

The Non-Fictitious Destiny of Youth in Hong Kong

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The film *Ordinary Heroes* (1999) by Hong Kong director Ann Hui tells the story of a group of social activists in the 1980s in Hong Kong. The director combines fictitious narratives with non-fictitious characters and historical contexts, making the film an allegory of the Hong Kong society. Focusing on the Left Melancholia among young activists, the director's intention is to describe the affective motivation of revolution. The relationship between social movements (or revolutions) and the youth is not necessarily a relationship of calling and being called. The relationship might be a result of contingency. By comparing *Ordinary Heroes* with the non-fiction novel *The Death of Lo Kei* (2018) by Hong Kong writer Wong Bik Wan, I attempt to point out the commonality of themes and skills between the two works, to discuss the representation of emotions in different historical moments.

Keywords: Hong Kong, Youth, Emotion, History, Revolution

"Don't let others know you enjoy Teresa Teng's songs, otherwise they will know you come from mainland China. No one will buy her CDs here, including her fans." In Peter Chan Ho-Sun's film *Comrades, Almost a Love Story* (1996), two mainlanders are selling their favorite Teresa Teng records in the Chinese New Year market. Their business fails at the end because they ignored the fact that mainlanders in Hong Kong were afraid to be identified and discriminated against as mainlanders. Before the complete opening of the market society in mainland China, Teresa Teng was a strange symbol of mainlanders' spiritual lives. She was a secret known to everyone. Her songs were banned in socialist China because they were sweet and emotional, "the voice of reactionary enemies". Mainlanders listened to her songs through illegal circulating cassettes, imagining a modern life. However, after they successfully immigrated to a non-socialist society, like Hong Kong, their favor for Teresa Teng remained underground. They were eager to be like real modern consumers, which meant they would have more choices for listening and say goodbye to their past as underground listeners.

Comrades, Almost a Love Story's Chinese title refers to one of Teresa Teng's famous song *As Sweet As Honey* (甜蜜蜜/Tian Mi Mi). Three years later, Director Ann Hui, known as one of Hong Kong's New Wave filmmakers, produced *Ordinary Heroes*, which was also named in Chinese after Teresa Teng's song *Endless Words*(千言萬語/Qian Yan Wan Yu). This film was released a year before the second millennium. Using this popular song by Teresa Teng to tell the story of Hong Kong, the film tends to depict not only the changing society of Hong Kong but also the geopolitical history of this place. The sound of Teresa Teng pierced through the iron curtain of the Cold War era, reaching people's family lives on both sides of the antagonistic alignments.



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Real, Fiction, Allegory of Society

In *Ordinary Heroes*, the song *Endless Words* expresses the affections of young activists in 1980s Hong Kong. When a young man named Tung plays a song on the harmonica, an amnesiac girl, Sow, recalls the past that she forgot due to a car accident. She was the daughter of a boatman, the indigenous inhabitants of Hong Kong and her family died in a fire. A group of enthusiastic people help her and other survivors to apply for public housing. She gradually becomes a social worker and helps the marginal population in Hong Kong, like "the boat brides" and "the no-card mothers," get residential rights [1]. She falls in love with Yau, the young leader of the movement. But Yau is betrothed to be married soon. Their underground affair is harmful to Sow, resulting in her tragedy.

The film portrays the social activists and their different life decisions in the 1970s and the 1980s. A street theater performance by storyteller Mok Chiu Yu appears in the film as an insertion, describing the life of a Hong Kong Trotskyist Ng Chung Yin. These people constitute the constellation of democratic movements in Hong Kong: Father Kam, an absolute idealist; Yau, an activist and Legco member; Long Hair, a rebel that always stands on the street; Ng Chung Yin, an upset revolutionary who is trapped by political conflicts; and the main characters, Tung and Sow, a young man and woman who are confused, bored, and get hurt in social movements.

It is a fiction based on real history. Father Kam, Long Hair and Ng Chung Yin are real activists in Hong Kong. They engage in several events that are shown in the film, including protests fighting for the rights of boatmen and cross-border families, and rescue movements for democratic activists in the 1989 Tiananmen crackdown. The love triangle between Yau, Sow and Tung, is used as the

context to discuss the Left Melancholia in Hong Kong: a depression when left-wing activists found themselves lost in an empty revolutionary imaginary. Yau is an ambitious politician with clear political goals. In order to get more political power, he gives up street demonstration and becomes a Legco member. His political ambition is projected into a love relationship, which prompts him to cheat on his fiancée and start an affair with the young Sow. Sow devotes herself to the movements for many ambiguous reasons. She is influenced by activists who had helped her family for a long time. She enjoys the feeling of people working together for a positive goal. Moreover, she wants to be by Yau's side. Similarly, Tung's role in the social movements is unclear. He is a supporter rather than an activist. His appreciation of Father Kam and adoration of Sow might be the primary motivations for his participation in the social movements.

Compared with these young people, Father Kam (Father Franco Mella) is more of an unreal figure. But he is de facto a real idealist. Born in 1948 in Milan, Father Franco Mella is known as an Italian Roman Catholic priest and Maoist social activist. Inspired by the Chinese Cultural Revolution, he planned to visit China via Hong Kong. Due to visa problems, he stayed in Hong Kong and served people there. As represented in the film, he went on many hunger strikes to fight for the human rights of mainland immigrants and political prisoners. Director Ann Hui uses Father Kam as a symbol of a Gandhian self-dedicator in an individualistic capitalist society. She once claimed that her purpose in this film was to make a record of these idealist activists in Hong Kong. In an interview, she said, "I have lived in Hong Kong for more than 40 years and rarely meet real 'heroes'. I regard these people as heroes, including 'the no-card mothers'. I want to make a film about these positive people" (Kwong, 2010) [2].

The director combines fictitious narratives with non-fictitious characters and historical contexts, making the film an allegory of Hong Kong society. Revolution, an idea that is suppressed by colonial governance and stigmatized by the terror of Communism, has been placed in front of the eyes of local audiences through a love story. Rather than the more politicized and violent Hong Kong 1967 Riot, the director chose human rights movements in the 1980s as the background of the film. Meanwhile, the storyteller, surrounded by people on the street, is telling an oral history of Trotskyist Ng Chung Yin's life struggle. Through the setting of "story-within-a-story" in an ensemble film, the director shows how Hong Kong has been shaped by geopolitical conflicts in the post war period. The conflicts of different ideologies in the revolution precisely project the situation of Hong Kong as a frontier of the Cold War. How did people live in Hong Kong, a place under the shadow of the colonial authority, the Communists, the KMT power, the Third Force, the Anarchist, the United States, and the Soviet Union? How did these forces govern people, and how did people determine their life goals in the face of these political powers?

The film traces the migration of people. The boatmen went from sea to land and mainlanders fled socialist China for capitalist Hong Kong. Even Father Kam is a migrant, coming from distant Europe. The movement of these people constitutes Hong Kong, a "borrowed space, borrowed time." Hong Kong is both a tug of war of political forces and a place for migrants to settle. At the beginning of the film, when the refugee living at the bottom of the bridge dies, other refugees immediately take away the things he left behind.[3]

Although the film is generally classified as a political film, its core theme is about the existence of humankind. What is the condition of humankind in the shadow of political conflicts? How should people's participation in politics be situated? Most important, what is the motivation of their actions?

Youth, Revolution, Love

Generally, the discussion of this film is often based on the assumption of “political coldness” in the consumerist society of Hong Kong. However, at this moment, when Hong Kong has become a city full of tear gas, the theme of revolution and youth is once again raised. People wear masks and confront police on the streets, proudly claiming that they are the young generation against the totalitarian regime, while the opposing camps (including the nationalists in mainland China who oppose the Hong Kong independence movement) have accused protesters of being “wasted youth”(廢青) and rioters.

The decontextualized inter-generational conflicts erase history and tend to establish fictional myths surrounding youth. Young people in Hong Kong (even in Taiwan) at this moment see the previous generation as the most conservative group. However, were those old men not the generation that participated in the democratic movement thirty years ago? Even in the corrupt pro-establishment camp, the shadows of the left-wing youth in the 1967 Riot are still looming. When young people give their vigorous energy, rebellious actions, and even their lives to the sublime imagination of revolution, how do they perceive death? Where does the impulse of sacrifice come from? At the end of 2019, the curse of youth suicide was widespread on the streets of Hong Kong. Hundreds of teenagers at Polytechnic University were besieged by the police and some could only flee through the sewers to escape the charges of sedition. It left the whole society with severe long-term challenges to resolve the problem of the young generation’s negative mentality and desperate worldview.

The great political crisis that Hong Kong society experienced in recent years has strong connections with discontent youth. This film gives an early description of young people’s political actions and their motivations. The reason why Sow and Tung engage in politics appears ambiguous. What do they demand? It looks like they just need companionship at the beginning. Before they join the movement, their lives are idle, while their discontent is frivolous. As Teresa Teng sings in *Endless Words*, “I don’t know why / I am surrounded by sorrow(不知道為了什麼/憂愁它圍繞著我)”. What urges them to engage with the movement may simply be sorrow. Young people are not always mobilized by sublime objectives of revolution. Their actions might be a result of excessive emotions. They accidentally bump against the wall of a society where people have little way out. At the same time, the atmosphere of revolution accelerates the flow of emotions. The love relationship narrative has been used as a method in contemporary films to depict the status of youth in political scenes. Similarly, in the film *Summer Palace* (2006) by the Chinese director Lou Ye, which was banned in mainland China, the political actions of the young men and women in the 1989 protest were also expressed as counterparts to love and sorrow.

The two emotional young men, Tung and Sow, anchor the director’s observation and question about young activists: What is the purpose of their political participation in capitalist Hong Kong? And what should the morals of revolution be? If participating in the revolution shows people’s morality and conscience, can young people be recognized as “(ordinary) heroes” if they participate in the revolution only out of boredom and confusion? Furthermore, how can the crisis of affective politics, which may be understood as the Left Melancholia, be resolved when young people get injured in the movement?

There is another work that portrays the same issues as *Ordinary Heroes*. Hong Kong writer Wong Bik Wan published the “non-fictitious novel,” *The Death of Lo Kei* (2018), after the Umbrella Movement. The film *Ordinary Heroes* and the novel *The Death of Lo Kei* have much in common. The figures that appear in the two works have relationships with each other. Long Hair, a character in the film, is known as Hong Kong politician Leung Kwok Hung. In an interview, he said that he had heard of Lo Kei in his childhood. Lo was regarded as a strange man in the neighborhood rather than a revolutionary. As a friend of the writer Wong Bik Wan, when Long Hair heard that Wong was interested in Lo Kei, he encouraged her to write down the “truth of history,” even though she does not have any memory of Lo Kei.

The Death of Lo Kei is based on the Kowloon Riot which happened one year before the Hong Kong 1967 Riot. Several months after the Kowloon Riot, a young man, Lo Kei, believed to have engaged actively in the riot, died in an accident. The work is unique in its writing style. It mainly consists of archives, including official investigations, court testimony, police reports, newspapers and magazines, and correspondences of Lo Kei and his friends. The author attempts to discover/recover an “unrecoverable” historical truth: the cause of Lo Kei’s death, or, who hanged him.

The hunger strike and demonstrations against Star Ferry’s fare increase in 1966 later evolved into the Kowloon Riot. According to the author, of the more than five hundred participants of the riot, none were over 25 years old. Lo Kei was detained by the police due to his appearance in the uprising. Not long after he was released from jail, his body was found in a friend’s room. The author uses archives to outline the despair of a poor youth. In her judgment, “the tightness of living space triggered the youth riot.” As she describes in the text, the emotions of young men and women were mixed with ambivalent feelings: “The happiness among the masses quickly deteriorated.” They enjoyed the cheerful atmosphere in the movement, but they also experienced fear (Wong, 2018) [4].

Who were the young people in Hong Kong that demonstrated on the street in the 1960s? The author writes, according to the 1961 census of Hong Kong Statistics Department, the original inhabitants, including the residents in Kowloon, the New Territories, and the indigenous people on the sea, totaled 260,000, while the migrant population from mainland China and Taiwan was 2.6 million, which was ten times more than the number of original residents of Hong Kong. The majority of Hong Kong residents at that time were immigrants. In the author’s comparison, Edward Leung Tin-kei, the young movement leader who was convicted of violating the anti-sedition laws in Mong Kok in early 2018, is also an immigrant to Hong Kong. Born in Wuhan, Leung moved to Hong Kong with his parents when he was one year old. He has been “disqualified” from the parliament because of his appeal for Hong Kong independence and has yet to be released from prison.

The two works both explore the fictionality of non-fictitious forms, to search for the possibility of representing the historical truth. In the film *Ordinary Heroes*, the director uses various methods to make up “evidence.” She inserts fictitious plots of real people and events. By producing a large amount of documentary photography, old photos of social movement scenes, and television records, she made part of the film a mockumentary. In the novel *The Death of Lo Kei*, archives arranged by the author, contrasting and conflicting with each other, reflect the truth that can hardly be caught or proved in one single archive: emotion. People that struggled together in the movement once trusted each other, but at certain moments they were isolated. Someone died, but his comrades no longer appeared to support him. A revolution is full of emotional mobilization. In the current struggle of

Hong Kong people, there exist symptoms of despair, nihilism, anxiety, and suspicion. Could the emotions remembered in different historical moments help us right now? If they can, then, how?

In the beginning of 2020, Father Franco Mella held a sit-in demonstration in front of the Central Government Offices in support of residence rights for children born in the mainland whose parents are Hong Kong citizens. People in Hong Kong who have lost trust in Beijing wrote hateful comments on the online reports covering his sit-in [5]. They cursed him as a traitor of Hong Kong and accused mainlanders of leeching from Hong Kong's public welfare. History does not repeat itself. It just isolated(割席) itself from its past over and over again—like Sow's amnesia.

Notes

1. The British Hong Kong Government implemented the Touch Base Policy in 1974, which allowed illegal migrants from mainland China to register with the authorities and get the residential right to live in Hong Kong. The policy was abolished in 1980. As a result, thousands of migrants were repatriated, including “the boat brides” and “the no-card mothers.” “The boat brides” refer to mainland women who got married to Hong Kong fishermen and did not receive Hong Kong identity cards yet. In 1987, the Hong Kong government finally agreed that children who have cross-border parents (one from Hong Kong and one from mainland China) and are under 14 years old are allowed to get resident identity in Hong Kong. But their mainland Chinese parents, mostly mothers, were deemed illegal migrants. These mainland Chinese mothers were called “the no-card mothers.”

2. The original quotation is in Chinese.

3. The residential problem of refugees who live at the bottom of bridges still exists in Hong Kong at present. Most of them come from Vietnam. Director Ann Hui is familiar with the issue of Vietnamese refugees in Hong Kong since she made several films on the issue, known as her “Vietnam trilogy:” *Below the Lion Rock: The Boy from Vietnam* (1978), *The Story of Woo Viet* (1981), *Boat People* (1982).

4. The original quotations are in Chinese.

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