

Howie Tsui

Retainers of Anarchy

By Elliot Albrecht

Howie Tsui
1 to 6
Retainers of Anarchy,
Key frame drawing for algorithmic animation sequence, 2017.

Photo: Maegan Hill-Carroll, Vancouver Art Gallery.
Courtesy the artist.



There was a time when lawlessness was king and opposing forces lived, plotted, colluded and fought out their differences without the intervention of authorities. Virtue was valued but bravery and resourcefulness were crucial above all else. Such an anarchic atmosphere was characteristic of both the now-levelled Kowloon Walled City in Hong Kong and the stories of *wuxia*, known in Cantonese as *mou hap*, a genre of fiction centred around martial-arts figures in ancient China. Hong Kong-born, Vancouver-based artist Howie Tsui drew from both for his solo exhibition *Retainers of Anarchy* at the Vancouver Art Gallery. His was one of three presentations in Vancouver by Hong Kong artists that marked the approach of the 20th anniversary of Hong Kong's handover from the UK to China in 1997; in addition, the Vancouver Art Gallery also hosted group show *Pacific Crossings: Hong Kong Artists in Vancouver* (see p116), and Tsang Kin Wah presented three public works around the city. The centrepiece of the exhibition was the eponymous *Retainers of Anarchy* (2017), a 25-metre-long digitally animated scroll painting made from more than 100 of Tsui's handmade drawings. The work depicts disparate scenes including torture, punishment, fantastical creatures and an imagined cross-section of Kowloon Walled City where nefarious goings-on are visible: a combination of real and imagined, rural and urban, and ancient and contemporary.

Typically set during the final days of the Song dynasty (960–1279), the characters of *wuxia* often originate from the lower social classes of Chinese society and fight for righteous values while remaining independent of aristocratic rule. Scholars have suggested that the stories were originally based on real characters and events. While evidence of *wuxia* stories dates back 2,000

years, during the 20th century the genre re-emerged as a symbol of personal freedom at the same time as a widespread break with Confucian values. *Wuxia* has been banned at times in mainland China due its fantastical themes and fears that it could conjure anti-government sentiment. In many cases its writers moved to Hong Kong and Taiwan to continue publishing. Perhaps its best-known modern master is Louis Cha, aka Jin Yong (b.1924), whose widely read writings have inspired television shows, theme parks, films – and Tsui's artistic output.

Tsui was born in Hong Kong and lived in Nigeria for several years before relocating to Thunder Bay, Canada; having left the city aged six, his memories of Hong Kong were faint. When he was a child in Africa, receiving shipments of cassette tapes from relatives in Hong Kong and reading *wuxia* stories provided a link to the culture of his birthplace. After graduating from the University of Waterloo in Canada in 2002, against his tutors' advice Tsui embraced his desire to draw cartoon-like imagery, which he does with humour and numerous cultural references. Projects such as *Horror Fables* (2009) drew from ancient Asian ghost tales and supernatural family anecdotes to underline the cult of fear in contemporary life. Similarly, his 2.5-metre-long scroll-like work on mulberry paper *The Unfortunates of D'Arcy Island* (2013) explored de-individualisation, political compliance and conformity through zombie culture.

Tsui's starting point for *Retainers of Anarchy* was a visit to Hong Kong in 2010, his first since childhood, where he encountered the 120-metre-long digitally animated scroll *River of Wisdom* at AsiaWorld-Expo. The state-commissioned work, which was unveiled in Shanghai at the



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有一段時間，無法無天就是王道，反對勢力在沒有政府干預的情況下生活、密謀、勾結和解決分歧。美德固然重要，但勇敢和智慧更為重要。這種無政府狀態的氣氛是以前香港九龍寨城和武俠小說——以古代中國武術人物為中心的一種小說——的特色。藝術家徐浩恩生於香港，現居溫哥華。他在溫哥華美術館的個展《無政府狀態的保留者》就取材自九龍寨城和武俠小說。個展是三個現居溫哥華的香港藝術家紀念香港回歸中國20周年的展覽之一；此外，溫哥華美術館還主辦了「橫渡太平洋」（見頁110），同時曾健華也在城市四周展出三個作品。展覽的重點是同名作品《無政府狀態的保留者》（2017年），一幅長達25米的大型電子動態長卷畫作，由超過一百幅徐浩恩手繪的畫製成。該作品描繪了不同的場景，包括酷刑、懲

罰、奇怪的生物和構想的九龍寨城橫截面。其中不法的景象隨處可見：結合了真實與想像、鄉下和城市以及古代與當代。

武俠小說的人物通常都是設定於宋末（960–1279），他們通常是來自中國社會的低下層，熱心爭取公義，不受貴族統治支配。有學者認為，這些故事最初是基於真人真事。雖然有關武俠小說的證據可追溯到2000年前，但在20世紀，這種體裁象徵個人自由的重現，同時打破了儒家價值觀。由於武俠小說的主題天馬行空，可能會引起反政府情緒，故在中國大陸不時被禁。在很多情況下，作者為了繼續出版，會搬到香港和台灣居住。現代最著名的武俠小說大師是查良鏞（生於1924年），又名金庸，其著作啟發了電視節目、主題公園、電影和徐浩恩的藝術作品。



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徐浩恩生於香港，先在尼日利亞居住數年，然後遷往加拿大雷灣。他離開出生地時年僅六歲，對香港的印象模糊。他在非洲生活時，香港親戚寄來的卡式錄音帶和武俠小說就是把他和出生地文化連結之物。

2002年，徐浩恩從加拿大滑鐵盧大學畢業，他沒有聽從導師的建議，決心實現自己繪畫卡通的願望。他參考眾多的文化，以幽默語調畫成一幅幅佳作。

《Horror Fables》（2009）取材自古代亞洲鬼故事和超自然的家庭軼事，突顯了現代生活中人們對恐懼的崇拜。他的另一幅作品《The Unfortunates of D' Arcy Island》（2013）是一幅以桑皮紙作媒介的2.5米捲軸作品，同樣以殭屍文化探索去個體化、政治合規性和一致性。

驅使徐浩恩創作《無政府狀態的保留者》的契機是他在2010年自小時候離開後第一次返港之時，他在亞洲國際博覽館看到了長達120米的電子動態版捲軸《智慧的長河》。這幅國家委託的作品在2010年上海世博會中國館揭幕，重制了其中一幅中國最著名的畫作——張擇端（1085-1145）的《清明上河圖》。它描繪了一個知識分子、僧侶、農民和學者共同和諧生活的理想畫面。國家媒體報導指動畫反映出「中國古代對城市的智慧」，評論家則認為動畫是軟實力和宣傳方式。2007年，原畫借給香港藝術博物館慶祝回歸十週年，鼓勵民眾對國家自豪，並阻止日益增長的獨立情緒。

徐浩恩還從生於意大利的清代宮廷畫家郎世寧的作品《百駿圖》（1728）中得到了靈感，將中國繪畫技術揉合西方視角。《無政府狀態的保留者》描繪了一個反烏托邦的場景，流浪漢和罪犯在酷刑、儀式、懲罰和流亡的場面出沒。一個男人的口被鎖鏈鎖到地上，一個身穿長袍的劍客坐在禿鷹身上飛來飛去，還有一個身穿古裝的男人被掛在樹上。作品參考了很多當代的資料：2015年，銅鑼灣書店創始人林榮基因為出版敏感政治書籍而被中國大陸政府跨境拐走並扣留。在畫中，林榮基被騎在馬上的弓箭手拖拉，頭上有一本打開的書。2014年佔領中環運動的青年領袖黃之鋒在畫中在躋身於一個倒塌的籠子中，試圖去觸及面前的一碟米飯和魚，圖畫也許是對他為爭取真普選而絕食108小時的想像。



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捲軸的中心是九龍寨城的橫截面，那以前是個無法無天的領域，也曾是地球上人口最稠密的地方之一。那裡由錯綜複雜且黑暗的走廊和明渠組成，有數以百計的多層臨時建築物，曾經有大約35,000人堵塞在約210×120米的空間內。九龍寨城以前是個軍事要隘，即使在1898年英國租借新界之後，中國在殖民地時期仍然保留了九龍寨城。英國在11個月後重新獲得控制權，但是英國並沒無處理寨城問題，亦沒有進入寨城執法。九龍寨城是沒有簽證的中國難民的熱門地，亦是有組織犯罪、賣淫、毒品、賭博和其他非法活動的溫床。在二戰期間被日本佔領後，人口急劇增長，50年代到70年代黑社會基本上控制了這個地區。寨城內任何你可以想像到的生意都有，包括醫生、牙醫、理髮店、餐廳、標牌商、印刷店和生產魚、糖果和服裝的小型工廠。徐浩恩的動畫窺視了幾個房間，人們在裡面打架、抽煙、嘔吐、訓練、做飯、照顧孩子、看電視和睡覺。在某處，觀點集中在一個身穿綠色圍裙的屠夫。他用雙手切碎肉，血濺在房間周圍，房內人們正在進行神秘的儀式。同時你又可以聽到麻將牌的嘈吵聲。

China Pavilion of Expo 2010, is a remake of one of China's most famous paintings, *Along the River During the Qingming Festival* by Zhang Zeduan (1085–1145). It depicts an idealised scene in which intellectuals, monks, peasants and scholars lived together in prosperous harmony. The animation was billed by state-media sources as reflecting “ancient Chinese wisdom about cities”, and regarded by critics as a form of soft power and propaganda. In 2007 the original painting had been lent to the Hong Kong Museum of Art as a celebration of the 10th anniversary of the handover, in an attempt to encourage nationalistic pride in Hong Kong citizens – and no doubt to discourage growing pro-independence sentiments.

Setting out to explore the medium of the digital scroll, Tsui also borrowed inspiration from Italian-born Qing dynasty court painter Giuseppe Castiglione's *One Hundred Horses* (1728), which combined Chinese painting techniques with western perspective rules. *Retainers of Anarchy* depicts a dystopian scene in which outcasts and outlaws roam among scenes of torture, ceremony, punishment and exile. A man is chained by his mouth to the ground, while a swordsman in robes flies in and out of view on a condor. Another man in ancient dress is hung from a tree. There are many contemporary references: Lam Wing-kee, the founder of Causeway Bay Books, who was detained and spirited across the border by the mainland Chinese government in 2015 for publishing unflattering material, makes an appearance, being dragged by an archer on a horse with an open book on his head. Joshua Wong, the teenage figurehead of 2014's Occupy Central movement, is shown in a toppled-over cage, attempting to reach a plate of rice and fish,

perhaps an allusion to his 108-hour hunger strike demanding universal suffrage for Hong Kong citizens.

Yet at the centre of the scroll is a cross-section of Kowloon Walled City, the lawless former neighbourhood which at its height was one of the most densely populated places on earth. Hundreds of makeshift multi-storey buildings and approximately 35,000 people were once jammed into a space measuring about 210 by 120 metres, delineated by a labyrinth of dark corridors and open drains. Previously a military fort, Kowloon Walled City was retained by China during the colonial period, even after Britain leased the New Territories in 1898. Britain regained control 11 months later, but left the settlement alone and did not venture inside to enforce the law. The area was a popular destination for Chinese refugees without visas and a hotbed of organised crime, prostitution, drugs, gambling and other illegal activities. The population grew sharply after the Japanese occupation during the Second World War, and triads largely controlled the area from the 1950s to 70s. Every business imaginable existed within the Walled City, including doctors, dentists, barbers, restaurants, sign-makers, print shops and small factories producing fish, sweets and clothing. Tsui's animation provides a voyeuristic glimpse into several of the rooms, where people fight, smoke, vomit, train, cook, raise children, watch television and sleep. At one point, the view focuses in on a butcher in a green apron chopping meat with both hands, blood splattering around the room, and men carrying out mystical rituals. The clattering of mahjong tiles can be heard.

Kowloon Walled City was demolished in 1993 and 1994 as a result of the Sino-British Joint Declaration and the British government's effort



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因為《中英聯合聲明》和英國政府在1997年歸還香港前對城市進行的美化工程，九龍寨城於1993年和1994年被拆除。當年的鬼鎮現在是一個耗資7600萬港元的公園。九龍寨城的故事至今在流行文化中仍然廣泛流傳，包括書籍、電影、漫畫和電子遊戲——一個位於東京外的遊樂園更在2009年把寨城部分面貌重現。這種對自主時期的浪漫主義與受歡迎的武俠小說及其粉絲文化類似。正如策展人斐丹娜在展覽目錄中引用中國學者趙毅衡最近提出的一句，武俠圍繞顛覆規限達到自主的人物，是「主流文化和／或殖民地文化所造成的均質化或同化力量結構創造的解放力量」。她補充說武俠「令邊緣化的中國社會解散……權力結構。」兩個傳奇的時代在徐浩恩的作品中交合，他以它們作為持不同政見者和抗命者的敘事工具，亦以它們去探索他口中所說的「無政府社會如何



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組織和發展行為守則以鼓動秩序」。隨著中國逐步顯示自己對特區的權力，這些法律、自決和權力問題對香港日益重要。



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to beautify the city before the handover in 1997. There is now a HK\$76 million park where the settlement once stood. Stories of the Walled City are still prevalent in popular culture, including books, films, manga and video games – a partial re-creation of the settlement was even built in an amusement park outside Tokyo in 2009. This romanticisation of an autonomous time echoes the popularity wuxia fiction and its fan culture. As Chinese scholar Henry Yiheng Zhao recently suggested, quoted in the exhibition catalogue by curator Diana Freundl, by revolving around characters who subvert rules in favour of self-determined virtue, wuxia is a “liberating force

from the homogenising or assimilating power structures created by the dominant and/or colonial culture”. She adds that it “allows marginalised Chinese communities to deconstruct... power structures”. Two storied eras meet in Tsui’s work, with the artist using them as narrative tools for dissent and disobedience, and to explore, as he says, “how anarchic societies organise and develop codes of conduct to encourage order”. These questions of law, determination and power become increasingly relevant in Hong Kong as China gradually asserts its power over the Special Administrative Region.