

DEFIANCE 008

DEMOCRATIC CRISIS IN HONG KONG

DENISE HO
HONG KONG SINGER,
PRO-DEMOCRACY AND
LGBTQI ACTIVIST



DEF008 - DENISE HO INTERVIEW TRANSCRIPTION

DEMOCRATIC CRISIS IN HONG KONG

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Peter McCormack: 01:54

Good morning, Denise.

Denise Ho: 01:55

Hi. Good morning, Peter.

Peter McCormack: 01:56

How are you?

Denise Ho: 01:56

I'm good, I'm good. Thank you.

Peter McCormack: 01:58

So, I originally was meant to interview in Taiwan.

Denise Ho: 02:01

Oh, really?

Peter McCormack: 02:02

Yeah, I came up to Taiwan. I did three interviews, but you were really busy, and so we didn't get to fit it in.

Denise Ho: 02:07

Right, yeah.

Peter McCormack: 02:07

But in some ways-

Denise Ho: 02:07

Sorry.

Peter McCormack: 02:07

... No, no, I think in some ways it's good that it's got delayed to today, because something quite interesting has obviously happened in Hong Kong.

Denise Ho: 02:15

Yes.

Peter McCormack: 02:15

It's not enough, right? But it's a start.

Denise Ho: 02:17

Right, right, right. Yeah. So Hong Kong, we have been in the fight for freedom for the past, almost five months now, like four and a half. And so, it has not been an easy four and half months, and it's especially devastating when you see these young kids in the front lines and they are doing their best to safeguard the city. But then the government, they are always responding with very non genuine promises.

Denise Ho: 02:49

And so, I know that recently, there have been the withdrawal of the extradition bill, but that honestly is just not enough. Because this whole movement, it started with the extradition bill, but it was never only about the extradition bill.

Peter McCormack: 03:06

Of course.

Denise Ho: 03:06

Yes, it's how the Hong Kong government has been only responding to the Beijing government, and the way that the one country, two system, motto has been eroded. This promise made by the Chinese government, it has just become a void, basically. It's not what it was meant to be, right now, with Hong Kong government totally controlled by the Chinese government.

Peter McCormack: 03:33

Well, I think what will be very useful, is to do some of the background. I know the background-

Denise Ho: 03:37

Okay, right, right.

Peter McCormack: 03:37

... because I've been preparing, and I also saw you perform in Oslo. And I'm going to say, I think you're fucking amazing.

Denise Ho: 03:44

Thank you.

Peter McCormack: 03:44

But I think not everyone, especially maybe in the UK, will know who you are. So, I think it will be useful to go through the background. What happened in 2013, and just go through it all.

Denise Ho: 03:54

Okay.

Peter McCormack: 03:55

And obviously we have a slight connection in that, I'm British, Hong Kong was under British rule at one point.

Denise Ho: 04:00

Yes, yes.

Peter McCormack: 04:01

So can you talk about your childhood, because part of your childhood was in Hong Kong, and then you moved to Canada.

Denise Ho: 04:06

Yes.

Peter McCormack: 04:07

So, and let people know what you do and, because you're obviously more than just an activist. You are a musician, as well.

Denise Ho: 04:12

Right. Yeah. So I am a singer, fundamentally, and I was born in Hong Kong. I spent my earlier childhood in Hong Kong, and then I moved to Montreal, Canada with my family when I was 11. So that is actually something that is very characteristic of Hong Kong, being this British colony and then being handed back to China in 1997. Hong Kongers have always gone through these different waves of immigration. Which is actually a very sad thing, when you think of it, because somehow we haven't found this connection to our home. And then every time there's something that worries people, people would choose to leave the city. But something changed, in 2014, because of the Umbrella Movement.

Peter McCormack: 05:09

Can I just go back a step, back in 1997-

Denise Ho: 05:12

Yeah, sorry.

Peter McCormack: 05:12

... because I remember the handover, I remember, because my mum made me watch it. Was it Chris Patten, was the governor?

Denise Ho: 05:17

Yeah, yeah.

Peter McCormack: 05:17

So I remember it, but I wasn't fully aware of what it meant, at the time. I was quite young. What did it mean to Hong Kongers at the time? Was there a lot of fear? Did people prefer to

be under British rule? Was there a fear of having Chinese rule or was there any part of you, like you know, do you feel Chinese, as well? Because, I don't know what it's like to be from Hong Kong.

Denise Ho: 05:35

Right. Well, I think it meant very different things for different people.

Peter McCormack: 05:39

Yeah.

Denise Ho: 05:40

Of course there was this fear of being returned to this China regime, that we know has no rule of law. And it has no respect for human rights. And so, for us to be handed back to this so-called motherland, it didn't mean much to most of the people. Especially people from my generation, where we were born into the British colony of Hong Kong.

Denise Ho: 06:09

But then, at the same time, did we feel British? Not really. That is something that is in the background, but it's not exactly our identity. So I would say that Hong Kong has been going through this search, for the Hong Kong identity, for maybe the past 30 years. And so with that, the handover, it probably frightened a lot of people. But then, because at that time, the Chinese government and the whole China economy was rising. So for maybe five or six years, after the handover, people thought it was actually working.

Peter McCormack: 06:55

Okay.

Denise Ho: 06:55

You know, where the economy was going well and we didn't see this erosion of the freedoms, just yet. It seemed very normal, and things were going fine. The one country, two systems, was seemingly working. But then 10 years, 15 years in, we started to see the changes happening. With the incorporation of a lot of Chinese companies. With a lot of mainland Chinese coming into Hong Kong, buying up the houses, making the real estate go really up into the sky. The Hong Kong people started feeling the changes in their daily lives. The prices, everything was going up. And then, also the freedoms, you know? The freedom of the media, the press, and the freedom of speech was starting to slowly erode. Yeah.

Peter McCormack: 07:51

Right. So interestingly, I actually went to Hong Kong my first time this year, by the way.

Denise Ho: 07:55

Okay. When was that?

Peter McCormack: 07:56

That was back, that was before everything started. And what was quite interesting was the little bits of Britishness, I saw. The buses-

Denise Ho: 08:04

Right, right, right, right.

Peter McCormack: 08:05

... the road signs, but I found it a very welcoming, very happy place. I really liked it. Everyone was really kind. But one of the things I wanted to find out is, you said about the prices were going up, and the properties were being bought. Do you think that was strategic? That was actually something that was strategically done? Or do you think that was just an outcome of handing back to Chinese rule?

Denise Ho: 08:28

Well, I would say, it was probably both.

Peter McCormack: 08:32

Okay.

Denise Ho: 08:33

In the earlier days, somehow, we even thought that maybe China is changing. I remember in 2012, when I came out publicly as a member of the LGBTQ community, I thought I would be blacklisted and banned in China. But then I was not.

Peter McCormack: 08:54

Okay.

Denise Ho: 08:54

And we even got this whole campaign going on in the Weibo, which is the Chinese version of the Twitter. And we got this LGBT campaign going on, and it was not banned. So

somehow we, in this very special time, we thought that China maybe is making progress in human rights, and how they were treating people. But then, 2013 happened, 2014, the Umbrella Movement happened, and then it was downhill from then on.

Peter McCormack: 09:30

So, just before we get into the, what happened in 2013 and 14, you'd obviously made a career for yourself as a singer.

Denise Ho: 09:36

Right, right.

Peter McCormack: 09:37

So I'm quite interested, what took you from being a musician, to being an activist? At what point did you realize, "Okay, I have to do something here?"

Denise Ho: 09:49

Well, I think my coming out was one of the very important steps, because I made that decision mainly because I realised that our legislative system in Hong Kong was rigged to be very pro Hong Kong government, and very pro Beijing. And so, it was the first time that I realised that, even though we had the right to vote for our legislators, part of the legislative system, in fact it was designed to be protective of what the government wants.

Peter McCormack: 10:26

So I read that only two of the three committee vetted candidates who loved the country would be able to run. Is that correct?

Denise Ho: 10:32

Well, that is the Chief Executive.

Peter McCormack: 10:34

Yeah.

Denise Ho: 10:34

And so the, of course, that part is what we are recently fighting for.

Peter McCormack: 10:40

Right, okay.

Denise Ho: 10:40

For real, universal suffrage. And of course that is the root cause of all the problems that we are seeing in Hong Kong right now. Because we don't have a leader that is answering to the people, and we don't have a leader that is thinking or working for the people. She or he is responding only to the leaders in Beijing. So that is very, very dangerous thing, as we can see right now. Because they would be pushing all these different laws and regulations ahead that would be favourable to the Beijing government. Namely, the extradition bill that they were trying to push ahead in June.

Peter McCormack: 11:19

Were you living back in Hong Kong in 2013 and '14, or had you gone over to Hong Kong because of what was happening?

Denise Ho: 11:27

Ironically, I returned to Hong Kong from Canada, in 1997.

Peter McCormack: 11:31

In '97, you returned there? Ah.

Denise Ho: 11:33

So, the exact reason why my family moved to Canada, I returned in that same year.

Peter McCormack: 11:40

Okay.

Denise Ho: 11:40

For my singing career.

Peter McCormack: 11:42

Which obviously went very well.

Denise Ho: 11:43

Yeah, it was, it was okay. It was okay in the formal part of the whole career.

Peter McCormack: 11:51

I think you're being modest. It seemed to go very well. Okay. So you were there. Talk me through what happened in 2013 and '14, and how you became central to this. Because I saw

the video of you being arrested, which was mind blowing, also. People being carried away. I've read about the song you wrote. So, can you tell me what happened, because I'm really interested in that part of the story.

Denise Ho: 12:09

Yes. So in 2014, the Beijing government released this white paper that they tried to push these rules onto how the Chief Executive, which is the leader in Hong Kong, would be elected. One of the main rules was that any candidate would have to be pre chosen by the Beijing government. And so, in fact, it is, it would be just a very fake election.

Peter McCormack: 12:40

Yes.

Denise Ho: 12:40

So people were very, very angry on that. And then it exploded into this 79 days of occupation, on the very main roads of Hong Kong. And that is the Umbrella Movement. Yeah.

Peter McCormack: 12:55

But, explain how the Umbrellas became relevant, because it's a really interesting story.

Denise Ho: 12:59

Yes. Well, I do think that is a very clear demonstration of how Hong Kong is apt in finding solutions to problems.

Peter McCormack: 13:08

Yeah.

Denise Ho: 13:08

So the Umbrella Movement was named such, because Hong Kong has, for the very first time in this very long history of Hong Kong, we were teargassed and pepper sprayed by the police. And then so, Hong Kongers respond very quickly and we used the umbrellas to block off all these pepper spraying, and the tear gassing. And, I think this term was coined by one of the international press, and then it became the name of this whole movement.

Peter McCormack: 13:40

And you wrote a song?

Denise Ho: 13:42

Yes, we wrote a song, me with another singer, Anthony Wong. The song name is Raise the Umbrella.

Peter McCormack: 13:49

Yep.

Denise Ho: 13:49

So because there is this double meaning to the word 'tang' which means raise and also it means support, in Cantonese. So, that song was made in October of 2014, in the very beginning of the Umbrella Movement because we wanted to show support for the students, and the people who were on the streets.

Peter McCormack: 14:13

You've obviously found yourself at the forefront of the protests-

Denise Ho: 14:17

Yes.

Peter McCormack: 14:18

... by having a personality, by having a platform, by being who you are. Were you, at the time, considering the risks to yourself with this? Or was it very just, natural? Because obviously putting yourself at the forefront, you're putting yourself at multiple different risks.

Denise Ho: 14:34

I made my decision to stand with the people, actually on the very first day of the Umbrella Movement, which was the 28th of September. Where the police, they fired 87 tear gas, at the people. Although right now, very sadly, this number is, it doesn't mean much in 2019, because we are being teargassed in extreme amounts on a daily basis. But then back then, in 2014, it was very, very enraging to the people. Because Hong Kong has always been known as this very peaceful and highly civilised society, and to be met with such police brutality was unseen and unheard of.

Peter McCormack: 15:26

Were these Chinese police, or were these Hong Kong police?

Denise Ho: 15:29

Hong Kong police.

Peter McCormack: 15:30

But are they Hong Kong police, directed by Chinese rule?

Denise Ho: 15:31

Well, we had a very pro Beijing Chief Executive, then. C.Y. Leung.

Peter McCormack: 15:36

Okay.

Denise Ho: 15:37

And then, he was known to be this very ruthless leader, and the way that he suppressed the people, it was probably his decision. But then, because he was very obedient to the Beijing government, so he probably also had orders from above.

Peter McCormack: 15:56

Okay.

Denise Ho: 15:57

And so I remember myself, I was at home on that day, because as a celebrity and a singer in Hong Kong, we know that there are some things that you can or cannot say. If not, then you would be censored and blacklisted by the Chinese government.

Peter McCormack: 16:13

Which happened?

Denise Ho: 16:14

So, yes, the critical moment for me was when the first tear gas was fired into the crowds of just really, everyday citizens, who were-

Peter McCormack: 16:24

Because that's the start of violence.

Denise Ho: 16:25

... Yes.

Peter McCormack: 16:26

Yes.

Denise Ho: 16:27

And so for me, that was the last line.

Peter McCormack: 16:29

Okay.

Denise Ho: 16:29

And I knew that I would probably be banned and blacklisted from then on, but then somehow, there are priorities in life where you have to put your integrity before these personal benefits.

Peter McCormack: 16:47

Yes. So, let's talk about the arrest. What actually happened on that day? I mean, I still, as I said earlier, the footage is mind blowing. Seeing people physically carried away. Somebody in a wheelchair, I saw, pushed away. I saw yourself, being marched away. What happened there?

Denise Ho: 17:01

It was a-

Peter McCormack: 17:01

... marched away. What happened there?

Denise Ho: 17:03

It was a very difficult 79 days, I would say, because near the end of the movement, the enthusiasm and the energy in the beginning sort of died down with the Hong Kong government sort of giving us the silent treatment, waiting it out. So at the end, it was not a very good vibe that was among the people. At the 79th day of the umbrella movement, there was talk about the police coming to clear the premises. So me, along with about 140 protestors, which were more high profile I would say, we decided to have a sit down and to be arrested by the Hong Kong police. That was the decision that I made, because out of this act of civil disobedience, we thought that we need to be sort of responsible for our actions.

Denise Ho: 18:08

Also, there were these student leaders who were among the people who chose to sit down. Also out of the sense of responsibility, I thought I needed to be with these people. Yeah.

Peter McCormack: 18:21

Were you charged or just arrested?

Denise Ho: 18:24

I was not charged, I was arrested. Then, of course, in the police station, they were trying to intimidate me being this celebrity. They tried to make me sign some papers, and then saying that they would release me afterwards. But then I was determined to be with the people, and so I said no, and I wouldn't sign the papers unless all the others were released. Finally, I was the last one to leave the police station.

Peter McCormack: 19:00

How long did they hold you there for?

Denise Ho: 19:01

Not very long, because probably they knew that if they detained us for too long then the crowds outside would go crazy. So we were detained about 12 or 13 hours, and then they released us. Yeah.

Peter McCormack: 19:13

But a lot changed after that for you.

Denise Ho: 19:15

Yes, obviously. Yeah.

Peter McCormack: 19:17

You became censored.

Denise Ho: 19:19

Yes. I was banned, censored, blacklisted in China, and the effects also came into Hong Kong, because a lot of the Hong Kong corporates were dependent on the Chinese market. So, as a result, basically all the brands and businesses have kept their distance from me.

Since 2014, I have lost all revenue that came from the China market and even any commercial revenue from Hong Kong brands and businesses.

Denise Ho: 19:53

I had to find different ways to cope with the new situation, these new challenges that I was facing. Instead of finding sponsors, corporate sponsors to my concert, I launched this crowd sponsorship campaign, which sort of I chopped up the big sponsorships into very small pieces, so that the local businesses, they could be a part of it.

Denise Ho: 20:19

And in the end, there were 300 local businesses that sponsored me, and then coming up to a sum of about 3 million Hong Kong dollars. I thought that was a very good social experiment somehow for these people, who were still very angry at the government, for them to be a part of this semi-entertainment, social movement that is my concert.

Peter McCormack: 20:47

Yeah, because the censorship of you is essentially financial censorship, too, essentially.

Denise Ho: 20:51

Yes, yes.

Peter McCormack: 20:52

Because it cuts down your income stream, and it shows how ... I guess it's a warning to others.

Denise Ho: 20:56

Yes. Well, I mean, you never see this official list of people who are blacklisted in China.

Peter McCormack: 21:03

You're one of them.

Denise Ho: 21:05

The way that they do it, the tactic that they use, it's that they make an example of one or two individuals or one or two companies by cutting off all their resources, cutting off all their revenue, and then the others would just start self-censoring themselves.

Peter McCormack: 21:22

So you're on a list with Winnie the Pooh.

Denise Ho: 21:26

Yeah. Yes, exactly. Sadly, it is working. On top of not being able to get corporate sponsorships, even a lot of my friends in the business, they have kept their distances. That fear is so great that they don't even dare to take a photo with me.

Peter McCormack: 21:51

Do you still consider them friends? Do you understand what they're going through. Or do you think ...

Denise Ho: 21:57

I understand, but I don't agree with it.

Peter McCormack: 21:59

Of course.

Denise Ho: 22:00

Because the way that censorship and these tactics work is that you succumb once, and then you are forever in their palms. That is even more scary than being on the other side, being blacklisted. Because, of course, you safeguard your career, but then at the same time you sacrifice all your freedoms and your liberties in saying the things that you might be really thinking. We are actually going through the second wave of political repercussions, where even someone merely liking a post on Instagram could be condemned, and then they would have to apologise to the Chinese public saying that, "Oh, I am very supportive of the Beijing government, and I condemn all the rioters in Hong Kong." So it's actually very ridiculous when you think about it, and it is very George Orwell-ish, the 1984 book where-

Peter McCormack: 23:05

Newspeak.

Denise Ho: 23:06

Yeah. When you see this sort of monitoring of everyone, every word and every action is being surveyed.

Peter McCormack: 23:16

Wow. But you obviously wouldn't go back and change a thing. You wouldn't undo this, because-

Denise Ho: 23:23

No.

Peter McCormack: 23:23

Right now, you're obviously a musician and an activist. Do you consider yourself more of an activist now, or do you feel more drawn to that? Or how do you split yourself between your music and activism?

Denise Ho: 23:34

Right. Well, I would say that that is one of my biggest sacrifice. Time, the issue of time, where I have to divide myself between these very different roles. But at the same time, I have this intention of trying to merge these two roles into one, into making this very hybrid version of a activist/singer.

Denise Ho: 24:03

To give some context, it is actually very difficult to do so in the Asian communities, where people, they see singers or basically any art form as merely entertainment, which is a very poor definition of song and music and movies. Because at the core of these art forms, it is the expression of the individual. When the whole society is going through this transformation of politics going into your daily lives, there is no separating of politics and activism and these different art forms. Because when the government, they have all these means to censor the news, to delete stuff, to twist the facts, and to spread all these lies with their propaganda machine, that is where the soft power of music and the arts come in, because we're in this age of the internet. There is no real censoring of a song, a song that goes into the public. They can try to remove it, but then it doesn't really go away. It exists in this cloud that is the internet. Anyone who tries actually can get a hold of any song or movie that they want to.

Peter McCormack: 25:39

Well, music formed around protesting is always very powerful. One of my favourite bands of all time is Rage Against the Machine. I think more than ever we need them back.

Denise Ho: 25:47

Yes.

Peter McCormack: 25:48

I think it can be very powerful. So has it changed your creativity then and your process of writing?

Denise Ho: 25:54

Well, very frankly speaking, I have not had a lot of time to put on my music and my creativity, which I am trying very hard to gain back that sort of space, because I do think it is very important for me to safeguard this side of my very different roles.

Peter McCormack: 26:19

Well, so we should talk about what's been happening recently in Hong Kong. Have you been there over the last few months?

Denise Ho: 26:25

Yes, I live in Hong Kong now, and although-

Peter McCormack: 26:28

See, I only see you traveling the world.

Denise Ho: 26:29

Yes, yes. Well I spend a lot of time abroad, overseas in different countries, because I have invitations to speak in different international platforms. But I still try to put a chunk of my time in Hong Kong, because I do think that being on the grounds is very important to be in touch with the people.

Denise Ho: 26:53

Because the last time I left was, I think, early October. No, I actually did the concert in London, and then I came to New York. So I've been away for about two and a half weeks. This is actually very difficult for me, because to see all this action happening in Hong Kong and then not being there and then seeing the young people being very exhausted and then very frustrated, I sort of want to go back.

Denise Ho: 27:25

But then also you see there is a higher threat right now on my personal safety, because

there have been a lot of outsourcing of violence to gangsters and thugs and then these attacks on high-profile activists, legislators, even students. So I know that I am one of the targets, but then still, I still want to go back and to be living in Hong Kong to be with the people.

Peter McCormack: 27:57

We'll walk through what's happened recently, but one of the things I have observed, and I'm kind of trying to theorise at the moment. I'm not sure if you've noticed over the last week the number of protests around the world. We've had Lebanon, we've had Spain, we've had Chile. There's a lot. One of the really inspiring things in watching what's been happening in Hong Kong is that it's a genuine fight for freedom. It's a genuine fight for the freedom of the people.

Denise Ho: 28:21

Yes.

Peter McCormack: 28:23

It appears to me that they are kind of winning. They are winning, they're making progress. I'm wondering if this is inspiring other people around the world who are feeling like they're living in injustice, that actually, "We can stand up to the authoritarians regimes."

Denise Ho: 28:37

Absolutely.

Peter McCormack: 28:37

"We can have a voice." Do you think it's coincidence, or do you think people are being inspired? I know it's a guess really, but ...

Denise Ho: 28:45

Well, I think it is both. Some might be coincidences, but also for sure that is an inspiration in Hong Kong's movement, especially with our very leaderless and decentralised version of a fight for freedom. Then the way that we have this motto that is, "Be water," where this sort of tactic that is very fluid, and it is very flexible, and we use our creativity and our solidarity to come in face of this biggest regime that is the Chinese government. For this very small city of 7 million people being able to stand up to this ruthless machine, for sure it is inspiring to other people in different countries.

Denise Ho: 29:41

I hope that it would be inspiring them to use different tactics. Maybe not the same tactics that we can use in Hong Kong, because geographically and also the characteristic of different communities is different. But then, this sort of mentality that anybody can start this movement, anybody can be a leader, anybody can have the idea that can change the world, that is what is important and the most important message of this Hong Kong movement to the world.

Peter McCormack: 30:15

Okay. So this most latest movement started with the legislative putting forward the extradition law. Was there any build up to this? Was there any tension building up to this? Or was this just a trigger on its own?

Denise Ho: 30:31

Well, I would say it is a very big surprise to everyone, including Hong Kongers, for us to be able to make this huge comeback from the very difficult five years that we had before that.

Denise Ho: 30:45

So for some context, after the umbrella movement, the whole Hong Kong society went into this very low point where people were frustrated, disappointed, and some even checked out of all these activism, because we thought that the umbrella movement was a failure, and then we thought that we got nothing out of this three months of occupation.

Denise Ho: 31:09

But then with the extradition bill that actually triggered back all these emotions from the people with our chief executive trying to push ahead this bill despite all these concerns coming from the Hong Kong communities, I think it is just destined somehow to become this global movement, which Hong Kong is in the front lines of.

Peter McCormack: 31:38

I think one of the biggest differences between now and 2014, this seems a lot more violent, and it seemed to start out quite peaceful. But the violence seemed escalated, which was very surprising. Because, as you say, Hong Kongers are very peaceful people. How do you feel about the escalation of violence this time?

Denise Ho: 32:01

Well for one, I would like to put in context that a lot of the so-called violent imagery was taken out of context, first. With the propaganda machines of the Chinese government, you know for sure that they would be using these imagery to try to change the narrative into something that would favor them.

Denise Ho: 32:26

Behind that, we have to ask the question, why this highly-civilised and peaceful community that is Hong Kong, why have we in the course of four and a half months morphed from a 2 million people march that is totally peaceful without one piece of glass broken, why have the people resorted to more aggressive means? Why do we feel the need to resort to these means? I personally have been on the grounds with the people a lot, and I think there are different levels to this question.

Denise Ho: 33:02

First, of course, it is because the people have no one to protect them. With the police force having full authority to do whatever they want with the people, with Hong Kong becoming this total police state, we have to defend ourselves from the police brutality that has been going on at the daily basis from early June. At the same time, as I said just now, the outsourcing of the violence to thugs and gangsters, where we see these pro-Beijing people with knives and then sometimes driving their taxis into these crowds of protesters-

Peter McCormack: 33:41

Shocking.

Denise Ho: 33:42

Yes, and also these undercover police who are disguised as protestors and then acting as agent provocateur, provoking violence among the people, and then at another instant arresting other protestors around them. So, it's a very mixed situation where, of course, there are protestors who are very angry and also very emotional on site, very frightened even, and using Molotovs or more aggressive means to fend off the police who would be charging at them if not with the batons and tear gas and everything firing at head level. So there is no easy answer to this question, but I do feel that the young protestors who are more aggressive now, they are not doing it only for the sake of venting.

Peter McCormack: 34:41

Of course.

Denise Ho: 34:41

It is really something that they are doing to defend themselves from the sort of police and the government's violence.

Peter McCormack: 34:51

One of the most amazing things I think has been watching the creativity of the protesters.

Denise Ho: 34:56

Yes.

Peter McCormack: 34:57

I've never seen anything like this where new tactics have been designed, new ideas like I've seen. Obviously, the use of the lasers, which was great. I've seen the way where they were trapping the smoke bombs with dry ice.

Denise Ho: 35:13

Yeah.

Peter McCormack: 35:13

So many things like that. I was like, "This is actually incredible."

Denise Ho: 35:15

Yes.

Peter McCormack: 35:16

It almost felt like guerilla warfare. I've just been out to Vietnam.

Peter McCormack: 35:20

And I spent some time in the South and my children and I visited the tunnels, and they were explaining the creativity of the Vietnamese soldiers because they didn't have the money of the American war machine. So one of the things they were doing, they were recycling American bombs.

Denise Ho: 35:35

Hmm.

Peter McCormack: 35:35

And I just love the creativity of the protesters. It's amazing.

Denise Ho: 35:41

Yes, yes, yes. Well, I mean, the way that they were dealing with the tear gassing, as you said, sometimes with the traffic cones, they would put it on them and then another person would be pouring water on the top little hole.

Peter McCormack: 35:58

Yeah.

Denise Ho: 35:59

I think the most funny of all was when the police went into residential districts and then all these residents came onto the streets. And then a dad, I think, he brought a steam fish dish with him, these aluminium dishes, and then he put it onto the tear gas, just covered it up.

Peter McCormack: 36:21

Brilliant.

Denise Ho: 36:22

And then it worked like a charm. And so also, with how the people expressing themselves also with the Lennon Walls everywhere in different districts of Hong Kong. And then you also know about the Hong Kong Anthem that was the song that was created by an anonymous songwriter.

Denise Ho: 36:43

So I'm very happy to see that the Hong Kong people have learned from the very mistakes that was in the Umbrella Movement where, back then, people were saying, "No, we don't need arts and music and different expressions because a fight is a fight." So that was the beginning of a very long learning process for Hong Kongers, and then this particular fight in 2019 you see these young protesters, they learned from what failed the people back five years back and now they are embracing different thoughts and different tactics, different creativity, which is essential to this very difficult fight that we have against the Chinese regime.

Peter McCormack: 37:32

Well, I'm very happy that something's changed today. I was myself very worried about how much this would escalate because we had reached the point where people were being shot.

Peter McCormack: 37:42

And once you reached that point, you don't know how far this can go. I mean, I was very young when Tiananmen Square happened, but it's vivid in my mind what did happen.

Peter McCormack: 37:51

And were you ever fearful that it could really escalate to the point of something very serious happening? And I think you know where I'm going with this, yeah.

Denise Ho: 38:00

Yes. Well, to be honest, I was never too worried that they would deploy the troops like they did 30 years back at the Tiananmen Massacre because, for one, China is trying to go into the world stage where they try very hard to pretend that they are this government that respects human rights, who does not violate all these basic freedoms of people, which is ridiculous.

Peter McCormack: 38:33

Yes.

Denise Ho: 38:33

But then they try, they try to put up this front. And so also at this age of the internet where the truth always prevail, it would be very difficult for them to hide the facts. They are trying very hard, but then it is working sometimes, sometimes not. So for them to deploy the troops like they did 30 years back, that would be a disaster to this government also, not only to Hong Kong. So basically, the times where they moved the troops to the border of China and Hong Kong, it was mostly for show and for intimidation mostly.

Peter McCormack: 39:12

Okay.

Denise Ho: 39:12

But then, at the same time, I think what is more dangerous is the way that they're utilising technology to twist the facts, to monitor people, to do surveillance, and to do facial

recognition. And this is something I think even the democratic societies of the West should be alarmed and should be worried about, because their powers is already here in the U.S., in U.K., in Australia, in Canada, and it is already making a very alarming change to how all these different corporates and different celebrities even act.

Peter McCormack: 39:52

Well, this is where, again, creativity becomes important because we've obviously seen what's happened with the NBA recently.

Denise Ho: 39:58

Exactly, yes.

Peter McCormack: 39:59

But we had the episode of South park. Have you seen it?

Denise Ho: 40:02

Yes. Yes.

Peter McCormack: 40:03

But that is a piece of creativity to challenge.

Denise Ho: 40:06

Yes, exactly.

Peter McCormack: 40:06

We've also had Quentin Tarantino say he's not editing his version of his movie for the Chinese market.

Peter McCormack: 40:12

So I think the more of that that happens, the better.

Denise Ho: 40:15

Exactly.

Peter McCormack: 40:18

Interestingly, so the extradition bill has been withdrawn, which is great. In my mind, at first, I was like, okay great, will that lead to an end of the protest? But there were four other, I've

got them noted down, the four other things, so people are aware of. You want for the protest to not be called a riot.

Peter McCormack: 40:35

You want amnesty for all arrested protesters.

Peter McCormack: 40:37

Are some people still in jail then?

Denise Ho: 40:39

Some are charged. More than 2600 arrests have been made. I think about only 4 or 500 have been charged.

Peter McCormack: 40:52

Okay.

Denise Ho: 40:53

But that also shows you how the police are just going out of control. They're just basically arresting anyone that they want without any clear evidence of them committing any crimes.

Denise Ho: 41:04

And, of course, one of the main demands that they could have easily responded to is the demand of an independent commission of inquiry.

Peter McCormack: 41:14

into police brutality, yeah.

Denise Ho: 41:16

Yes, yes.

Peter McCormack: 41:17

And I've got the fourth one just so people are aware, it's the implementation of complete universal suffrage as well.

Denise Ho: 41:22

Right.

Peter McCormack: 41:22

So that's the four other demands that the people have. What happens now? Do the protests continue?

Denise Ho: 41:30

Well, I mean, that is something that only the government can really answer to because in this very leaderless movement, there is no easy way out where previously in the Umbrella Movement when there were leaders, they would start so-called dialogue between these organisations and the government. But then it led to very empty promises and sometimes, just even as a PR stunt that they would do to try to demonstrate to the world that, "Oh, we are talking, but no, they are not listening." So this time around, it's not easy to have a dialogue because we don't have any leader in this movement. And so the only way for the government to bring an end to this unrest is for them to genuinely address these demands of the people. So the extradition bill, as I said, it was never only about the bill, it was about all this kind of corruption and the erosion of all the freedoms in the Hong Kong society.

Denise Ho: 42:37

So I would say one of the easier things that they could have done early on is to have this independent commissions to inquire on the police brutality, because that is what is enraging the people at the daily basis, where the police, they just have full authority. And it is something that enrages the people every day, more and more every day. And so I would say in the long term, of course, it is the political reform that we can elect our own Chief Executive. But then, in the short term, that is something that they can do but they are not willing to do for some reason.

Peter McCormack: 43:17

Well, who follows Carrie Lam is going to be very interesting.

Denise Ho: 43:19

Right.

Peter McCormack: 43:19

Because if it's another pro-Beijing person, you won't see any change.

Denise Ho: 43:24

Exactly.

Peter McCormack: 43:24

It'll be the same.

Denise Ho: 43:25

I think we have to understand that even the government, whether it's the Hong Kong government or the Chinese government behind them, they are in a very critical situation also. I would say that they are also very fearful of what might happen because with all the international attention and all the backlash that is coming from all these self-censorship in the U.S. and different communities, China is also in a very difficult situation and there is no more brushing off these problems by giving these fake promises to the public. They really have to genuinely answer and address these problems.

Peter McCormack: 44:08

Okay. Well, I'm conscious of your time. You're a very busy person and I'm very grateful for you to give me some of your time today.

Denise Ho: 44:13

Thank you so much.

Peter McCormack: 44:14

I've got two final questions I want to ask you. So firstly, how are you feeling right now about everything? Are you, are you confident and positive, are you tired? How are you right now?

Denise Ho: 44:28

There are ups and downs.

Peter McCormack: 44:29

Yeah.

Denise Ho: 44:29

Sometimes I would feel some sort of exhaustion from all that is happening. I would need a break sometimes. I meditate, luckily, so that helps. And I am still somewhat optimistic in the very long term of things.

Peter McCormack: 44:46

Because I do see these very important shifts happening in the world where, say for example, in the U.S., the Congress is pushing ahead the Hong Kong Human Rights and

Democracy Act, which would mean there would be sanctions and regulations on Hong Kong and China officials that would be violating all these human rights in Hong Kong.

Denise Ho: 45:07

And at the same time, as we said earlier, all these movements happening in the world against all these different dictatorships and the people standing up to these people in power, I think there is something there and we need to acknowledge that and to, sometimes when it gets very frustrating, to pull back the whole perspective and get a wider sense of everything. So I try to work on getting this sort of message out, not only to Hong Kong people, but really people in the world to make people understand that these dictatorships, these tyrants, they could be overturned, or at least to make them respect some of the rules that would be universal to everyone else and not just have everything their own ways. And I think it's doable. I think if we get enough people to understand and to awaken to the situation and for people in democratic societies to exercise these kinds of pressure on their governments and to make them react to these situations, I do think that there is something there.

Peter McCormack: 46:22

That's fantastic. You've almost answered my second question.

Denise Ho: 46:24

Okay.

Peter McCormack: 46:24

Because what I was going to say secondly is that you're obviously very focused on Hong Kong, but in supporting the Human Rights Foundation, you obviously are aware there's lots of similar situations around the world.

Denise Ho: 46:36

Exactly, yeah.

Peter McCormack: 46:36

I mean, Alex Gladstein, who I think's amazing, he very early on told me that half the world's population live under authoritarian regime.

Peter McCormack: 46:45

We're against authoritarianism, we're against tyranny. So I've noticed obviously that you're a

campaigner for Hong Kong. I also saw your speech at the U.N. by the way, which was brilliant.

Denise Ho: 46:55

Thank you.

Peter McCormack: 46:56

But also, are you drawn to the wider activism across the world now? Are you feeling part of that?

Denise Ho: 47:04

Yes, I do. I am very grateful for the Human Rights Foundation for inviting me to the Oslo Freedom Forum because the first one I participated in was in May, and so right before the whole movement in Hong Kong happened, and it was an eye opener for me.

Denise Ho: 47:23

Because, before that, I didn't know that there was this community of activists from different corners of the world and I didn't realise that there could be power in this sort of solidarity. Because sometimes when you are in your own fight, you would focus too much on the details, and then on the how difficult it is for yourself. But then when you see the fuller picture where you know all these people are fighting for maybe different scenarios, but in fact the same cause, then you draw energy and you give energy in these very heartwarming communities. And that is also something that I think the world also needs to understand, is that we cannot do it alone. We need to be in these fights together where it is Hong Kong standing with Taiwan or with Catalonia, with Chile, with North Korea even. How can we unite all these different amazing people and then to be in this very global fight together?

Peter McCormack: 48:30

I don't think there's a better way to finish it. I think that's fantastic.

Denise Ho: 48:33

Thank you.

Peter McCormack: 48:33

I'm going to say it again and say, excuse my language, I think you're fucking amazing.

Denise Ho: 48:36

Thank you.

Peter McCormack: 48:37

I think what you've done is amazing. I find you very inspirational.

Denise Ho: 48:41

Thank you.

Peter McCormack: 48:41

Like I said, Oslo in May was my first time, so I saw you perform. I'll keep an eye out for you in London. I think my sister would be a big fan of yours.

Denise Ho: 48:48

Thank you.

Peter McCormack: 48:50

So thank you so much. In the future, if there's anything I can do for you ...

Denise Ho: 48:51

Okay.

Peter McCormack: 48:52

... if you remember me ...

Denise Ho: 48:52

I will.

Peter McCormack: 48:52

... if you ever want to come back on, you let me know and yeah, continue the good fight and I know it's only one step today, but congratulations on what happened in Hong Kong today. You were obviously a very important part of that, so thank you very much.

Denise Ho: 49:03

Thank you so much.

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