

CY, P'NER

comics as eyewitness

August 2020

Palestine

Puerto Rico

Hong Kong

front line defenders



cypher

/ˈsaɪfər/

The dictionary definition of cypher is 'a secret or disguised way of writing'. In many ways, this is the essence of comics storytelling – the image, rather than the word, is a disguise for many words, that can convey meaning, emotion, and can re/frame an entire narrative.

Rap and hip hop culture has taken the word and ascribed a new meaning: 'an informal gathering of rappers, beatboxers and/or breakdancers in a circle, in order to jam musically together.' This, too, we find relevant to this project, in that we are bringing together artists and HRDs in freestyle collaboration of activism and art with the aim of informing, elevating and inspiring.

For us, this captures the spirit of why we are working in comics and guides how we facilitate the process of creative production.

Co-Producers:

Beldan Sezen and Adam Shapiro

Cover art by Hafez Omar

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frontlinedefenders.org/cypher





adam shapiro

The stories this edition appear together more by accident than intent, but yet have a basic thread connecting them and the human rights defenders. Palestine, Puerto Rico and Hong Kong – all places and spaces that are unfree and yet where resistance has long challenged oppression. The stories presented here are but small pieces of larger narratives and experiences of communities that refuse to accept the dictates of larger (much larger) powers – and pay a heavy price for it.

When I learned that Hafez Omar had been released from prison, I immediately started thinking of ways to work with him, given his incredible talent. His imprisonment – punished for producing viral art that brought worldwide attention to Palestinian prisoners – represented the power of artistic expression to resist and undermine dominance, and was the kind of story that we wanted to bring forward with this project. That Hafez was an artist only meant that his autobiography was the perfect story for an edition of **Cypher**.

In 2014, I went to Hong Kong to document the work HRDs were doing to support and sustain the Umbrella Movement – the largest protest movement the city had ever seen up until that point. It was the most incredible mass movement I had experienced, with daily speeches, rallies, outdoor classrooms in rotation for students, geography-based rap sessions, press conferences, etc. Pup tents lined the main thoroughfares in Admiralty with signs indicating they were free for use and with information on who to call if you needed food or medical support. Monitors stood at crossing points over the concrete media separating the highway to ensure one-way pedestrian traffic among the throngs. And taking the stage each night were youth activists who knew the modern history of their compatriots in China and how the Tiananmen protests had been crushed. Five years later, the protest movement was reignited and the stakes have been higher. Memory, present and future are all coming together as the people of Hong Kong enter a new era that resembles the nightmare they already witnessed as history in post-Tiananmen China. Depicting some of this story in **Cypher** is the least we could do to honor the courage of the human rights defenders at the forefront of these movements.

Hurricane Maria, which battered Puerto Rico in 2017, unleashed the raw power of nature on Boricuanos, but in an incredible demonstration in the face of multiple forms of adversity, community activists – people like Shariana Ferrer Núñez – found new ways to organize and overcome death, deprivation, neglect and corruption. Street protests led to the resignation of the governor, and his hand-picked successor. And the movement put Puerto Rico ‘on the map’ in the United States as never before – in the media, in political and policy spaces, and made more people aware of the unique – and unfree – status of the island and its residents. And within all that turmoil and upheaval, Shariana – a Black queer feminist Puerto Rican activist – and her fellow WHRDs built La Colectiva Feminista en Construcción and ignited a revolution.

It is our hope that you these stories inspire you in many ways – including to learn more about these HRDs and their struggles.

This edition we bring you a new wrinkle – an audio interview with Hafez Omar that you can listen to while reading his story. We commit to continuing to explore ways to enhance the experience of **Cypher**, and provide the best possible platform for the voices, perspectives and experiences of HRDs.

Editorial



beldan sezen

We tell stories of human rights defenders not to dwell on negative aspects of a country or sensationalize, or feed stereotypes but to uphold human rights. Every country, every nation, every culture has something valuable, beautiful that adds to the fundamental and universal rights that all should enjoy. Pakistan the country we featured in [Cypher 01](#) recently passed a law that “guarantees citizens the right to express their gender as they wish, and to a gender identity that is defined as “a person’s innermost and individual sense of self as male, female or a blend of both, or neither; that can correspond or not to the sex assigned at birth”¹.

No government is innocent of violating human rights which each and every individual has, no matter how much I may disagree. National and personal levels of power structures can intertwine and puts us in places where freedom becomes just “another word for nothing left to lose”. As such life, a life, loses any value.

Better solutions have to be found than oppression, blunt violence, rape, disappearance and killings by those in power against ‘the other’, merely because we don’t agree, know better or fear to lose something we deem valuable. The ‘slap of a hand’ never convinced me to participate in anything.

When we team up human rights defenders with artists we not only visualize the stories but set in motion a process of engagement with the stories that unpack how comics, how drawing is perceived in parts of our world that are unknown to me. I might not be used to a region’s particular Idiosyncrasies but I am used to visual storytelling, to comics. The act of drawing is as self-evident to me as human rights.

August 2020

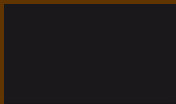



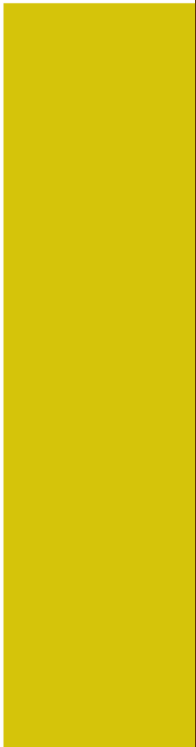
¹ source: [Al-Jazeera](#), [npr](#)

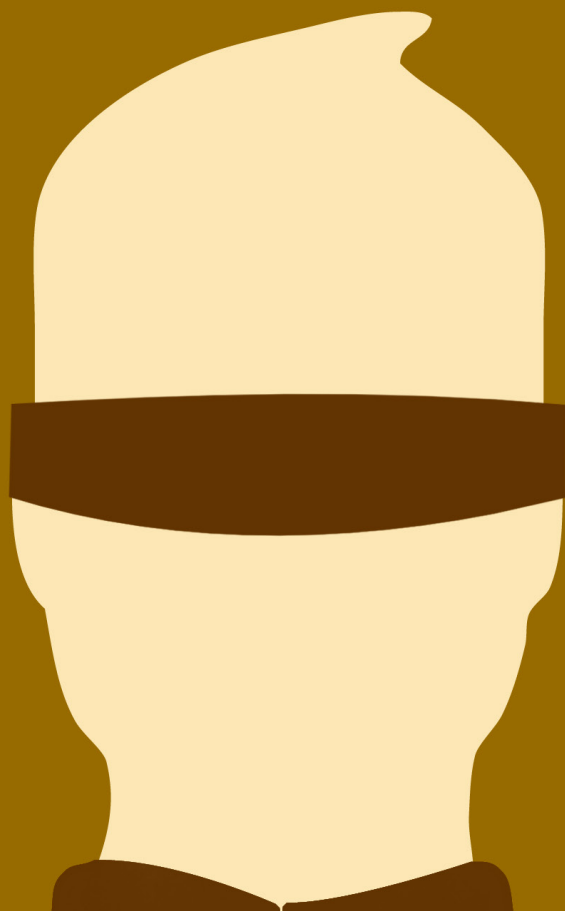
Palestine

"You put weapons into people's minds"

Hafez Omar is an artist and human rights defender. His award winning artwork has been widely used on posters and in campaigns defending the rights of Palestinian prisoners and for the Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions (BDS) movement. Hafez Omar has been vocal in his opposition of extrajudicial killings and the siege of the Gaza Strip. The human rights defender had been working in his newly-opened graphic studio in the hours preceding his arrest.

Artist: Hafez Omar
[Instagram](#) @hafezomar

	 <p>PANTONE © 484 CE</p>	 <p>PAN 464 C</p>
		
	<p>PALESTINE 4600 PRISONERS</p>	<p>PAN 103 C</p>



שובט



'You're wearing now what you drew'



كرامة = NaCl + H₂O
Dignity

حافظ عمر

A poster in support of hunger strikers.

Wheat Shall Fill the Valley

Translation/Interpretation/Caption Text:

On Man/ They gagged his mouth,/ Bound his hands to the rock of the dead/ And said: Murderer!/ They took his food, clothes and banners,/ Cast him into the condemned cell/ And said: Thief!/ They drove him away from every port,/ Took his young sweetheart,/ Then said: Refugee!// O you with bloodshot eyes and bloody hands,/ Night is short-lived,/ The detention room lasts not for ever,/ Nor yet the links of chains./ Nero died, Rome did not:/ With her very eyes she fights./ And seeds from a withered ear/ With wheat shall fill the valley.

Mahmoud Darwish

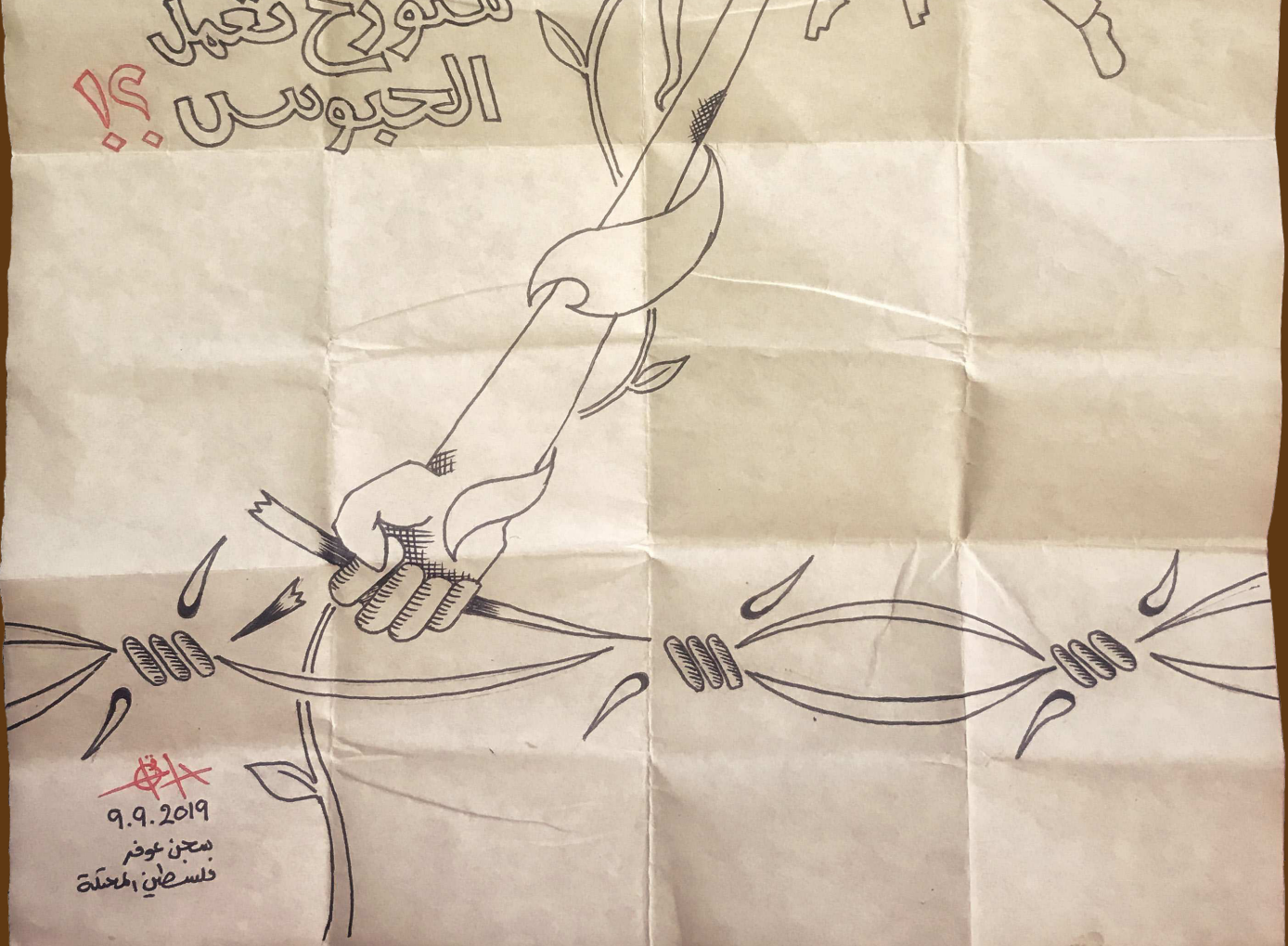
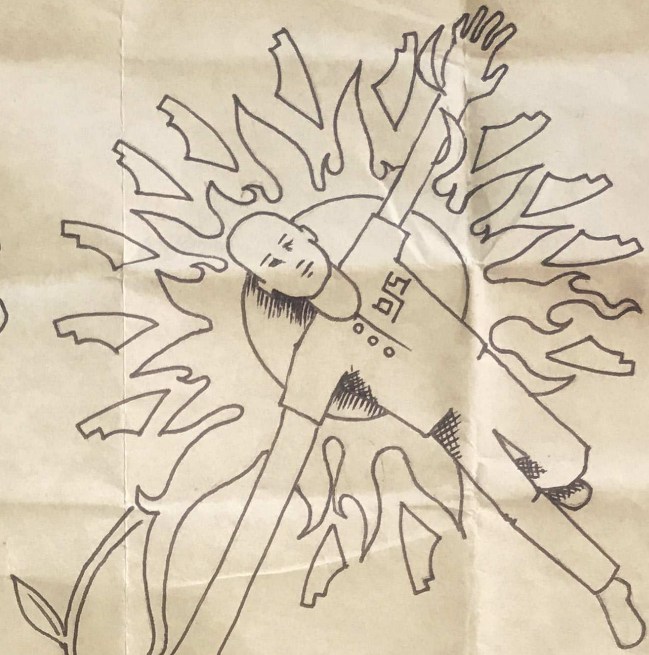


Hafez
talks



سنغلا العراڊي سنابل

بشمس الحرية
فينا بين رجبين
الشمس؟
والفجر بيننا
تسويج تعيل
الجبوس؟!



9.9.2019
مجن خوف
فلسفة المحنة

'The sun of freedom, who among us is locked up? And dawn between us....locked up?'

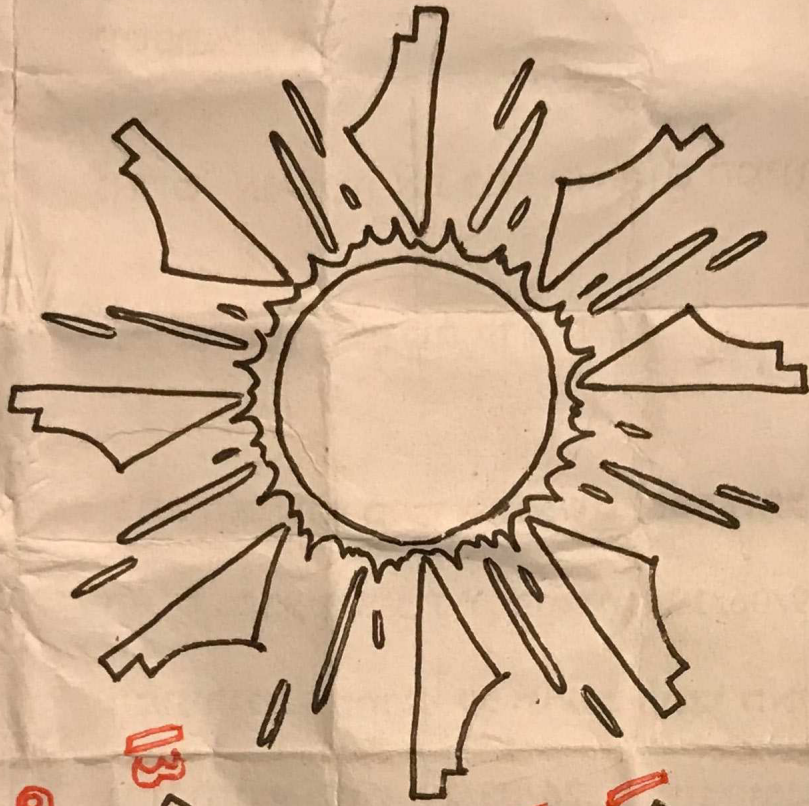
Hafez
talks



'april 17'

'Day of the Palestinian Prisoner'





وَتَمَّسَّتْ الشَّمْسُ
فِي كُلِّ أَرْضٍ بِهَا
فِي هَذَا الْيَوْمِ
وَاحِدَةً: فَالِصَّالِحِينَ

2019.5.27

Hafez
talks



'My voice'

لو رحل

ما بترحل
حنا جركم

'if it's gone, you have yours'



Puerto Rico

“We have no fear,” declares Shariana Ferrer, one of the co-founders of the leading feminist movement on the island that helped topple the previous governor. “This fearlessness has to do with how much we have survived. You have to understand that we have been cornered and we are fighting back.”

If there is a face to the feminist movement in Puerto Rico, it is La Colectiva Feminista en Construcción. Five years ago, Ferrer – a black, queer, feminist activist from Aguadilla – came together with six compañeras and began discussing intersectionality and how they could work together to build a better Puerto Rico. Together, they created a space where they decolonized themselves and tried to figure out a better way to push social change and social justice.

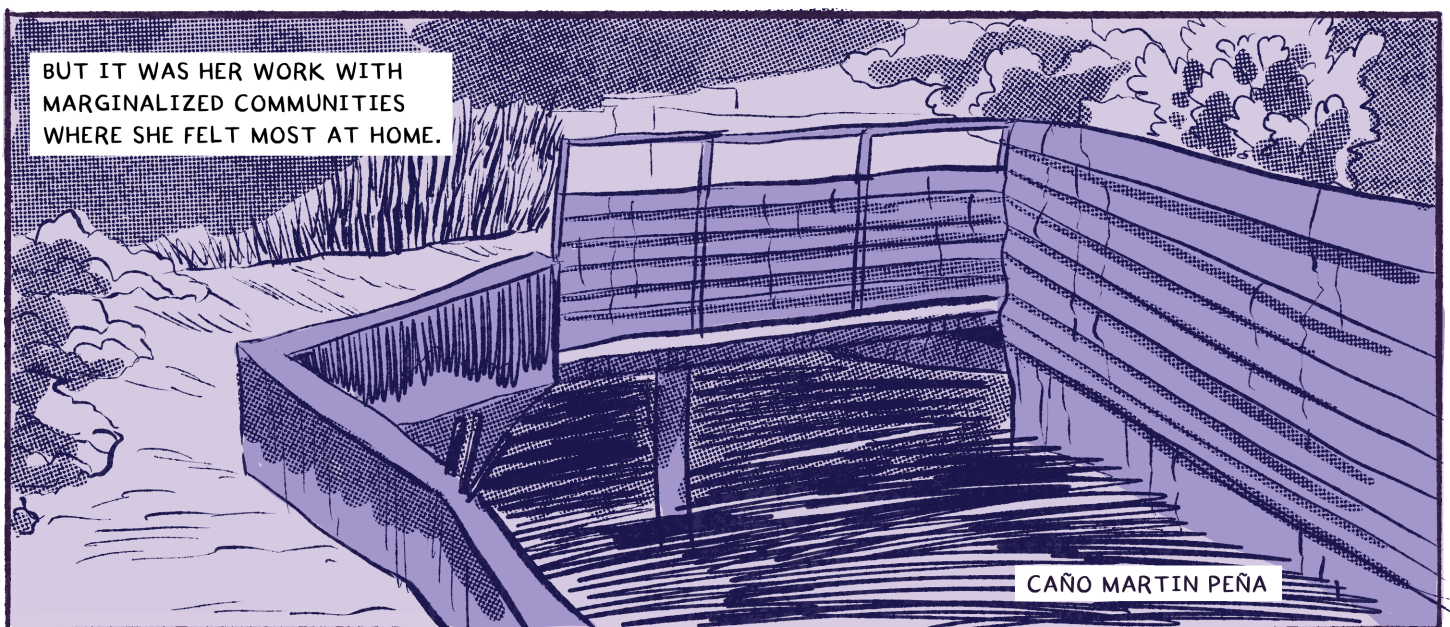
Artist: Rosa Colón Guerra is a comic artist and illustrator living in San Juan, Puerto Rico. Her work has been published in *The Nib*, *The Believer*, *The Lily*, and in the Eisner Winner *Puerto Rico Strong* by Lion Forge.

[Twitter/Instagram](#): @sodapopcomics

LA COLE CENTERED THE DAY'S PROTEST AROUND EIGHT DECREES: THE END OF "VIOLENCIA MACHISTA", BODY AUTONOMY, THE RIGHT TO WORK, IMMIGRATION RIGHTS, AND PUBLIC SAFETY, HOUSING AND HEALTH. "THESE CLAIMS ARE TIED TO THE DEBT AND IT'S WOMEN WHO ARE AFFECTED IN TERMS OF PUBLIC POLICY, "WHEN THE PAYMENT OF THE DEBT IS PRIORITIZED WITHOUT ESTABLISHING WHAT ESSENTIAL SERVICES ARE." SHARIANA -(PERIÓDICO TODAS)

WILL ANYONE COME, YOU THINK?







BY 2014, SHARIANA BEGAN TO FEEL RESTLESS. SHE FELT FEMINIST ISSUES WERE NOT PRIORITIZED IN LEFTIST CIRCLES, AND THE "TOKEN" FEMINISTS WERE LEFT TO FIGHT ON THEIR OWN. BIT BY BIT, LIKE-MINDED FRIENDS BEGAN TO MEET UP WITH SHARIANA, AND A NEW POLITICAL FEMINIST GROUP WAS BORN.

LA COLECTIVA FEMINISTA EN CONSTRUCCIÓN, IN CONSTRUCTION, BECAUSE IT'S ALWAYS RE-EVALUATING, CHANGING AND GROWING.

THEY WANTED TO ORGANIZE FUN PERFORMATIVE PROTESTS THAT WOULD CATCH PEOPLE'S ATTENTION, AND START DIALOGUES.

PUERTO RICO A LA VENTA



IN 2016, WHEN OBAMA SIGNED THE P.R.O.M.E.S.A. LAW, SHARIANA AND LA COLE DECIDED IT WAS TIME FOR ACTION.

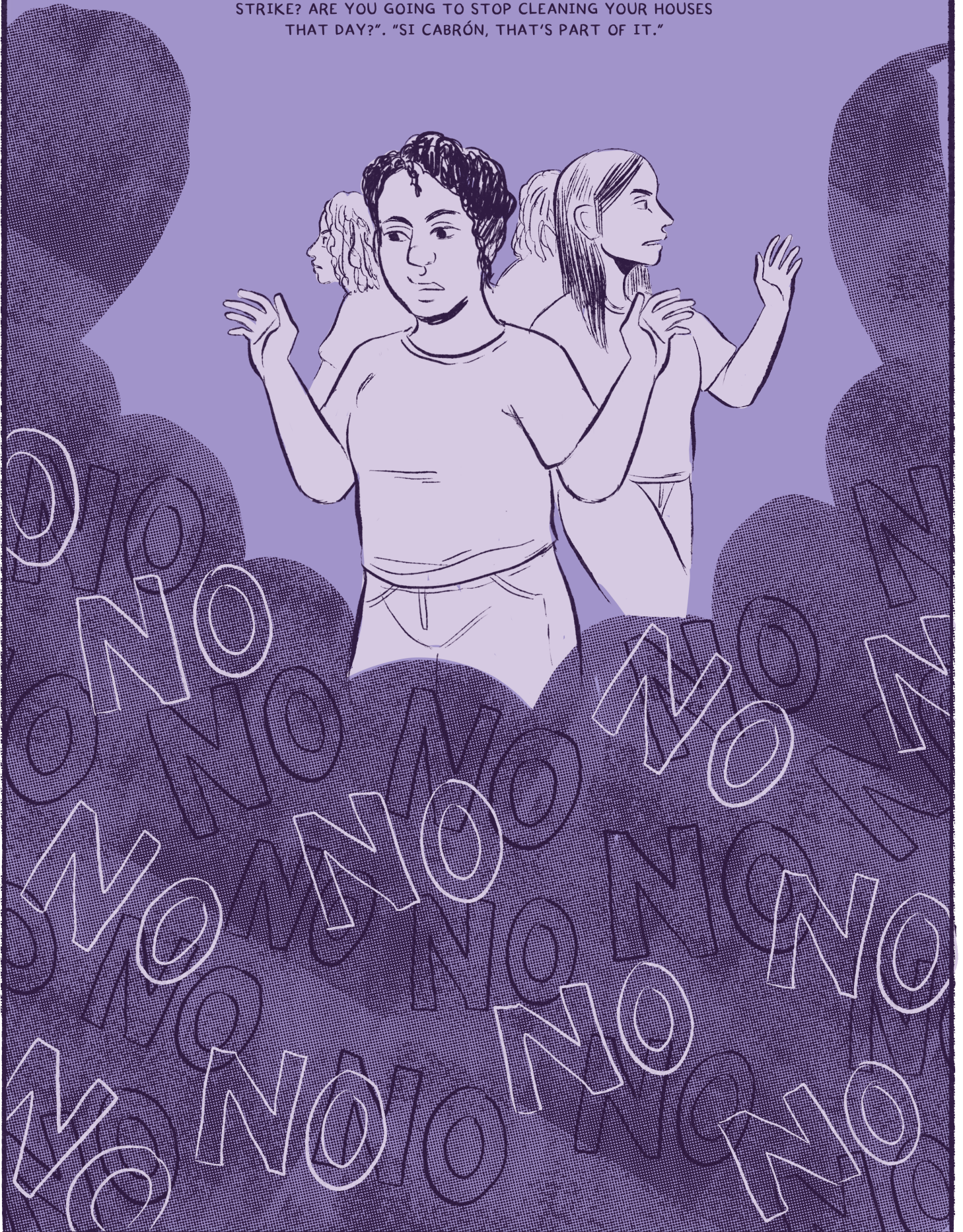
30% MÁS EN
VENENOS
PARA TU SALUD

¡ORGANÍZATE
Y LUCHA!



EARLY IN 2017, LA COLE REALIZED THERE WAS A NEED TO PARTICIPATE IN POLITICAL ACTIONS AND ALL THAT WAS MISSING WAS THE SPACE TO DO SO. SPURRED ON BY P.R.O.M.E.S.A. AND THE BURGEONING RESISTANCE MOVEMENT AGAINST TRUMP IN THE U.S., WOMEN WERE LOOKING TO MAKE THEIR VOICES HEARD. "HAY QUE CREAR ESPACIO PA' QUE LA GENTE LLEGUE."

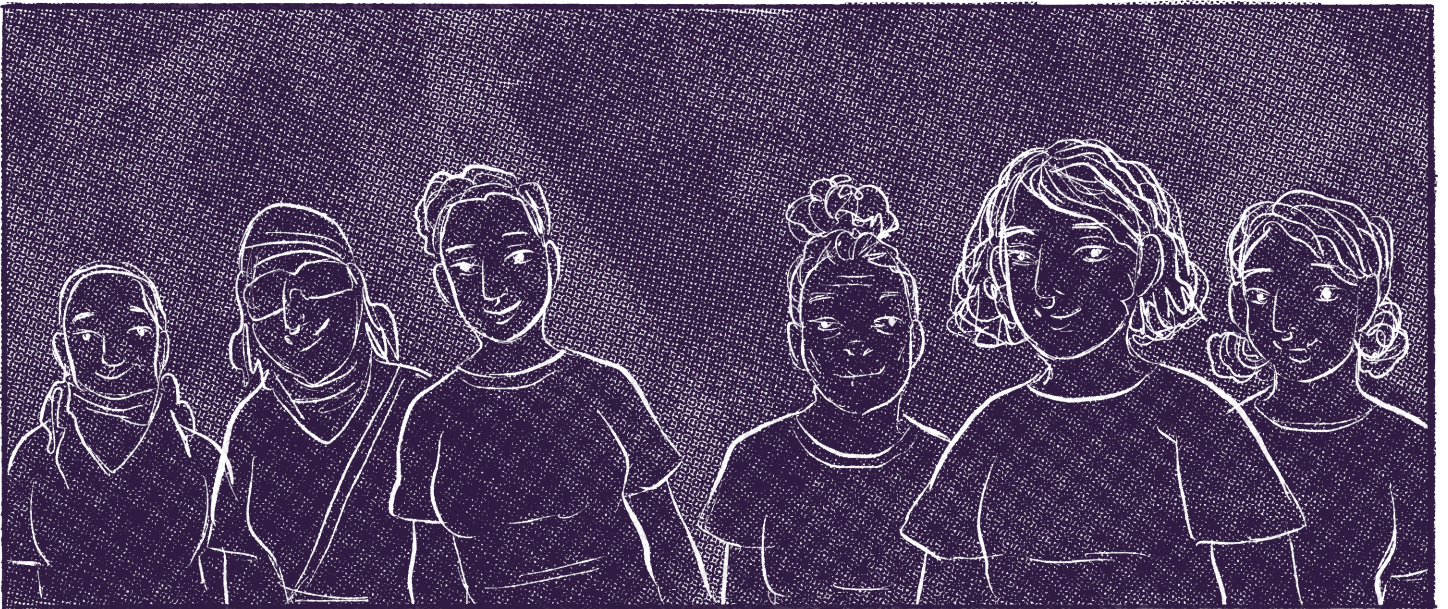
SHARIANA FELT THE ENERGY WAS RIGHT FOR A PARO, OR STRIKE, AND LA COLE APPROACHED OTHER ORGANIZATIONS TO GET THE BALL ROLLING. SURPRISINGLY, THEY WERE MET WITH RESISTANCE AND SEXISM. "WHERE ARE YOU GOING TO STRIKE? ARE YOU GOING TO STOP CLEANING YOUR HOUSES THAT DAY?". "SI CABRÓN, THAT'S PART OF IT."






UNFAZED, LA COLE CONVENEDED
ON FACEBOOK AND BEGAN
ORGANIZING THEIR ACT OF
CIVIL DISOBEDIENCE.

SI NOSOTRAS PARAMOS EL
PAÍS SE DETIENE.



THEIR STUBBORNNESS
PAID OFF AS MORE AND
MORE WOMEN SIGNED
TO PARTICIPATE. BUT
WOULD THEY COME ON
THE DAY?





SI NOSOTRAS PARAMOS
EL PAÍS SE DETIENE



LA COLE TOOK PUERTO RICO'S MAIN HIGHWAY FOR TWO HOURS ON MARCH 8, 2017, AND DESPITE WHAT THE REST OF THAT YEAR WOULD BRING, HURRICANE MARÍA AND ITS AFTERMATH, THEY REMAINED BUOYANT.



LA COLE BECAME MORE INFLUENTIAL, AND HELPED SHAPE PUBLIC DISCOURSE ON THE ISLAND AROUND FEMINIST AND GENDER ISSUES.

IN A WAY, THEY PAVED THE WAY FOR THE SUMMER 2019 PROTESTS BY SHOWING PUERTO RICO WHAT POLITICAL ACTION CAN BE. FROM A GROUP OF FRIENDS TO A MASSIVE MOVEMENT.



LA COLE PROVES THAT TO BEGIN A REVOLUTION ALL YOU NEED IS A FRIEND.

BY ROSA LUÓN BUENIA

Hong Kong

On 6 August 2020, Hong Kong police brought charges against 24 pro-democracy activists and human rights defenders for organising or participating in an annual vigil on 4 June 2020 to commemorate the 1989 massacre in Beijing's Tiananmen Square.

On 3 and 4 June 1989, Chinese troops opened fire on peaceful protesters who had assembled in great numbers in the capital to call for political and economic reforms, killing hundreds and possibly thousands. After 31 years, no one has been held accountable for these killings despite repeated demands from families and civil society. In mainland China, it has been forbidden to commemorate the massacre, or to even find reference to it on the internet sites available in China. Only in Hong Kong could people remember the victims of that day, and was an indication of the tangible difference between the freedoms of Hong Kong by comparison to the mainland.

Among the 24 activists facing new charges, 11 are affiliated with the pro-democracy advocacy group Hong Kong Alliance in Support of Patriotic Democratic Movements in China, which has been organising the vigil since 1990.

Artist: A.Li, is an artist from Hong Kong who loves photography and illustration. He works as a producer and an editor for the TV broadcasting industry. Reading internationally produced comics since his early youth, Li started to digitally draw comics in 2019.

[Instagram](#) @TrEE_w
[Behance](#)



THE TANKS ARE GOING TO TIANAMEN SQUARE, BUT A MAN WITH PLASTIC BAG IS STANDING IN FRONT OF THE COLUMN...



...THE ARMY BEGAN TO CATCH THE PEACEFUL PROTESTERS...

OH NO...

THEY'VE DONE NOTHING WRONG...

HOW COME THEY ARE ARRESTING THEM?

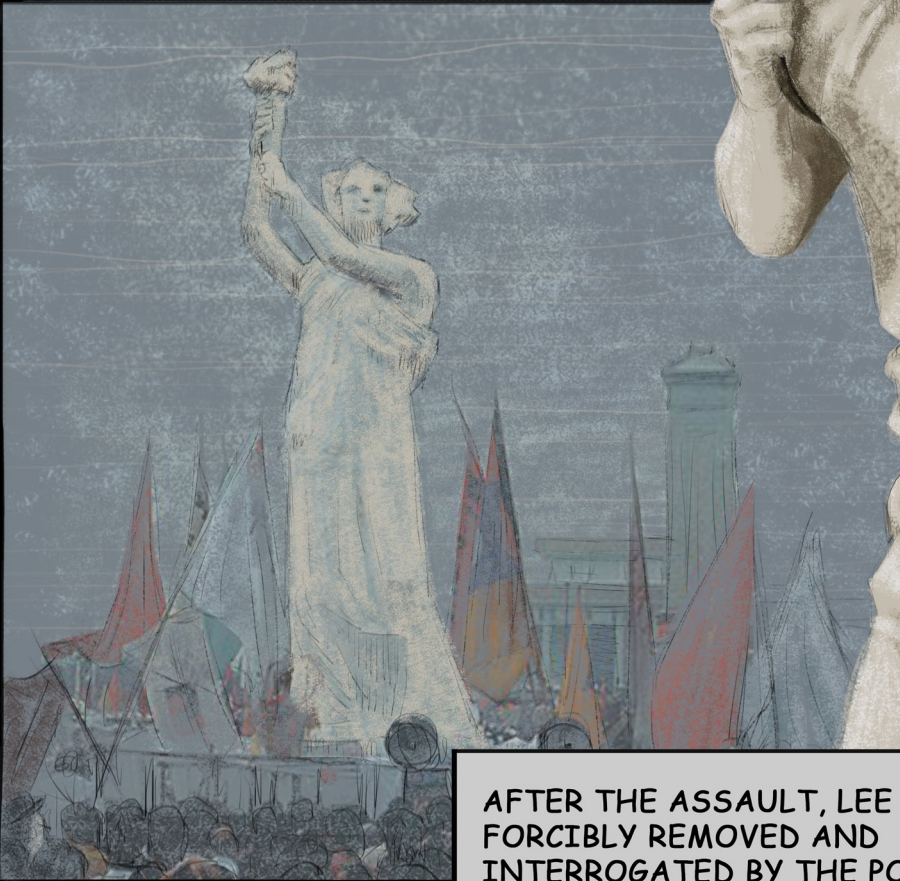
THE PROTESTERS
VALIANTLY RESISTED,
THE ARMY STARTED TO
SHOOT...



GRACE WAS 4 YEARS
OLD WHEN THE
MASSACRE HAPPENDED.

SEEDS

CHEUK-YAN LEE BROUGHT DONATIONS FROM HONG KONG TO BEIJING TO SUPPORT THE PROTESTERS BEFORE 4 JUNE.




AFTER THE ASSAULT, LEE WAS FORCIBLY REMOVED AND INTERROGATED BY THE POLICE ON THE PLANE TO HONG KONG.




AFTER SIGNING A 'LETTER OF REPENTANCE', HE WAS RELEASED AFTER 3 DAYS.



REV. YIU-MING CHU PARTICIPATED IN 'OPERATION YELLOW BIRD' TO RESCUE THE PROTESTERS.



CHU WENT TO THE WESTERN CONSULATES AND LOBBIED THEM TO ACCEPT EXILED CHINESE STUDENTS AND SUCCESSFULLY RESCUED MANY PRO-DEMOCRACY ACTIVISTS.



HOWEVER, THE CCP CONTINUED TO SEVERELY SUPPRESS AND ARREST DISSIDENTS.





THE "TIANANMEN MOTHERS",
COMPOSED OF THE FAMILIES
OF THE VICTIMS,
HAS ASKED THE CCP FOR
"TRUTH, COMPENSATION AND
ACCOUNTABILITY"...



...BUT IT HAS BEEN SUPPRESSED
FOR MANY YEARS.



CITIZENS OF HONG KONG WERE EXTREMELY OUTRAGED BY THE CHINESE COMMUNIST PARTY'S INTIMIDATION...



BUT THE GREATER THE REPRESSION, THE GREATER THE RESISTANCE...

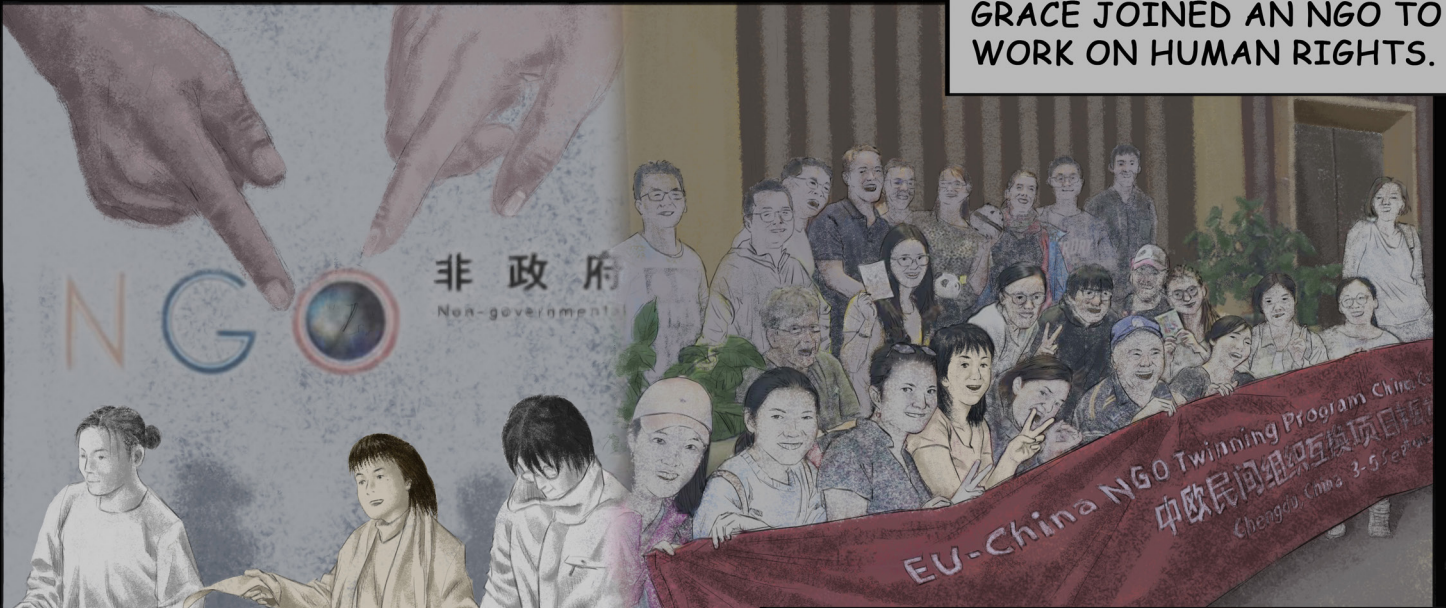
...FOR THE 4 JUNE 2009 MEMORIAL, HUGE NUMBERS TURNED OUT AS CANDLELIGHTS FLOODED VICTORIA PARK, AS IF TO SHINE LIGHT BACK TO BEIJING AND BACK TO 1989.



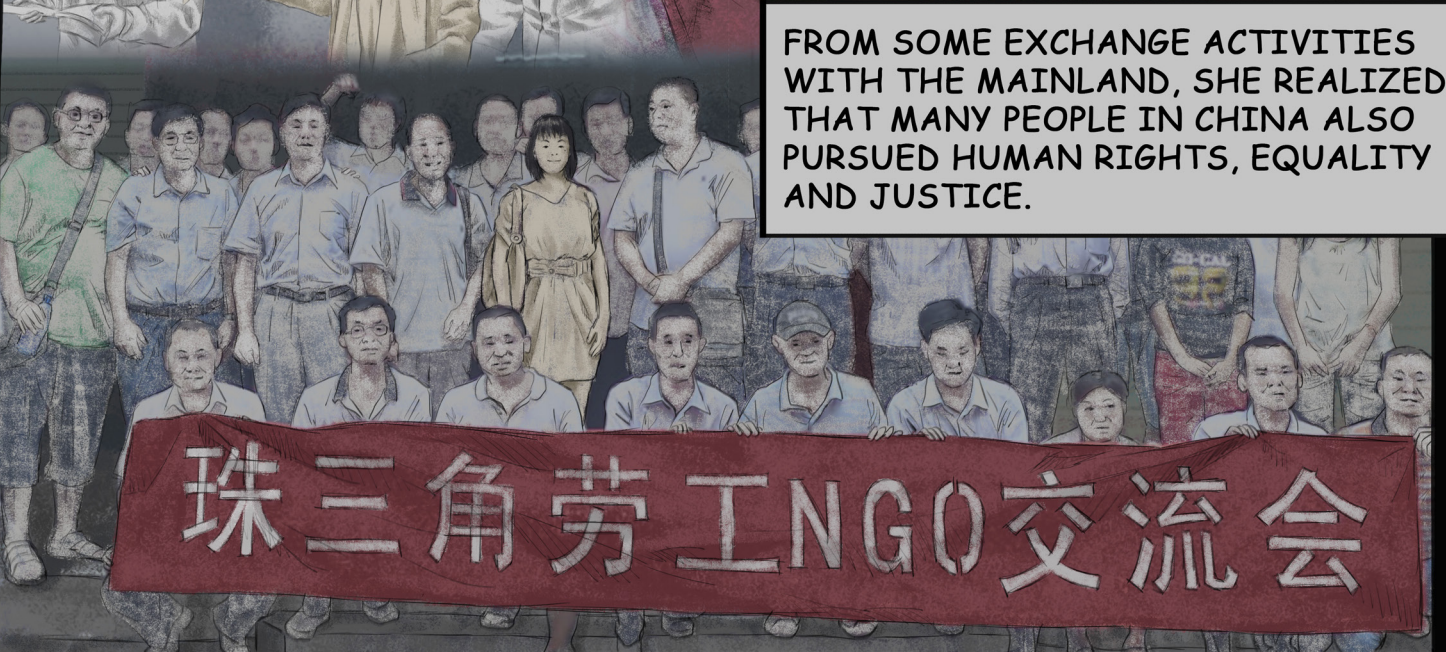
FROM THE TIME SHE WAS 24, GRACE AND HER YOUNGER BROTHER, WILLIAM, NEVER MISSED ATTENDING THE ANNUAL MEMORIAL.



GRACE JOINED AN NGO TO WORK ON HUMAN RIGHTS.

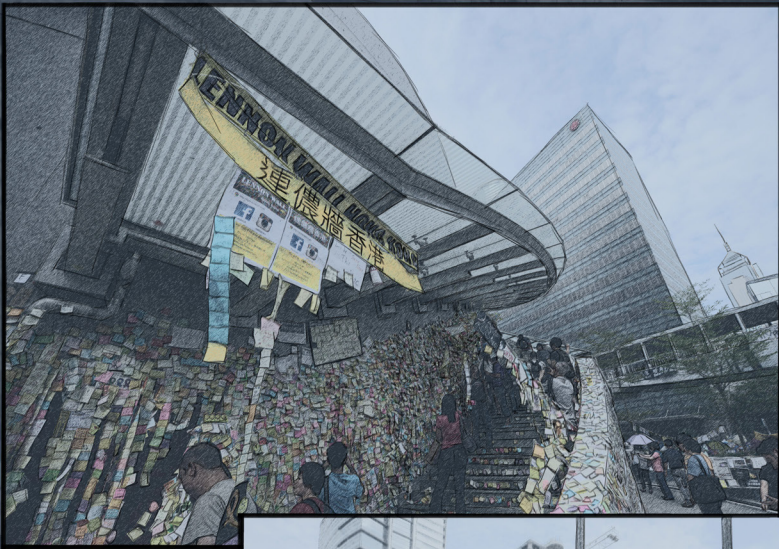


FROM SOME EXCHANGE ACTIVITIES WITH THE MAINLAND, SHE REALIZED THAT MANY PEOPLE IN CHINA ALSO PURSUED HUMAN RIGHTS, EQUALITY AND JUSTICE.



*Labour of Pearl River Delta NGO exchange activity

DUE TO CCP EFFORTS TO ERODE HONG KONG'S DEMOCRACY AND HUMAN RIGHTS PROTECTIONS, REVOLUTIONARIES KEPT PROTESTING - RISING UP LIKE THE ERUPTION OF A VOLCANO, ESPECIALLY THE 'UMBRELLA MOVEMENT' IN 2014.



*Umbrella Square





BUT THE HONG KONG GOVERNMENT DID NOT LISTEN TO PUBLIC OPINION...

...THE POLICE VIOLENTLY CLEARED THE STREETS.

THE COPS ARE USING TEAR GAS, RUN...



...WHAT THE...?



WILLIAM... HANG ON...



NO WAY...
WILLIAM!



GET THE KID,
AND **RUN!!!**



C'MON GRACE...
WE CAN DO NOTHING NOW,
LET'S CONTACT A LAWYER.
WE'VE GOTTA RUN QUICKLY...



*Freedom is priceless! Support Hong Kong's fight for freedom!



自由无价! 支持香港为自由而战!

IN THE MEANTIME, MANY
MAINLAND PROTESTERS SUPPORTED
HONG KONG IN GUANGZHOU;
THEY WERE ARRESTED WHEN THEY
HELD A SOLIDARITY BANNER IN PUBLIC.

AFTERWARDS, THE JUNE 4TH MEMORIAL
WAS OPPOSED BY THE AUTHORITIES FOR
THE FIRST TIME. PEOPLE IGNORED
THEM AND CONTINUED TO ATTEND,
NOT JUST IN VICTORIA PARK, BUT ALSO
IN VARIOUS DISTRICTS THROUGHOUT
HONG KONG.



AND THE POLICE ARRESTED
MANY DEMOCRATS, ALLEGEDLY
FOR ILLEGAL ASSEMBLY.



ARE YOU
ALRIGHT?



YUP.
HE'S OK.

I'M FINE.
HOW'S THAT KID?
DID HE ESCAPE?

WILLIAM...
I'M SORRY...

DON'T BEAT YOURSELF
UP ABOUT IT, I DID IT
BECAUSE IT WAS THE
RIGHT THING TO DO.

BUT I'M...

HEY, HOW'S MY
NEW HAIRCUT?
I THINK IT'S COOL.



LISTEN UP,
MY SIS...

A LOT OF TIMES YOU
DON'T CHOOSE TO HOLD
ON, AND THEN THERE
ISN'T ANY HOPE...

...YOU HELD ON,
AND SO THERE
IS HOPE.

YOU GOT IT?



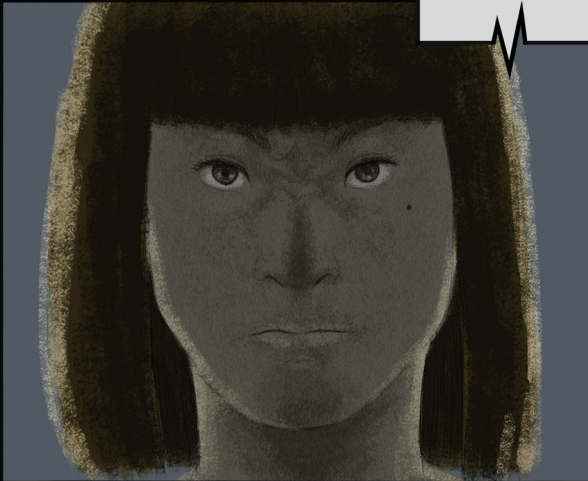
1 JULY 2020



CHINA'S TOP LEGISLATIVE BODY, THE NATIONAL PEOPLE'S CONGRESS STANDING COMMITTEE...



...UNANIMOUSLY APPROVED A SWEEPING NATIONAL SECURITY LAW TAILOR-MADE FOR HONG KONG...



...IT IS EFFECTIVE IMMEDIATELY...



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