

**The Cinema of Wong Kar Wai:
Chinese and Western Culture Differences in Narrative Cinemas**

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**THE CINEMA OF WONG KAR WAI:
CHINESE AND WESTERN CULTURE DIFFERENCES
IN NARRATIVE CINEMAS**

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ABSTRACT:

Wong Kar wai is one of the most famous Chinese directors in modern filmdom. The cinema of Wong Kar wai is important 20th century cinema in 90's Hong Kong society, which was in a post-industrial and post-colonial situation. In this paper, I have chosen four of Wong's films: *As Tears Go By* (1988), *Happy Together* (1997), *In The Mood For Love* (2000) and compared them respectively with American and British films *Mean Streets* (1973), *Brokeback Mountain* (2005), and *Brief Encounter* (1945) with similar themes. These comparisons will be used in order to explore the spiritual tendency of Wong's cinema, and to discover its meanings within the context of Chinese culture. In addition, the aim will be to demonstrate the methods of imitation, reproduction and the mixing up of genres that are Wong Kar wai's aesthetic strategy, which helped him to express his particular thematic, stylistic characteristics and establish his unique auteur status.

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CHAPTER ONE

The cinema of Wong Kar wai is important 20th century cinema in 90's Hong Kong society, which was in a post-industrial and post-colonial situation. The feeling of uncertainty, mixed-up genres and “disorder” narratives belong to Wong's post-modernist strategy of reconstructing his narratives. Beyond these delicate surfaces, themes of refusal and acceptance, loss and gain, forgetfulness and remembrance constantly appear in his films. These elements compose the inner bewilderment and sentimental tension of Wong's cinema. These unique characteristics made Wong's films highly acceptable to the multi-cultural audiences of Hong Kong, as well as those of mainland China, and have even been brought into North American and Western audience's field of vision.

In this paper, I have chosen four of Wong's films: *As Tears Go By*, *Happy Together*, *In The Mood For Love* and compared them respectively with American and British films with similar themes. These comparisons will be used in order to explore the spiritual tendency of Wong's cinema, and to discover its meanings within the context of Chinese culture. In addition, the aim will be to demonstrate the methods of imitation, reproduction and the mixing up of genres that are Wong Kar wai's aesthetic strategy, which helped him to express his particular thematic, stylistic characteristics and establish his unique auteur status.

As a director who was born in Shanghai and moved to Hong Kong in his childhood, Wong Kar wai has been influenced by a group of famous Chinese and foreign writers and filmmakers, that gave him the inhering talent for exploring the past,

capturing sensations ¹ , and criticizing our material world, which divided him from other so called ‘New wave’ or ‘Post New wave’ ² Hong Kong directors in the 90s. His education background in Graphic Design and his work experiences as a film scriptwriter ³ gave him more opportunity to learn from modern Western directors. And his favourite French New wave directors and the American director Martin Scorsese deeply affected him, and made him soon form his own standpoint when he directed his first film *As Tears Go By* in stylistically combining motif depth, image quality, and commercial motive. From the beginning, Wong already tried to play a unique role in his directing life – an Auteur, who’s truly sensed Hong Kong’s post industrial social reality, and fully understood the game rules of commercial filmmaking. At the same time he also loves simple themes and film language. As a contemporary film director, his ‘Hong Kong experiences’ closely linked the perplexed state of city life, and civilian’s spiritual emotional conditions. However, he represented it in an unusual and characteristic way. It was Wong’s great wisdom in filmmaking.

Wong Kar wai is not the only well-known director in the Chinese community, but he is the only one who has gained a good reputation lasting for almost two decades. Comparative contemporary directors are Chen Kaige and Zhang Yimou. Their films

¹ original text: Wong's characters charge headlong through a neon-lit city of endless nights, searching for love and finding sensation at every turn. resource from *DREAMS + DESIRE: THE FILMS OF WONG KAR-WAI*, viewed 9 Mar. 07, <<http://blogs.indiewire.com/dates/archives/002063.html>>

² The term of ‘New Wave’ and ‘Post-New Wave’ were highly used by Chinese media when describing contemporary Kong Kong directors, it seems the term has misused by media.

³ After graduating from Hong Kong Polytechnic College in graphic design in 1980, he enrolled in the Production Training Course organized by Hong Kong Television Broadcasts Limited (TVB) and became a full-time television scriptwriter.

Resource from: Wong Kar-wai, *wikipedia*, viewed in 2 Feb. 07. <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wong_Kar-wai>

Farewell My Concubine and *Raise the Red Lantern* (1991) “marked a turning point in so-called ‘Fifth Generation movies’.”⁴ Indeed, *Farewell* is a masterpiece in Chinese film history, and it also reached the summit of Chen’s career. However, the old Beijing stories no longer adapt to the new audience’s taste. Chen and Zhang have made a lot of changes to their new filmmaking in order to cater to those easily changeable audiences living in quickly developing China. Nevertheless, Chen’s first try in Hollywood (*Killing me softly*) and the most recent huge budget epic (*The Promise*) did not obtain or gain him more audiences. Relatively, Zhang’s effort has been to pander to overseas’ audiences love of an unenlightened and fatuous old oriental nation. Although his new films, from *Hero* to *Curse of The Golden Flower*, weren’t respected by domestic audiences, the North American market always gave him positive reviews and became a source of huge income, which also motivated him to keep on experimenting. Therefore, what made Wong Kar wai’s cinema unique and distinctive was its ability to produce art and commercial success in a Chinese context at the same time.

In highly evolutionary China, directors are endlessly reforming their film languages, the same applies to Wong Kar wai. He never tired of putting new ingredients into his work. From his first directed gangster film (*As tears go by*) to the latest sci-fi melodrama (*2046*), from ancient costume play (*Ashes of time*) to modern urban noir (*Chungking Express*), he worked within a very wide range of styles and genre. There is no other Chinese director that has dabbled in such an expansive art field, and has achieved big hits with every film. His films are never made to cater for audiences or film critics. He never made a million dollar premier or used nudity content to grab attention. Wong Kar wai is always an obstinate auteur who insists on his own principles. He still wears dark glasses. He still endlessly recreates scripts while shooting films, and re-edits afterwards, until the ‘final’ version appears.

⁴ Berry, C (ed.) 2003, *Chinese films in focus : 25 new takes*, British Film Institute, London, p.89

In Wong's cinema, the modern living locations are what I am familiar with the most. Although he did not show many high technology facilities to represent a modern city; the overcrowded streets and the alienation of urban people was very close to my life experiences of what makes the true essence of city life. As one who grew up in a big city, and being one of the first generation of 'one child policy', I could hardly get guidance from my parents or anyone else, but the same confusion and indescribable solitude could be found in Wong's film characters. Therefore, analysis of Wong's cinema for me is more like finding a better understanding of myself, and that was the reason his films attracted me.

Different from Tsui Hark and John Woo's Kong Fu films, which were trying to recapture people's spirit in an imaginary warrior's world, Wong Kar wai's films are towards combining reality with the fictitious, in order to present life's absurd and fragmented aspects. Compared to younger directors like Fruit Chan whose films truly represented working class's lives, Wong's films appear the aspect of expressionism and elites' consciousness for the educated middle class audiences. Also other than feminism director Ann Hui's work, Wong's films are from a male viewpoint but injected with female in sight.

Hong Kong's colonial history is different from other modern cities in the world and caused it to be deeply influenced by the West. On the other hand, as a domain of the People's Republic of China, it had strong links with its mother culture. Therefore Hong Kong is both localized and indigenized with Chinese and foreign cultures. The consequence is that Hong Kong is confused as to its identity.

Over the 150 years of English colonial rule, Hong Kong transformed from a fishing village into a world famous trade port, export and financial centre, not only for products but for cultural exchange. This particular cultural atmosphere makes Hong Kong people very sensitive about recognition of their political and cultural identity.

Historically, there were many political incidents ⁵ that increased Hong Kong people's fear and unease about their recognition of self-identity. 'In comparison with Macao, the colonial government didn't force or promote its own national ideology on Hong Kong.' ⁶ At the same time, the situation meant that Hong Kong was isolated from Chinese culture for quite a long time. The scarcity of a leading orthodox ideology makes mass culture appear more independent. With regards to recognition of political and cultural identity, the mass media reveals its awareness in many levels of this problem. A comprehensive review of the most popular film genres in Hong Kong during past 50 years reveals that many of them contain such an issue. Kong fu, wu xia (martial arts swordplay), ancient costume play, gangster, family and undercover themes etc. are all in Hong Kong films' affections. Although these films are all productions of entertainment, their multi-angles reflect general idea of recognising their identities while a mainstream ideology was missing.

The popularity of undercover subject films and TV programmes in the recent decade reveals Hong Kong people's concept of identity recognition. Undercover as a particular role has distinct cultural meaning in Hong Kong, that is neither a survey

⁵ 1841 Preliminary cession of Hong Kong Island to United Kingdom

1842 Cession of Hong Kong Island, founded as a crown colony of the United Kingdom

1860 Cession of Kowloon (south of Boundary Street)

1898 Lease of the New Territories (including New Kowloon)

1940s Japanese Occupation Era

1950s - 1997 under British rule

Resource from: 'History of Hong Kong', *Wikipedia*, viewed 23 Mar. 07

<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hong_kong_history#Colonial_Hong_Kong_Era_.281800s_-_1930s.29>

⁶ This knowledge was taught in my high school history lessons: large numbers of Portuguese colonizer mixed-married local Macao colonists, that made colonizer and colonists mixed together. By contraries in Hong Kong, British made strict stratification by racial groups, and uncommonly marry with locals. People in Hong Kong were British nationalities, but they were actually low class citizens.

for end-result, nor a discussion of how complex an identity could be, because “identity recognition” is after all a political and ethical choice by individuals. The ‘*Infernal Affair*’ film series consciously or unconsciously truly expressed Hong Kong people’s uncertain thoughts about their identity crisis: one desperately wants identity back, the other is anxious to get rid of his past. That is a description of Hong Kong people’s ambivalence when they were facing the ‘returning’ to mainland China. Therefore, 1997 was not only a historical landmark, but also a signifier of identity crisis. From Tsui Hark to Wong Kar wai, from action film to art house, it is possible to see the perennial theme shared in Hong Kong cinema by the questing and assertion of it. And in Wong Kar wai’s film, he represented people’s inside uncertainty by not showing obviously about it. In his film, we can easily find a noisy city, twisted spaces, and ambiguity in time. Also the protagonists are always searching, escaping, or waiting. These series of marginal characters and obscure narratives basically fit Hong Kong people’s mental state when they are facing the ‘returning’ to mainland China. Therefore, Wong’s films became the ‘allegory of Hong Kong’. As the screenwriter of complex allegories, Wong Kar wai built his unique auteur status, which made him distinct from almost all the other directors in Hong Kong.

Most of Wong’s films are in ruptured narrative, and those stories were pieced together and disjoint. *As Tears Go By*, *Days of Being Wild*, and *Happy Together* are a few of his films that have relative coherent narratives. Some people say *As Tears Go By* is a ‘gritty romantic crime-drama inspired by Scorsese’s *Mean Streets*’⁷

⁷ As Tears Go By, *The New York Times*, Tuesday, March 27th 2007, viewed 8 Mar. 07

< http://movies2.nytimes.com/gst/movies/movie.html?v_id=160001>

CHAPTER TWO

Wong Kar wai's directorial debut, *As Tears Go By*, surprisingly won two trophies⁸ in the Hong Kong Film Awards in 1988. It was more than ten years later when I saw this movie for the first time, and Andrew Lau, Jacky Cheung and Wong Kar wai had all been hugely successful in their careers. Cinematographer Andrew Lau has directed his own hit movie, *Infernal Affairs*. And Maggie Cheung is no longer known just as a former 'Miss Hong Kong', but as a skilful actress, who is no longer placed in films as a decorating vase. She has become more mature, and aware of how to represent women's desires and struggles by using her slim body, dressed in a lot of different costumes. (in *In the Mood For Love*, 2002)

The achievement of *As Tears Go By* was not only two trophies, but also aesthetically. In this film, 'Wong Kar- wai made Hong Kong audiences see hand-held camera skill for the first time'⁹. That was used widely by French New Wave directors. Also he combined a romantic atmosphere with a commercial element, inspired by a music video. This new invention exploited a new path for Hong Kong gangster movies. All these demonstrated Wong is the pioneer of Hong Kong New Wave. At the same time, he discovered a group of talented actors. 'Jacky Cheung as a three-year experience singer who won his first acting award was seen as a

⁸ Won: Best Supporting Actor (Jacky Cheung), Best Art Direction (William Chang) in 1989 Hong Kong Film Awards.

Resource from: *As Tears Go By*, *wikipedia*. viewed 20 March 2007

<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/As_Tears_Go_By>

⁹ '旺角卡门', *wikipedia*. viewed 20 March 2007

<<http://zh.wikipedia.org/wiki/%E6%97%BA%E8%A7%92%E5%8D%A1%E9%96%80>>

miracle.’¹⁰ ‘Andy Lau whose acting always been criticized by film critics since his career started in 1981, for the first time obtained commendations in this film.’¹¹

And for Maggie Cheung, who used to be an adornment on screens, although she did not make a breakthrough in this film, started to speak with her eyes. Therefore, *As Tears Go By* is a dividing line for many members of its crew.

If it is said, that *As Tears Go By* is ‘a part-yakuza, part-Scorsese gangster film set on the neon-drenched mean streets of Mongkok’¹², I would rather say it is a Chinese *Jiang Hu* film: a more proper word to describe the particular type of Chinese local gangster film. Literally, *Jiang Hu* could be translated as ‘rivers and lakes’ that alludes to the wide and extensive territories of the knight-errant’s world. The term *Jiang Hu* emphasizes more chivalry, personal loyalty, and brotherhood, rather than killing, fighting, or physical prowess. What everybody knows is that this film borrowed highly from *Mean Streets*: that ‘the characters of Andy Lau, Jacky Cheung and Maggie Cheung mirrored, almost exactly, the roles played, respectively, by Harvey Keitel, Robert De Niro and Amy Robinson’¹³. But not everyone is aware that Wong has reconstructed it into a Chinese gangster melodrama, which attaches importance to the innermost feelings of people who live in the margin of our society. Looking at this film’s Chinese title - ‘Mongkok Carmen’¹⁴ - will give you a hint. The female lead Ah-Ngor, like a modern Carmen, set in Mongkok, was foredoomed

¹⁰ ‘旺角卡门’, *wikipedia*. viewed 20 March 2007

<<http://zh.wikipedia.org/wiki/%E6%97%BA%E8%A7%92%E5%8D%A1%E9%96%80>>

¹¹ ‘旺角卡门’, *wikipedia*. viewed 20 March 2007

<<http://zh.wikipedia.org/wiki/%E6%97%BA%E8%A7%92%E5%8D%A1%E9%96%80>>

¹² *DAYS OF BEING WILD: THE FILMS OF WONG KAR-WAI*. viewed 20 Mar. 07,

<<http://www.cinematheque.bc.ca/archives/wong.html>>

¹³ Nield, Anthony 2005 ‘As Tears Go By’, *DVD Times*. Viewed 05 Mar. 07,

<<http://dvdtimes.co.uk/content.php?contentid=55877>>

¹⁴ In simplified Chinese: 旺角卡门, a literal translation: Mongkok Carmen
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to end her love life tragically. By the analysis above, it has already shown us the two main clues which ran through this film's narrative - brotherhood and love.

The film opens with young gangster Wah getting a visit from his cousin Ngor, who is coming from Lantau Island to receive medical treatment in Mongkok. While Ngor stays, Wah just broken up with his girl friend, and had a crash on Ngor. But Wah has no time to start with Ngor, because his arrogance 'brother' Fly increasingly gets him into trouble. After Ngor returns home, Wah can't get her off his mind, and decided to start a 'normal' life with her in Lantau Island. However, their good times did not last long. At last, Wah backs to Mongkok again to rescue Fly then never returns.

This film is not quite a labelled 'Wong Kar wai's film', as his later works are, except for the dazzling camerawork, slow-motion, and montage that occurred sporadically. I think the least likeness is the scarcity of voice-over. In Wong's films, the use of voice-over helped enrich narratives, and open out their philosophy of life. Those profound comments played an important role in Wong's cinema. Strictly speaking, this film does have a voice-over; when Ngor has gone back to Lantau Island, Wah is reading the letter she left. In this letter, Ngor explained why she had to go so quickly, and told him she bought some new glasses. It seems she was telling trivial matters. However, Wong Kar wai has encoded plenty of information in this plain scene, which not only deeply implied her feelings to Wah, but also prefigured their sequel. Therefore, this scene became a remarkable turning point for their relationship.

Ngor wrote: 'I also bought a few more glasses. I know they'll all get broken sooner or later, so I hid one of them. One day, when you need that glass, give me a call, and I'll tell you where it's hidden.' Here, 'glass' signifies Wah's 'love (or relations)', and 'broken' corresponds to when, previously, he 'broke up' with his girlfriend. Like a glass, his love relation is brittle, because his current status has not allowed him to keep a normal love life. His ex-girlfriend complained that she obtained

neither him nor money in their six-year relationship. Perhaps we can say Wah is pure-hearted like a transparent glass. But, after all, glass has a function as a container, and is not to be left unused. In a relationship, a pure heart is not enough. Ngor clearly knows Wah's situation, so, at the same time she hid a glass in his house, she also hid her love to him in her heart. And that's Ngor's way of telling her feelings - that if he needs love, she will be there.

As Ngor's voice-over finished her letter, a montage appeared on screen. At eye height, we saw a road at the foot of a mountain. Two buses ran towards each other in opposite directions, and soon passed one another (*figure 1, figure 2*). The following scene was a high angle of the forest (*figure 3*).



figure 1



figure 2



figure 3

The camera was always placed in a “callous” position, like an insensitive spectator who rationally observed everything from the sidelines. Here, Wong again gave a hint that Ngor and Wah’s futures will be similar to the buses - although they had a brief encounter, finally, each goes his own way. And then Wong seemed to offer an option. The image of the forest firstly reminded me it's the place for retired knights or an anchorite in Chinese old martial novels. It seems that Wah had the possibility to start a new life with Ngor, like million of other normal people, if he broke away from his current life. And Wah took the chance to change, after he met his ex-girlfriend by coincidence. Because he saw that she had become a happy and ordinary wife who was bearing a child and waiting for her husband, at that moment, Wah must have remembered the woman who was waiting for him. Although he could not wait to be with Ngor, he still hesitated to express his feelings. ‘I just wanted to say...I found that glass’ was Wah’s way to tell of his love. But, after he saw Ngor accompanied by another man, he threw the glass into the ocean. We can say it was Wah releasing his unhappiness. Or, to think about it in another way: he let the glass sink into the deep sea which was like letting his love sink downwards into his heart. That was Wah’s decision to set her free. Maybe he knew that when glass sinks in water it won't be broken easily. Therefore, I say ‘glass’ has symbolic significance in Wah and Ngor’s love story.

At last, Wah finally left Ngor because he had a reckless, immature brother who needed to be protected. As a mid-level triad thug who has been paid to kill since he was fourteen years old ¹⁵, Wah must have known deep down an old saying: ‘someone involved in gangs world, will have no command over himself’ ¹⁶. Therefore, brothers always matter, when compared to personal affairs. Wah started

¹⁵ Wah’s line in film: ‘at the age of 14, I was already getting paid to kill.’

¹⁶ An old Chinese saying always referred to Hong Kong gangster films.

with Ngor because she was ‘always in his mind’¹⁷, but, when Fly got into trouble, he again left Ngor to rescue his brother. So, I think Wah is a simple man with a simple heart, exactly like Fly. They both did things without giving them much consideration. For Wah, he was wishing to escape from his present life with Ngor, but he was constantly pulled back in by his troublesome brother Fly. At last, he abnegated his love to Ngor, and even ended his life - all because of his loyalty to a brother-like friend. So brotherhood was the keynote as the storyline developed.

Some viewers asked ‘why the two (Wah and Fly) are so inseparable despite their obvious, and frankly immense, differences.’¹⁸ I would give a simple answer for this: they are inseparable because they are gang brothers, and they are actually the same type of man. This will be understood more deeply, only if interpreted within a Chinese cultural context. First of all, we have to understand the mainstream ideologies among local heroes, which I think are dedication and loyalty. Wah, who died to save brother, was promoted as having an essential quality of being a man. This olden value encouraged a sense of pride in sacrifice for a brother. Also, it is part of traditional Chinese values that an elder brother should be responsible for a younger, like a father for a child. (Though I have no brothers or sisters, I take the example of how my father treated my youngest uncle to help me understand the philosophy of being an old brother. Every time I saw Wah forgave his stupid brother, it was like watching the story that took place in my family.) In the old Chinese value system, we have been taught: ‘brothers are intimate like your hands and arms, lovers

¹⁷ Wah’s line in film: *‘I know what I’m like and what my work is like. I can’t promise you anything. If you weren’t always on my mind ... I wouldn’t come here.’*

¹⁸ ‘As Tears Go By’, *Hong Kong Cinema*. Viewed 20 March 2007,

<http://www.hkcinema.co.uk/Reviews/As_Tears_Go_By_Wong_Kar_Wai.htm>

are similar to clothing’¹⁹. No matter whether it was brotherhood, or love, people’s feelings and emotions were always emphasized in Wong’s cinema. In this film, it was about undeserved love: Wah did not deserve Ngor’s love, and Fly did not deserve Wah’s brotherly love.

As Wong Kar wai’s first effort, *As Tears Go By* introduced his unique film style to the conventional Hong Kong gangster and action film market. My first impression was that this film did not seem to be much like Wong’s later works. Perhaps it could be identified as an ordinary gangster film that is mainly about brothers, women, honour and love, which makes it no different from other works in the 80s. But, after I watched it the second time, I found some characteristics belonging to Wong, which have been developed well in his later films.

First of all is his special character. Wong was very interested in representing the life of people who live marginal in the world, like gangster, killers, or jobless ones. In this film, besides Ngor, who works as a waitress, none of the characters in this film have a decent ‘occupation’ which could be written on a personal résumé. The two male leads, Wah and Fly, are small-time hoods on the street. Their status determines that they are unsteady, insecure, and uncertain about their lives in this modern society. But they were not reconciled in this post-industrial society. At the same time they also wanted to live harmony in the world. Therefore their inner desire and outer status strongly collided. The designing of these two characters was not random. Quite the opposite, their actions and struggles could be defined as a signifier of the director’s self-expression, which, I think, signified Wong Kar wai’s personal understanding about life. Therefore, these characters were the embodiment of a kind of Wong Kar wai’s ideology. ,No matter what they did, or what were they called, or

¹⁹ Written in the 15th Chapter of *Romance of the Three Kingdoms*, a Chinese historical novel, based on the events in 220-280 D.C. It was written in old Chinese, so it has different translations. Another version is ‘brothers are like hands and feet, wives and children are like clothing’.

even if they were without a name, characters in Wong's later films all possess the nature of disorientation, alienation and decadence, as Wah and Fly do. Those intrinsic qualities were evident throughout all of Wong Kar wai's works, and became a core element in his narratives.

In this film, Wah aspired to a position of stature in the local street gangs, and Fly dreamed of becoming a legendary gangster hero. In the main, both of them were thirsty to be known, and have respect, because they needed an 'identity' to be remembered. They would obtain an 'identity' only if their dreams came true. Otherwise, they would still be one of the nameless gangsters stroll the streets. That educed another aspect of Wong's film characters – searching, they either chasing the past or looking for future. This feature of Wong's cinema veritably represented the spiritual status of the new generation who had grown up in a special historical environment in Hong Kong.

It is revealing to compare *As Tears Go By* with the American film upon which it is based Martin Scorsese's *Mean Streets* (1973), from the point of view of revealing what is unique to Wong Kar Wai's cinema.

Since Wong Kar wai's *As Tears Go By* is almost a Chinese version of Martin Scorsese's *Mean Streets*, the two films unavoidably have a lot in common. Therefore it is essential to discover their differences in following the same storyline as well as to identify their commonalities within their different cultural backgrounds.

In the early '90s, there was a famous Chinese TV series that for the first time showed the life of New York for Mainland Chinese audiences. This programme had a widely quoted slogan that 'if you love someone, send them to New York, because it is a heaven; also if you hate someone, send them to New York, because it is a hell.' This description of New York at some level tallies with Martin Scorsese's portrayal of New York in his film, *Mean Streets*.

Both films represent the city realistically. In *Mean Streets*, described as half-autobiography of Martin Scorsese, New York is a Mafioso's city, which is noisy and cold, like a devil under the streetlamps. It is filled with gangsters in extremely difficult conditions. The smell of depression permeates this city. Scorsese represents this city in a documentary-like, realistic way, and all the emotions of pain, pity, and helplessness are hidden.

Similarly, Wong Kar wai also represents the city realistically in *As Tears Go By*. It has vivid fighting scenes, which are violent and bloody. But these sanguinary and noir-like scenes still contain a slice of lyricism. Because Wong Kar wai wants to touch the most sensitive nerve of audience, he wants us to be moved and impelled at the moment the blood gushes on the screen. Therefore Wong Kar wai's purpose is more obvious than Scorsese's; he establishes two brother-like friends, as close as flesh and blood, and then sends them down into the nether world together. The realistic look of this film is only a surface that actually covers the two male protagonists' (Wah and Fly's) destructive attitude. They seem to want to tell us that no matter how hard you willing to embrace the world, you will be abandoned anyway.

In these two films, Johnny and Fly are both small-time hoods, who always dream about standing out among their fellows; and Charlie and Wah both play the older brother's role, who are always unprincipled and endlessly protect their little 'brothers'. These four characters all have a positive attitude towards life in their original mindset. At the same time, there is also a similarity between two female characters, Teresa and Ngor. They are not like most of the other female characters in gangster films, an obstacle to the gangs, but these two tender, feminine characters signify the only relaxing place for Charlie and Wah to seek comfort and briefly escape from the involuted Mafia circle.

Furthermore, different from the male characters' special status, the female characters in both films are more similar to ordinary people, so their characters are more close to the audience. On the other hand, the character of Ngor has a more tragic ending than that of Teresa, which reflects the directors' different viewpoints about women.

In *Mean Streets*, the character of Teresa is relatively independent. Although she faces difficulties, at least she has the freedom to make choices, whereas in *As Tears Go By*, the female character, Ngor, is more passive, and, fatally, she knows Wah will eventually choose his brother over her. She seems always waiting for Wah to announce her destiny. As the weak side of the relationship, Ngor encounters the same fate of her gangster boyfriend in relation to his brother – rejected, with Wah and Fly rejected by the society, while Ngor is rejected by Wah. She wears a face-mask, and, close-lipped, she seems prepared to accept rejection. Therefore the female character in *As Tears Go By* is not only a woman who is waiting to be loved, but also a woman waiting to be refused. This increases the dramatic tension that the male characters' tragic ending roots in an irresistible outer power, but for the female character, she just waits and accepts. The difference between the two female characters reflects the difference between two cultural backgrounds that compares the West, influenced by the women's rights movement, with China, a nation with over two thousand years of feudal rule, and a view of woman that is relatively traditional. Therefore the female character in *As Tears Go By* at some level reveals the common feature of women in a certain cultural background who are bred to grin and bear it.

Another cultural difference is seen in Charlie and Wah's different motivations for saving their 'brothers'. Both of them to the best of their abilities protect their brother-like, but uncontrollably dangerous, friends. However the ideology which supports their actions is absolutely different. For Charlie, this power is rooted in his religion. Since he is a reverent Catholic, he knows his guilt and is very willing to do

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penance for it. For reminding himself of the pain of being in hell, Charlie always puts his finger in fire to feel its heat. At last, he finds a way to make atonement for his sin by protecting his 'younger brother' Johnny. On the other hand, for Wah, he has no belief; the only reason that motivates him to sacrifice for his brother is the bred-in-the-bone traditional doctrine. Wah is influenced by the old value that 'brothers are like your hands and feet, but lovers are only like a piece of clothing.' That explains why he chooses brother over lover, and finally even sacrifices his life for helping his brother. Beyond Charlie and Wah's similar actions, there are two different motivations that reveal different cultural backgrounds in ideology.

In their narratives, both films have three mirrored characters: Charlie and Wah, Johnny to Fly, Teresa to Ngor. Stories in *As Tears Go By* mainly unfold among the three, but in *Mean Streets*, besides the three main characters, there are several other characters. However, Charlie and Johnny's brotherly friendship, and Charlie and Teresa's love relationship, are the two main themes in this film.

Unlike *Mean Streets* as a review of the director's life in 'little Italy' of the '50s, *As Tears Go By* does not directly reflect Wong Kar wai's early life, but both films reflect an 'anti-hero' theme. They both tell the story of 'ordinary' gang members in their particular environment, and that they are lost and helpless. Furthermore, both films succeeded commercially, while at the same time, they also audaciously explore aesthetics, ideology, motif and sociality. The death of the unpredictable young brother in both films represents the characters' boredom with living in the gangster world, and also reflects their helpless feeling about being involved in a life of crime. They do not die in an atmosphere of morality, justice or romantic idealization, but are shot to death like rats in the street. This 'anti-hero' emotion is a breakthrough in the 'hero' formula in genre film, and is built on a feeling of dejection about an uncontrollable life.

CHAPTER THREE

A similar film to *As Tears Go By*, *Happy Together* is one of a few of Wong Kar wai's works which tell a complete story. Released in the same year in which Hong Kong was handed over to mainland China (1997), the ambiguous title '*Happy Together*' made this film inscrutable. If the viewer ignores the messages hidden in this film, *Happy Together* could be described as a simple love story between two male lovers.

The love story and romance were popular genres in Hong Kong's film market during the 1990s. Some remarkable works, including Stanley Kwan's *Red Rose White Rose* (1994), Peter Chan's *Comrades, Almost a Love Story* (1996), and Ann Hui's *Eighteen Springs* (1997) have become collective memories of that period of time. Meanwhile, Ann Lee's homosexual film *The Wedding Banquet* (1993) discovers the possibility of another kind of love. At the time the film was made, homosexuality did not have as much acceptance as it does nowadays in terms of society's consensus, and the state had a great amount of control of subject matter, performing rigorous censorship of public media. As a result, only a few directors dared to depict that new subject, although most of them realized expressly that the film market was almost saturated with 'normal' love stories, and a homosexual theme would refresh the market and allow audiences to experience something different from 'ordinary' romances. Therefore, the appearance of *Happy Together* brought a breath of fresh air to the Chinese film community, and it earned Wong Kar wai a Best Director award at the 1997 Cannes Film Awards²⁰.

However, *Happy Together* was not the type of work which aimed to hunt for novelty for its own sake. Furthermore, the film was not intended to reveal

²⁰ Wikipedia, Wong Kar wai Awards
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extraordinary love affairs between members of the same sex. Rather, it is a sentimental romance tragedy set in Argentina. Two lovers from Hong Kong have helplessly and desperately drifted to the opposite side of the globe. At the same time, this film expresses the director's concerns about politics, and his philosophy of being alive, as well as the symptomatology in contemporary Hong Kong society.

Ho Po wing (played by Leslie Cheung) is a flighty lover, who frequently breaks up with his taciturn, traditional boyfriend Lai Yiu fai (played by Tony Leung). The two are never really apart, however, since Po wing has a 'curse' which ensures that Yiu fai back to him. Though Po-wing often suggests that they should separate, but his 'let's start over' gets to Fai every time. In this way, Po wing becomes more and more unpredictable in their relationship, and Fai suffers more and more from this. In the film, they have travelled all the way to Buenos Aires to 'start over' again, and plan to return to Hong Kong as soon as they have seen Iguazu Falls.

Nevertheless, unexpected events affect their plans. Po wing and Fai get lost on their way to the waterfall, and after an argument their relationship ends again. Po wing is then badly injured, and goes back to Fai to live under Fai's care for a while. For Po-wing, Fai has always been like a port, allowing him to return like an unsteady boat that is tired of sailing. Those days they spend in Yiu fai's apartment were their happiest time together. Fai acts as Po wing's loyal caretaker, cook, shopper and dancing partner.

In order to keep Po wing with him, Fai secretly hides Po-wing's passport. Po wing still runs away as soon as he recovers, but keeps calling Fai to ask for his passport back. Fai is happy that his lover must be reminded of him often, until he starts a delicate relationship with a young man, Chang, from Taiwan. At last, Fai decides to go back home. Before he leaves, he visits Iguazu Falls, and Chang's family in Taiwan. Po wing's passport has never been returned. Fai did not mind returning it but he did not want to see his former lover because he dreaded hearing what Po

wing always says. The 'curse' still has the power get to Fai, but this time he will not let Po-wing have power over him. At the same time that Fai finally finds his own way, Po wing, a man who has lost his identity, is left in an exotic nightscape weeping alone.

Although this film ends with the cheerful song "Happy Together," recorded from Daniel Chung's live concert show and features all the audience's cheering, it still cannot sweep away the fundamentally sad tone of the film. The reason that this story is so sorrowful is not only that it shows how two lovers fall out of love, but also because it causes viewers to sympathize by truly expressing people's contradictory and lonely inner world when they are away from home.

Perhaps the meaning of 'home' varies for different individuals. In this film, home was an outland place that the protagonists were keen on going back to, since it was their spiritual harbour to rest their rootless and tired souls.

At the beginning of the film, Po wing and Yiu fai's plan of visiting Iguazu Falls together is also a promise that signified that they are 'starting over' in Argentina. Therefore, visiting the waterfall became their spiritual goal, which encouraged them to maintain their relationship. Yiu fai always remembers this promise, and even had been locked within it. Even after he determines not to see Po wing again, he still could not forget to see the waterfall; it seems as though he has decided not to love Po wing any more, but still kept the habit of loving him. He seems compelled to love and tolerate Po wing, since it will help them fill his empty spirit.

As their relationship changes, visiting the waterfall together becomes a dream that can never come true. Then Yiu fai stops being controlled by Po wing, choosing instead to fix the broken relationship with his father. From Yiu fai's narrations, we know he has appropriated money from the company he worked for before he travelled to Argentina. Since the boss of that company was an old friend of his father, Yiu fai has disgraced his father very much. At that moment, a tension appears

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