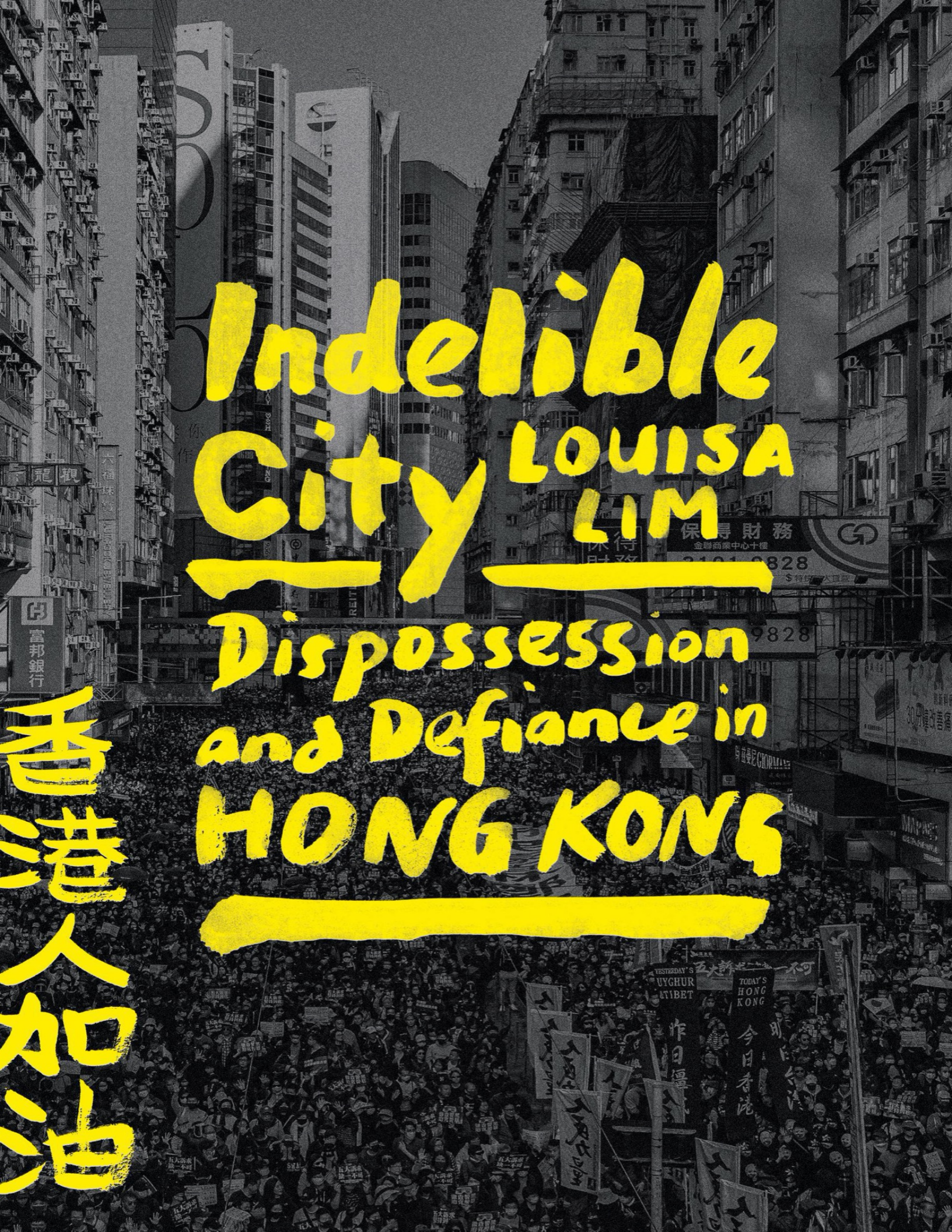


Indelible City LOUISA LIM

Dispossession and Defiance in HONG KONG

香港人加油



INDELIBLE CITY

DISPOSSESSION

and

DEFIANCE

IN HONG KONG

LOUISA LIM

RIVERHEAD BOOKS NEW YORK 2022



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To all those who really fucking love Hong Kong

I DON'T THINK I CAN GET THE LAND BACK.

The King of Kowloon

YOUR FURIOUS CHARACTERS ON THE RED POSTBOX KINDLE IN US A FLAME WE HAVE ALWAYS
KNOWN.

“King of Kowloon” by Jennifer Wong

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AUTHOR'S NOTE

Although I lived in Hong Kong for almost all my childhood and some of my adulthood, I am not a native Hong Konger, and I no longer live in the city. My position on the sidelines liberates me to write more openly than others. However, my freedom must not come at the cost of my sources. Nowadays the act of writing about Hong Kong has become an exercise in subtraction. Though the interviews for this book, unless otherwise stated in the text, were carried out prior to the introduction of the national security legislation in June 2020, the broad and retrospective application of the legislation has compelled me to remove some names and details from the text nevertheless, to protect those with whom I spoke.

This act of stripping away the identities of interviewees is all the more painful because my aim in writing this book was to place Hong Kongers front and center of their own narrative. Yet in this national security era, writing about Hong Kong's distinct identity is land-mined with risk. Indeed, many of Hong Kong's best writers can no longer find the words, or even the platforms, to express themselves openly. This book owes its existence to all those who spoke to me, both named and unnamed. I hope I am honoring the truth of their words while being mindful of their safety.

PROLOGUE

I was squatting on the roof of a Hong Kong skyscraper, sun blazing on my head, sweat dripping into my eyes, painting expletive-laden Chinese characters onto a protest banner eight stories high and wondering if I had just killed my career in journalism. The air was soupy with heat, and through the haze I could see a satisfying Tetris-scape of rooftops packed so tight they seemed to interlock. I'd come to the rooftop to interview a secret cooperative of guerrilla sign painters who specialized in producing mammoth pro-democracy banners to be slung from Hong Kong's highest peaks. But as I watched, my fingers itched to grab a paint brush and join in.

It was the autumn of 2019, the day before China's National Day, commemorating the seventieth anniversary of the establishment of the People's Republic of China on October 1, 1949. For months, millions of people had marched through Hong Kong's streets, in the biggest and most sustained anti-government protests the territory had ever seen. After 155 years as a British colony, Hong Kong had been returned to China in 1997, in an unprecedented transition of sovereignty. Although Beijing had vowed that Hong Kong could preserve its way of life for fifty years—until 2047—China was now threatening to ram through legislation that would renege on that promise.

The secret band of calligraphers had been busy deploying their team of rock climbers to scale Hong Kong's crags in the dead of night, so that people woke up to gigantic signs exhorting them to "Take to the Streets to Oppose the Evil Law" or "Fight for Hong Kong." The sheer scope of the banners turned the territory itself into a canvas and reinvigorated the protest movement when morale was ebbing. I'd always been fascinated by the

audacity of the sign painters, but I had no idea who they were or how to get in touch with them. That morning, someone who knew of my obsession had contacted me out of the blue to invite me to watch them in action. It was an offer I couldn't refuse.

The sunbaked rooftop of this tall building offered both the privacy and the expanse necessary to lay out the huge banners and dry them. There were seven sign painters. I had promised not to divulge any details that might expose their identities, but I was surprised that instead of the young, athletic radicals of my imagination, they were older men and women whose familiarity with one another was evident in the wordless efficiency of their interactions. Working quickly, they unfolded a gigantic bolt of thick black cotton, then used their feet to stamp the material flat on the roof in a brisk, communal dance. They placed rocks along the edges to hold the cloth still. Then an elderly calligrapher began sketching out the characters in white chalk. Moving with a fluid grace, the writer's entire body mirrored the strokes of a calligraphy brush dancing across the fabric as the piece of chalk dipped and curved, tracing the outline of four enormous Chinese characters.

As the final ideogram took shape, I couldn't help but snort with laughter. The words the calligrapher was so carefully inscribing on the banner were 賀佢老母, a swearsy and wholly untranslatable pun in Cantonese, the dominant language spoken in Hong Kong and parts of southern China. A literal translation would be "Celebrate their mother!" but this was actually a pun playing on the most popular Cantonese insult: 屌你老母, or "Fuck your mother!" So the actual meaning of the banner was something along the lines of "Fuck your motherfucking National Day celebrations!" In other words, the slogan was calculated to cause maximum offense, by mocking the massive military parade to be held in Beijing and at the same time underscoring that Hong Kongers did not consider themselves part of the People's Republic of China. It was an irreverent slap in the face that was simultaneously laugh-out-loud funny and deadly serious, not least because, if caught, the sign painters could face jail time.

I watched as they grabbed their pots of paint and silently squatted beside the banner to begin filling in the characters, struggling with my desires. For

months, my dual identities as a Hong Konger and a journalist had been engaged in a silent contest of wills, as I tried to safeguard my professional neutrality. This was becoming ever harder as the familiar world I'd grown up in, with all its predictable certainties, collapsed around me. On the surface it was still the same city pulsing with energy from the shoals of people surging through the skyscraper-lined streets, the beeping signals at zebra crossings, the LED signs jostling for airspace, the acrid dried-fish reek of a Chinese medicine shop melding with the rich bark-smoke aroma of a stall selling tea-steeped eggs. But the apparatus beneath this sensory cacophony was shifting in ways I could no longer ignore.

The police, instead of being guarantors of security, were behaving like violent thugs who beat and arrested children for wearing a particular color, or for standing in a particular street at a particular time, or for nothing at all. The courts, instead of being neutral arbiters of the law, were handing down political verdicts disqualifying popularly elected legislators from the legislature and imprisoning people for peaceful protests. The government officials, instead of enacting and administering policy, had disappeared from view and were limiting their interactions with the populace to violence meted out by the police on their behalf. Overnight the world had turned upside down.

The known rules of engagement no longer seemed to apply, and this was also true for the practice of journalism. Far from protecting reporters as civilians, the police were singling us out for attack. They pepper-sprayed us, tear-gassed us, shot burning liquid laced with indelible blue dye from water cannons directly at us, pulled guns on us, beat us, arrested us. We'd begun by wearing fluorescent vests and helmets marked PRESS and 記者, but it soon became horribly obvious that we were effectively putting targets on our heads and torsos.

The sheer density of Hong Kong's maze of apartment blocks, alleyways, and markets meant that few residents were untouched by the government's forceful suppression of the protests. Almost 90 percent of the population had been tear-gassed. It could happen while you waited for a late-night snack of fishball noodles, on a Sunday afternoon stroll along the waterfront,

or even while sitting at home, as stinging clouds drifted up from the street, leaching through window frames and air-conditioning vents. One-third of Hong Kong residents showed signs of post-traumatic stress disorder. It sometimes felt like the government was at war with its people.

It felt personal, too. The issue of belonging has always been a complicated one for me, as a half-English, half-Chinese person who was born in England but brought up in Hong Kong. My family had moved to Hong Kong when I was five, so that my Singaporean father could take up a civil service job. As far back as I could remember, this city had been my home. So while I am not a native Hong Konger, I was made by Hong Kong. I was shaped by Hong Kong values, in particular a respect for grinding hard work and stubborn determination. Hong Kongers called it Lion Rock Spirit, after a popular television series about a squatter colony living at the foot of a local landmark, a small mountain topped by a rocky formation resembling a Chinese lion crouching down, poised to leap. To me, Lion Rock Spirit translated into a willingness to fight to protect my values, no matter how powerful the opponent.

During the decade that I had been based in China as a journalist, that compunction drove me to write the stories that I felt needed telling, no matter how politically sensitive they were. It prompted me to leave Beijing in order to write a book about the Communist Party's bloody suppression of the 1989 protest movement in China, and how it had managed to excise those killings from the collective memory. I knew the book would prevent me from returning to China for many years, but I also knew it was a story that should be told. In journalistic terms, protest movements were my bailiwick, but I never in my wildest dreams imagined one would so thoroughly engulf my beloved hometown. Once it did, there was no question in my mind that I had to cover it. I was already living in Hong Kong, on research leave from my job teaching journalism in Melbourne, when the protests broke out. After I went back to work in Australia, I regularly returned to Hong Kong on short reporting trips, until Covid-19 closed our borders.

How to practice ethical journalism under the circumstances? Until this point, I'd unquestioningly followed the accepted journalistic practice of trying to remove myself from the story as far as possible. But could I remove myself from the picture when the picture was already part of me? I'd been grappling with this for months, without any clear answer.

That day on the rooftop, the question answered itself. I knew all the reasons why I should stay sitting on the sidelines, but I also knew that I wasn't going to. Driven by gut instinct, I stood up and walked over to take a paint pot for myself. I knew I was crossing a line, from neutral reporter to voluntary participant in an act of protest, and that in doing so, I was violating the cardinal tenet on which I had based a quarter century of journalistic endeavor. But I also realized at that instant that I didn't care. I didn't agree with everything the protest movement did. I was viscerally opposed to any use of violence, and it still shook me to see protestors throwing bricks at police or hurling petrol bombs, regardless of the tactics the police were using. But since the protests had begun, the idea of accountability seemed to unspool a little more every day. We were all living in the eternal present, where the future was so uncertain that it was unseeable, and the past had receded into irrelevance. And so, I placed my paint pot on the ground and, dipping my brush into the viscous white paint, I became a member of the team.

Filling in the “celebrate” 賀 character felt disappointingly anticlimactic at first. It was basically painting-by-numbers on a grand scale. It wasn't challenging, but the shakiness of my hands meant I had to concentrate so as not to dribble outside the lines. The sun was beating down on the back of my neck, and drops of sweat were falling from my forehead onto the fabric. But as I painted, I entered a kind of meditative daze, zeroing in on my small task to the extent that I forgot I was supposed to be interviewing the others. Quite literally, I was transfixed by the power of the word writ large.

There was something else propelling me, too. For years, I'd been obsessed with a mysterious individual who'd become the most unlikely of local icons. He was a toothless, often shirtless, disabled trash collector with mental health issues. But, through his misshapen, childlike calligraphy, he

had become a household name, first reviled, then fêted. His given name was Tsang Tsou-choi, but everyone called him the King of Kowloon. Over the years, Tsang had come to believe that the jutting prong of the Kowloon peninsula had originally belonged to his family and had been stolen from them by the British in the nineteenth century. No one could say for sure why he believed this, but his conviction became a mania, as his imagined dominion extended to Hong Kong Island and the New Territories that make up the rest of Hong Kong.

In the mid-1950s, the King began a furious graffiti campaign accusing the British of stealing his land. His denunciations took the form of tottering towers of crooked Chinese calligraphy in which he painstakingly wrote out his entire lineage, all twenty-one generations of it, sometimes pairing names with the places they had lost, and occasionally topping it all off with expletives like “Fuck the Queen!” He waged his graffiti war first against the colonial British government, and then against China, after Britain returned Hong Kong to Chinese control in 1997.

The King did not bother with paper. Using a wolf-hair brush, he painted directly on the walls and slopes that he believed he’d lost, marking his domain with the art of emperors: Chinese calligraphy. He was exacting in his choice of canvas; he would paint only on Crown land, or, after the change in sovereignty, government land. He gravitated to electricity boxes and pillars, walls and flyover struts. His words played their own magic tricks before a captive audience of haggard commuters and weary retirees; they were there one day, gone the next, washed away or painted over by an army of government cleaners in rubber boots with thin hand towels hanging from the backs of their hats to serve as makeshift sunscreens. But overnight his words were back again, as if they had never disappeared, in a game of textual whack-a-mole played across the entire territory for half a century.

The crazy thing was that it worked, despite the King’s execrable penmanship. He’d had only two years of formal schooling, and he advertised that educational deficit in every misshapen, unbalanced character that he wrote. But his shonky, wonky characters laid bare all the flaws and idiosyncrasies a proper calligrapher would have tried to suppress, and that

made them memorable. His words were a celebration of originality and human imperfection with a who-gives-a-fuckness about them that was genuinely inspiring. He broke all the rules, repudiating traditional Chinese behavior. This, too, was a facet of Hong Kongness: Hong Kong was an in-between space, a site of transgression, a refuge where behavior not acceptable in mainland China was permitted and even celebrated.

By the time the King died from a heart attack, in 2007, he had made an estimated 55,845 works in public space. Over the years, his blocky characters slowly wrote themselves onto our brains to become a collective memory that was as iconic a marker of Hong Kong identity as its bottle-green snub-nosed Star Ferries or its spiky skyline. For so many, his words served as the first articulation of an uncomfortable instinct they couldn't quite voice themselves. "It's a little bit like our political situation," one commentator observed to me. "The land was owned by British, now owned by China. It's supposed to belong to China, but most Hong Kong people, they don't identify with the Chinese government. In some way they still think that Hong Kong is a colony, a colony of China. So what Tsang Tsou-choi did is something they want to do." The King was speaking for his people.

When he died in 2007, the newspapers erupted in a communal wail. *The King is dead, and everyone is missing him. . . . The King is dead and his people are crying and wailing. . . . The King is dead, his ink treasures were poetic masterpieces. . . . The King is dead and the writer is sad as Hong Kong has lost a legendary figure. . . . The King is dead, who will succeed him?* As his work disappeared from the streets, it appeared on the auction blocks of Sotheby's, surging in price until he was the most valuable artist in Hong Kong.

Some years ago, I'd been seized by the idea of writing a book about the King of Kowloon. It was a notion that I found hard to resist, even though it was obviously a fool's errand. His family had always refused to talk to journalists, and there was almost no concrete information about him. But I stubbornly set off on my quest, trekking out to industrial buildings, public housing estates, and villages in the New Territories to find people who'd

known the King. These were places I'd never visited in the four decades that I'd lived on and off in Hong Kong. Along the way, I discovered a multitude of Hong Kongs. The Hong Kong I had grown up in had been a bubble within a bubble, and my pursuit of the King exploded that bubble.

As I painstakingly worked my way through the eccentric cast of characters who had painted with the King, sung about him, written about him, or simply knew him, I found the story slipping away from me. At first my aim had simply been to find out whether his claims to the land had any truth to them. I'd assumed that I would be able to pin down concrete details through my interviews. But all the interviewees disagreed vehemently about almost everything, even the slim handful of biographical data that existed, or whether he was mentally competent. Worse than that, they spent endless hours in interviews sniping at one another. None of my normal journalistic approaches seemed to be working.

Meanwhile, my pursuit of the King took me deeper into Hong Kong's story. To examine his claims to the land, I started looking at the acts of possession and expropriation by the British colonizers. I soon realized that, in order to understand these, I needed to make sense of the complex saga of how Hong Kong had become British in the first place. I hadn't intended to go any further back than that, but everyone who was interested in the King kept talking about the boy emperors of the Song dynasty who'd fled to Hong Kong in the twelfth century. Eventually, my new interest in Hong Kong's precolonial history led me all the way back to the middle Neolithic era, six thousand years ago. The King had somehow taken me back to the beginning.

Along the way, I fell into other untold stories of Hong Kong, creation myths and legends, real and invented histories, tales of rebellion that had been wiped from the record, tales of courage that had never been told. They changed the way I viewed Hong Kong history, which I'd always assumed was an inventory of cut-and-dried facts that fell into a straightforward narrative. Instead, these hidden histories in their kaleidoscopic, multicolor multitudes pushed back against the idea of a singular, authoritative, state-imposed narrative. They put Hong Kongers front and center of their story,

in particular reinserting them into the crucial negotiations over the transfer of sovereignty, a chapter in which the most important Hong Kong voices have never before been heard. These hidden histories placed the insurrections of recent years in the context of a far longer narrative of defiance and dispossession. That was the story I ended up writing.

But even as the focus of my interest shifted, I found that the King had burrowed into my consciousness, as a prism through which Hong Kong's story could be viewed. A prism bends and separates white light into a rainbow of colors, and once the massive street protests began in 2019, his story refracted into variegated narrative stripes that illuminated Hong Kong in ways I had not anticipated. Like the story of the protest movement, his was a David and Goliath tale of a doomed rebellion against an overweening power. Like his story, the story of the protest movement has evolved into a story about erasure, about who gets to tell Hong Kong's story. Throughout their history, Hong Kongers have been minimized in, or even completely removed from, the official accounts told by their successive rulers. Hong Kongers have never been able to tell their own story; none, that is, except the poor, sad, old King—"the last free man in Hong Kong," as he was called by writer Fung Man-yee.

As I wrote, the King became, rather than my subject, my unlikely lodestar. Amid the scrolling whirligig of Hong Kong politics, I couldn't help noticing a pattern emerging. When something big happened, I often already knew the main players through my pursuit of the King. When in 2016 an outspoken university lecturer named Chin Wan became the first academic to lose his job for his political views, I remembered that he'd written the first essay in a book about the King. When legislator Tanya Chan was put on trial for her role in the Umbrella Movement, the eleven-week-long 2014 street occupation seeking greater democracy, I already knew her because of our shared interest in the King. In 2020, when Hong Kong's top satirical TV show, *Headliners*, was canceled for its political content, I messaged my condolences to its host, Tsang Chi-ho; we'd become friends after I interviewed him about a newspaper column he'd written on the King. Sometimes it seemed like the King was guiding me

from beyond the grave, breadcrumbing my trail to Hong Kong's most interesting thinkers.

This pattern was no coincidence. To think or write about the King was to consider his preoccupations: territory, sovereignty, and loss. He had publicly raised these issues at a time when no one else dared think about them. The very name he gave himself held within it a rebuke to Hong Kong's colonizers. He was the original sovereign, and Kowloon belonged to him; he was a shaman, a truth-teller, a holy fool.

As the years passed, this book grew harder to write. Its subject matter—sovereignty and identity—became intensely politically sensitive following Beijing's imposition of national security legislation on Hong Kong in June 2020. The way the law is being interpreted appears to view discussions of sovereignty or autonomy as potential secession, meaning that the King himself could nowadays be seen as a threat to national security. But in their continued acts of defiance, no matter how small, Hong Kongers are following the lead of their dead King.

So who today are the Kings of Kowloon? Are they the ancient clans in their walled villages who were the traditional subsoil owners, or the multinational corporations whose towering headquarters transformed the cityscape, or the Communist Party leaders in Beijing who can impose their will on the people of Hong Kong by fiat and force? Or are they the ordinary people who occupied the streets of Kowloon with their bodies, reclaiming the space-time that is their own? As if seen through a prism, the answer depends on the angle of viewing.

PART 1

DOMINION

CHAPTER 1



WORDS

It was during Hong Kong's steamy, explosive summer of 2019 that walls became weapons. Millions of people marched through the streets to protest against the extradition law they feared would mark the end of the territory's way of life. Armed with Sharpies and Post-it Notes, they feathered the walls with sorbet-colored declarations in black Chinese characters: *We love Hong Kong! We are Hong Kong! Hong Kong never give up!* These were not only walls of discontent but also walls of community; over and over, the messages asserted a distinct Hong Kong identity, separate from China.

Soon the notes were proliferating across overhead walkways and through underground tunnels, on shop windows and street signs, railings and billboards, like a swarm released into the wild, to pollinate and colonize the city. They evolved into pavement mosaics made up of scores of A4 photocopies glued end to end across the sidewalk near the government headquarters. Pedestrian walkways and underpasses quickly became impromptu galleries of dissent, with anonymous heartfelt pleas jostling for space. Often they were strategically placed. A black-and-white carpet of pictures of Chinese president Xi Jinping forced commuters to stomp on his face. Black-clad teams were deployed to paper footpaths at jogging speed, for kilometers at a time. Their assembly-line efficiency was mesmerizing to

behold: an advance crew ran ahead, spraying glue, followed by a second string who threw down posters in a checkerboard pattern, black backgrounds alternating with white as they cantered past, and bringing up the rear, a final crew who used long umbrellas to tamp the posters down onto the glue as they ran. *Go, Hong Kong! Some people move on, BUT NOT US.* Soon the black-clad protestors had graduated to graffiti slogans spray-painted straight onto roads, highway dividers, and tram shelters. *Fuck the police. Chinazi. If we burn, you fucking burn with us.* Public surfaces became anonymous repositories for people's deepest and most dangerous sentiments.

The protests sprang out of the massive opposition to proposed changes to Hong Kong's extradition laws that would permit the rendition of alleged criminal suspects to China. This would put anyone, no matter their nationality, in danger of having to stand trial under a Communist Party-led legal system rife with abuse and with no presumption of innocence. The new extradition legislation would forcefully undermine the most basic tenets of Hong Kong's cherished status quo. It would endanger the city's judicial independence, its rule of law, and its status as a political refuge, the very things to which Hong Kong attributed its success. The British had not endowed their subjects with full citizenship, the right of abode in Britain, or universal suffrage, but they had inculcated them with civic values, including an almost religious respect for freedom, democracy, and human rights. And Hong Kongers were not going down without a fight.

I was transfixed by this movement building in front of my eyes, and especially by the explosion of subversive Chinese characters running riot across public space, repurposing the city into an evolving, open-air gallery of populist ideas. These displays were called Lennon Walls, after a wall in Prague that had been painted with countercultural, anti-establishment graffiti beginning in the 1980s, shortly after John Lennon's death. Hong Kong's original Lennon Wall had been established in 2014, during the pro-democracy protests of the Umbrella Movement, when people began sticking Post-it Notes on a circular concrete staircase near the government headquarters. I'd visited that wall daily, and I started doing the same this