

CHRISTINA CHAN

close-up

by Jasmin Wong



Christina Chan Hau-man sits in a quiet tea garden on the weekend hideaway island of Cheung Chau. Far away, at last, from the prying eyes of the paparazzi, the bitter criticisms and the accolades, this young woman has also escaped, albeit temporarily, the labels traitor and heroine.

Ever since she held up a Tibetan flag during the Hong Kong leg of the Olympic Torch Relay, Christina Chan has rarely been out of the media spotlight. By the time thousands of protesters surrounded the Legislative Council to oppose funding for the HK\$66.9 billion Express Rail Link, she was already a protest celebrity. She stood out, even among the group described by the media as the young, fearless and rebellious post-80s generation. Chan prefers to call them the “self-initiated citizens”.

Chan says she moved to Cheung Chau to escape all the attention: she was sick of being followed by photographers and recognised by passers-by. But the island has proved no barrier to determined paparazzi.

In January, the *Oriental Sunday* magazine splashed photos of a scantily clad Chan on its cover. The magazine claimed that she was not properly dressed at home and caused discomfort to neighbours.

Chan says her neighbours have never complained. She is unhappy with the allegations, but shrugs them off. She is tired of the attention, but not afraid of it. “I am half a public figure,” she concedes.

In person, Chan bears little resemblance to a public figure. She is petite, quiet, rational. During the interview, she flips through the Chinese food items on the menu a few times before finally giving up. “I am a vegan,” she declares and insists on having nothing but a cup of water. There is nothing clearer than her determination.

She thinks it is unfair that people fight for democracy and save people’s homes while humans devastate animals’ habitat and torture them for their own satisfaction. She says animals should be freed from being confined, tortured and killed, just as humans should be.

After all the explanations, she finally gives in to her hunger, thanks to an over-night evaluation meeting of the anti-rail protest. She orders noodles with vegetables.

Chan prides herself on her fierce independence and attributes it to a childhood spent away from her family and fending for herself at boarding school in Britain. The experience turned her into the fearless, determined and outspoken young woman she is today.

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Asked about the event that shot her into the limelight, Chan insists she did the right thing at the time. During the Olympic torch relay in 2008, she held a snow lion flag with her Australian boyfriend and several students from the University of Hong Kong (HKU) in support of greater freedom and human rights in Tibet. Their action was considered to be anti-China by some mainland exchange students nearby and sparked an argument between two groups, which captured the media’s attention.



Chan says she is happy to live in Cheung Chau because she can escape from all the attention.

“All Tibetans are Chinese but no one speaks out for them,” she says, explaining her act. Chan stresses she is not advocating for Tibetan independence, which is a taboo subject in China.

“I love my country. What is a country without her people? I do want the best for the people, but that doesn’t mean a political party should tread on people’s basic rights,” Chan says.

The incident gained prominence because of the Olympics. “There was such a nationalistic pride generated by the government. People couldn’t see anything else,” she says.

Chan says the central government wants to silence dissent in the country, that it imprisons those who speak out, or forces them into exile. “People think that China is a rising big country, a great nation. But they should also know how the party dominates and how people suffer,” she says.

Her motives are simple. Once she finds something is unfair, she protests. Her participation in the anti-rail protest, for instance, was not well planned but it was sincere.

The media calls her the “goddess” or poster child of the post-80s generation,

but Chan points out that although the young made up the majority of the protesters in recent protests, they were not the sole participants. The protests actually included a wide range of people, so it is inaccurate to call them all post-80s. She says they should be called “self-initiated citizens”.

She considers her actions in the protests to be rational rather than radical. For Chan, rationality is a term that is open to interpretation. “Sitting at home quietly without concerning myself about the deterioration of homelands and human rights is more irrational than subjecting myself to criticism,” she says.

In the past, she had tried to turn her back on protesting and just quietly stay at home. But sitting at home and watching the injustices on television just made her more miserable so she took to the streets again and did not stop.

Chan does believe she has been singled out for her activism because she is a woman.

For instance, Leung Kwok-hung, known as “Long Hair”, is also an outspoken politician and does similar things to Chan during protests. But Chan says he has not been insulted with humiliating and violent words because he is a man.

She says perceptions of female activists in the public eye are somewhat distorted. People tend to think they join the protests with ulterior motives such as to gain publicity and attract the opposite



SAMUEL CHAN CHE-CHUNG

Chan actively participates in the anti-Express Rail Link movement.

sex. “People do attack us when they see girls out there,” she says.

Local people have a false assumption about Hong Kong girls, according to Chan. “I guess it’s like a political arena. Traditionally, only men participate in social movements. But now, girls participate and society is not used to that,” she adds. “People are used to enslave others and being enslaved. (They think) when a girl goes out to protest, she must have *Guan yin bing* but not with her own mind.”

Guan yin bing refers to males who submit to women they admire. Without any hesitation, Chan says she does not have any *Guan yin bing*, despite what the magazines say.

Chan has her own perspective on different things in life and she attributes

this to her philosophical training. She is currently studying for a master’s degree in philosophy at HKU.

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Studying philosophy, she realises she will not earn a lot of money after graduation. But she does not mind at all because she thinks life is not just about achieving things all the time. She only wants to be happy, although she cannot define what happiness really means. Chan is not one to plan the future, she does not know what she will be doing down the road from now. She may continue her activism or go to the United States to further her studies. “After which I will be 30 by then; God knows what I will be doing after that,” she giggles.

Christina Chan feels satisfied after finishing her noodles. A few people pass by the tea garden, completely unaware that the young woman calmly sitting there is the controversial troublemaker and the heroine for democracy. For now, she is just Christina. 

