy. In the decades since the handover, mainlanders who once eagerly anticipated the return of Hong Kong have visited this other China and been shunned the moment they open their mouths. The long-lost relatives have been reunited only to find that they have little in common.

One evening, I had dinner with Ho and her friend Anthony Wong, one of the singers with whom she performed “Raise the Umbrella” in 2014. He was also one of the first Cantopop stars to come out as gay, doing so six months before she did. We met up at a fusion restaurant whose offerings—“house-cured citrus salmon,” “cardamom French toast”—wouldn't have seemed out of place in Williamsburg. It was in the Sai Wan district, part of the low-lying area to which Chinese residents were historically confined. “My grandparents lived here, and I lived with them for a while when I was young,” Wong said, as we sat down. As a child, he loved sneaking into the neighborhood's traditional Cantonese opera houses.

Like Ho, he has suffered professional repercussions for his political stance—within six months of the protests, job offers had completely dried up—but the pair share a wry fatalism. When I asked whom they were friends with in the entertainment business, she looked at him and laughed: “Do we even have any? These days, we’re more like outcasts!”

Wong is older than Ho—in his mid-fifties, although with a face so babyish that his thin goatee comes as a surprise—and spoke about the early years of Cantopop. “I was a teen-ager in the seventies and still remember what it was like to hear Sam Hui singing in Cantonese,” he said, referring to the singer chiefly credited with pioneering the genre. “Before then, everyone was listening to English music, and even Hong Kong musicians were just playing covers of English bands.” Cantonese singing was rare outside traditional Cantonese opera.

The growth of Cantopop was driven by a huge expansion of Hong Kong media, especially television, which gave it its reach across Asia. At a time when there were virtually no cultural exports from mainland China, Hong Kong became the default producer of pop culture for the entire region. The eighties were Cantopop’s golden age, Wong said: “There was this exuberant hybridization of East and West, old and new, and a feeling of endless possibilities.” Wong himself was an influential member of the scene, as one half of the duo Tat Ming Pair. Ho had earlier mentioned their 1988 hit “Forbidden Color”—the word for “color” also means “lust”—as an example of how apparently innocuous mainstream releases could address important issues. The song, with its wish that someday “our forbidden color can permeate beyond our dreaming souls,” is now an L.G.B.T.Q. anthem, and she performed it with him after they had both come out. But, when it was originally released, it would have seemed like just another catchy song to most listeners. “The meaning of a song can change—can hide, reveal, or mutate depending on context,” she said.

The success of Cantopop in the eighties led to a kind of efflorescence in the nineties. The stars, the spectacles, and, for a while, the money got bigger than ever, but the hit factories had become so efficient at reproducing their winning formula, and so focussed on releasing songs that could appeal to people across the whole of Asia, that the product became homogenized. “Hard-nosed capitalism helped create the Heavenly Kings and Queens,” Wong said, using a term reserved for the very biggest stars. It was in this world that Ho struggled in her early years. “You had to write and deliver a certain type of song, a safe song,” she said. “There is stagnation in an environment where experimentation isn’t encouraged because it messes with the bottom line.”

Ho’s emergence as a star coincided with the end of the fat years. In 1998, the industry’s record sales reached 1.6 billion Hong Kong dollars. By 2017, sales had shrunk to two hundred million, with a market share of just fifteen per cent of total music sales. The decline has been hastened by the reëmergence of mainland China as an economic and cultural power. Cantopop has been losing out to its Mandarin counterpart, Mandopop.

“The mainland’s entertainment industry no longer needs Hong Kong,” Wong said. “They have developed their own Heavenly Kings and Queens, their own Anita Mui.”

The rise and fall of Cantopop mirrors the growing and waning influence of the place that produced it. Hong Kong, formed by the unlikely confrontation between an ascendant British Empire and a diminished Chinese one, enjoyed an anomalous period of dominance, and it sang of its own troubled adolescence. Though its overwrought laments about painful Sunderings and doomed relationships may have seemed more theatrical than real, they provided a public platform for private longings, expressing the cultural rupture underlying the heritage of an island and its ceaseless tide of immigrants.

My last evening in Hong Kong coincided with the twenty-ninth anniversary of the Tiananmen Square massacre, or the “June 4th incident,” as it is known in the People’s Republic. Every year since 1989, the day has been commemorated by a vigil in Hong Kong’s Victoria Park, a startling sanctuary of green in the midst of the steel-and-concrete jungle. It is the only public memorialization of the Tiananmen events permitted on Chinese soil.

I went to Causeway Bay, the city’s busiest shopping district, to follow a procession to the park, about half a mile away. Cordoned off from traffic, the street resembled a lively night market. On either side of the road were booths where politicians and activists wielding bullhorns passed out flyers. Vertical blue and red banners—proclaiming people power and freedom of the press—billowed in the wind. I caught sight of Joshua Wong and Nathan Law standing on a platform, shaking hands with supporters. Groups of policemen in blue berets stood, arms folded, expressionlessly surveying the growing crowd.

There had been a light rain, and, when we finally emerged onto the park’s central lawn, there was a sweet, loamy smell. Thousands of people had already amassed, holding candles in tiny paper cones. The vigil, which is organized by a group of veteran campaigners, has always had the democratization of China as its central message, but since the Umbrella Revolution, it has seemed to be as much about what’s happening in present-day Hong Kong as about what happened in Beijing before activists like Wong and Law were born.

The voice of an organizer boomed through a bank of speakers in Cantonese and Mandarin, remarking on how strange it was that more years had passed since the Tiananmen massacre than were lived by the young men and women who died. In front of me, a mother wiped her eyes as she held onto her toddler daughter. On a screen, the face of an elderly woman appeared, the mother of a nineteen-year-old man who had been killed during the massacre. She looked away from the camera as she recalled going to identify the body. “My son was like me—he had a mole on his forehead,” she said.

“When I saw the mole on his forehead and the clothes he wore when he left for work, I fell limp to the ground.”

The vigil lasted around two hours. As it was drawing to an end, a song came over the speakers:

Perhaps my eyes will never open again.

Will you understand my silent emotions? . . .

If it's to be so, grieve not,

The soil of our Republic contains the love we have given!

It was “Bloodstained Glory,” but not the version I'd loved as a child. Rather, it was a recording that Anita Mui had made soon after Tiananmen, to commemorate the deaths of the protesters, students who loved their country and gave themselves to the cause of making it something better than it was.

The melody looped in my brain as we walked out of the park, and I remembered what Denise Ho had said about how context can reveal new meanings to a song. “Bloodstained Glory” was a hymn of government propaganda that turned into an anthem of resistance, a tribute to dead People's Liberation Army soldiers that now memorialized people killed by People's Liberation Army soldiers. It seemed somehow appropriate that a Cantopop singer had brought about this transformation, and it occurred to me that, at its root, it was a love song. ♦