



Rainbow warriors

Denise Ho and Anthony Wong, two of the city's most prolific voices for LGBTI rights talk to Arthur Tam about how far we've come and what battles Hong Kong still has to fight for equal rights. Photography Paul Tsang. Art direction Jeroen Brulez

Over the past year, singers Denise Ho and Anthony Wong have become the two most outspoken celebrity figures in Hong Kong. And it's all happened during the Umbrella Movement protests. They've called for legitimate elections and true democracy in our society, realising that now is the time for change. Inspired by the tenacity and resilience of the student protests, the pair have felt a strong desire to join in the struggle. Ho was even arrested during the final day of the protests in Admiralty. These stars want LGBTI rights in Hong Kong. They're using their gifted voices to call for equality.

You'll know this already but, for the record, Ho, also known as HOCC, is a beautiful 37-year-old who's been a much-loved Cantopop star for more than a decade. And Wong, aka Ming Gor, is a debonair 52-year-old singer, composer and producer who's been on the scene for 30 years. Neither is unfamiliar with the importance of honesty and making a stand. In fact, Wong was the first celebrity to 'come out' in front of his fans in the city. Back in April 2012, he stood on stage during his concert at the Hong Kong Coliseum, wearing a dildo hat, and boldly declared 'I am gay. I am homosexual' to a rippling roar of support. Then, in November, Ho participated in HK's Pride Parade and, in an emotional speech on stage, said 'silence is no longer an option. If I can speak out and make just a small inkling of an impact for equal rights, my own reservations are insignificant'. At the end of her speech she spoke the immortal words 'I am gay' to an emotional, teary-eyed crowd.

Since 2012, the duo have become close friends and civically engaged compatriots who have attended pretty much all LGBTI-related events like Hong Kong Pride, IDAHOT (the International Day Against Homophobia and Transphobia) and Pink Dot. In January 2013, they, along with other gay activists, founded the group Big Love Alliance in a bid to bring awareness to LGBTI issues and Ho became a particularly active voice at Legco meetings, speaking out in favour of transgender rights.

The duo have chosen to use their status as public figures, as well as their music,

as avenues to push forward calls for anti-discrimination legislation to protect sexual minorities – an ongoing war the LGBTI community has been waging with conservatives and the government for nearly two decades. On top of that, Ho and Wong collaborated with other artists to produce the main theme song of the Umbrella Movement, *Raise Your Umbrella*, which won the People's Choice Award at the Commercial Radio Awards. It was a resounding moment that spoke not only of a political shift but a musical one. And all eyes were on Ho and Wong. The pair sit down with *Time Out* to discuss the backlash they've had to endure in their campaigning, as well as the work they've still got to do in tackling the issue of equal rights. And ultimately, why it's all worth it...

Greetings to both of you. Now that a few years have passed since you both came out, how have your identities changed?

Denise Ho: The change has been huge. During the Umbrella Movement, it was like we were presented as citizens. People didn't really see us as just LGBTI artists.

Anthony Wong: We were seen as civil citizens more than just gay personalities.

H: People didn't really bring up the fact that we are gay. It's like people saw us as people and weren't concerned about our gay identities. Whether or not you're gay or straight, it's just one part of you. The more important part of your identity is being a citizen and recognising how you can fulfill your social responsibility.

Do you feel pressured to carry the banner for the LGBTI community?

H: The pressure is something that affects us all. Once people start becoming more involved and caring about what's happening in society, it's not only the people on the frontlines who feel pressure. Young people, especially today, share in that pressure. Once everyone starts moving towards this state where we all care about progress, the people who choose not to speak out are probably going to feel a lot of pressure as well. For me, this pressure is good because it makes me think about what more I can do. What I can contribute.

What more can you contribute, then?

H: That's difficult to say exactly but LGBTI rights is also part of the bigger picture of what we want, which is to fight for a legitimate election and a real democracy. If we don't achieve that, there won't be LGBTI rights. These things are interrelated.

W: But of course we can speak out on both fronts. But I agree, we need to achieve the big picture because if the legislative structure is broken, none of the anti-discrimination bills or amendments that we suggest would ever make it past the conservative groups.

Last year was a hugely meaningful one for both of you due to your involvement in the Umbrella Movement. What moments were particularly moving?

W: I was so moved and inspired by how people joined together for what they believe in. I took a stand because of them.

H: I remember this religious individual who came up to me and said that he initially didn't believe in gay rights, but changed his mind because he saw me at the protests. So, what happens is, all those preconceived beliefs are stripped away and we find out that we aren't all that different. We're all trying to achieve the same goal.

Has your upbringing been a major influence in your determination to change Hong Kong for the better?

H: This guy [looks at Wong] has been a bad influence on me [laughs]. But, seriously, my family is great. They've always given me and my brother a lot of room to grow. Very early on, our parents supported us in our interests in art and music. And then, after entering the entertainment industry, I met Anthony, who on the surface seems very genteel but, there's this fire and passion in his heart. So now I have someone who's my senior, my peer and also my friend, who came out before me and made me feel safe to come out and speak out with more courage.

So how long have you known each other?

W: Quite some time actually but it's been within these two years that we really started getting to know each other. The issues ►

Homosexuality used to be something no-one spoke of, so nothing changed

brought us together. But back to your original question, my parents were quite conservative and have passed away. A decade before I came out to the public, I came out to my parents, who were not happy about it at all. They, like a lot of Chinese parents, thought 'what have I done to deserve this?' So I waited until they passed away before I publicly came out because I didn't want to make them unhappy. So, my influences in essence really came from what I saw and read, and especially the music that I listened to. When the protests first started I was actually in London and I saw this documentary called *Pride*, which is about a group of LGBTI activists and coal miners joining together to protest against Thatcherism. At that moment, all these memories started flooding back about that period of time. And I remember that the activists reached out to popular gay musicians at the time called Bronski Beat to help the coal miners raise money during their struggle. People criticise the Umbrella Movement for having foreign influences and that's definitely true, but not from money. The influence comes from education and watching global events. This world is interconnected, so we all influence each other.

What do you say to people who disagree with mixing art with politics?

H: This is a very traditional Chinese perspective because once you look outside of that context and into other cultures' art history, you'll notice a lot of work has to do with politics. In societies influenced by Chinese culture they always make it like it's a dirty thing. But from my understanding, discussing politics should always be for the betterment of society and that's what art and music does inherently. It provokes a discussion and makes people think. So the end goal is the same.

W: I think there are two ways to look at it. In an ideal society you can choose how you create your art. It could be art for art's sake or it could be political. That's your choice. But at this moment, Hong Kong isn't in an ideal state.

Should more artists should weigh in with their thoughts on political movements?

W: I really think that's a choice for an artist. But, as a citizen, everyone should have an opinion and care.

H: Sometimes in the music industry there is a very narrow view of what music should be. Entertainment should be related to entertainment and societal issues should be left with society. But I don't think we should make such a clear distinction. We have all these tools and creative ideas which we could be using for societal enrichment. And I'm not saying it necessarily has to do with politics but I am saying that we could be doing more. ▶



Stylist Sean Kunjambu
Denise Ho's hair Heibie Mok @ Hair Culture
Anthony Wong's hair Ivan Lee @ HeadQuarters
Makeup Hubei Har
Wardrobe
On Denise Ho: Maison Margiela Nude bodysuit, Sacai Luck Navy mixed-media pinstripe parachute pants, Christian Louboutin shoes

On Anthony Wong: J.Crew Steel Blue Japanese chambray Ludlow suit, J.Crew Beige dry cotton striped crew knit, Christian Louboutin shoes



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When it's so important to speak truths, thoughts of backlash become so insignificant

How do you reach a compromise with someone who is adamantly homophobic?

H: No-one is forcing another person to accept an idea. It's about respecting someone's right to live their lives the way they see fit. However, the anti-voices are saying, 'they we don't agree with you, so we want to take away your rights', which is wild. For example, I'm not religious but I believe in someone's right to practice what they believe. But why can't it work the other way around?

W: It illustrates that homophobia is severe and that there is more work to be done to protect a minority group. In fact, in a true democracy, the purpose is to protect the rights of minorities. Minority protections do not need approval from a majority.

Denise, there's a rumour that you might run for Legco. Is this true?

H: Well that's something that I can't answer right now [chuckles]. First, I have to consider whether I actually have the ability and whether I am truly suitable to be a legislator. I'm the type of person who follows through with whatever I do, so I can't go into it blindly.

Do both of you see a shift in the music scene where more emerging artists are showing concern for society?

W: Absolutely. Especially during the protests. Sometimes the music industry in Hong Kong is unfairly criticised for not caring. But in the independent music scene you can see how passionate some artists are. The movement has given birth to a group of musicians who care.

H: The biggest realisation is people know they don't have to rely on some large entity to voice out. There are so many avenues available for musicians to express what they want to express. You don't need a big record label to produce your song.

Now that you've gone political, do you think you can ever turn back?

H: In life you never turn back. You always move forward.

W: A lot of things haven't been achieved yet and it's going to be a long-term battle.

H: Hong Kong is changing. Even if you don't want to care, you'll discover there is no way to avoid it. ■

Perhaps there are celebrities and artists afraid of backlash from the Mainland. Are either of you scared?

W: Between silence and boisterous there's a lot of space that will let you have an opportunity to express yourself. And regarding backlash, I would say that, yes, I'm scared. But during a time when it's so important to speak truths, thoughts of backlash become so insignificant. But obviously I can't speak for everyone. There are a lot of reasons that might deter someone from speaking out.

Now that the protests are over, have you noticed your careers have been affected?

W: First off, it isn't over. It's just in a process of re-planning. We haven't had any activities in the Mainland since the movement and our Weibo accounts got frozen, so we haven't had much interaction with our Mainland fans.

H: My career has been affected but I remain positive because what we are doing is influencing the youth in China. On my Instagram, sometimes I get some negative comments from Mainland followers. But I believe if I remain persistent and do what I think is right, I can gradually make an impact.

Do you feel disappointed by these negative messages, though?

H: Not really. What I find hard to bear is how their mindset comes off as brainwashed.

W: Not willfully biased.

H: I find it to be a pity that their worldview

has been blocked off, which is not their fault because that's the environment they live in. I want to find a way to change their perception, which is why I won't block or delete them. If they continue to make the effort to follow and see me, I believe I can change their opinions.

What do you say to people who believe that the protests divided the city?

W: Whether it's a place, a city or a whole country, you must have a lot of different voices, opinions and beliefs before you can reach true harmony. This process is painful but we must go through it. We can't fool ourselves into believing that no argument means that no problem exists.

H: It seems that it has been a long time since Hong Kong people started reflecting upon the current state of affairs. Before, it didn't seem like democracy was even in our consciousness because people were preoccupied with making money. And then suddenly issues beyond just our simple livelihoods start sinking in and we're forced to decide where we stand, which can be emotional and divisive. But take a look at Taiwan or other foreign countries and you will see that this is normal. Just take a look at a single family and you'll notice that not all members agree on an issue. But just because they disagree doesn't mean they give up on each other. Having arguments is not a bad thing. Homosexuality used to be something no-one spoke of, so nothing changed. Discussion is vital for change.

Wardrobe
On Denise Ho: J.Crew White silver lacquered top, MM6 light wash denim long skirt, Christian Louboutin shoes

On Anthony Wong: Wallace & Barnes at J.Crew Navy bomber jacket, Sacai T-shirt, Sacai camo print pants, Jimmy Choo Shoes



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