

Ghostly Matters in Wong Bik-wan's Re-imagined Hi/stories

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Abstract: *It is no doubt that Wong Bik-wan is a unique voice in contemporary Hong Kong literature. In *Tenderness and Violence* (1994), most of the characters are twisted and they are haunted by the ghost from the repressed past, while in *Children in the Darkness* (2012), the characters are marginalized by the mainstreamed society, and they can only gain the sense of belongingness in the forgotten spaces. Her stories can be regarded as the hi/stories of Hong Kong in Esther Cheung's sense. Although they are extremely different from the official narrative constructed by authority, they do represent another version of history that explore the problematic aspects of dominant rhetoric such as legacy, heritage, urban revitalization, and modernization. In this sense, Wong's hi/stories exemplifies her aesthetics of making visible the invisible. What's more, her works need to be understood along with the spectral criticism since haunting is a particular way of knowing what has happened or is happening, what can be seen and what is in the shadow. Thus, the ghostliness in the dissertation do not refer to the literal ghost or the specific human, but to an abstract social figure which reveals the ghostly aspects of social issues.*

Keywords: *Hong Kong literature, Wong Bik-wan, Spectral criticism*

1. Introduction

In the field of Hong Kong cinema and literature, the idea of ghost and haunting has been applied a lot for several reasons. Some writers might regard the ghosts as something negative and oppressive, while others such as Wong Bik-wan welcome the ghosts to retell their stories since listening to them somehow helps people to learn the ghostly aspects of social issues. As one of the most stylish woman writers in Hong Kong, Wong Bik-wan examines the hidden history from the pathological connotation and the psychological effect of past to go against that official grand narrative. In this paper, I am going to investigate the ghost from past in *Tenderness and Violence* (1994) and the ghostly space in *Children in the Darkness* (2012) by drawing Esther Cheung's theory of history and hi/story, the idea of spectral criticism, Avery Gordon's notion of ghostly matters and Anthony Vidler's critique of the architectural uncanny, where appropriate to shed more lights on the issue.

Wong Bik-wan develops her own kind of aesthetics by mixing the polar opposites tenderness and violence together in *Tenderness and Violence*. The violence here includes character's behaviors such as killing and abusing, while the tenderness is more about the mood and motif created by writer. *Tenderness and Violence* is a collection of short stories with various themes: the distorted love relationship, the traumatic past experience, and the lost city, etc. Most of the characters in *Tenderness and Violence* are twisted and they are haunted by the ghost from past, while in *Children in the Darkness*, the characters are marginalized by the mainstreamed society who can only gain the sense of belongingness in the forgotten ghostly spaces such as the prison and the rest house. Basically, *Children in the Darkness* records sixty years of the male protagonist Ah Nan, a marginalized gangster, a drug dealer and addict, and an ordinary people of Hong Kong metropolis. Through Ah Nan's point of view, the audience thus gains the opportunity to explore the forgotten spaces and the life of marginalized lower-class people. Although *Tenderness and Violence* reflects Hong Kong people's anxiety before the handover while *Children in the Darkness* is more about the condition of people in metropolis, they both represent hidden sides of official history and grand narrative. Therefore, it is worthwhile to draw Esther Cheung's notion of Hong Kong history and hi/story, to explore further the social commentary Wong Bik-wan tries to make towards what has happened and is happening in her beloved but unhomely homeland.

Derrida has mentioned that Shakespeare's *Hamlet* should be regarded as the typical spectral work for the spectral nature is well demonstrated by both the specter characters in play and the nature of the work itself. But what does literature have to do with specters and the dead? Why do the writers recall the dead

to return? For Derrida, the act of reading, the contact with literary texts is somehow like having conversation with someone who is dead, but also not yet dead [1]. It is the message of the dead motivates us to undertake action exploring what haunts us, what displaces us, what is vague and what is hidden in the history. Sometimes, “the ghost is more powerful than the living” [1]. It seems that what Derrida intends to claim here is that the ghost, the specter and literary texts “all carry a secret which we are not able to retrieve” unless we spare no effort concentrating on revealing and exposing it [1]. Therefore, we can say that the spectral criticism offers a new way for readers and scholars to approach the textuality, the way of reading through the material text to a different absence, in order to help disclose the “text” that lies beneath the literal text. The “text” beneath the text, the secret and the message of the dead mentioned above are similar in some way, all of them attempt to induce us to learn the ghostly aspects of particular social issues, which echoes Avery Gordon’s statement again.

2. The Hi/stories of the Spectral City

In “On Spectral Mutation”, Esther Cheung examines several versions of spectral city in contemporary Hong Kong cinema, and tries to trace how various moments of danger in Hong Kong history are associated with certain expressions of the ghostliness, homelessness and alienation [2]. However, these films and literature cannot be counted strictly as the ghost genre. They do not present the literal ghosts, instead, most of them evoke the sense of ghostliness and haunting in the space of the city at specific disjointed moments in Hong Kong history. For instance, in Ann Hui’s early *The Secret*, the ghost is not a literal ghost, but a ghostly female victim in a psycho-thriller, while in Lillian Lee’s adopted film *Rough*, the beautiful and nostalgic Fleur returns to the underworld in order to trace her love. Additionally, what Fruit Chan attempts to explore in *Little Cheung* are more about urban revitalization, historical preservation and the new subjectivity. Obviously, Hong Kong is such a complicated cultural space involved with “colonialism, postcolonialism, globalism and postsocialism”, which attracts a great deal of writers, filmmakers and scholars to explore the intriguing relations between city, space, individual, history, and aesthetics [2]. In spectral analysis such as the films mentioned above, they recall the ghost and build the atmosphere of ghostliness in order to see “what has happened and is happening” and the ghostly aspects of social issues – class, identity, gender, race, so on and so forth, since “the ghostly haunt gives notice to that something is missing” [3] For Derrida, the dead and the ghost demand justice since “they are absent”, and “the justice which we owe them thus become the target of their actions” [1]. In this sense, Wong Bik-wan’s fictional writing do reflect certain hidden parts excluded by the official history and the grand narrative of Hong Kong by welcoming the ghosts from the repressed past to tell their stories, and inducing the reader to follow the rootless specter-like characters flowing through the ghostly space in the modern but uncanny Hong Kong city.

2.1. The History and Hi/story of Hong Kong

When talking about the history of Hong Kong, most people would immediately think of its great process developing from an insignificant fishing village to the worldwide financial giant, and the 1997 turnover when its sovereignty submitted from Great Britain to Mainland China. However, for Esther Cheung, there are actually three historical representations of Hong Kong, the epic (macro-history), the micro-history and the allegory confirming and subverting the grand narrative. Cheung borrows Walter Benjamin’s idea to illustrate that it is the time of the “now” produces the impetus for historians to write the past. “To articulate the past historically does not mean to recognize it ‘the way it really was’, but to seize hold of a memory as it flashes up at the moment of danger, to make sense of the past” [4]. Although Wong’s stories point to a real world outside the text, she never intends to reconcile image and reality in the representations. The hi/stories reimagined by her challenges the common sense and intends to draw a distinction between “the past as it is in itself” – *res gestae* – and “the past as it is narrated” – *historia rerum gestarum*, and to “acknowledge our limitation that history is only available in narrative – somewhat like hi/stories” [2].

Compared with the dominant grand narrative of Hong Kong, what Xi Xi intends to do by writing stories is to express the desire rendering Hong Kong as “an un-heroic space for ordinary people” [2]. *The Flying Carpet* mixed reality with imagination together is Xi Xi’s attempt to reconstruct Hong Kong’s past and history. She explores the representative public space teahouse, where the audience thus gains the opportunity to listen to the topic of everyday life. And when the reader follows the trace of characters, they will see how their experience is associated with the social environment. The narrative method Xi Xi used is another form of historical representation that historians rarely adopt, since the discrepant relationship between signifier and signified might not contribute to the “real” history. However, for

Cheung, this kind of hi/story offers the alternative way for people to see the society and the condition of individuals in the specific time joint. Similarly, Wong Bik-wan's hi/stories allow people to see the "spectral" side of the "spectacle", echoing Donna Haraway's perspective that history is actually a study of "anomalies" [2].

2.2. *Tenderness and Violence (1994) and Children in the Darkness (2012)*

It is not too much to say that reading Wong Bik-wan's stories is "a nightmarish experience" since her imagination is not only interwoven with the taboo-breaking issues and the dark side of human nature, but also with the vulnerable and fragile mortal beings [5]. The fictional world she established is a chaotic world of no law, no morality and no mercy, which reflects the condition of Hong Kong in the pre-1997 era in a way. Wong writes abundantly about orphans and diaspora who suffer a lot from the alienation, being haunted by the traumatic experience and the sense of uncertainty and rootlessness. Under the context of late 1990s, Hong Kong people's attitude toward the coming return is paradoxical. On the one side, there is a strong yearning for origin, history and collectivity. While on the other, there is tremendous fear that history will pull them into the whirlpool of China's violent past. Thus, in *Tenderness and Violence*, Wong Bik-wan concerns about the pathological connotation of history and past. The pre-given Chinese identity thus becomes an oppressive burden for the younger generation, the sojourners, and the Hong Kong people in general. Apart from the pre-given identity that one cannot get rid of, Wong Bik-wan also problematizes the imposed notion of *Huigui* (returning home). The home supposes to be the place that one can gain the sense of belongingness. Nevertheless, Hong Kong people's home turns out to be uncanny and becomes "the source of anxiety and alienation" [6]. Facing the coming handover, some people chose to go abroad and search for a new home. While for those who never left, home became a strange place since they have to adopt the alien political and cultural practice. Therefore, *Tenderness and Violence* is more of the hi/stories of the repressed past, dealing with the anxiety and alienation of Hong Kong people in the pre-1997 era. The reader thus gains an opportunity to follow the dead, or the diaspora, to see how different individual is haunted by traumatic past, the uncanny home, and the tremendous vortex of history.

If *Tenderness and Violence* is the hi/story of the repressed, then *Children in the Darkness* is the hi/story of the marginalized that narrates the tale of a group of drug dealers coming from the lower sector of Hong Kong metropolis. Ah Nan and his peers are all subject to the cruel realities in a big city. In contrary with the rapid development of the city, they are marginalized by the mainstreamed society, and they can only gain the sense of belongingness in the city's shadow such as back-alleys, dai pai dong, public housing estate, prison and rest house, like invisible ghosts and specters. However, Wong Bik-wan, as a humanist, not only restricts her horizon in the context of Hong Kong this time, but also points to the universal concerns of class inequality, urban alienation, the feeling of loss and disorientation of knowing nowhere to go caused by the process of modernization. Anthony Vidler has noticed the uncanny feature of the modern architectures, "the uncanny needs to be understood in its aesthetic dimension in connection with the representation of a mental state disturbed by the ambiguity between what is real and unreal, between waking and dreaming" [7]. Despite of the psychical states of the alienated individual in the modern city, the ghostliness in *Children in the Darkness* is associated with the urban renewal project conducted by the Hong Kong government after the 1997 handover, aiming at constructing another urban landscape. Through Ah Nan's narrative, readers can sense something changed and something unchanged of the city and its people when he was in and out the prison. During the period of half century, the memories "no longer have a place" – the young age, traditions and other timeless events.

3. Ghostliness in the Hi/story of the Repressed

In *Tenderness and Violence*, Wong Bik-wan presents the audience an extreme but divine world of overwhelming softness and violence, with the revelation against the rationality, order and subjectivity the mainstreamed world celebrated. The themes of this book can be classified into violence, sacrifice, eroticism, law, so on and so forth. And in the stories with all the themes mentioned above, there is a specter, which is the demon rejected by the rational and ordered world. Wong Bik-wan writes as a deconstructive evocation, declaring the fact that the rejected and repressed demons will return as specters one day. In this case, the repressed ghostliness means the individual in the story, the fear of the Hong Kong people and the hidden part of history in general. Apart from the haunting from the repressed, the ghostliness in *Tenderness and Violence* can be referred to Eileen Chang's influence upon Wong Bik-wan. Although the distorted world is not that acceptable in the mainstreamed society, we cannot deny the significance of this kind of writing as deconstructive evocation.

3.1. History as Inherited Madness

As what have revealed above, the hidden side of history has been repressed by the grand narrative of Hong Kong such as Hong Kong people's fear and anxiety provoked by the coming handover in late 1990s. It is undeniable that there is no absolute objective history since history has been manipulated by the governors in order to internalize and naturalize certain issues and values they want the people to acknowledge. In *Tenderness and Violence*, Wong Bik-wan dares to disclose what has been neglected and erased in official history by deliberately recalling the diseased people in different time and space, some of them suffer from different forms of violence in the horror age of China, while others are trapped in the foreign country when they thought they have already escaped from the uncanny homeland. Despite of the character's personal traumatic experience, it is the era, the problematic history and pre-given identity cause all these abnormality and disintegration.

Firstly, sometimes, history and heritage are not something positive as people used to know since they may transfer the traumatic past from the old generation to the young generation. Take "Moon of the Twin City" as an example. The story consists of three ordinary people's life: Chen Luyuan, a coroner, who has killed eighteen people, including his own daughter; Qiqiao, a madwoman who suffers from the cultural Revolution and 1950s famines, killed by Chen Luyuan; Xiangdong, a youngster who is fond of taking pictures of dead bodies finally hangs himself. Qiqiao's mental disorder infects the younger generation Xiangdong who lives across from her and is fascinated by her madness. And the reader is introduced to Xiangdong by the coroner Chen Luyuan, who examines Xiangdong's dead body after he hangs himself. Chen finds a batch of photographs Xiangdong took before committing suicide, and realizes that Xiangdong has developed the fascination to the dead bodies. Xiangdong has witnessed his mother being tortured by the Red Guards and even by his own father. Moreover, he is the one who found out his mother's dead body after she used the red cloth to hang herself. It is what he has gone through cause his obsession of the look of the dead, and then the fascination to the mad woman Qiqiao. He gazes her and her madness obsessively through the camera again and again. It is also "the relationship with death" that connects Xiangdong with Chen Luyuan since Chen is the one who certifies Xiangdong's death. When the reader is introduced to the death of Xiangdong, they are also invited to explore Chen Luyuan's past as well. Through the flashback, the reader thus knows that Chen Luyuan is not only a coroner but also a grim reaper, who used to kill sixteen victims during the period of Cultural Revolution, including his own daughter Baojing. He later killed corrupted president in the college, and the last killing is the murder of the mad Qiqiao. It seems that these three people have no direct relationship, but actually, the business of death threads them together: "Chen Luyuan as a killer, Qiqiao as a victim, while Xiangdong as a witness to death" [6].

But why does Wong Bik-wan dig out the diseased and dead bodies? Unlike other conventional writers who like to retain the nostalgic past, Wong Bik-wan prefers to treat history, notional memory, and national identity as oppressive burden for Hong Kong people since they are silenced and have no right to choose. In facing of the coming handover, most Hong Kong people are anxious about the uncertain future. These fears are "the undersides of the historical connection and heritage not often discussed in China's rhetoric of the motherland's embracement of Hong Kong" [6]. Therefore, it is obvious that the ghosts in "Moon of the Twin Cities" not only refer to Xiangdong, Xiangdong's dead mother, the mad Qiqiao who has suffered for several decades, other victims killed by Chen Luyuan, and the forgotten specters who sacrificed in that historical period, but also the hidden side of history. Avery Gordon has suggested, "the ghosts always return with a story to tell" [8]. Wong Bik-wan already recalls the ghosts in the form of reconstructed hi/story, and it is time for the reader to realize that there is a ghostly history out there and there is a ghostly aspect of motherland's nationalist embracement.

People only pay attention to the positive side which can unite the entire country and race together, ignoring the fact that the over-emphasis on national history would be an oppressive burden for the young generation. It takes time for them to figure out who they really are and what does it mean to be a Hong Konger, and a Chinese since they are born and bred in a peculiar time and space and grown up and struggled in a "moment of danger", the "time out of joint". Wong Bik-wan tries to end the hi/story in a benign manner by using John Lennon's beautiful song "Imagine", but it finally fails since the repressed will always return. It is not too much to say that the value of Wong's hi/story is not its authenticity or the nostalgia sentiments, but the courage to "make visible the invisible" in the hegemonic historical narrative [6].

3.2. *The Ghostly Writing Devices*

“I hate the repetition of human life,” Wong Bik-wan wears the mask of her character and says, “since the repetition discloses the fact that human beings are doomed to be weak and finite” [9]. Thus, in order to exorcise the repetition, Wong tries various kinds of writing techniques and styles to reconstruct hi/stories. Nevertheless, she is haunted and possessed by that repetition she tries to exorcise. Repetition refers to the literary device consisting of repeating a word, phrase or sentence, which is very common in poetry, prose and even in speech. It is a good way for the reader and audience to remember the work. But the repetition I am going to talk about is slightly different from this kind of repetition. In *Tenderness and Violence*, Wong repeats the names, subjects, and times consciously and unconsciously, strengthening the effect of ghostliness. To begin with, the most striking repetition in *Tenderness and Violence* is the recycling of the same group of characters, regardless of their fate and destiny at the end of individual stories, as if they were going through repeated reincarnations. “The eternal return of these characters induces the reader to muse about repetitions and haunting in which the present is ominously independent of past” [9]. For example, Chen Luyuan in “Moon of the Twin Cities” might be the grim reaper in the horror age of China, while in “Sinking to Hell” Chen becomes a prisoner imprisoned for no reason. Although they differ in occupations and experience, those Chen Luyuan share certain qualities such as being cruel. Chen in “Moon of the Twin Cities” kills eighteen people including his own daughter, while in “The Lost City”, he kills his wife and children. Additionally, he murders several women in “The Butterfly Hunter”. So, Chen Luyuan is the incarnation of demon. The characters created by Wong Bik-wan are like the incarnations of pathological demon who are repressed and marginalized by the mainstreamed society where claims justice, law and mercy. Because of the repetition of names, the reader would feel that they seem to know about this people but at the same time, they would feel that they have no concrete idea of what kind of people he or she is. It is this kind of mixed feeling contributes to build the atmosphere of ghostliness, which confuses the reader to tell whether the character and the incident they have read are real or fake. In this case, it seems that the characters Wong Bik-wan created are like the ghosts experiencing different afterlives again and again, but being unable to rest in peace and transcend the cycle of reincarnation. Through repeating their afterlives, Wong manages to help the ghostly characters recover from the trauma they have been through. Although the ghosts are extremely ruthless, cruel and morbid, all of them deserve to be sympathized since their monstrous deeds are caused by the entire social system and the era. They return to the world that repressed and rejected them in order to show the audience there is another hidden side of the seemingly peaceful world. In addition to the repetition of the names, the repetition of times is also manipulated by Wong Bik-wan. If the future represents the time moving forward, then the recollection of one’s memory is the time running backwards. The memory can be counted as the repetition of the specific period of time, which is the return of the past and return of the trauma. The repetition of time makes the reader question the authenticity of the part they have read since all kinds of memory are squeezed into the same story, which helps the shadowy hi/story be filled with the sense of haziness and illusion.

Furthermore, intertextuality is another literary device that also contributes to the feeling of ghostliness in *Tenderness and Violence*. “Any text,” French semanticist Julia Kristeva argues, “is constructed of a mosaic of quotations; any text is the absorption and transformation of another” [10]. Allusion, pastiche, parody and quotation all belong to the intertextual figures. So, in short, a literary work is not simply the product of a single author, but of its interrelationship with other texts. While for Roland Barthes, who claims the death of the author, it is the fact of intertextuality that allows the text to come into being. He advocates that, any text is “a new tissue of past citations” such as bits of code, rhythms, units of the language, so on and so forth [11]. And “the intertext is a general field of anonymous formulae whose origin can scarcely ever be located; of unconscious or automatic quotations, given without quotation marks” [11]. Thus, we can sense that these anonymous past citations are like the ghosts returning to haunt the new text and its author. And in the case of *Tenderness and Violence*, Wong Bik-wan is this kind of author who is haunted by the precursor.

When reading the work of Wong Bik-wan, the name of Eileen Chang usually pops out of reader’s mind. It is undeniable that there are quite a bit of similarities between their works. For instance, in “Moon of the Twin Cities”, Wong’s Qiqiao is the namesake of protagonist in Cheung’s 1943 novella *The Golden Cangue*. In Chang’s story, Qiqiao is a woman trapped by a loveless marriage and traditional Chinese ethics. At first, she is a victim who is forced to marry into an upper class family. But later, she becomes abnormal and tries to destroy the life of her daughter by inferring her friendship, love relationship and every single chance of independence. Her daughter thus starts to show the signs of Qiqiao’s madness at the end of the story. Furthermore, Wong borrows the motif of moon in Chang’s story as well. At the beginning of *Golden Cangue*, Eileen Chang writes that the moon thirty years ago was “larger, rounder,

and whiter than the moon now” in old people’s memory, “but seen after thirty years on a rough road, the best of moons is apt to be tinged with sadness” [12]. Dating back to earlier time, the image of moon first appeared in Lu Xun’s “Diary of Madman”, serving as the witness of cruel humanity in a village filled with cannibals. The recurrent motifs of moon appeared in past Chinese literature demonstrate that Wong’s story has a strong connection to madness and the dark side of history and humanity. It is the same moon that witnesses the cruelty of humanity, the first thirty years of Qiqiao’s madness, and the other Qiqiao’s mental disintegration. When being tortured by the Red Guards, Wong’s Qiqiao looks at the moon, and she feels that the moon now is “a moon like blood, it was not like this in the past. In the past, the moon was round and white, like her round, full face when she was young” [9]. After both Qiqiao’s death, the motif of moon reappears. For instance, in Wong’s story, after Qiqiao’s death, Chen Luyuan sees the moon, “this is the moon of Guangzhou... Crowds and crowds of the people, like ghosts in a mass grave, pushed and shoved on the Western Embankment Road” [9]. The moon is a symbol of madness and violence from the past, “a persistent witness of death and betrays in individual’s life through the different generations” [6].

However, Wong Bik-wan denies the statement that she is wholly influenced by Eileen Chang. The rebellious break with the great precursor can be understood as a resolution to go against the “anxiety of influence”. Harold Bloom rejects the traditional view that the literary device of intertextuality has a benign and empowering influence on modern poets, instead, this “influence” is more of “an astral disease” that would cause threat and anxiety [13]. In order to escape from the possession of the dominant precursor, these poets tend to operate “revisionary ratios” through six techniques, from “the poetic misreading” to battling with “the return of the dead”. That is to say that the writer is unable to create original poetry after being fully aware of the influence of the precursor at first, but finally emerging as a truly independent individual. Although the concept and procedure Bloom coined is applied in the field of poetry, we can still adapt it to illustrate the subtle relationship between Wong Bik-wan and Eileen Chang. Wong’s intertextual story is neither an imitation, nor a parody, but rather a kind of violation of text. She smashes Eileen Cheung’s integrated stories into independent fragments, and then reconstructs her own hi/stories by piecing together all the motifs and names. Although Qiqiao in “Moon of the Twin Cities” is the namesake of Chang’s protagonist in *The Golden Cangue*, they share different life experience in different ages. Wong deliberately recalls the ghost from the Republican period and replays the insanity in a new period of time and place. Thus, Eileen Chang uses writing as a mirror to reflect her miserable life which is full of setbacks and frustrations, while Wong Bik-wan prefers to construct a chaotic underworld to mirror back the ghostly social issues that official history rarely touches upon, such as the critiques of justice, history, freedom, and city, etc. Compared with Chang’s limited personal perspective, Wong is more aggressive since she turns the focus to the political implication and the monstrous history. In Bloom’s opinion, it is hard to say if Wong develops into a completely independent writer and gains her own voice, however, she puts great effort to kill and destroy the mother figure Eileen Chang by rewriting Qiqiao’s story in the new historical period, conveying the fear of the next full moon.

4. Uncanny Homeland in the Hi/story of the Marginalized

It is undeniable that a book cover is essential because it offers the first meet between the book and its reader. Usually, the book cover is from designers or illustrators. However, in the case of *Children in Darkness*, the cover is drawn by Wong Bik-wan herself. You cannot tell the standing figures in the picture are men or ghosts at the first sight, and the twisted architecture surrounded is like the abandoned and haunted house that only emerges in one’s nightmare. So judged from the cover, we can assume that the ghostliness in *Children in the Darkness* has a strong association with the ghostly figures and the uncanny architecture. Although *Children in the Darkness* adopts a different style and focuses on different group of people in post-1997 era, Wong Bik-wan continues to speak for the marginalized lower-class people who addicts to drugs like what she did for the demons who has been repressed by the official history in *Tenderness and Violence*. *Children in the Darkness* cannot be counted strictly as the ghost genre since there is a clear absence of literal ghosts, but it involves the ghostly voice and uncanny architectures to reveal the “secret of class” in the prosperous Hong Kong- “the socially and culturally marginalized people and spaces are sacrificed at the expense of Hong Kong’s global desire” [2]. In contrast with the pre-1997 *Tenderness and Violence* which mainly talks about Hong Kong people’s fear toward the coming handover, the interest of *Children in the Darkness* lies in its “double-coded meaning of the specific and universal, and the ways in which it was received and articulated across geo-political boundaries” [2].

4.1. Ghostly Figures and Their Ghostly Voice

According to Avery Gordon, “the city can be regarded as a site where ghosts gather; a dense site of history and subjectivity where grieving and remembering are always in conflict with forgetting” [3]. Although they the characters in *Children in the Darkness* are not literal specters in typical ghost genre, the drug addicts from the lower sector of Hong Kong society share similar characteristics with the ghosts, who have nowhere to go and only can murmur their stories again and again in order to forget about the traumas they have experienced. Following the ghostly figures, the readers thus gain the opportunity to explore the life of the “shadow” who has been marginalized by the mainstreamed society. The protagonist Ah Nan and his sister have emigrated from Shanghai to Hong Kong since an early age. Being abandoned by the mother and alienated from the father, Ah Nan chooses to leave home and search for another community. He walks into the bar operated by big brother Wong Tin-soi and then befriends with other drug addicts who share similar experience of being abandoned by the adults and the mainstreamed society. However, in contrary to typical *Young and Dangerous* series in which celebrates heroism and *jianghu*, *Children in the Darkness* shows a great departure from the heroic and romantic ideal since the youngsters are considered as failures and losers in social life. Ah Nan, Ah Sang, Ah Ngau, Ah Giu, and Ah Bak are all subject to the cruel realities of life in a rapidly developed Hong Kong city. They speak Cantonese slangs, they live in the public housing estates, and wander around the dark side of the city such as old-markets, bars, back-alleys and other forgotten space, where the abandoned kids, aged people and lower-middle class reside. The gangsters, killers, and drug addicts are caught up in a sense of homelessness. And the underworld/*jianghu* thus symbolized as a space away from home, in which they can search for substitute fathers and families. Big brother Wong is like the substitute father for Ah Nan who teaches him lessons, Ah Sang is more of the brother who gives his bed to Ah Nan by saying that he prefers sleeping on floor, while Ah Kei who has mental disease regards Ah Nan as big brother and invites him to join the wedding. Although these characters are ordinary, unattractive, misbehaving, and not hard-working like the heroes we used to see in the gangster genre, we may still argue that the hi/story Wong Bik-wan reimagined records the underworld by reinterpreting the meaning of heroism, individualism and community in a complicated space which has to deal with colonialism, postcolonialism and globalism.

It is easy to feel the sense of the ghostliness in Wong’s depiction of the characters and events. The lower-class people are not like human beings, but more of the walking dead that have been haunted and possessed. When Ah Nan narrates his second meet with the out-of-dated actress Fan Lailai, the reader would have the odd sense of déjà vu, as if they are reading a traditional ghost story from Pu Songling’s *Liaozhai Zhiyi (Strange Tales from a Chinese Studio)*. “That was a windy night. I immediately went up to answer the door when I heard the bell ringing. But I could see no one. Then the bell rang again” [14]. Wong Bik-wan continues to glamorize the effect of haunting and ghostliness, “Fan Lailai invited Ah Bak and me to wander around with her. She was so weak that night, leaning against Ah Bak like a baby” [14]. Ah Nan thought aloud, “I would rather die than holding hands of a ghost without a soul” [14]. He and Ah Bak did not follow Fan Lailai, while she ran out crazily to the road like a moth chasing after the fire. When they woke up next morning, Ah Nan and Ah Bak heard the neighbor discussing that the pretty actress had jumped from the roof and died last night. Wong Bik-wan does not reveal what haunts Fan, why does Fan commit suicide, why does she come for Ah Nan and Ah Bak, and why not others? Several days later, Ah Nan picked a pair of red shoes and he suddenly realized that maybe it is because of the unhappy marriage or an unfaithful lover that drive Fan to commit suicide. After all these happened, the Ah Nan and Ah Bak are wondering, “what if we go with her, will the result be different” [14]. For Ah Nan, there are a lot of ghosts in the human world. “Some follow the lived, waiting for the death, while some haunt the lived until the lived die” [14]. After heard the crying of a patient, “am I a human” and “are you a human”, Ah Nan thought of his father, grandmother, and Ah Sang, feeling a little bit cold [14]. The ghosts that haunt you are actually the people you have ever known, and you cannot get rid of them because you feel sorry, grateful or hateful for them.

The ghostly voice is another indispensable element that can also evoke the sense of ghostliness. As we all know, the ghostly voice is not a new aesthetic invention used in filmic field, especially in Hong Kong cinema. It allows the audience to “seek the possibility of hearing what we do not see” [2]. In the case of *Children in the Darkness*, although the voice is not from the dead, the post-traumatic voice of Ah Nan shares similar characteristics- the voice is sounded out after the fact, narrating the past story he has experienced over several decades. Wong Bik-wan adopts the kind of ghostly voice as the marginalized lower-class people’s fatal means of being heard, the way of revealing their subjectivity. With the distorted world created in *Tenderness and Violence* and the tragic doomed life of protagonists in *Children in the Darkness*, the representations of Hong Kong in Wong Bik-wan’s reimagined hi/stories seem to be pessimistic. Nevertheless, the most pathetic is not the experience of the characters or the pathological

writing aesthetics, but the message that these insignificant can only gain their subjectivities in the fictional reimaged world. The identity crisis provoked in the “moment of danger” still haunts Hong Kong people in the post-1997 era. They continue to think about the past, the present and the future, to figure out who they really are. However, maybe there is no answer at all. In order to find a way to jump out of the whirlpool of identity crisis in the rapidly changing Hong Kong, one must first learn how to settle with the unsettling and reconciled with oneself as foreigners. When reading the story, the reader might sense that Ah Nan talks and confesses a lot after abusing the drug, between waking and dreaming. He repeatedly murmurs, “do I have a role in other people’s life” [14]. Can he save the life of Fan Lailai if he stays with her? Can he save the life of big brother if he tells him that the girl does not love him? He keeps asking these questions because he wants to interrogate that if the individual is strong enough to change the fate? At the end of the story, sitting at the second floor of the bus, Ah Nan cannot stop thinking that if he did not go across the sea, if he did not go to Wan Chai, if his father did look for him that night, he might not be a drug addict that has spent half of his life in the prison and madhouse. But Ah Nan finally denies these assumptions by saying that “it doesn’t matter to me right now” and “all of those good and bad have passed” [14]. According to Esther Cheung again, the coded ghostly voice invites the audience to decode the multiple layers of meaning. In the instance of *Children in the Darkness*, Wong Bik-wan uses Ah Nan’s ghostly voice-over as the representative voice of Hong Kong people to question colonialism, postcolonialism and other complicated issues the weak is unable to control. Apart from Hong Kong people, the individual in a general sense is always imposed unwanted burden and heritage by the dominant government, the monstrous history, and the irreversible trend of the world, having no right to master one’s own fate.

4.2. *Uncanny Architectures in the Unhomely Home*

The sense of ghostliness has to be understood with reference to the socio-economic condition of lower-class people [2]. Anthony Vidler has revealed the uncanny feature of modern architectures by saying that “the architectural uncanny” refers to both “indoor architectural space” and “urban exterior” [7]. It is obvious that there is a clear association between Vidler’s notion and Sigmund Freud’s idea of uncanny. For Freud, uncanny, or unhomeliness, is more than “a simple sense of not belonging; the fundamental propensity of the familiar to turn on its owner” [15]. The sense of unhomeliness and estrangement has attracted intellectuals’ attention of our century, given political and economic force by “the resurgence of homelessness itself, a homelessness generated sometimes by war, sometimes by the unequal distribution of wealth” [2]. In *Children in the Darkness*, the city space is like the ghost town, haunting the passers-by and the city itself.

Most lower-middle class Hong Kong people would define their everyday life with leisurely shopping malls, while Wong Bik-wan places the marginalized characters in unglamorous space. Through Ah Nan’s perspective, one should not expect to see a familiar Hong Kong with prosperous areas like Central and Tsim Sha Tsui, but to see a Hong Kong with relatively undeveloped areas such as Wan Chai, Yau Ma Tei, Mong Kok and Lai Chi Kok. Esther Cheung argues in her essay “On Spectral Mutation”, “the use of dark spaces in the film noir style not only clouds our understanding of what truth is, but also evokes threat and dead. Dark space is the harbinger of the unseen, which erodes our sense of security” [2]. We can say that the defamiliarization of Hong Kong city is Wong’s strategy to induce the reader to see the unseen – the sense of homelessness, the problematic urban renewal conducted by government, and the modern anxiety provoked in the post-1997 era. There is a traditional link between one’s physical home and the socio-economic dimension. As what have suggested above, the characters of *Children in the Darkness* are from the lower sector of Hong Kong society, and they can only search for root and gain the sense of home in the ghostly space like bars, dai pai dong, old markets, back-alleys, rooftop house, prison and rest house. One can only see the famous Victoria Harbor and the skyscrapers in the travel commercial which celebrates Hong Kong’s capital success. In this case, like the unprivileged lower-class people who have been marginalized by the mainstreamed society, the seemingly unglamorous buildings and the relatively undeveloped city spaces are gradually forgotten. The relationship of this kind of low-cost housing to a sense of homelessness can be further demonstrated by examining Hong Kong’s socio-economic condition and the housing policy [2]. The Urban Renewal Authority came up with the goal in the post-1997 era, “to create quality and vibrant urban living in Hong Kong – a better home in a world-class city” (Hong Kong Special Administrative Region). In order to construct a spectacle of a global city with high-risings, the unglamorous buildings and the undeveloped area have to be revitalized and renewed, serving for the global dream the upper class come up with. So, it has to sacrifice the living space of the unprivileged and the insignificant. In *Children in the Darkness*, one of the most obvious examples is Li Chit Street, an old street located at Wan Chai. When Ah Nan went to Li Chit Street for the first time, he saw “a bunch of people lying in the ground of a grocery, surrounded by syringes, tinfoil,

and bottles” [14]. Across them, he went up to the second floor, and found that “there is no one, but several folded chairs, a tomb of god, a red bulb, a statue of Guan Yu, a stick of incense burning in a censor, and the rotten fruits” [14]. Through the description of Wong Bik-wan, the reader would have a sense of ghostliness towards the forgotten space. And then, following Ah Nan’s step, we come to realize that he was here since he was going to smear the blood as a sign of the oath with other gangsters. So, the marginalized drug addicts can gain the sense of home and belonging in such a ghostly and haunted dark space. In the hi/story reimagined by Wong Bik-wan, she mentions repeatedly several old communities like Lit Chit Street, where look shabby and dread. But the ghostly town does mean a lot for the lower-class people who were born and inhabit there since it symbolizes as one’s root and home. Although this kind of estates is valuable for the locals, the government still demolishes and revitalizes them in order to build “a better home in a world-class city” and a city with history at the cost of the unprivileged. In this sense, the hi/story written by Wong Bik-wan is another version of history questioning government’s long-term ignorance of the social-economic condition of the marginalized, the interior and the unprivileged. Generally, almost all the global cities are noted not only for their advanced technology, the transportation network, and financial prosperity, but also for the uneven distribution of wealth and social inequality [2].

Since 1997, there is a growing need in historical preservation in order to create the sense of belonging. So, the Hong Kong SAR government has combined Chinese nationalism with Hong Kong’s global dream as the official narrative. In addition “to a better home in a world-class city”, the Urban Renewal Authority also came up with the goals in 2011, “to preserve by maintaining and restoring buildings of historical and architectural value, and to sustain local characteristic” (Hong Kong Special Administrative Region). The urban revitalization projects aim at selecting the past to serve for the present, so some old neighborhoods that have been revitalized and renewed no longer have a place in the city and history. In reality, Li Chit Street has been demolished and renewed into a fake *tong lau*, the traditional tenement house with unique Chinese style in Canton, which is more of “a stylistic connotation of pastness” and not “the representation of history reality” [16]. In this sense, nostalgia can be understood as an artificial ideology manipulated to reduce the political complexities of history and heritage. Nostalgia is cultivated by the government through the official history museums or programmes in order to foster certain social values. History is no longer the history that represent past reality, but “a history commodified and turned into desirable and consumable objects” [6]. Apart from the revitalized fake *tong lau* in Li Chit Street, stores such as Shang Hai Tang that sell various Chinoiserie, revitalized old brands such as Twin Girls Cosmetics, restaurants such as Sweet Dynasty that offers “traditional” Chinese desserts, all cater to the nostalgic desire through their goods, designs, and packagings. So, in the case of ghostly Li Chit Street, Wong Bik-wan points out the problematic aspects of so-called history preservation, urban revitalization, and heritage industry that try to strengthen the association between Hong Kong and Chinese nationalism.

Released from the prison after serving his sentence, Ah Nan has been assigned to work in a hospital as a social volunteer. Sitting on the second floor of the bus, he looked out of the window, and suddenly found out that the rooftop house he had lived is disappeared, so does the symbolic buildings of Li Chit Street and Spring Garden Lane. Instead, a lot of new estates and high buildings with glass skin rise at Wan Chai, which made Ah Nan sigh that he was “more and more distant from that Wan Chai in his memory” [14]. Ah Nan confessed that he enjoyed watching the weather forecast which you can see the weather all over the world. When Zurich has just come to night, Sydney already welcomes another midday. “It is interesting that the world has half daytime and half dark night at the same time” [14]. If there is a light, there will be the shade and dark as well. The shadowy figures and the ghostly space are scattering over Hong Kong and even the whole world. In *Children in the Darkness*, the ghostly hi/stories are not only about the marginalized people from the lower sector of Hong Kong society, but also about the uncanny architectures that has been demolished and revitalized by the government, the secret of social inequality existing in every global city. Thus, this time, as a humanist, Wong uses Hong Kong as starting point to illustrate the ghostly aspects of universal problems in the modern era.

5. Conclusion

“In the times of peace, men and ghosts are kept apart, while in a world like ours, men and ghosts are mingle freely”, David Wang Der-wei quotes Zheng Yiniang’s words to reveal the basic nature of Chinese ghost tales – “at times of chaos or *luanshi*, the world is so disturbed as to unleash the forces of both social and cosmological transgression” [17]. He further argues that many writers from Taiwan and Hong Kong have presented “the ghostly effect of *déjà vu*, an uncanny re-vision of the past or pre-vision of the coming future” at the end of twenty century [17]. Hong Kong, as an uncanny space that was hard to be defined, must deal with the new culture and politics, along with complicated colonialism, postcolonialism and globalism. Such uncanniness could not be depicted and caught through conventional history, so, it was

left to the cinema and literature to define it.

In Wong Bik-wan's writing, the ghostliness plays an essential role in establishing her aesthetics of making visible the invisible. The ghostly matters in Wong Bik-wan's writings are not only about the content or the theme, but also about the writing techniques applied such as intertextuality, repetition, ghostly voice-over, flashback, so on and so forth. Almost all the writings are ghostly texts since each new writer is haunted by the primary precursor and he must overcome the influence by destroying the father figure, and to finally establish his own voice. The ghosts in her writings do not refer to the literal ghosts, or the specific human beings, but to a social figure which induces the reader to "the dense site where history and subjectivity make social life" [8]. In the critical moment that provoked a collective search for identity and meaning, almost every Hong Kong writer and filmmaker has a version of "old Hong Kong", but Wong Bik-wan tends to reach the hidden side of history, which is often repressed under the official narrative. Thus, Wong's writings are more like the hi/stories which allow the reader to experience a defamiliarized and spectral Hong Kong. These reimagined hi/stories, for her, are like the "invaginations" to reveal the ghostly aspects of the social issues. If *Tenderness and Violence* is the hi/story of the repressed which presents the fear of Hong Kong people facing the coming handover, then the post-1997 *Children in the Darkness* is the hi/story of the marginalized which criticizes the alienation, social inequality and the urban renewal projects in the global cities. Her version of history lies not in the nationalized spaces of heroic monuments, but in the intimate ghostly spaces of dark back-alleys, dai pai dong and rooftop houses, where ordinary people "perform their banal but important acts of daily survival" [6]. As what Avery Gordon has suggested, the city is such "dense site where ghosts gather, and a dense site where grieving and remembering are always in conflict" [8]. Ghost, or haunting, is not something fierce, but a very particular way of "knowing what has happened or is happening, what can be seen and what is in the shadow" [8].

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