

The Contemporary Narratives of the 1960s Social Movements in Hong Kong: Notes on Wong Bik-wan's *The Death of Lo Kei*

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Wong Bik-wan, a famed Hong Kong writer, published her novel *The Death of Lo Kei* in 2018 in response to the 1960s and 2010s social movements in Hong Kong. As mentioned by most critics, the novel's aesthetic uniqueness lies in the form of intertwining a major proportion of directly quoted archival texts with fictional writing, which is identified as "non-fiction fiction" by Wong. Drawing insights from previous critics, this article addresses the aspect of aesthetic form and readership. Further borrowing concepts about archives, this article aims to highlight the significance of the novel as a medium of rethinking archives and literature.

Keywords: Kowloon Riots, Mong Kok Riot, Post-umbrella Movement Literature, Archive, Non-fiction fiction, Wong Bik-wan

An Overview: Contemporary Narratives of the 1960s Social Movements in Hong Kong

The narration of the 1960s social movements or riots has been a notable phenomenon in the Hong Kong cultural scene, exemplified by 1967 by Pants Theatre Production, *Vanished Archives* 《消失的檔案》 produced by Connie Lo Yan-wai, *No.1 Chung Ying Street* 《中英街一號》 directed by Derek Chiu, and *The Death of Lo Kei* 《盧麒之死》 written by Wong Bik-wan. While the former three center on the Hong Kong 1967 Riots (六七暴動), the latter depicts the 1966 Kowloon Riots (九龍騷動), which are deemed as a relatively autonomous youth revolt when compared to the patent left-right wing blocs of the 1967 Riots (Law, 2015). While such an affirmation is problematic to some critics (Pang, 2018), this short article does not lay emphasis on the problem of restoring "historical truth." Rather, the central thread of these notes is to capture the 1966 Riots as a critical historical project for the present.

The bleak scenario of social movements nowadays gives rise to an urge to revisit 1960s social movements and the confusion of participants (Pang, 2018). In other words, the structure of feeling, which refers to a "particular quality of social experience and relationship, historically distinct from other particular qualities, which gives the sense of a generation or of a period" (William, 1977, 131), of post-umbrella movement somehow echoes that of the 1960s. *The Death of Lo Kei* juxtaposes the images of Lo Kei (盧麒) and Edward Leung Tin-kei (梁天琦), who are regarded as the key figures of the 1966 Kowloon Riots and the 2016 Mongkok Riot, respectively. Besides the resemblance between the two, we may build an association between the emotions highlighted in the

riots – from “exuberant” atmosphere (Wong, 2018, 45) to “Fatigue. Disappointment. Attached.” (疲乏。失望。縈戀。) (Wong, 2018, 63). To some critics, “affect history” are the keywords of the book (Li, 2018; Yeung, 2018).

Hence, my question would be: Why does Wong explore and develop such an experimental literary device of combining seemingly informational archives and seemingly fiction? Would such an approach become a hindrance to lyrical expression and readers’ understanding? In order to answer this question, this article has to turn to aesthetic form and readership first. Following this, this article will highlight the significance of the novel as a medium of rethinking archives and literature per se.



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The Perspective of Readership: A Challenge to Readers

A number of book reviews reflect that *The Death of Lo Kei* poses a challenge to readers (Lok, 2018; Ng, 2018). Unlike relatively conventional fictional devices, in which readers can be immersed in scenes, characters, dialogues and conflicts, *The Death of Lo Kei* collects different threads of archives from newspapers, government reports on the Riots, and court judgements, many of which are selected and directly cited. The tone of the discourse is somehow maintained, while the narrator’s voice is mainly indicated in brackets within the quoted paragraphs.

On that day “the youth who went on hunger strike in protest against the proposed Star Ferry fare increase” “appeared in Star Ferry Pier on 8 a.m. and were stopped by several policemen, who were booed off by the crowd” (Wong, 2018, 8).

Such a device was associated with *Dokumentartheater*, using archives as performance materials (Tang, 2018). It also attains an alienation effect, ascertaining the “authenticity” of the quoted historical texts. While these texts are assumed as “fact,” the narrator interrupts the readers with remarks in brackets and the quoted discourses are far from coherent. Despite its contextual and formal differences with Brecht’s epic theatre, the novel, to a certain extent, realizes Walter Benjamin’s remark on Brecht – “the audience should learn to feel astonished at the circumstances under which he functions” (Benjamin, 1939, 105) and “this discovery (or defamiliarization) of situations is fostered through interruption of the action” (Benjamin, 1939, 105). Both the difficulty and the pleasure of reading lie in identifying paradoxical discourses. Hence, the novel opens up a space for readers to actively participate in reading the texts.

Despite the montage style of writing, the book can be read as a detective story and the core enigma here is the death of Lo Kei – whether he was murdered or committed suicide. The novel seems to maintain the hermeneutic code, suggested by Roland Barthes, an enigma that can be distinguished, suggested, formulated, held in suspense and finally disclosed (Barthes, 1974, 19). The novel lays out different suspicious details, for example, Lo Kei was hung with a blue shirt from another person and the height of Lo Kei exceeded the distance between the upper bed of the double bunk beds and the floor. On the other hand, Lo Kei’s notes conveying his frustration, depression and his ill-fated life history are also supporting evidence of his “suicide.” However, unlike ordinary detective stories or historical investigations, the narrator contends that the truth about the incident remains hidden beneath a shroud of secrecy. While the jury reached a verdict that Lo Kei committed suicide, the narrator does not prefer any final conclusion to determine his cause of death.

The judge summarized the case and told the three jury members the followings: “The case may have four causes of death: (1) died of natural causes; (2) accidental death; (3) killed, including suicide, murder and manslaughter; (4) died of unknown causes.” “The judge indicated that the deceased did not die of diseases or accidents according to the evidence; therefore, the possibility of the first and the second causes could be eliminated.” “The most significant evidence was based on the pathologist Li Fook-kei’s examination and descriptions.” “Hence, both murder and manslaughter were unlikely the causes. If the jury cannot rule on the cause of death, the verdict of the fourth cause will be reached.” (The fourth cause: died of unknown causes.) “Eventually after 15 minutes of discussion, the jury ruled that Lo Kei committed suicide.” (We cannot accept the unknown?) (The History does not give the final answer.) (Wong, 2018, 83).

The novel eschews the notion of authentic historical truth and traditional historical narratives ascribing a single reason to a single event. Rather, Wong is more likely a believer of historical contingency and indeterminacy and asks a series of “what-ifs” to complicate the depiction of the riots, relating the occurrence with a number of everyday particularities – public holiday, locations, the presence of the movie theatre and even the living conditions of Lo Kei.

One must not forget that the novel presents a certain perspective of representing the Kowloon Riots. Some critics reflect that the novel deviates from ordinary narratives of the 1960s social protests (Tsang, 2019; Chu, 2018). It is very intriguing that the novel includes the lists of commercial movies in theatres and the ambiguous love relationship between Lo Kei, Lui Fung-oi and Brian Edward Raggensack in minute details. Other than depicting social actions as totally rational, it lays emphasis on encounter by chance in lieu of mobilization or social network, soft power and everyday life in lieu

of political sphere, and emotion in lieu of rationale. Wong framed the question of history as emotional rather than cognitive – “We can never understand anything from the history, except feelings” (我們從來沒有從歷史明白甚麼, 除了情感。) (Wong, 2018). This triggers vigorous debate. On the one hand, some appraise the form of “affect history.” On the other hand, some espouse a clearer and detailed socio-political relationship behind the protagonist Lo Kei. This arouses the very fundamental problem between “literature” and “politics” and what it is meant to be “literature,” which will be outlined in the next part.

The Dialogue between Archival History and Literature

The usage of archival history in the novel is still highly debatable. Critics like Tam asserted the book as a “polyphonic novel”(Tam, 2018). This appropriation of Mikhail Bakhtin somehow suggests that the privilege of the author is denied and voices from plural ideologies and the author can coexist. In contrast, Lee contended that the author’s presence is still very strong (Lee, 2018). Meanwhile, Tsang criticized the novel for the author’s privileged voice and deemed it as a misappropriation of historical texts, which should be regarded as an ethical issue (Tsang, 2019). Wong herself responded to Tsang by reaffirming the writer’s freedom and her humanist intention in writing the novel (Wong, 2019). Such contestation may further our deliberation on the essence of literature.

From the perspective of archival history, the significance of the novel should still be acknowledged in terms of the nature of archive. Borrowing Jacques Derrida’s insights, “archive” is related to commandment. “In an archive, there should not be any absolute dissociation, any heterogeneity or secret which could separate, or partition, in an absolute manner. The archontic principle of the archive is also a principle of consignment, that is, of gathering together” (Derrida, 1998, 3). On the contrary, *The Death of Lo Kei* highlights the incoherence and heterogeneity of archive, countering the commanding nature of archive.

Wong’s book is patently not the nostalgia for the “eternal” historical image and social movements. Rather, she “grasps the constellation which her own era has formed with a definite earlier one.” (Benjamin, 1998, 263). In other words, she has chosen a specific person, Lo Kei, who has moved her so much and created a unique experience in the past instead of writing an ordinary historical continuum.

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