

Reframing Celebrities in Post-Handover Hong Kong: Political Advocacy, Social Media, and the Performance of Denise Ho

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Abstract

The post-Handover years of Hong Kong have witnessed an escalating visibility of local celebrities in its political scene. Responding to a society that is clouded by civil unrest and social tension, some famed individuals have readily given their voice on political issues in the media-shaped social environment. This article will study the Hong Kong-based Cantopop singer Denise Ho as a case in point to scrutinize how “performance” is interpreted as strategic and discursive framing of one’s mediated image within the changing celebrity culture of Hong Kong. Rather than a quality that individuals possess or inhabit, this article reconceptualizes celebrity as a process, or a “frame” through which the persona is configured, addressed and negotiated. The article will identify two performative “moments” pertinent, directly or laterally, to the 2014 Umbrella Movement which also marks the pinnacle of Ho’s politically-charged image: first, the arrest of Ho in a police clearance action on December 11, 2014, and second, a free substitute concert held by Ho on June 19, 2016, in place of the one canceled by the French cosmetic company Lancôme. The analysis will delineate two vectors in Ho’s performance—to impress and to express—and will argue that the performance is an outcome of the interplay of multiple forces such as the audience, the media, and the celebrity herself, which works to reconstruct her personality as versatile, dynamic, and impactful. This article will shed light on the vital convergence of celebrities and politics in post-1997 Hong Kong, providing a theoretical discourse for understanding how local public personalities operate at this historical and political juncture.

On November 25, 2016, the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) announced the result of “100 Women of 2016” and two Hong Kong laureates were on the list: football coach Chan Yuen-ting and Cantopop singer Denise Ho. The BBC described Ho as “one of the biggest names in Asian music” who is also “an icon of resistance to Beijing” (“100 Women 2016”). Such acknowledgement points particularly to Ho’s engagement in pro-democracy campaigns in Hong Kong, most notably the Umbrella Movement, which took place from September 28 to December 15, 2014. The Movement was officially set in motion as an act of civil disobedience by the group Occupy Central with Love and Peace,

in response to a decision issued by National People's Congress Standing Committee on August 31, 2014 that imposed a constraining framework on judiciary autonomy and marred the long-discussed reform of the election mechanism of Hong Kong's Chief Executive. The campaign was seasoned with the police's use of tear gas and pepper spray to disperse the protesters on September 28, 2014, which mobilized thousands of people, from various levels and sectors of the society, to participate in the Movement. A number of Hong Kong celebrities such as actors Tony Leung Chiu-wai, Anthony Wong Chau-sang, Nicky Cheung, Chapman To, and musician Anthony Wong Yiu-ming expressed their support for the Movement on Weibo that led to their being put on an alleged blacklist by the PRC government (Blundy; Tharoor; Ong, "China Blacklists"). Even megastars Chow Yun-fat and Andy Lau blogged to denounce the police's suppression of the nonviolent demonstrators and were purported to have suffered the removal of their advertisements in China (Ong, "China Media Authorities"). Denise Ho, one of the stars in question, showed her immense support and presence in the Movement by visiting the protesters, singing at the Occupy sites, and defending the campaign's agenda against the government in sundry media appearances. Her explicit political stance also resulted in her departure from her record company, which disagreed with her robust attitude on politics. Building up a persona marked by individuality and authenticity, Ho places herself among the society's progressive voices, which is a notable aspect of the contemporary celebrity culture in Hong Kong with regard to the changing socio-political environment in the post-Handover era.

This article examines the impact of Denise Ho's persona upon the intersection of celebrity and politics in a social environment in Hong Kong heavily shaped by the media. Scholars have studied the rise of power and influence of famed individuals—such as celebrities, politicians and public intellectuals—in the sphere of public affairs, though mostly in a Western context (Lowenthal 109). These famed individuals have revealed the capacity of garnering public awareness in the West to political causes, posing challenges to policy makers and mobilizing followers' participation. By leveraging media coverage and communicating solidarity with an audience, they articulate the capacity to initiate social changes and shape collective consciousness (Marshall 246). These academic analyses work to debunk the notion that celebrity is merely "a status rewarded to talented individuals" (Drakes and Higgins 88), enhancing the worth of celebrity endorsement that was brought to political causes.

Studies also show that performance is important in the media-shaped political culture and in its engagement with its audience (Corner 16; Drake and Higgins 89). In this light, the performative dimensions of the politically active personalities are worth noting. This article borrows for its conceptual orientation Philip Drake and Michael Higgins's idea

of celebrity as frame. Drake and Higgins delineate a performative account of leadership through the analysis of televised political leaders' debates in the 2010 general election in Britain. By positioning political leaders as celebrities, they argue that the "frame" becomes an organizing principle through which a "situation" is defined by its audience members (378). The leaders-celebrities engage in a creative performance, chiefly expressed through language and symbolic actions, which they uniquely offer to the audience. Simultaneously they expect responses from the audience, shaping followers' agency in reciprocity.

Expanding from Drake and Higgins' argument, this article hypothesizes that "performance" is interpreted as strategic and discursive framing of Denise Ho's mediated personality. Rather than a *quality* that individuals possess or inhabit, this article reconceptualizes celebrity as a *process*, or a "frame" (with both performative and interpretative rules) through which the persona is configured, addressed and negotiated. While Ho is well known for her sexually ambiguous image, the focus of this article is instead on her political advocacy and the way she "performed" certain acts. The discussion begins with Ho's Cantopop image and its gradual intersection with politics, followed by an analysis of two noteworthy "performative" moments during and after the Umbrella Movement. The first moment refers to the arrest of Ho by the Hong Kong police during the clearance of the occupied site in Admiralty on December 11, 2014. The second moment is a free concert held by Ho in Sheung Wan on June 19, 2016, more than one and a half years after the Umbrella Movement, as a substitutive performance of a publicity show cancelled by the cosmetic company Lancôme presumably due to pressure from Beijing. How is Ho's persona and political intent "performed" in these two "moments"? How creatively and efficiently does her performance assert independence and agency in her stardom? How does Ho's performance work to connect the masses in recent social movements in Hong Kong? The rest of the article will answer these questions by delineating two vectors in Ho's performance: to impress and to express. On the one hand, Ho, in the Occupy site, performs to impress, inspire and inform the public about the significance of civil disobedience; on the other, in the substitute concert, she expresses an overt individuality and authenticity as an independent singer—through overcoming a politicized cancellation from Lancôme and pursuing a spontaneous, technologically unrefined performance. Such performance is eventually an outcome of the interplay of multiple forces such as the audience, the media, and the celebrity herself, reconstructing Ho's persona as versatile, dynamic, and impactful. The article discusses the models and mediating discourses relevant to the operation of local public personalities, thereby demonstrating new possibilities of understanding celebrities at this historical and political juncture of Hong Kong.

The Recent Political and Entertainment Scene of Hong Kong

Denise Ho's politically-driven persona is embedded in the context of Hong Kong's politicized stardom in the pre- and post-colonial periods. Dating back to the post-war period, with the palpable presence of left-wing film studios such as the Changcheng Film Studio, Hong Kong film stars explicitly showed political affiliations as part of their public personality. Some of them, such as Fu Che and Shi Hui, not only declared their political stance, but also exercised radical actions (Yau 46; Fu 125). Taiwanese singer Teresa Teng, who gained border-crossing fame in East Asia, was famous for her politically contentious image (Liew). She was outspoken in her anti-communist stance, revealing close ties to the Kuomintang (KMT) which crystalized her indigenized Taiwanese identity and facilitated her popularity in Hong Kong in the 1970s and 1980s (Gold 909). In addition, the democracy campaign in mid-1989 marked one of the significant moments of politicized stardom in Hong Kong. The campaign incorporated a strong presence of local celebrities, which served as a response to the Tiananmen Incident on June 4, 1989. Myriad singers joined the recording project of the song "All for Freedom" to raise funds for the dissenters in Beijing.¹ Certain famed personalities, furthermore, spearheaded the rescue effort, officially named Operation Yellow Bird, a joint effort of the Triad, diplomacy units, and the churches, to "smuggle" more than 130 leading rebel students and intellectuals to escape China (Hewitt; J. Lam). In addition to activists Szeto Wah and Reverend Chu Yiu-ming (a leading icon of the 2014 Occupy Central Movement), entrepreneur-actor John Sham, producer-actor Alan Tang, and Canto-pop singer Anita Mui were on the list. The campaign matured the impending crisis of colonial Hong Kong towards the Handover and incubated the territory's intense relations with her motherland in the subsequent decades.

The undercurrents in which entertainment and politics crisscrossed each other have continued into the transitional era of Hong Kong's Handover, which has shaped the critical discourse of local celebrities in recent time. Towards the end of the 2010s, Hong Kong society was clouded by an array of civil unrest, engendering unprecedented social tension since 1997. Institutionalized and structural inequality worsened with the post-1997 government-business alliance in Beijing and Hong Kong in the name of neoliberal policies. The disproportionate scale between the massive Chinese consuming public and the Hong Kong market caused vigorous competition for safe healthcare and food, real estate properties, and education opportunities across the border. The dwarfing of cultural space led to the erosion of the so-called "Hong

¹ "The Concert for Democracy in China" (民主歌聲獻中華) held in Hong Kong raised US\$1.9 million (Lee 133).

Kong” way of life (Szeto 121–22). Events including the demolition of Star Ferry Pier in 2006 and Queen’s Pier in Central in 2008, the removal of Choi Yuen Village in 2009, the anti-national education movement in 2012, and the disappearance of booksellers in 2016, not only catalyzed public anxiety about the legitimacy of the “One Country, Two Systems” policy, but also further exacerbated the complicated China–Hong Kong dynamics. In a landscape marked by perceived injustice, exploitation, and political suppression, some local celebrities provided responses via diverse means such as art and performance. For example, pop singer Anthony Wong Yiu-ming participated in a series of stage performances with the avant-garde theatre Zuni Icosahedron in 2009 to criticize the city’s lack of cultural development through the means of architecture (B. Lam). Wong’s embodiment in the sphere of art was enmeshed with the later development of his stardom. Equally active as Ho, he has lent support to the recent gay rights movement and the Umbrella Movement.

An expanding interest in public affairs is also evident in the star discourse, assisted by the popularization of social media. Social media has opened up new communication outlets for celebrities to publicize their offscreen presence and to give their voices on political issues, which is not a monopoly of pro-democracy artists. Many artists have expressed opinions that align with the authorities. Donnie Yen, Yang Ying “Angelababy,” William Chan Wai-ting, and Hins Cheung, for instance, have publicly defended China’s claim of sovereignty over the South China Sea on China’s microblog, Weibo (Lin). The young Hong Kong singer-composer, G.E.M., has declared on Weibo her patriotic fervor in response to a rumor she was banned from performing in China, simultaneously making clear her disapproval of the Umbrella Movement (Kwok). On the other hand, there are celebrities who are more dissenting, such as actor Anthony Wong, who has defended the protest culture in Hong Kong against criticisms made by some Mainland Chinese people (Lee). The rise of new communications technology facilitates the decentering of cultural production, not only allowing political actions to take new virtual forms, but also valorizing the democratization of fame (Youngs and Allison 3).

Yet the rising voice of Hong Kong celebrities in politics is not matched with corresponding vigor in current scholarship. Scholarly interest in celebrity advocacy has largely focused on famous western figures with much less attention being given to Chinese or Hong Kong entertainers. Prominent instances of star-powered initiatives in Hollywood include Frank Sinatra, Marilyn Monroe, and Arnold Schwarzenegger who defended George Bush’s policies in 2004 (Drake and Higgins 87–100). Also in 2004, New Labour in Britain won the favor of rock stars such as Bono, Oasis, and Paul Weller (Drake and Higgins 88; Farrell 393–406). These examples come from North America and Europe, and there is only limited effort to examine

celebrities in the Greater China region. Some of the few studies available refer to the advocacy of basketball player Yao Ming and actress Li Bingbing on wildlife conservation (Hassid and Jeffreys 763–76), actor Jet Li’s engagement in disaster relief (Lau 169–92), and actor Pu Cunxin’s public-health effort in AIDS prevention (Hood 85–102). Concerns in these studies are often framed as humanitarian, although debates in policy-making are sometimes covered. The limited body of critical research is far from enough to draw an accurate picture of the increasing presence of Hong Kong celebrities in politics.

Denise Ho is a Hong Kong celebrity who has attracted popular and critical attention for her extensive participation in public affairs since 2007, a decade after Hong Kong’s Handover. Whereas Ho’s political image has increasingly become the focus of the press, there is still a lack of formal study on this matter. Existing literature about Ho mainly analyzes her queer image (Li), but few address her evolving role as a celebrity-advocate. One of the scarce exceptions is Tommy Tse’s interview-based account of the social and political influence of celebrities through juxtaposing Denise Ho with another Cantopop singer Pakho Chow. Nonetheless, such discussion is inadequate for critically exploring the potential and connotation of Ho’s political image. Responding to such inadequacy, this article serves to fill the gap by critically engaging with Denise Ho’s political persona, unraveling the dynamics of performance, fame, and power in the changing celebrity culture in Hong Kong.

“Coming Out”: Denise Ho’s Cantopop-based, Evolving Persona

As “an idiosyncratic cultural producer” (Li), Denise Ho is a local popular icon whose appeal straddles the mainstream Cantopop scene and alternative popular culture. Nicknamed HOCC, Ho launched her music career in 1996 after she won a local music contest, New Talent Singing Awards. Rejecting a purely feminine appeal as many of her female counterparts preferred, Ho was known for her modern, androgynous image, exemplifying the status of Cantopop stars as trendsetters of popular culture across Chinese communities through the 1980s and the early 1990s (Chu, “Before and After the Fall” 4). From 2006 to 2010, Ho was one of the top 10 best-selling local singers in Hong Kong (IFPI Hong Kong Top Sales Music Award). She rose to be an Asian pop spectacle, acknowledging her unique and self-sufficient image which was also simultaneously marketable.

Ho’s musical success was intertwined with her effort in civic participation. After the launch of her charity fund in 2007, she released in the next year her Cantopop album “Ten Days in the Madhouse” which addressed various social issues, followed by a fundraising exhibition named “Ten Days of Christmas” in Hong Kong. Despite

disappointing sales of the album, Ho continued to display her social consciousness by collaborating with Mak Yan-yan, a local female independent filmmaker, to produce the documentary film *The Decameron* in 2008. Named after Giovanni Boccaccio's novellas after the 1348 epidemic in Florence, Italy, the film documented life stories from socially underprivileged groups and minorities. Ho also redirected the income of the DVD for charity. These endeavors unfold an amalgam of musical discourse and social critique, paving way for her increasing visibility in the political arena.

The breakthrough of the development of Ho's entertainer-advocate persona was marked by her civil-rights advocacy for the LGBT community, accompanied by the declaration of her sexual orientation. Her ambivalent sexual orientation attracted much tabloid attention, while her Cantopop performance functioned as a site that contests her star identity.² At the eventful "Dare to Love" Hong Kong Pride Parade in November 2012, she confessed her lesbian identity. In the following year, she founded the Big Love Alliance (大愛同盟), a nonprofit group to promote LGBT rights in Hong Kong, in coalition with singer Anthony Wong Yiu-ming, composer Jason Choi, DJ Brian Leung Siu-fai, politicians Raymond Chan Chi-chuen and Syd Ho. As Ho expressed in an interview, the founding of the Alliance advanced her vision of civic engagement, confronting the difficulty of striving for equal rights in Hong Kong society (Tse 43).

Subsequent to her "coming out of the closet," Ho was also released from the corporatized structure in her music career, and became an independent singer. In 2015, she left her record company, East Asia Music, which disagreed with her political expressions and established her own label "Goo Music." Such a change resulted in a significant decline in her earnings (TOPick). Invitations to perform in mainland China also vanished, while Chinese streaming platforms, including iTunes, seemed to have filtered and deleted her songs (Phillips). She was erased from state-owned media conduits in China. Her inimical relationship with China deteriorated with a Facebook post on her birthday in 2016 about her encounter with the Tibetan spiritual leader the Dalai Lama, whom China has accused of splitting Tibet from the nation. Despite the loss of market in China, Ho defended her decision by appealing to the importance of maintaining one's integrity: "You

² In 2005, she participated in a theatrical project entitled "Butterfly Lovers" as leading actress, producer and musical director, and the performance is regarded as exemplary of intertextuality and queer culture. Based on the Chinese household tale of the "Butterfly Lovers," the musical portrays a romance between a young couple the musical portrays a romance between a young couple in which the woman at one point disguises herself as the opposite sex. Whereas the original tale celebrates the purity and chastity of heterosexual love, the theme of cross-dressing is extended into the modern setting to allow the reading of potential gay nuances and fluid sexual identity.

must separate yourself from the whole system before you come into contact with the outside world. The process is indeed a rather difficult one” (Tse 44). Ho’s image treads beyond the traditionally non-political spheres (specifically, entertainment), and has attracted a cult following that concentrates on individualism and freedom in the changing socio-political milieu of Hong Kong.

The First Moment—To Impress: Being Arrested

Denise Ho’s public presence in the Umbrella Movement—the pinnacle of the manifestation of the singer’s civic engagement—exposes the interplay between public space and celebrity appeal. Like many other “Occupy” campaigns, the Umbrella Movement was marked by a prolonged takeover of urban space through the assembly of citizens. The claim of the right to public space was transformed into a mode of deliberative democracy, subverting the common symbolic control of those spaces by the authority (Calhoun 29). As a co-founder of Hong Kong Shield, an alliance of local media professionals, intellectuals, and artists, Ho joined the occupation in Admiralty, one of the key Occupy sites, and was detained by the Hong Kong police in the clearance action on December 11, 2014. The police action reinforces the view that the body of law enforcers was defending the interest of the government against the assembly, similar to other Occupy Movements around the world.

The moment of action involved slogans as performative utterance. Charles Tilly postulates that movement slogans are generally understood as “frames” or “scripts” that echo a “repertoire” of collective action. It is also one of the characteristics of protests in Hong Kong (Veg 692). A range of slogans were elicited from the crowd in the occupation in Admiralty, for instance, “Leung Chun-ying, step down” (梁振英下台), which was a direct response to the government, or “I want genuine universal suffrage” (我要真普選), which was a frank demand of democracy, or “Civil disobedience: No justice, no peace” (公民抗命，無畏無懼), which was a statement of the entire protest campaign. The deliberate exchange can be considered perlocutionary, one of the dimensions in John L. Austin’s typology. The perlocutionary action is “not normally thought of as just saying something” (7), but something that creates effect on and interaction with an intended audience (109; 118) for the purpose of persuading, inciting, and inspiring. Furthermore, the repetitive utterance of the slogans, led by the celebrities and echoed by the occupiers, make ordinary statements a ritualized performance (Calhoun 30). The ritualistic practice evokes a decentralized, popular nature of slogan as participatory democracy (Calhoun 30).

The shouting of slogans emblemizes how Ho’s political visibility continues alongside and intersects with her Cantopop presence. One of the slogans uttered by Ho reads, “Being born in troubled times entails

certain responsibilities” (生於亂世，有種責任), one of the most widely circulated slogans in the Occupy space, appearing in the form of posters, banners, and T-shirt designs. The line was appropriated from the lyrics of one of Ho’s songs called “Glamorous” (艷光四射), written as a tribute to Anita Mui, Ho’s mentor who inspired her political consciousness.³ The lyrics were written by Wyman Wong, one of the most prolific and iconic lyricists who has written more lyrics about social issues in recent years, colliding with the thematic shift from romance to politics in the current Cantopop industry (Ng; Veg 689). Scholars acknowledge that Cantopop is a music genre that possesses the potential to record and represent social aspects (Lee 132–33; Brace and Friedlander 117). Lyric is one of the predominant features of Cantopop, a vehicle of power (Witzleben 245; Chu, “Research on Lyrics of Cantopop in Hong Kong” 14–15). The lyrics of “Glamorous” are recontextualized in the 2014 civil disobedience and replayed in the Occupy space that uncovers Cantopop’s capacity of striding away from commercialized packaging and interrogating the impossible future of Hong Kong.

Denise Ho’s “arrest” image is not only emblematic of resistance, but also highly performative, resonating with one of the traits of Occupy movements (Veg 691). In his analysis, Craig Calhoun posits that Occupy Wall Street was more a moment than a movement due to the absence of organizational structure in the campaign. The occupation of public space reminds one of the nineteenth-century utopian socialists who tried to demonstrate their ideal of a better society by organizing communes. It was also perpetuated in a relatively contemporary instance of street theatre in the 1960s, potentially inspired by Brecht or the Living Theatre, which was characterized more by dramatic performances than by socialist programs. In Ho’s arrest scene, she, like other protesters, walked to a police car with a somber face, under the escort of two uniformed police officers, and the crowd cheered her on. Ostensibly, such a “grandiose” moment designates an act played for the audiences and cameras, validating her status both as a citizen and as a celebrity. The pictures of arrest went viral on the Internet, both on mainstream media sites and in fan circuits, capturing the recent international wave of mobilization in which visual media play a role by circulating images of urban occupations (Calhoun 27). Some media, moreover, coin Ho as the first celebrity to be arrested at the Occupy site, shaping the heroine persona of Ho in the campaign. This “performed” aspect becomes a spectacle that impresses and solidifies her status as a democracy fighter.

³ Anita Mui was a Cantopop diva in the 1980s and 1990s, and attracted a broad fan following in Hong Kong and East Asia. As J. Lawrence Witzleben describes, she gave shape to an independent and versatile appeal that “exemplifies and transcends the stereotype of the Hong Kong popular singer as packaged and manipulated by record companies and managers” (246).

The Second Moment—To Express: The Lancôme Concert 2.0

While the first moment emphasizes the idealism in solidarity movements and the impression Denise Ho gives through her performative utterance, the second moment frames Ho as an independent singer that expresses authenticity in a different sense than previously understood in music. Authenticity in popular music has been studied in David Marshall's work on music celebrity, which argues that the technology of reproduction problematizes this concept and reveals two levels of authenticity in the music industry: the recording as a genuine representation of music and the concert as a faithful reproduction of the genuinely recorded music (153). However, in Ho's case, I argue that authenticity was not pursued in copying recorded music, but in the spontaneity as well as politicized meaning of the singer's live performance: her singing deemphasizes the technological apparatus of acoustic production, giving space for the "express[ion of] intimacy, individuality and a range of emotions" (Marshall 156). In this manner, authenticity in a live performance does not only personalize the relationship between the performers and the listening public, but also fertilizes Ho's politicized stardom.

Denise Ho's Lancôme concert is a telling example of how the singer authenticates her individual performance as an extension of her political stance and her agenda of staying independent in her music career. Soon after the Umbrella Movement, Ho's activism in the campaign threatened the opportunities for her performing life. On June 5, 2016, Lancôme, a France-based international brand of cosmetics owned by L'Oréal, called off a concert featuring Denise Ho—who was originally billed by the company as "made of unstoppable energy"—due to "possible safety reasons," and, in a move to avoid further being associated with her, also disclaimed that she was the brand's spokesperson (T. Cheung). This provoked fury among fans in Hong Kong and mainland China, who criticized Lancôme's decision as submissively kowtowing to China, which was at that point the third largest sales market for L'Oréal after the United States and France (Yang and Chandon).⁴ This resulted in a boycott to the brand from the Hong Kong public, demanding an official response from the management (Tsang and Wong). Internet users in mainland China, furthermore, circumvented the "Great Firewall" to attack Lancôme's Facebook page as an expression of discontent.

In the end, Ho organized a concert without commercial sponsorship—a rare effort at resisting China's domination of the market.

⁴ According to L'Oréal's 2015 annual report, the Asia-Pacific region is her major new market in view of the expanding cosmetics consumption. The company benefited from the good performance in China whereas Hong Kong is a difficult market.

Since the late 1970s, Cantopop has evolved into a highly profitable business. From the 1980s, its audience expanded thanks to the popularity of television, and its production and sales have dominated the entertainment business of the territory (Chu, “Before and After the Fall” 1). Following its entry into the World Trade Organization in 2001, China has opened its market to cultural industries in Asia including Hong Kong, resulting in dozens of Cantopop singers turning northward to seek opportunities. Ironically, such liberalization of the market is often coupled with heightened censorship and protective measures applied to “foreign” businesses due to so-called national security and interests (Szeto 125). Consequently, as Jimmy Pang elucidates, some Hong Kong celebrities and their management practise self-censorship in order not to lose access to the lucrative but intimidating Chinese market (Chow and Lee).

Rejecting the capitalistic logic, Ho’s concert was capable of spontaneous and authentic expression, unlike the usually glamorous Cantopop performance. Entitled “*you zhong de piaoliang*” (有種的漂亮), literally “beauty with guts” which loosely echoed the courage-themed Umbrella Movement, the show was held on June 19, 2016, the day on which the Lancôme event was originally scheduled. It became a widely-attended 90-minute free outdoor event at Po Hing Fong, also nicknamed “PoHo,” in Sheung Wan District, which is renowned for its historical architecture and bohemian lifestyle (Uttam). The live spectacle of the concert was a compelling factor that attracted the attendance of over a thousand fans and onlookers. Coupled with minimal use of enchanting costumes, alluring makeup, extensive dance troupes, sophisticated sound equipment and extravagant stage settings—what Cantopop concerts have conventionally relied on (H. Cheung)—Ho’s performance appeared spectacular yet unrefined. She provided unrehearsed singing free from a pre-set rundown and detail. She played the guitar herself, and could not be bothered by the occasional discord, dissonance, offbeat, and sound inconsistency that punctuated her singing. The improvised approach of Ho’s singing allowed Ho to give a performance that was very different from the recorded music. It was not that the performer was unable to reproduce the same version of the recording in a less controlled environment, as David Marshall posits about live performance in concerts (155–56). Instead, Ho did not seek to imitate the studio recording (153). In short, the performance resisted the aestheticization of professional and consumption-based entertainment, granting Ho’s presence a sense of “spontaneity,” which reminds one of a crucial aspect of the protesters’ responses against the police’s use of teargas to disperse them in the Umbrella Movement (Veg 682).

The expressivity of authentic performance is also evident in the use of new media technology, which nuances the usual understanding of activism. In one of the songs, Ho introduced newly written lyrics, which

she also instantaneously posted through her smartphone onto her Facebook profile, and invited the audience to download the text and sing alongside with her. She engaged with the audience in a complicitous interplay in which both the producers and consumers played their parts in contending the aesthetic meanings of texts. Ho's creative performance not only produced a passive audience fed with a fetishized spectacle, it also showed the potential of expanding the role of audience in the consumption of popular music to a more active end (Middleton 60; Frith 319–20). Responding to the democratic nature of Occupy movements mentioned earlier, Ho showed a preference for networks, reinforced and activated by social media, rather than organizations, displaying commitment to the notion of democracy. Her performance thus evoked public consciousness of a political agenda in an ostensibly depoliticized way. In this way, the individual performance becomes part of a performance of the democratic campaign itself.

Conclusion

This article has analyzed how performance became a strategy of reframing Denise Ho's status as a celebrity-advocate, shedding light on a growing trend of famous individuals in Hong Kong facing the crossroads between entertainment and politics. The analysis here identified two performative moments—first, in the “arrest scene” of civil disobedience, and second, the live spectacle of her self-financed concert—to demonstrate how Ho's performance oscillated between commerce and politics, worked to impress and express. In the first moment, without inclination to highly structured actions, Ho's performance at the arrest scene impressed the public to the extent that her presence extended beyond her Cantopop persona. In the second moment, i.e. the politically-charged authenticity expressed in her concert, the singing was spontaneous and was not shaped by technological sophistication, but instead turned out to be a more individualized performance assisted by social media. Through these two moments, Ho expanded her personality from the realm of entertainment to the realm of public affairs, and in the process, the audience, the star, and the media all played roles in orchestrating and asserting Ho's relatively flexible image, opening up new dimensions of her public presence. Thus, her image reveals the possibilities and potentials of the celebrity-making practices in the entertainment apparatus, overcoming the restrictions of a hierarchical society. This noteworthy phenomenon of celebrity advocacy, therefore, coincides with the civil demand that has penetrated Hong Kong society, and exhibits the democratized nature of star-making during the transition of sovereignty in recent decades.

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