NEW VOICES ON GLOBAL HONG KONG

Humour and Political Resistance: Dayo Wong's Stand-Up Comedy in Hong Kong

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Ernest Leung is the inaugural recipient of Global Hong Kong Essay and Creative Project Award at York University. His paper examines the performances of one of Hong Kong's most popular stand-up comedians, Dayo Wong, and asks how Wong uses humour to ridicule political oppression while bridging the growing social division in a time of political struggles?

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This paper examines the performances of one of Hong Kong's most popular stand-up comedians, Dayo Wong. This study is guided by the following research question: *how does Wong use humour to ridicule political oppression while bridging the growing social division in a time of political struggles?* To do so, this paper begins with a brief review of existing literature on how art and humour can be used for building political resistance and social change, followed by a short overview of Hong Kong's stand-up comedy industry, the changing political climate in Hong Kong, and Dayo Wong's career. Then, I will analyze two of Wong's performances—"唔黐線唔正常" ("Not Normal If Not Insane") in 2014 and"金盆啷口" ("Gargling with a Golden Bowl") in 2018—to investigate how he uses humour to build resistance against hegemony and political oppression as well as form solidarity with participants of pro-democracy movements. Next, I will examine how Wong's humour in these two shows bridges the growing social division in Hong Kong. Lastly, I will analyze Wong's performances in conjunction with the changing political economy in Hong Kong to examine how politics obstruct Wong's creative freedom. Ultimately, I argue that Wong's humour helps resist political oppression and bridge the social division among Hong Kong people, but the changing political economy impeded Wong's production of political comedy, so much so that he decided to quit stand-up comedy in 2018.

Art and Social Change

Art encompasses tangible and intangible objects that embed cultures experienced by our senses, such as books, films, statues, music, and performance art (Arendt 1961; Freeland 2001). Many scholars have demonstrated how the arts can be used to effect social change. In his celebrated essay, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," Walter Benjamin ([1935] 2006) writes that "[d]istraction as provided by art presents a covert control of the extent to which new tasks have become soluble by apperception. Since, moreover, individuals are tempted to avoid such tasks, art will tackle the most difficult and most important ones where it is able to mobilize the masses" (33). Benjamin argues that reproduction technologies, such as photography, allow works of art to reach people in the working class. People in the working class can

then engage in critiques of works of art and become conscious of the political message(s) embedded in them.

Furthermore, art can drive social change by changing people's emotions. Lesley Stern (2008) suggests that films "evok[e] the motility of filmed emotion—its propensity for movement, to move from one place to another—but also its capacity to *move, to effect change elsewhere"* (195, emphasis added). Notice the phrase "capacity to move, to effect change elsewhere." Here, the verb "to move" refers to art's capability of changing one's emotions (Stern 2008, 195). In doing so, art can drive the audience to change their behaviour. As Stern (2008) continues to write, "It is in the viewer that the possibility for movement, for historical change, is realized" (211). To paraphrase Stern, works of art can not only physically move people to carry out certain actions, but also induce feelings among people. These feelings then stimulate people to change their actions. This ability to create changes through feelings has been captured in the scholarly discussion of affect theory. Defined by Gregory J. Seigworth and Melissa Gregg (2010), "affect is found in those intensities that pass body to body" (1). In a nutshell, affect refers to the forces and intensities that induce feelings in our bodies. By making us feel certain things, affect "can serve to drive us toward movement, toward thought and extension, that can likewise suspend us . . . across a barely registering accretion of force-relations" (Seigworth and Gregg 2010, 1). The significance of works of art is that they produce affect and change people's behaviours and actions, which is an essential element of social change (Pedwell 2017).

Stand-up Comedy, Humour and Resistence

Undoubtedly, stand-up comedy is a form of art. It includes both tangible objects (comedians) and intangible objects (jokes) that capture cultures that our senses experience. Stand-up comedy induces feelings through humour, which is related to comedy but are different concepts. According to Andrew Alexander Monti (2018), humour is "the cognitive stimulation of laughter" (175). Meanwhile, comedy is "a series of instances of humour arranged in a narrative or storyline" (177). We can consider comedy as the content, such as stand-up comedy. On the other hand, humour is the "cognitive stimulation" that stimulates people to feel a cogni-

tive tickling sensation and laugh (175).

Scholars have theorized how humour can be used to resist hegemony and create social change. Russian literary critic Mikhail Bakhtin is perhaps one of the most influential scholars in this area of study. Bakhtin studied the humour and laughter at carnivals. To him, carnivals are spaces isolated from society, where social hierarchy and hegemony are suspended. As he says, the laughter in carnivals "celebrated temporary liberation from the prevailing truth and from the established order; it marked the suspension of all hierarchical rank, privileges, norms, and prohibitions" (Bakhtin 1984, 10). In other words, everyone is treated equally in carnivals. Even the working class is allowed to make fun of the ruling class. As such, humour is a powerful, nonviolent weapon for generating political resistance and creating social change. As Majken Jul Sørensen (2017) argues, "humo[u]r provides the mechanism by which activists can talk back to those in power—often about their own absurdities" (148). By exposing the absurdities of those in power, humour can drive social change by "generating belief, commitment, and action" against those in power (R. Chow 1997, 35).

Hong Kong's Stand-up Comedy, the Changing Political Climate, and Dayo Wong

In Hong Kong, stand-up comedy is a relatively recent art form that started in the late 1980s (Tam 2013; Bo 2015). Currently, studies that examine Hong Kong's stand-up comedy remain scarce, likely due to its relatively low popularity (Lam 2021; Lo 1998). However, another reason why studying Hong Kong's stand-up comedy industry is a challenging task is that this industry cannot be easily theorized and generalized. King-fai Tam (2013) points out that the stand-up comedy industry in Hong Kong is divided into Cantonese and English performances, and the two sectors "basically do not interfere with each other" [Original quote: 基本上是互不干涉] (476). While Cantonese performances are popular and tend to draw large crowds, English performances are smaller in scale and take place in nightclubs or restaurants (Tam 2013). Furthermore, the audience who attend Cantonese vis-à-vis English performances is vastly different. As Cantonese stand-up comedy is often performed by celebrities, most attendees are the performers'

fans (Tam 2013). From a scholarly standpoint, Hong Kong's stand-up comedy industry is dynamic and defies generalization, which makes studying and theorizing it a challenging task.

Furthermore, the changing political climate in Hong Kong poses a great impact on the larger cultural and creative industries. In 1997, Britain returned Hong Kong to the People's Republic of China. Several scholars have suggested that this decolonizing movement is just a turnover from one colonizer (Britain) to another (China) (R. Chow 1992; R. Chow 2013). To borrow Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's (1998) term, despite having gone through decolonization, Hong Kong remains a city that "cannot speak" (104). Replacing Britain, China becomes the colonizer that continues to silence Hong Kong's voice. However, since the 2010s, several pro-democracy movements have taken place in Hong Kong to resist political oppression. For instance, in 2014, the Umbrella Movement took place where activists took to the street and occupied certain financial districts in the city to demand the government reform the electoral system.

Several artists and performers showed support for pro-democracy movements in their work. Dayo Wong (Wong Tze-wah) is one of those who voiced support in his stand-up comedy performances. Wong is often acknowledged as the most influential stand-up comedian in Hong Kong. He started performing stand-up in the 1990s. One characteristic of Wong's performances is that he often touches on pressing political issues (Zhang 2014). For example, after the 2014 Umbrella Movement in Hong Kong, Wong openly jokes about police brutality against pro-democracy protestors, a topic that I will return to later in this paper. Wong's comedy aligns with the Western tradition of stand-up comedy, which draws humour from social critique: "[f]rom inception to present day, stand-up comedy finds its humo[u]r in observational commentary and social critiques" (Chattoo 2019, 511). Current academic discussions around Wong's works and his humour focus on his performances in the 1990s and 2000s without considering his use of humour to critique politics in the post-2014 era (see, for example, Tam 2018; 2013; Lo 1998). The post-2014 era is an important period worthy of attention because of increasing political oppression, resistance, and social division (Lee 2020; Lüqiu 2018).

The purpose of this paper is to fill this gap in the literature by examining how Wong uses humour to resist political oppression and bridge social division since 2014.

Methodology

Purposive sampling was to examine Wong's stand-up comedy shows in the post-2014 era. The shows included in this study are "唔黐線唔正常" ("Not Normal If Not Insane") in 2014 and"金盆嘟口" ("Gargling with a Golden Bowl") in 2018. The performances are available on YouTube. In total, 4 hours 41 minutes and 46 seconds of footage were reviewed. I used textual analysis to analyze the "language [and] symbols" in Wong's performances (Hawkins 2017, 1754). Textual analysis is useful in revealing how Wong strategically uses language and symbols to create humour for the purpose of building political resistance and bridging social division. Note that all of the jokes are performed in Cantonese. However, to keep this paper succinct, only the English translations of the jokes are reported below alongside the analysis.

Ridiculing Oppression and Hegemony: Building Resistance

One prominent theme in Wong's performances is his use of humour to highlight China's censorship. In his 2014 show "Not Normal If Not Insane," he uses humour to highlight China's incapability to talk about the Tiananmen Square incident due to self-imposed censorship by the government. The Tiananmen Square incident happened in 1989, when "tens of thousands of students gathered in Tiananmen Square demanding democratic and other reforms" (Encyclopaedia Britannica 2022). To end the protest, the Chinese government deployed the military to forcefully remove the protestors. Military actions killed and wounded many students and civilians and led to the international condemnation of China (Langley 2009). Since then, the Chinese government has imposed censorship to restrict the discussion of this incident within China (Xu 2014). Using humour, Wong brings to the limelight the unspeakability of the Tiananmen Square incident to ridicule China's censorship. In one of his jokes, Wong characterizes Hong Kong as a daughter-

in-law who challenges the authority of China, to whom Wong refers as a mother. Specifically, Hong Kong questions China: "where were you after June 3?" (Wong 2014, 9:19–9:21). In response, China says: "how dare you bring this up" (Wong 2014, 9:19–9:30). The humour in this joke is that China cannot honestly answer the question without bringing up the Tiananmen Square incident. Yet, if China chooses to respond, it will go against its own censorship. The insolvability of this dilemma is the humour, allowing Wong to make fun of China's anti-democratic censorship.

Apart from the date, Wong uses the year of the Tiananmen Square incident to create humour. He explains that the Hong Kong police force only fired 87 tear gas bombs during the 2014 Umbrella Movement because they were approaching the number 89: "Why did the police stop shooting after the 87th tear gas bomb? Because it's getting close to 89. Oh wow 89 is a really sensitive number" (Wong 2014, 17:45–17:49). Like the first joke, the humour here is the sensitivity around the Tiananmen Square incident. As the incident took place in 1989, the number 89 alludes to the incident and is thus subjected to China's censorship. As such, Wong jokes that the police only fire 87 tear gas bombs to avoid mentioning the number 89. The humour in these jokes highlights the conundrum of China's censorship. On the one hand, the Hong Kong and Chinese governments censor any mention of pro-democracy events and ideas. On the other hand, this self-censorship ends up silencing and complicating the governments' day-to-day operations. By highlighting the absurdity of Hong Kong and China's censorship, Wong challenges the government's suppression of democracy and freedom.

Wong also uses humour to ridicule the police for perpetrating violence against protestors during the 2014 Umbrella Movement. In "Not Normal If Not Insane," Wong imagines a scenario where his imaginary friend Ah Keung prepares himself for the protest. At first, Ah Keung asks Wong's imaginary grandfather for plastic wrap to protect his eyes from tear gas. However, instead of providing Ah Keung with plastic wrap, the imaginary grandfather advises Ah Keung to buy an under guard for his crotch area because "the most important part of protesting is protecting one's crotch area" (Wong 2014, 23:08–23:10). On the surface, this joke is a typical

"dick joke" where comedians make reference to sex to produce humour (Lloyd 2007). However, there is a deeper layer in this joke that I want to uncover. Apart from referencing sex, this joke has an incongruous element. In humour studies, incongruity is a theory that refers to the humour produced via "the perception of something incongruous—something that violates our mental patterns and expectations" (Morreall 2020). In Wong's joke, the incongruity is that the grandfather advises Ah Keung to protect his crotch area instead of his head and eyes, which are arguably more important body parts. To make this joke even more incongruous and humorous, Wong says that the grandfather's advice turns out to be true: "It turns out, you really have to wear it [under guard] for the past few days in Mongkok . . . . Women even have to wear metal cages. Wear them around here [their chest area]. It was very dangerous" (Wong 2014, 23:22–23:33). For context, Mongkok was one of the territories that protestors occupied during the 2014 Umbrella Movement (C. Li and Tong 2020). On several occasions, police and suspected triad members attacked protesters in Mongkok (P. A. Chow 2015; Yuen 2018). In this context, what is originally thought of as a foolish joke—wearing an under guard during a protest—becomes true. In showing how a piece of comedic advice turns out to be valid, the humour forces the audience to realize the seriousness of the violence that protestors experienced. It induces the audience to sympathize with the protestors and form solidarity with the movement.

Mending the Gap: Bridging Social Division Through Humour

As a result of the recent pro-democracy movements, there is an emerging "animosity between people of different political affiliations" and "political and social polarization [pro-protest vis-à-vis anti-protest]" in Hong Kong (Shen and Yu 2021, 233). In his shows, Wong attempts to use his humour to bridge this social division. While Wong criticizes political oppression from the government, he also makes fun of those who blindly criticize everything about China. In "Gargling with a Golden Bowl," he mentions an incident where a female socialite criticizes him for speaking Mandarin:

> As soon as she heard me speak Mandarin, she pointed at me and said "you shut up! That's disgusting to hear!" We were all shocked. We were all socialites and have certain prestige. We were all silent, so I had to say something to resolve the tension. Disgusting? Let me say it again. [In Mandarin] "You said it's disgusting? You're not being reasonable! Everyone, say something!" [In Cantonese] She stood up and shouted at me: "That's bloody disgusting! You shut the heck up!" (Wong 2018, 18:32–19:01).

The humour in this joke is found in the socialite's indiscriminate criticism of Wong for merely speaking Mandarin. The significance of this joke is that it critiques the politics of language in Hong Kong. In Hong Kong, Cantonese is the primary language spoken in everyday life, not Mandarin (R. Chow 2013). As such, Cantonese becomes an identity marker of "local Hong Kong identity"; whereas Mandarin is unwelcomed because it signifies a mainland Chinesesness that clashes with the local Hong Kong-ness (Y. Li and Xiao 2020, 505). The discrimination of Mandarin speakers is what Li and Xiao (2020) call "symbolic violence" (499). By poking fun at the socialite who criticizes Wong for nothing other than speaking Mandarin, Wong's humour highlights the ludicrousness of people who blindly discriminate against Mandarin and its speakers. In doing so, his humour shows that such "social justice warriors" also have a role to play in leading to the increasing polarization.

To bridge the social division between the government and citizens, Wong mentions that both sides must admit their wrongdoings. Consider the following joke in which Wong talks about how to address the social division:

> I don't think our government should hold a grudge against the citizens. You know, they should say "that's right. The police are professional, but we are quite amateurish when it comes to tear gas bombs." However, at the same time, protestors are also amateur, right? You guys didn't get paid. You guys don't go out and protest every day, right? So, what is actually happening? It's a conflict between amateurs and amateurs. It's a misunderstanding! Why do we need division between the police and citizens? (Wong 2014, 19:33–20:30).

In this joke, Wong says that the police should acknowledge their lack of experience in dealing with protests. The police should apologize and acknowledge that they "are quite amateurish when it comes to tear gas bombs" (19:51-19:54). As Wong mentions,

acknowledging the government's wrongdoings and exaggerated use of tear gas bombs is the first step toward reconciling the social division.

Wong's second piece of advice is that the protestors need to recognize that they are also amateurish. However, I want to emphasize that this joke is, in fact, a double-entendre that applies to both the citizens and the government. On the surface, Wong is suggesting that protestors need to recognize they are not professionals, whereas the police are carrying out their duties given to them by their superiors. As such, the protestors should listen to the police's decisions. Yet, on a more subtle level, Wong suggests that the government needs to eliminate their mistrust of the protestors. During the 2014 movement, the Hong Kong government pushed "a narrative of 'foreign interference' . . . that accuses civil society organizations of being inauthentic, that they are being used and funded by foreign governments, especially the United States government, who seek to undermine and weaken China by fomenting revolution in the name of 'democracy'" (Tsui 2015, 451). Here, Wong is countering this narrative by suggesting that the protestors are not under any foreign economic influence. Rather, the protestors are seeking democracy. The police force has misunderstood the protestors, and it needs to eliminate their mistrust of the protestors. Taken together, Wong suggests that both sides of the protests must admit their wrongdoings and listen to each other to resolve the ongoing social division.

Producing humour and comedy in the changing political economy: is it possible?

Wong announced that "Gargling with a Golden Bowl" would be his final stand-up comedy performance (Szeto 2018). He did not officially explain the reason why he decided to quit comedy. In the following section, I want to draw connections between Wong's performance and the changing political economy in Hong Kong to unravel how the changing political economy creates immense restrictions on comedians' creative output, so much so that some of them decide to leave the industry.

Hong Kong's political economy has experienced a vast change since the handover in 1997. In the context of communication and media in Hong Kong, due to increasing Chinese influence, media outlets are censoring themselves and avoid making critical comments against the Chinese regime to shield themselves from political pressure (Fung 2007). For example, the largest television company, Television Broadcast Limited (TVB), was found to self-censor when reporting on the Umbrella Movement (Lee 2018). Most recently, in May 2020, a popular political satire show called "The Headliner" was also suspended, due to fear of political pressure (W. H. Lo and Wong 2021). China also has a history of censoring satirists whose jokes are 'too' critical of China (Luqiu 2017). As such, Wong is in a dangerous position where he could be the next target of China's censorship. Although he could keep performing without employing political satire, this decision is itself a form of self-censorship that limits one's creative freedom. With limited creative freedom, it is rather reasonable that performers such as Wong decide to quit the comedy industry.

But China's censorship is not the only restriction on Wong's creative freedom. Equally important is the audience fragmentation created by the polarization in society, which further restricts what materials that Wong can produce. Audience fragmentation is a concept in media studies that describes situations where "the mass audience, which was once concentrated on three or four viewing options, becomes more widely distributed" (Webster 2005, 367). To put it simply, audience fragmentation suggests that the audience no longer consumes media content in the same channel at the same time. Rather, it is distributed into different channels and platforms, and members of the audience do not interfere much with one another. Various reasons can lead to audience fragmentation. For instance, the rise of streaming services can cause audience fragmentation because these services "provide th[e] opportunity for viewers to consume stories at their own pace and schedule" (Lotz 2021, 888). Differences in political ideology could also lead to fragmentation because people are more likely to consume media content that aligns with their own political ideology (Hahn, Ryu and Park 2015). In "Gargling with a Golden Bowl," we can observe how the audience's pro-democracy background restricts the types of jokes that Wong can produce:

The police beat protestors up in a dark corner, a dark corner. That cannot be acceptable, correct? [audience cheering]. *I am still not very certain about you guys' [political] background*. It sounded like people on this side is more enthusiastic about that one. Come on. The judge has decided on this. It cannot be disputed, right? *Oh ok. You guys aren't going to cheer on that one.* Throughout history, good people are all framed by bad people! *Ok, you guys like this one.* (Wong 2014, 20:34–21:16; emphasis added).

In this instance, Wong is making three statements with contrasting ideologies. The second statement about the judge's ruling of a case on police violence is anti-protest. Meanwhile, the other two are pro-protest. It turns out that the two pro-protest statements are what generate cheers from the audience. The audience's reaction shows acutely how it is fragmented. It consists primarily of those who are pro-protest and only cheer for pro-protest statements. In this situation, Wong is forced to take a pro-protest view because, after all, a comedian's job is to entertain and generate laughter. If Wong takes an anti-protest stance, he will not generate any laughter, and his show will fail. Under this circumstance, Wong's creative freedom is limited. His audience becomes a form of censorship, monitoring what content Wong can produce. Under such immense pressure and such a restriction, it is rather understandable that Wong decided to quit the industry during this challenging time.

Conclusion

In line with his earlier performances in the 1990s and 2000s, Wong continues to use his humour and comedy to poke fun at political oppression and offer his critiques on pressing political issues. In the post-2014 era, Wong notices the growing social division and attempts to use his comedy to address this problem. His humour emphasizes that both the government and the citizens have to come together to address the division. Yet, as we can observe from Wong's performances, it remains unclear whether the changing political economic circumstance allows future productions of political comedy and humour. The changing political economy plays a big role in limiting performers' creative freedom. This study has examined just the tip of an iceberg of Hong Kong's

stand-up comedy industry. Future research is needed to examine this dynamic industry that offers serious implications about the political economy conditions in Hong Kong. Furthermore, this study has not examined how Wong uses memory and nostalgia for colonial Hong Kong to produce humour. Future research can examine how memory and nostalgia are sites of resistance in the context of stand-up comedy.

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