She was loved for standing up to China. She may die in jail.

The story of Claudia Mo is also that of Beijing's tightening grip on Hong Kong.

By Primrose Riordan and Chan Ho-him in Hong Kong.

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Just after dawn on January 6 2021, Claudia Mo's housekeeper heard a sharp knock at the front door. The early hour, and Mo's profile as a prominent opposition politician, made the housekeeper wary. She opened the door a crack, leaving the safety chain in place, and saw a troop of police outside. The housekeeper rushed to wake Mo, but the officers smashed through into the living room. "It was just thuggery, sheer thuggery," said one person with knowledge of the raid.

Mo, who was then 64 years old, was arrested and taken to Aberdeen police station on the south side of Hong Kong island. Her husband, the 79-year-old British journalist and historian Philip Bowring, was left to sit in shock in the sudden quiet of their home. Similar scenes were playing out across the city as hundreds of police officers pulled a dragnet over Hong Kong and arrested more than 50 pro-democracy advocates — academics, activists and politicians.

A few days later, home on bail, Mo posted a photo on Instagram of her front door and its broken safety chain. "Been away a bit, mainly behind bars. They've seized my #cellphone and #computer . . . am having a lot of trouble doing my usual online thingies," she wrote.

Although the arrests were a shock, they were not exactly a surprise. Mo, for one, had been warning of China's growing authoritarianism towards the territory for years. In 2016, after Beijing took the unprecedented step of banning two elected politicians from taking their seats in the Hong Kong legislature, she wrote it could be "the beginning of the end . . . Today Beijing talks about anti-independence, tomorrow it talks about anti-self-determination and the day after it can talk about anti-democracy altogether."

Mo has a sense of humour and honesty that have made her a beloved figure among democracy supporters. Some refer to her in Cantonese as "Auntie Mo". While on bail, along with Instagram posts showing flowers, butterflies and sunsets, Mo posted a photo of a bottle of Citibrew beer. The label showed a woman holding an umbrella, a symbol of the democracy movement here. The beer was called "Tough Ladies IPA".

The most recent photo on her Instagram page is of a couple of dusty hardback books, one bearing the imprint of Oxford University Press, alongside some small papery grey objects. "My apparent year-after-year wasp nests from a long-time-no-clearout bookshelf," she wrote, adding a wasp emoji. That was on February 25 2021. Three days later, she was arrested again. Ever since that

day 16 months ago, she has been in prison, along with 46 other top democratic politicians and campaigners. They have come to be known as the Hong Kong 47. All have been accused of "conspiracy to commit subversion" under a draconian new national security law imposed by China in 2020.

This month, after long and often chaotic pre-trial hearings during which some defendants collapsed and had to be sent to hospital with exhaustion, the Hong Kong 47 were finally sent to the High Court. The trial is set to begin later this year. This pivotal moment in the story of the city and its troubled relationship with China coincides with another milestone: President Xi Jinping's expected visit on July 1 to commemorate the 25th anniversary of Britain returning Hong Kong to China. It is halfway through the 50 years of "one country, two systems" autonomy that Beijing guaranteed the territory in 1997.

If they are given the maximum sentence available, the Hong Kong 47 could die in jail. Critics say that their journey through the city's legal system shows that China is exploiting the veneer of respectability that the courts offer, including a staff of UK-trained judges and lawyers, to impose its will. In the process it could destroy Hong Kong's last safeguard that distinguished the once freewheeling city from the oppressive authoritarianism of mainland China.

Claudia Mo's parents came to Hong Kong in 1950 as refugees from Ningbo near Shanghai, part of the exodus that greeted the communist takeover of China. Mo was born in 1957, the youngest of four children, "the baby of the family", as she once told an interviewer. Her father had a small interior design factory and shop, and she attended a Roman Catholic school run by French nuns in an upmarket district of Hong Kong. She managed to pick up a fair amount of French, sparking a life-long interest in languages.

Her parents sent her to Canada to complete her education, and she ended up studying journalism at Carleton University in Ottawa. Mo found it so cold there that she took additional courses in the summer in order to complete her four-year degree in three years. In 1980 she returned to Hong Kong, taking a job as a translator for Agence France-Presse, then moved to The Standard newspaper. One afternoon at the Foreign Correspondents' Club she met Bowring, a journalist who had worked for the Investors Chronicle and the FT and was about to start at the Far Eastern Economic Review. They married in 1982 and have two sons.

In June 1989 Mo was chief Hong Kong correspondent for AFP when she was asked to report on the Tiananmen Square protests. She landed in Beijing on the day of the massacre. "As soon as I arrived, I could smell gunpowder," she later told the South China Morning Post. "I saw blood splattered all over Changan Avenue and heard the loud thuds of convoys of tanks that were being driven around the city."

It was a turning point. Mo's political awakening led her to help found one of the city's oldest and most popular opposition parties, the Civic party. She entered politics in an era that typified the optimism of her generation. In a 2008 advertisement for the party that encouraged voters to register, Mo and fellow party members danced and laughed through a goofy rap performed against a candy-coloured background.

But in the years that followed, they watched with increasing anxiety as the autonomy that was meant to be guaranteed by Beijing under the "one country, two systems" framework — including freedom of speech, assembly and protest — eroded. China promised to introduce universal suffrage to elect Hong Kong's chief executive, but in 2014 announced restrictions that would make it effectively impossible for critics of Beijing to run for the position.

It was the catalyst for the Umbrella Movement, in which tens of thousands of people took to the streets of Hong Kong to protest peacefully. Many carried umbrellas to protect against tear gas and pepper spray, and they became a symbol of the resistance.

The demonstrators were eventually dispersed and some of the ringleaders arrested. Mo, who took part in the protests, told a journalist the following year that she wouldn't call them a failure, because "a lot of people seem to be paying attention to the plight of the Hong Kong people". But she said she believed that Beijing had "become harder — they think Hong Kong people are just really disobedient; they have this parental mentality".

At times, it seemed as though pro-democracy campaigners were making headway. Initial attempts to get Hong Kong to introduce separate national security laws and nationalist education into schools failed in 2003 and 2012 respectively, after public pressure campaigns. In 2019, Carrie Lam, Beijing's anointed leader of the city, proposed legislation that would have allowed the extradition of Hong Kong residents to mainland China. It sparked the biggest pro-democracy movement on Chinese soil since Tiananmen Square. One demonstration was attended by an estimated two million of the city's 7.5mn people. Lam was forced to withdraw the bill.

The campaigners' sense of relief was short-lived. In response to the sometimes violent 2019 protests, a newly empowered police force arrested more than 10,200 people and prosecuted over 2,800 of them, spanning the breadth of Hong Kong society, from students and waiters, to gym owners and physicists.

On May 8 2020, chaotic scenes took place in the legislative council when pro-democracy lawmakers clashed with their pro-Beijing counterparts over who would control an important committee. Dressed in a smart black top, white jeans, a patterned scarf and a face mask, Mo physically tried to stop four security guards from dragging away a colleague, but was restrained by two other guards. Afterwards she slumped over her desk, pressing a tissue to her eyes as she broke down in tears.

The following month, Beijing introduced the vaguely worded security law under which the 47 were eventually charged. It outlaws subversion, terrorism, secession and "collusion with foreign forces". It overhauled school and university curriculums, and forced children as young as six to take national security lessons. Residents fear they may cross red lines without even realising it. In June, the new police commissioner, Raymond Siu, said people could have broken the security law if they simply watched a documentary on the protests.

More than 60 civil society organisations, including unions with thousands of members, have closed — some after threats to the safety of their leaders' families. Multiple news outlets have shut down, journalists have been prosecuted and political cartoonists have fled. A snitch line was set up for citizens to report possible breaches of the security law, with police saying they had received more than 260,000 tips.

The arrest of the 47 was the single largest application of the national security law yet. Authorities accuse the pro-democracy campaigners of using an informal election primary in July 2020, in which hundreds of thousands of Hong Kongers queued to vote, as part of a conspiracy to win a majority, veto key legislation and "grab the power to administer Hong Kong". Critics say the case is a political tactic aimed at wiping out the city's pro-democracy movement.

One judge who was not authorised to speak publicly told the FT they would bet their life against the 47 getting the maximum sentence, arguing that there was "no reason" to think the national security law would be adjudicated differently to other laws. "Anyway [they] have the security blanket of appeal."

But many lawyers working on the case fear judges have little leeway to acquit defendants under the new law. "The charge is so broadly drawn that it is easier to prove," a senior counsel for another of the 47 defendants says. They are "shit-scared they are facing 10 years to life".

Mo, along with most of the remaining democratic lawmakers, resigned from the legislature in November 2020 after her colleagues were ejected under China's tough new election rules. Before her arrest, she had said she was preparing for a quiet retirement from public life in which she could spend time with her grandchildren.

In August last year, a friend of Mo's named Shiu Ka-chun received a letter from her, which he shared excerpts from on social media. Mo said she had been teaching English to other prisoners and that her Christian faith was helping her. She thanked Cardinal Joseph Zen, the 90-year-old retired bishop of Hong Kong, for visiting. "I may be stumbling but not falling," she wrote. In January this year, Zen gave her Dostoevsky's Crime and Punishment and The Brothers Karamazov to read. Two months ago, to the shock of many, Zen himself was arrested under the national security law, though not remanded into custody. (He is still in Hong Kong.)

Apart from the odd letter, Mo and many other former prominent politicians have ceased talking to the press. In rare cases where activists have been released on bail, they have had to agree to forgo public commentary altogether. Mo was denied bail partly due to WhatsApp messages she sent to international reporters.

When the pre-trial hearings first started at West Kowloon Magistrates' Courts, there was something of an atmosphere of a family get-together, with activists and their relatives catching up despite the grim circumstances. There was chatting and shouting as the defendants came in and out of the dock.

But in hearings this month the mood has been darker. A threatening pre-recorded message reminded attendees to keep quiet. Tearful family members now used homemade sign language, love hearts out of their hands, to cheer defendants.

In hot and stuffy conditions during the city's humid summers, the 47 prisoners have faced bouts of solitary confinement. Avery Ng, a pro-democracy politician recently released from jail, said that at Lai Chi Kok Reception Centre, where some are detained, cockroaches crawl over their sleeping bodies at night.

"We wait to learn our fate, as if it has already been laid out before us," wrote Gwyneth Ho, another of the 47, in a letter released by friends last year. "[Isn't] this what they experienced in the past? [Mainland Chinese activists] who pressed up against the red line over and over, who were imprisoned and then released again and again, were completely forgotten by the world and the society they inhabited . . . Their hair turned from black to grey, then fell away. Is this not the Hong Kong of 10 years hence that everyone is gradually coming to dread?"

Hong Kong's new leader, John Lee, is a former policeman who oversaw the suppression of the 2019 protests. In late May, President Xi said Lee would usher in a "new era", and that the electoral changes which effectively snuffed out direct voting should "persist for the long run".

In jail, pro-democracy politicians and campaigners are trying to stay strong physically and mentally through exercise, reading and prayer. Emily Lau, a veteran democracy campaigner who frequently visits prisoners, said that the former vice-chairman of the Democratic party, Andrew Wan, has lost his double chin, while Lam Cheuk-ting, another democrat, had shown her his new muscles. "How do you train yourself to be locked up, for an unknown amount of time?" says Lau. "[For now] they are mentally and spiritually fit. If they are mentally defeated, then it's all over."

Mo has been a prolific writer, authoring at least 10 books over the course of her life, including a couple on raising children — "essentially sharing my experiences throughout my, ahem, reasonably successful motherhood", she joked on a personal website many years ago. Her publisher Jimmy Pang misses her presence at the city's annual book fair where she was known as

the “mic queen” for standing at his stall for hours introducing her books and speaking to passers-by.

“She would quote this line as she signed her new book for her fans, especially young people: ‘It’s not the dog in the fight, but the fight in the dog,’” Pang told me. “[She meant] the fight between two dogs is not about their sizes, but more about the spirit that they hold in the fight. When you fight, relying on pure violence is futile. Focus on how to hold on.”

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