



Powered by Desire: The Hong Kong Identity through the Cinematic Lens of Wong Kar Wai

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Abstract

The concept of a monolithic Hong Kong identity is a thoroughly nebulous one. Indeed, the social consciousness of the nation is deeply complex and fragmented, residing in the liminal quandary between socialism and capitalism, between East and West, between freedom and subjugation. This paper explores the representation of desire in three of Wong Kar Wai's films – *ChungKing Express* (1994), *In the Mood for Love* (2000) and *2046* (2004). Through an analysis of these three films, we propose that desire itself is a manifestation of the Hong Kong people's want for their own identity, and the inability to attain such is what reinforces this desire in many tenets of their life.

Hence, we initiate a reading on the changes in the Hong Kong political landscape, and how this uncertainty suffuses into a drifting sense of rootlessness that permeates the core of Wong Kar Wai's films, as a sense of loss and unsettled satisfaction consistently drives his characters. His works act as a time capsule, crystallising these intense feelings and personal moments of his experience with Hong Kong. With his filming techniques, Wong portrays desire in his unique way, improving our understanding of the Hong Kong identity.

Acknowledgements

We would like to thank our teacher-mentor, Ms Lynette Lim, for her guidance and support.

Introduction

“Somehow everything comes with an expiry date. Swordfish expires. Meat sauce expires. Even cling film expires. Is there anything in this world which doesn’t?” In light of the simmering social turmoil, these contemplative words uttered by a drunk He Qi-wu in *ChungKing Express* have never rang more true amongst Hong Kong citizens than today, where the recent events bring with it the daunting realisation that the expiry date set for Hong Kong of the year 2047 has been creeping closer, whether they like it or not.

Seemingly always in transition, the fate of Hong Kong has never felt certain to its citizens. Once a Chinese state, Hong Kong had been ceded to Britain in 1843. Then in 1997, it was handed over to China once again, where it would operate under a “One country, two systems” until the year 2047- after which, its handover to China would be complete and Hong Kong would be officially recognised as a Chinese state. These complications in its history have resulted in an acute sense of rootlessness felt amongst its citizens, especially for those who have lived through both its liberal Western past and face an impending, drastically different future under the authoritarian Chinese government.

Through his films, Wong Kar Wai explores this poignant sense of change, and against the backdrop of a transitioning Hong Kong, the idea of impermanence in relationships and identity. While Wong has resisted totalising any interpretation of the meaning behind his films, an analysis of such on a literal and thematic level seeks to uncover how Wong subtly navigates these concerns through his rich story-telling, characterisation, and other filmic techniques. In his universe, themes of love, memory, society and belonging are carefully interwoven into his stories, and investigated through the lenses of space, time and place. His stories are never just conveniently set in Hong Kong, and all reflect a Hong Kong he deeply misses and yearns for. Whether it is through his experimentation of colours, music, or poetry, Wong brings a dream-like magical quality to the ordinary, and uses these themes to be extended metaphors and added layers of meaning for each other, working in tandem to create an elegantly stylised nostalgia both for the past, and his vision of a Hong Kong which eventually never rests, and is constantly striving ahead. After all, change is a force thrust upon these citizens, and the discomfort and turmoil emerging from seeking to grapple with such has led Wong to once comment that “Memory is [but] a curse to Hong Kong”.

His works therefore are more than just a mere documentary of Hong Kong, but act as a time capsule, crystallising these intense feelings. His willingness to divest himself from the blinding lenses of nostalgia and idealism invigorate his films with a renewed, and tempered sense of hope. Beyond the dinky apartments and congested roads that characterise his films, Wong conscientiously transfigures, and brings out their magical qualities, eventually depicting an electrifying, brilliantly vibrant city that Wong deeply loves.

“If memories could be canned, would they also have expiry dates? If so, I hope they last for centuries.”

Love

Set in 1960s Hong Kong where society is ever-changing and there is little for the characters to hold onto, characters in Wong Kar Wai's film use love as a way for them to lose themselves from the realities of life. When their love does not flourish, the characters are subsequently *unmoored*. They either cling onto their past love, unable to move on; or they constantly switch from lover to lover, yet still failing to find the antidote to the inner emptiness they feel from the absence of a lasting connection.

Understanding what life was like for those who lived in 1960s Hong Kong allows us to better understand love as an all-consuming force as portrayed in the films. Economically, the 1960s was crucial for the rise of Hong Kong as one of the four Asian Tigers. The increased economic activity meant that an average life there was characterised by long hours dedicated to work, rather than being at home with one's loved ones. Coupled with the massive inflow of immigrants, “Hong Kong grew in wealth and population at an unprecedented rate to become the significant high-rise metropolis it is today” (Evans, 2020).

Despite constantly being surrounded by a sea of people, individuals in Wong's films are portrayed to be disconnected and detached from the world around them. Their overwhelming sense of loneliness and monotony in their lives becomes a strong, pervasive force that constantly haunts them.

Wong is able to beautifully capture the essence of stagnation and solitude in his films through featuring “only a handful of locations in his films”. Viewers constantly watch the same scenes shot from the same angle and location, mimicking the dull and repetitive nature of the characters' lives.

In *In the Mood for Love*, the same flight of stairs being climbed up is played over and over again as the characters return home, symbolising the routine and stagnation they have grown to as part of their daily lives. Whereas in *ChungKing Express*, the “shallow depth of field throughout the film (...) means that usually only one person or thing is in focus while the rest of the scene is blurry” (Jones, 2020). This ultimately “enhances the loneliness that these characters feel because only one thing can really be in focus at a given time, heightening the solitude of their lives” (Jones, 2020)



Figure 1.1 - 1.4: Flight of Stairs in *In the Mood for Love* repeatedly filmed
Source: Wong (2000)

Characters are unable to escape from their monotonous lives with their own will and actions. Hence, in most of Wong's films, it is love that acts as an impetus for change. It is love that adds colour to their dull lives of routine. It is love and the blossoming of a new partnership that breaks the stagnation. Now, they can find comfort and company in their new partners.

In *In the Mood for Love*, Mr Chow and Mrs Chan provide each other company, bringing about a greater change in their lives. They no longer have to endure the overwhelming sense of loneliness and despair from their partners constantly being away.

Wong is able to beautifully capture this new profound change with the same filming technique of watching the same scenes shot over and over again. However, as the image of the same flight of stairs Mrs Chan climbs flashes before the viewers, the use of more cheery and uplifting music points towards how now there is something for Mrs Chan to look forward to when returning home, which is a possible encounter with Mr Chan and the joy of seeing him again. Her life is no longer plagued by the overwhelming sense of loneliness and now, she has found a new source of joy and change with Mr Chow. In *ChungKing Express*, Cop 223's salvation can be found in his ex-girlfriend, May and Cop 663 with his flight attendant girlfriend.

"Most of my films deal with people who are stuck in certain routines and habits that don't make them happy. They want to change, but they need something to push them. I think it's mostly love that causes them to break their routines and move on."

- Wong Kar-Wai

Yet, it is because of the immense loneliness and monotony which causes love to become an all-confusing force. The characters become so emotionally invested that when this love fails to flourish, they are often left with the devastation of heartbreak. The emotional torment is amplified. Had they been less invested in their love, perhaps it would have hurt less.

When the characters' love fails to blossom, they are usually portrayed struggling to move on from their beloved. Drowning in their despair, they cling onto fragments of memories of their previous lover as if those are the only fragments of happiness they can find in their lives. Returning to their dull routines, the characters view their lives as purposeless.

After having May break up with him, Cop 223 still clings onto a small chance of hope that perhaps she will come back to him in a month, symbolising his inability to move on. Hence, to commemorate each passing day he buys a can of pineapples that expires on 1 May. It is the "lingering shots of expiration dates on objects make us hyperconscious about the concept of loss and finally" (Lee, 2021). Additionally, "the omnipresence of his ex characterised by her conspicuous absence" is felt throughout the first half of the film, allowing us to understand the massive emptiness and solitude Cop 223 feels as we see him do everything he can to preserve remnants of his love that is slipping away.



Figure 2.1 & 2.2: Scene from *ChungKing Express* of Cop 223 eating pineapples
Source: Wong (1994), Travis (2021)

In the second half of *ChungKing Express*, the portrayal of anthropomorphism, the tendency to attribute personality to inanimate objects, is demonstrated in Cop 663 as he struggles to grapple with his breakup. While watching Cop 663 talk to inanimate objects such as towels and soap does produce a comical effect, it also vividly portrays him turning to "inanimate objects for company as a way to deal with his own loneliness" (Travis, 2021). Furthermore, it represents Cop 663's inability to find another partner to move on so as to fill the void left in him.



Figure 3.1: Cop 663 in *ChungKing Express* talking to a bar of soap
Source: Wong (1994)



Figure 3.2: Cop 663 talking to a towel.
Source: Wong (1994), Travis (2021)

In *2046*, a sequel to *In the Mood for Love*, Mr Chow is evidently still unable to move on from his love for Mrs Chan. When Mr Chow is in Singapore and faced with another chance of experiencing love again with a woman named Black Spider, upon finding out that her name is “Su Li-zhen”, an iconic shot of Mrs Chan (whose actual name is also Su Li-zhen) from *In the Mood for Love* flashes across the screen. It is clear that Mr Chow is reminded of Mrs Chan once again, and also evident that a relationship between Mr Chow and Black Spider would simply not work as it would merely be a hollow one. Black Spider would only represent the idea of what a successful relationship with Mrs Chan would have been like for Mr Chow. Hence, through this scene of Mr Chow, it sheds light on how the overwhelming despair characters face after their breakup results in them failing to recognise the new chances of real love, despite it being in front of them.

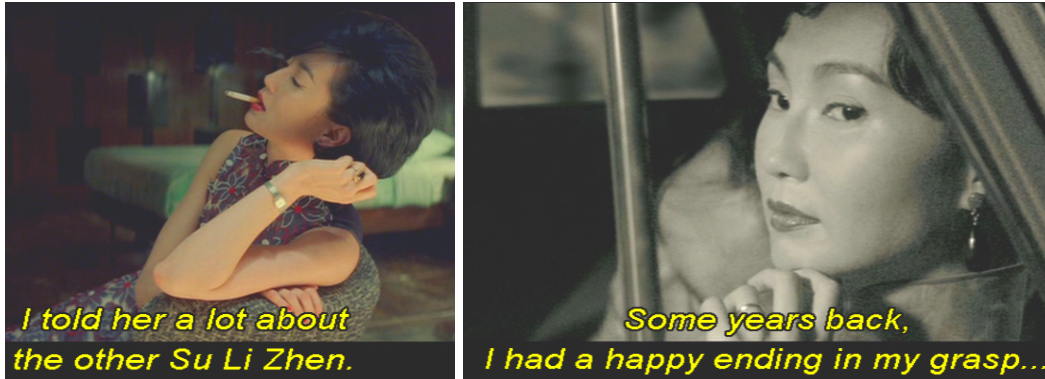


Figure 4.1 & 4.2: Scenes from 2046 about Su Li Zhen
Source: Wong (2004), Wallace (2013)

Furthermore, more specifically in 2046, characters may deal with their emotional suffering by switching between different lovers, in search of a salvation for the inner emptiness arising from the absence of a lasting connection. However, given that they are still mourning over their lost lovers, they are unable to find the strong sense of desire in other potential lovers.

They compare potential lovers to their previous ones, using how alike a potential lover is to their previous lover as a gauge of whether or not the relationship should be pursued. Usually however, the divergence between a character's desire and the reality faced results in a sense of disappointment and loss. They are ultimately left hopeless in finding the salvation they seek.

For instance, in 2046, Mr Chow gets another shot at experiencing love again with his neighbour, Bai Ling. Their relationship initially started off as a purely physical one but as it progressed on and she wished to "establish a more long term and exclusive relationship with him, Mr Chow backs out" (Alex, 2015) out of fear of commitment. Most importantly, he backs away from this chance at love again simply because wishing to continue on and establish an official relationship that started off rather scandalously was not something Mrs Chan would have done. Bai Ling does not fulfill his idea of what Mrs Chan would have done and hence, he backs out.

In conclusion, the monotonous lives of those who lived in 1960s Hong Kong and the way love provides them an escape explains why love becomes an all-consuming force for those who experience it. Additionally, the portrayal of characters dealing with the aftermath of heartbreak and desiring to find love again but never truly finding it can be said to be a metaphor in explaining the Hong Kong identity; those who live in Hong Kong are constantly searching for something but in the end, are never truly able to find it.

Social stigma as an obstruction to love

In 1960s Hong Kong, most of the people were still very conservative and adultery was not accepted. Additionally, the “rapid growth in the population exerted enormous pressure on Hong Kong’s housing” (Hong Kong Memory, 2012). Hence, this meant that individuals had to deal with crowded and populated environments even in the setting of their own homes. Individuals had little privacy and were constantly under the surveillance of landlords and neighbours. Wong is able to portray this most vividly in *In the Mood for Love* by making clear that the living conditions Mr Chow and Mrs Chan live in is rather crowded, with little privacy.

Throughout the film, Wong “never once shows a room in full view” rather, “through windows or doors that are always open” (Accented Cinema, 2019). Additionally, Wong uses the technique of framing within a frame, where “every single shot features characters not only framed by the rectangle of the film itself but by smaller internal shapes as well such as door or window frames” (Hammond, 2017). Through this, “by placing objects in the foreground, the director enhances the feeling that the characters have - of being observed - not to mention, our own feelings, of being observers” (Puschak, 2015). By placing greater emphasis on the audience’s own feelings of being observers to the love unfolding between Mr Chow and Mrs Chan, it feels as if the audience themselves too have taken on the role of their neighbours, constantly observing and watching the couple’s every move.

In *ChungKing Express*, Faye’s ability to break into Cop 663’s apartment to clean his house daily despite not knowing him personally also serves to reinforce the idea of there being little privacy in Hong Kong.

Hence, given this setting, the risk of gossip and damage it can do to one’s image is more significant. Mr Chow and Mrs Chan have to continuously remind themselves they are being watched and consequently, practise self-restraint in their actions and language towards each other. The real action or hints of their feelings can only be seen in their postures, glances and touches that the two exchange. Ultimately, they are still both married to their respective spouses and being seen together can lead to massive misunderstandings and gossip of them pursuing adultery.

In a scene from *In the Mood for Love*, both Mrs Chan and the audience are once again reminded of the fact that their neighbours are in fact watching her and Mr Chow, and even advises her against it due to the possible damage it can cause to Mrs Chan’s reputation.



Figure 5.1 & 5.2: Scene from *In the Mood for Love* where Mrs Chan is confronted by her landlord about her recent outings with Mr Chow

Source: Wong (2000)

However, when Mr Chow and Mrs Chan are alone, their feelings for each other and the chance of pursuing a relationship never truly flourishes. Throughout the film, they are still haunted by the shadows of their own marriage. Given how society has influenced them to perceive adultery as shameful, Mrs Chan's strong moral codes is also another primary reason for the failure of their partnership. Mrs Chan's continuous insistence and repetition of the phrase "We will not be like them (their spouses who are having an affair)" to Mr Chow is a vivid example of this, and the reason for her walking away after he confesses to her. While tragic, to her, a chance at love with Mr Chow is simply impossible given their circumstances.

Space

It is not the object of our desires but desire itself, which will drive Hong Kong forward.

In his essay *Street studies in Hong Kong*, Frank Leeming defines the spatial environment of 1960s Hong Kong by its almost suffocating claustrophobia - 'dense ... cellular, predictable [and] repetitious' (Leeming, 1977). Indeed, housing in this period was marked by its conservative use of space; Mar identifies "spirit of the *tong l'ou* tenement" with ideas of "flexibility and permutation ... [serving] to maximise space." (Mar, 2002)

This sense of constriction arising from the limited land space of 1960s Hong Kong suffuses the spaces found in Wong's films as well. In his films, the suffocating backdrop of a land-scarce Hong Kong is commonly viewed as an obstruction to the personal desire for a fixed and unwavering identity. This is elucidated through 2 key lenses.

Firstly, urban alienation thwarts the personal desire for a steadfast romantic relationship in Wong's Hong Kong; physical closeness fails to bridge the inward rift separating characters emotionally, and often ironically reinforces this gulf. Gan notes how, for instance, "the ...

familiar [tale] of physical proximity [and] emotional distance” (Gan, 2003) surfaces in the bar scene between Cop 223 and the drug dealer in *Chungking Express*. This corroborates with the larger argument that “Wong’s characters ... are alienated from one another even though they are involved in one another’s lives.” (Chong, 2003)

Amidst the congested spaces of the cityscape, the relentless flow of people is an agonizing constant for many of Wong’s characters, leaving them with unsatisfied relationships that are at best ephemeral and transitory. This is reflected in the preponderance of hotels in his films - in *Chungking*, Cop 223 leaves the blond-wigged woman to rest in the temporary solace of a hotel room; In *Mood*, Chow and Su rehearse the identity of their partners in the privacy of a hotel away from their apartment; in *2046*, the Oriental Express serves as the site in which Chow confronts a myriad of women, all haunting reminders of Su.

“the ‘hotel-world’ is built on contradictions; it creates both feelings of familiarity and strangeness, rootlessness and stasis, freedom and inhibition. It is a space in which humans meet and form groups but simultaneously feel alienated.”

Joanna Elaine Pready

In the aforementioned 3 examples, hotels, with their connotations of ‘rootlessness’ and instability, serve as a poignant embodiment of the urban alienation plaguing Hong Kong in the 1960s. While they serve as a place of respite and sexual intimacy, their defining characteristic as a place of transition and ephemerality ironically amplifies the emotional distance alienating these characters. For example, Chow’s relentless searching for Su in his experiences with the stream of women occupying the adjacent room leads to a wearied sense of exasperation. This is represented in the claustrophobia projected by the frame below. The auditory element of Bailing’s sexual liaison is at once invasive and disquieting, protracting the nature of Chow’s agony, as his desire for a stable relationship is eroded in a world of inconstancy where sex is purely transactional and without substance.

Secondly, on a more national level, adding to this disorienting loss of identity is the influence of globalisation in Hong Kong. Wong’s spaces are distinctly cosmopolitan, consisting of an amalgamation of cultures. In *Chungking*, past literature elucidates how “the Chungking Mansions ... was built in the 1960’s to accommodate for the influx of migrants ... [and in] the 1990’s, it was used to accommodate tourists and guest workers from all over the world. Rich or poor, most immigrants thought of Hong Kong as *a space of transit rather than a place to settle in.*” (All Answers Ltd., 2018) Even the film’s title is an amalgamation of two distinct places, further emphasising this state of confluence.

The hypermodern landscape of Chow in *2046* can thus be seen as a dystopian climax of the

globalising Hong Kong landscape presented in *Chungking*. In Chow's mind, the robotic citizens of Hong Kong in this sterile environment are mechanical and drained of life, uniform in their appearance and identity. This can be seen as a pessimistic foretelling of the dangers awaiting Hong Kong under China in 2047, whereby the metanarrative of pan-Chinese nationalism homogenizes national identity and eradicates diversity.

"The problem facing Hong Kong's citizens is that the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) has attempted to promote and shape their national identification through government policies, the mass media, and grassroots patriotic events." (Liu, Lee 2013)

In a physical setting inundated by these alienating forces, some have argued that Wong's characters experience an irreversible loss of personal identity. With the desire for a fixed and fulfilling identity seemingly quashed by these forces of urbanity and globalisation, this fate is, ostensibly, unavoidable. This dilution of personal identity is conveyed with a deep-seated sense of pessimism by Chong when she states that "[the] urban environment forces the characters to blend in en-masse, so that individuality is forfeited." (Chong, 2003) Her unequivocal conclusion then, that "Wong's films are about our postmodern human condition" suggests that personal identity will indubitably remain elusive in Hong Kong.

Yet, the argument that Wong's films indulge solely in this postmodern fantasy of an endless deferral of meaning and identity is largely untenable. Beyond "put[ting] obstacles in the way of characters when they want to love and be loved in return", the urban environment of Hong Kong and the underlying forces of modernization and globalisation also provide a tempered sense of renewal for characters to grapple with their loss and reconfigure their identity.

Globalisation, for example, is at once a source of emotional distance and reconciliation in Wong's films. Despite its aforementioned effects of alienation, it also provides Wong's characters with a means to achieve catharsis from the sometimes suffocating nature of city life in Hong Kong through travel. In *Chungking*, Faye's decision to fly to California materialises her desires from the level of pure simulacra; "California Dreamin'" and simulating Cop 223's former lover.

Physical displacement is at once the cause of their emotional distress, and the means through which it is alleviated. This is purposeful as Wong clearly states that "[he] wanted an ending 'with a distance', the two characters distanced from their usual surroundings."



Figure 6: Scene from Chungking Express of a shirt hanging
Source: Wong (1994)

In *Mood*, Chow's trip to Angkor Wat in Cambodia provides an almost spiritual respite from the heartbreak plaguing him in Hong Kong.



Figure 7: Scene from In the Mood for Love with a monk overlooking Angkor Wat
Source: Wong (2000)

Just as the landlady Mrs Suen seeks refuge from the instability of Hong Kong resulting from the 1966 Cultural Revolution by migrating to the US, Wong's characters gain a liberating sense of catharsis when they physically displace themselves from the shifting sands of Hong Kong. It is in this catharsis which allows characters to refine their perspective of their loss, and recuperate from this hurt. At the end of *Mood*, Wong departs from the literal 'rose-tinted glasses' saturating the prior scenes, providing an unembellished examination of their past from a new and refined angle. Their parallel gaze towards the room from the same windows represents an honest confrontation of their loss, largely bereft of the blinding idealism or romanticism of the previous scenes. The distance breeds a sense of honesty.

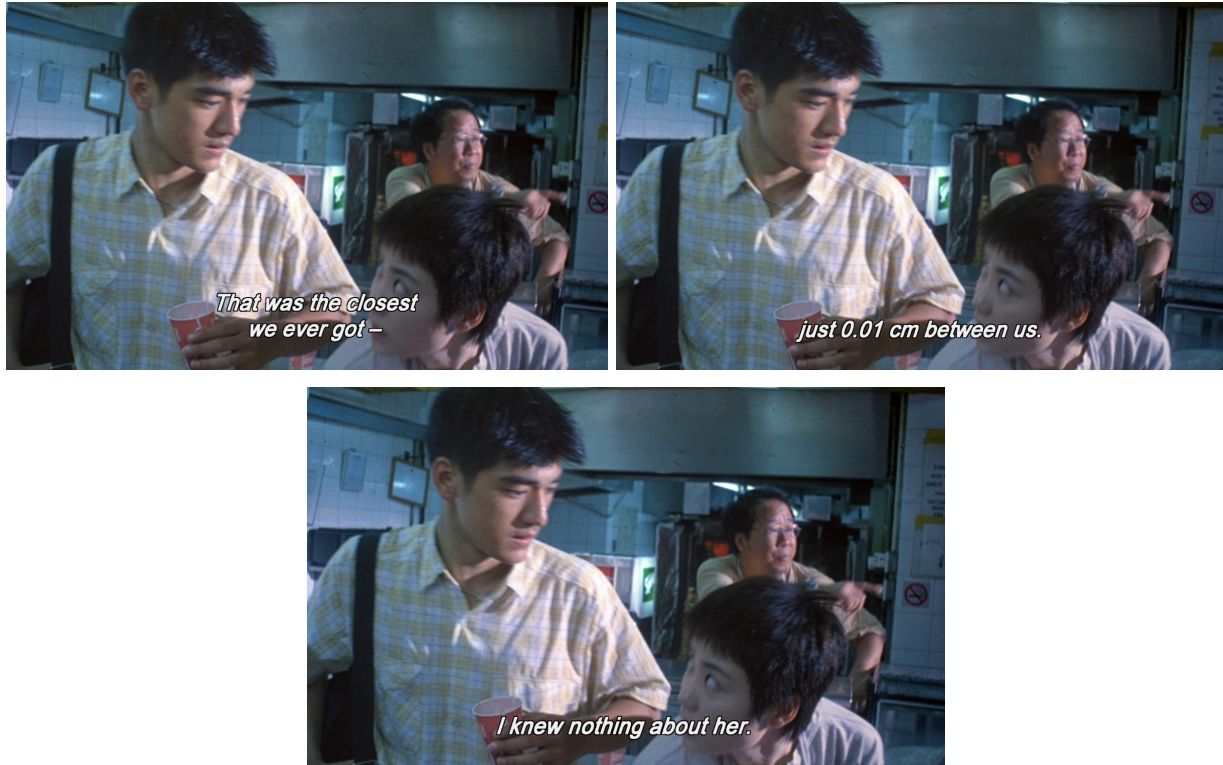


Figure 8.1-8.3: Scene from *Chungking Express* where Cop 223 and Faye cross paths
 Source: Wong (1994)

Time

Into these rooms thousands of Hongkongers piled in October, smartphones at the ready, their cameras' flashes reflecting off the glass shielding the display. After nearly two decades and 4000 exhibits, the Hong Kong Story exhibition is closing. When it reopens after two years, the exhibition and the city it resides in will be unrecognisable... "Hong Kong people are notorious for not caring that much about history anyway. There is no money to be made. But I went two days before it closed. I have never seen so many people there before and I have never seen so many parents telling their kids about what is going on."

**- Eryk Bradshaw for the Sydney Morning Herald,
 "The fight to save Hong Kong's past from its future"**

In this section, we will explore how these films demonstrate and resonate with Hong Kong society's desire for different points in time outside the present- in large, to recapture and preserve the past as an instantaneous defensive response to threats of erosion or erasure, but sometimes also to use an idealised future as a means for escapism.

These films evoke the “Old Hong Kong” aesthetic- they feature Hong Kong’s peak period of prosperity, between the end of the war to the decade building up to the handover in 1997 (Lam-Knott, 2019). This is despite their largely modern production dates closer to the turn of the century (especially *Mood*, set almost 40 years before it was produced). Wong explains why himself in the following interview (Kaufman, 2009).

indieWire: Why Hong Kong in the early 60s?

Wong: I always wanted to make a film about this period, because it’s very special in the history of Hong Kong, because it is right after 1949 and a lot of people from China are living in Hong Kong and they still have their dreams about their lives back in China. So like the Chinese communities in the film, there are people from Shanghai and they have their own languages and they don’t have contact with the local Cantonese. And they have their own movies and music and rituals. That is a very special period and I’m from that background. And I want to make a film like this, and I want to recreate that mood.

There are many important factors behind Hong Kong denizens’ particular nostalgia for this period of time; including extensive infrastructural and quality-of-life improvements, the entry of many foreign firms and industries as stimulants of rapid economic growth, and the promotion of a unique Hong Kong identity onto the world stage as the entertainment industry enjoyed a golden age.



Figure 9.1-9.2: A text card from the ending of *Mood*, signalling a flashforward in time from this point on. Source: Wong (2000)

However, a new reason has turned this phenomenon from a simpler affection to something more desperate and resolute. As locals face increasingly insurmountable challenges to survive; as Hong Kong’s prosperity seems to have stagnated, and as the mainland’s influence encroaches; resistance to the prospect of its relics disappearing completely has made the appreciation of this period of time very uncontroversial as people become increasingly protective of it. Likely because of the films’ immersion in these sorely missed years, embedded

in its costumes, set designs, colour grading and throwback music, they have all the more gained an enduring esteem as quintessential Hong Kong cinema. Furthermore, the perpetually aching yearning for unreachable halcyon days- whether before or after the present day- is clearly reflected in Wong's films.

The acknowledgement and visual representations of time's scarcity in Wong's films are significant in understanding the pressure time exerts on the characters' actions. (148 words)

A signature shot of Wong's is one in which a clock dominates the foreground for a few seconds as time elapses, partially obscuring the blurred background and its characters in action; the unstoppable, omnipresent passage of time dwarfs anything within it, even appearing to confine people and places to a less significant corner of the frame and turning viewers' attention further away from them.



Figure 10: A clock dominates the foreground of a shot of an office in 2046. Source: Wong (1994)

In *Mood* this occurs during a conversation of major change where Chow offers to bring Su along with him to Singapore so that the two can start over apart from their unfaithful partners. The 11th hour clock at the forefront suggests that this plan is at the mercy of extremely limited time, foreshadowing that ill timing will indeed be its undoing as Su arrives too late to leave with him.



Figure 11.1-11.2: Neither Chow asking the question or Su's response is seen on screen, and instead another clock is emphasised. Source: Wong (2000)

Elsewhere, in 2046, a jaded Chow and his new interest Bai Ling employ time extremely transactionally, selling each other their company for a trivial sum of money on each occasion.

Having established the threat of time running out hanging over every character's head, one can glean from the films' various plotlines several different responses by these individuals to the central quandary of an unfulfilled desire for an elusively distant point in time. Parallel to these responses, these films metaphorically answer a question closer to real life- if time is quickly running out for Hong Kong's present identity mired in past glories, what options do its people have?

To preserve objects of the past and deny their loss

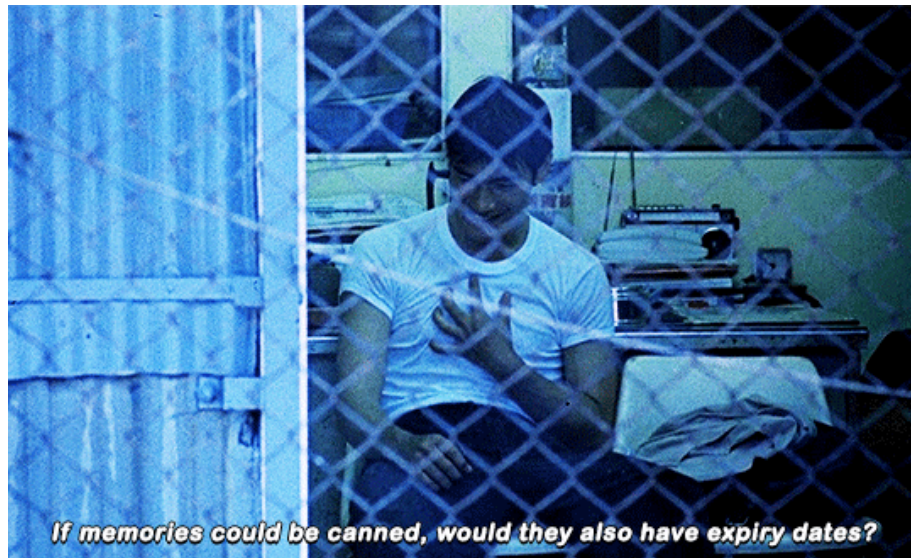


Figure 12.1-12.2: Cop #226 buys a can of pineapple every day for a month until his ex-girlfriend's birthday. He contemplates how she has changed over time. Source: Wong (1994)

None of these films are explicitly connected to Hong Kong's politics, but these parallels can easily be drawn from their subtext. One of the most iconic metaphors for the state of the

territory are the motifs of the pineapple cans during Cop #223's arc in *Chungking Express* with the same expiry date of his birthday- May the first- which brings to mind the expiry date of the Hong Kong identity as we know it in 2046 (which another movie of Wong's is named for). Despite the failure of his past relationship, he decides to prolong his hope in it by giving it this very arbitrary "expiry date", coping with his solitude by convincing himself that at least some of ex-girlfriend May's affection for him remains preserved and unchanged until then. With some self-awareness he laments that although pineapples are her favourite fruit, she may change her mind on them like she did with him as time passes.

In the same movie, Cop #663 nurses a similar break-up in a similar manner- he keeps his flight stewardess ex-girlfriend's uniform and toy planes in his flat, and delays opening her letter of separation indefinitely, enabling himself to believe that she has never left his life at all.



*Figure 13: Cop #223 ruminates on how to preserve the memories of his failed relationship.
Source: Wong (1994)*

This particular quote showcases the rationale of "canning" these memories, in the futile hope that they would never "expire" for eternity. Likewise, the true state of "normalcy" that Hong Kong seeks to preserve is not uniform between the government and the people, the former of whom seems to regard changes in its political landscape as small interruptions to daily functions and not an irreversible change in society.

To actively attempt to recapture the past, deliberately reconstructing the present to resemble it as closely as possible

Because Chow's experiences change so drastically with time's passing, he immerses himself in a cycle of recapturing sequential periods of time gone by; the first time with Su as they reenact their affair in *Mood*, and the subsequent attempts in 2046 with the different women he encounters and sometimes courts. In *Mood* Su's countless colourful cheongsams in both Eastern and Western styles are not only used as a marker for the time period, but to obscure whether she and Chow are representing themselves or their roles in each scene, and the scenes' causation or chronology. Neither are successful: while neither Chow nor Su are exactly aware of the accuracy of their efforts to reproduce their spouses' affair, they come dangerously close to creating a new one themselves, and are neither able to start a new life together nor to truly forget each other as they try to move on. Chow does the same in 2046, trying to recreate certain experiences he had with Su with the women of the movie- for instance, as Jing-wen helps him write his novels like Su did; to little satisfaction on his part, demonstrating the inadequacy of this course of action in achieving true catharsis.

As Chow writes 2046, at first insisting that it models Jing-wen's past relationship with her boyfriend but gradually realising that it reflects his own past instead, he comes to realise that his characters being fated to end apart parallels how he could never truly be happy with Black Spider in Singapore, as it appears to be fate itself that kept him from winning a game and thus starting a relationship with her. In this sense, he unconsciously recreates his own past in his work. This also causes him to notice Lulu's cycle of repeating history as she pursues her abusive, unfaithful boyfriend, ruefully concluding that she might stagnate and live in the past forever, satisfied by her own suffering. Upon this realisation, his own growth to avoid this fate is set into motion as well.

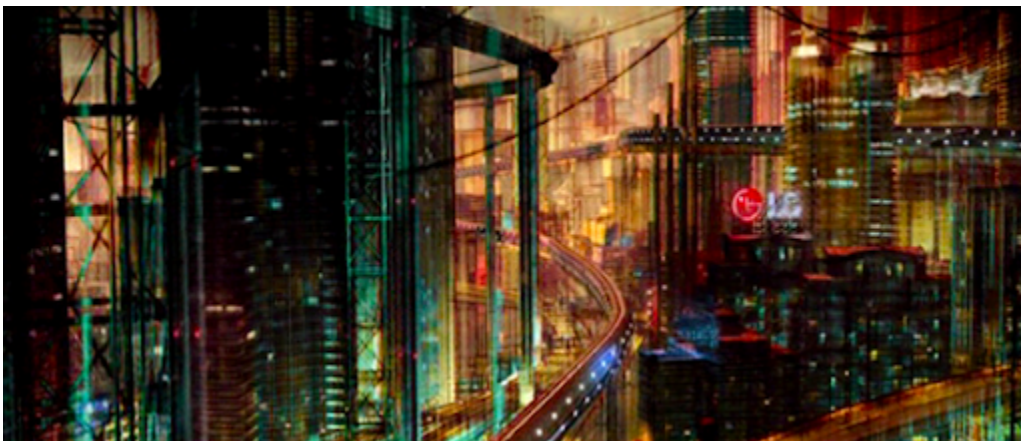


Figure 14: The futuristic, expansive cityscape of 2046 far removed from the present. Source: Wong (2004)

This depiction of the world of 2046 is a projection as well- its hyper-modern landscape clearly distinguishes it from the present time, and demonstrates Chow's escapism from his current situation through his works.

To accept pursuit of or obsession with the past as a fruitless endeavour, accepting the changes around oneself, and focusing one's energy on the future Instead:

This is often the conclusion the characters reach after going through harrowing experiences and realisations that change them fundamentally. In *Chungking Express*, cop 663 and Faye's reunion has them agreeing to seek a new destination together, symbolised by Faye's new paper boarding pass with an ambiguous endpoint. The past year sees them realising the other's increasing influence on their lives, as the former has taken over the food stall the latter used to work at, and the latter has become a flight stewardess to fulfil the former's preferences in women. In Wong's films, a renewed resolution to let go of one's desire for the past comes hand-in-hand with stark personal change.



Figure 15.1-15.3: While both appear to be trapped behind the gate's iron bars, Chow comes to his first realisation which will motivate him to propose running away together to Su. Source: Wong (2000)

Instead, in *Mood* the protagonists consider the prospect of abandoning their charade of their spouses' past interactions in favour of leaving for Singapore together and beginning a real relationship with each other; however, poor timing leaves this plan unfulfilled, and the film's ending demonstrates even poorer timing as they often come minutes away from running into each other again in the same places in the hope of another encounter, showing that their desire for each other has not changed.

Chow, who then pursues women who remind him of Su in one way or another- though none are exactly similar to the original- tries to reconcile these feelings in the novel 2046, where he

projects himself upon its hero Tak. Tak ultimately renews his resolve to leave 2046's lossless world after accepting that he will not find love with the train assistant, which parallels Chow's acceptance that he too will not be able to find Su in anyone else, after which he rejects Bai Ling's advances and declares that his time has become more valuable such that he will not squander it on this pointless endeavour, contrary to his transactional treatment of it earlier in the film.

Both physically and metaphorically, the room or novel 2046 is no longer available to him, forcing him to progress on to 2047, experiencing a change in perspective and course of action. Its real-life counterpart is the Hong Kongers who, against the current tide, retain the capacity to envision the possibilities for a Hong Kong past its "expiry date", and as a result are not as engrossed in restoring the island to a more desirable past state as their peers.

Regardless of the choice every character makes, this desire for lost time can never be fulfilled, and they drift further and further apart from their memories as time's arrow marches on, which becomes more difficult to pursue as they become obscure.



Time's passing is certain, but the characters' grasp on it is often as lacking as their grasp on these memories. The events of these movies are not presented in a linear fashion, but as vignettes narrated in voice-overs. The films' liberal movements back and forth within their chronologies are reminiscent of how a person remembers their experiences in transient fragments, not necessarily with any throughline or logical progression. Additionally, the flow of time is sometimes exaggerated to evoke a certain emotion- for instance, the unrealistic time card below expresses Chow's stasis and frustration as he struggles to process his inner emotions while writing his novel.

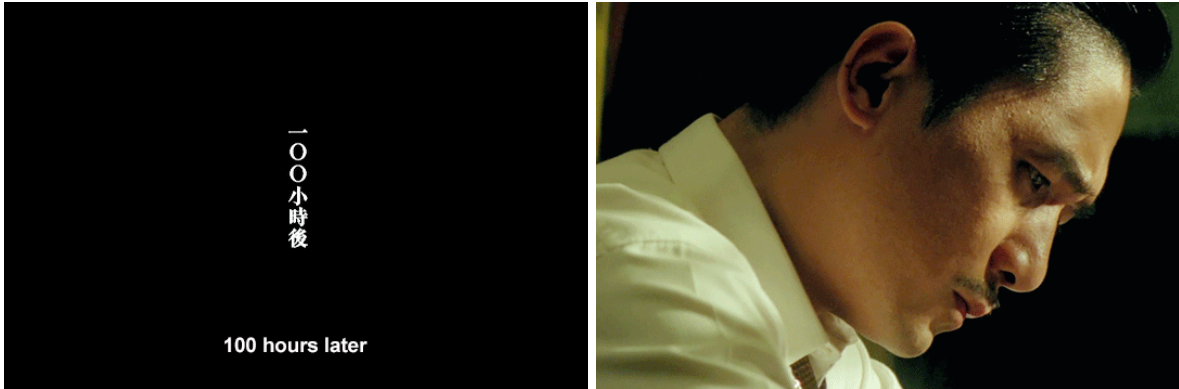


Figure 17.1-17.2: A time card with an exaggerated interval showcases how Chow is emotionally frozen in time. Source: Wong (2004)

Another variety of shot composition common to Wong's films is where the characters in the foreground, most often in a moment of intimacy, are either frozen in time or captured in slow-motion in contrast to the fast-paced blur of city activity in the background, highlighting how one's experience of time's passage is heavily modified by their emotions, becoming inconsistent with reality when someone strongly desires to retain it a bit longer.



Figure 18.1-18.2: On two separate occasions in 2046 crucial to cop #663 and Faye's relationship, they are isolated from the fast pace of the world around them- on the left as they connect with each other, and on the right as #663 waits for her in vain. Source: Wong (2004)

Despite the films' immersion in scenes from the past that evoke nostalgia in the audience, and despite these characters' personal attraction to their own nostalgic experiences, they are still surrounded by and cannot be separated from more mundane or even negative events, highlighting the farce of nostalgia in that it merely isolates a compelling but small part of the past, converts it into an unattainable desire, and even distorts its memory as times and circumstances change, especially where emotions are heavily involved.



Figure 19: Chow's story in 2046 begins with this text card, explaining the connection between his actions and his emotions. Source: Wong (2004)

Because of this, we can infer that Wong's goal is not necessarily to romanticise the past like his characters, but to present a more realistic and well-rounded view of how people's relationship with it evolves with time even as the events themselves remain unchanged.

So too has Hong Kong's relationship with its past evolved. While taken for granted before it became the past, in hindsight it has come to form the foundation of Hong Kong's identity, and now simultaneously increases in vulnerability and value- to polarising effects within its society, as many struggle to reconcile realpolitik and practicalities with their emotional attachment to happier times. These films both reanimate the appearance of this identity and symbolise these difficult decisions to much of their audience.

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Annex 1: Cover Page

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由渴望
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the hong kong identity through the
cinematic lens of wong kar-wai

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