

Hong Kong Identity, According to Wong Kar-wai

by Doug Gritzmacher

One of the first shots in Wong Kar-wai's film *Days of Being Wild* (1990) is close-up of a clock. The clock hangs above a snack bar counter being tended to be a young woman. A man walks down the stairs behind the counter and approaches the woman. The

deny. It's done."

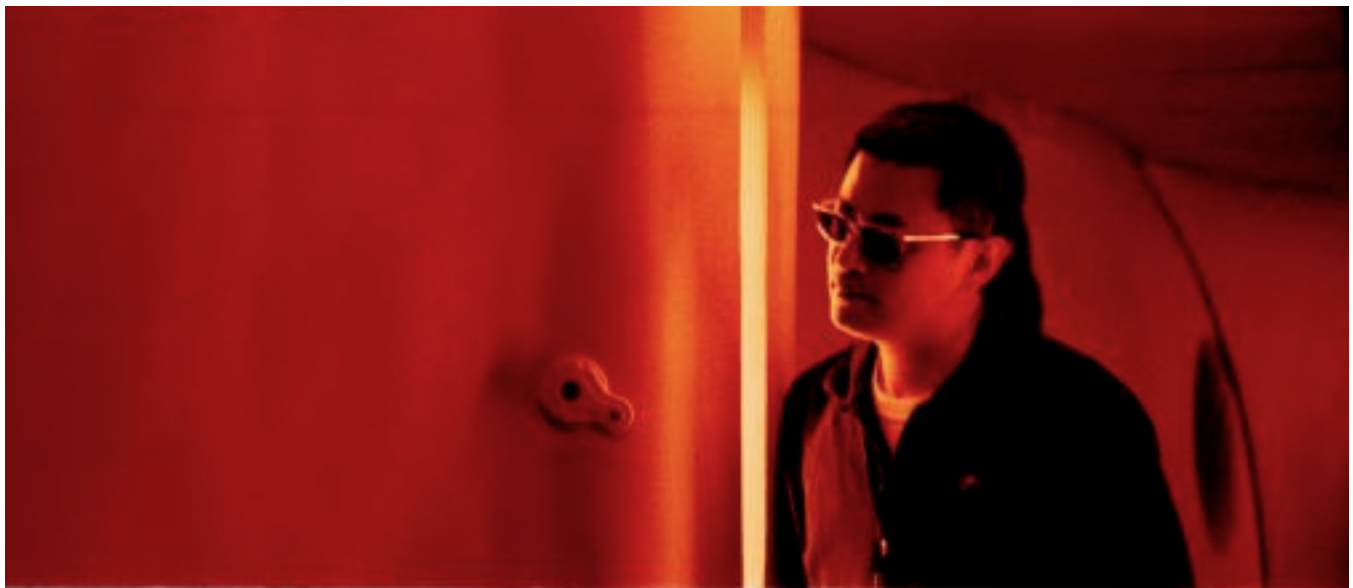
The film is barely five minutes old and already it is clear that Wong is fascinated with time, specifically moments of time. Clocks and discussions on time preoccupy both the camera and what the characters talk about for the rest of the film. By the end, we realize Wong

ing more than a reminder of loss. In *Days*, Yuddy, while in the Philippines, talks with a man from Hong Kong:

"It's possible if we met in Hong Kong again we wouldn't recognize each other."

"I hope not."

"Have we met before?"



Wong Kar-wai

man, Yuddy (Leslie Cheung), ask the woman, Lai (Maggie Cheung), what her name is. She refuses to tell him. Banter between the two of them ensues. Yuddy lifts his wrist and ask Lai to look at his watch with him for one minute. After the minute passes, Yuddy asks Lai, "What day's today?" "Sixteenth," Lai says.

Yuddy looks at her a moment and says, "Sixteenth. April the sixteenth. At one minute before 3 p.m. on April the sixteenth 1960, you're together with me. Because of you, I'll remember that one minute. From now on, we're friends for one minute. This is a fact you can't

chose to show a close-up of the clock at the beginning of the film so as to transform its meaning into a metaphor for the film, which itself could be said to be a metaphor for Wong's filmography.

Wong was raised in and is a resident of Hong Kong, a densely packed city of 6 million people. This fact makes confrontations between people a frequent daily occurrence and often random. So many people come and go that nothing really seems to last (9). In this kind of environment memory takes on new kind of importance, one that often makes Wong's characters wonder if memory is noth-

"I don't know. I'm not good at remembering things."

"Me either."

Here it seems Wong is saying the key to dealing with the realities of personal relationships in a densely packed urban environment like Hong Kong is to remember as little as possible. But as Anthony Leong writes in an article that appeared in the journal *Asian Cult Cinema*, memory is actually a double-edged sword. "Essentially, Wong postulates that the pain of loss and the tenacity of remembrance are both destructive forces, yet essential for survival," Leong writes.

Memory, then, is both comfort-

ing and depressing. It is treasured because it is a reminder of happy moments, but depressing because the moment is gone forever.

So when Yuddy asks Lai to look at his watch with him for one moment, it seems Wong is saying that one must accept life is a collection of moments and should be valued for what they are. While the passing of moments leads to a sense of loss, the fact that more moments are to come can be a comforting realization.

Wong sees value in addressing the issue of memory because it is central to the concerns of modern Hong Kong society. But Wong is in a long line of Hong Kong filmmakers to use cinema for examining social issues central to Hong Kong, starting with the new wave cinema movement in the late 1970s.

Hong Kong enjoyed a financial boom during the 1950s and 1960s but the side effects—crime, drugs and housing shortages—became major

problems in Hong Kong society in the 1970s (p. 145, 6). Suddenly the melodramatic films of the characteristic of Hong Kong cinema up to

amples that addressed crime and drug problems, collectively (p. 145, 6).

Films out of this movement garnered the Hong Kong film industry dominance in the East mostly because they dealt with issues Hong Kong citizens were concerned with.

“Hong Kong filmmakers, on the whole, tend to cater to a collective mass audience and to play up the sentiments of such an audience,” Sek Kei wrote in article appearing in the journal *Bright Lights*. “This is a feature of Hong Kong cinema not found in the movies produced in other countries.” (7).

This is probably because Hong Kong is a place like no other world. In fact, Hong Kong is not even a country.



that time were no longer relevant. Audiences were hungry for something that spoke to and addressed the social problems that they were experiencing with increasing frequency on the streets around them. *Anti Corruption* (1975) and *Jumping Ash* (1976) are two notable ex-

Colonized by the British since 1842 and populated mostly by refugees who fled China after Mao came into power in 1949, Hong Kong is a city caught between the traditions and history of the East, and the

economic and individual freedoms of a globalized Western world (p. 266, 3). This uncertain existence has led Hong Kong citizens to develop collective identity crises.

This crisis was only made worse by Sino-British Joint Declaration. In 1984, Great Britain and China signed an agreement authorizing the British to turn over Hong Kong, a British colony since the Opium War, back to China on July 1, 1997. This agreement had enormous impact on the collective anxiety by exposing issues that, up to that point, had existed subcutaneous of all other social issues. But between 1984 and 1997, the anxiety of being turned over to China dominated Hong Kong society like no other. This, of course, attracted the attention of many new wave directors, who were already addressing social issues with their films. "The core group of new wave directors (Ann Hui, Yim Ho and Tsui Hark) converged in their concerns stemming from the central motif of the China question: the 1997 syndrome..." (p. 155, 6).

But no other filmmaker has addressed the different components of this anxiety with such emotion opulence, depth and lyricism as Wong. "Few other directors have ever imbued their movies with such a metaphysical sense of time at work; dilating, stretching, lurching, dragging, speeding by," Tony Rayns wrote in the journal *Sight and Sound* upon the release of Wong's *Chungking Express* (1994). (11)

Wong spent the early part of his filmmaking career working with some of these new wave filmmakers. His adoption of their socially

conscious spirit is evident in the script he wrote for Patrick Tam's *Final Victory* (1987) and in his first feature, *As Tears Go By* (1988).

But unlike most of the new wave filmmakers, Wong was as interested in the artistic possibilities of film as he was in their social relevance. *Days* was his second feature and upon its release showed that Wong had taken the new wave movement to a new height of maturity, one that was as stylistic as it was socially relevant, and one that is often referred to as the second new wave.

The issue of memory, explored by Wong in *Days*, was amplified by the anxiety over the impending Chinese takeover. Hong Kong citizens became concerned that once the takeover happened, their previous way of life would become nothing but a memory. This anxiety is brought to light by the sudden surge of nostalgic films being produced in Hong Kong in the 1980s and early 1990s. These films were often set in 1950s and 1960s, a time of intense industrial development in Hong Kong that came to be largely because of the economic freedoms allowed under British colonial rule (p. 265, 3).

By the end of the '60s, Hong Kong was well on its way to developing into the globalized transfer point for manufactured goods that it is today. Hong Kong citizens have enjoyed a large degree of economic success as a result of this, but the Sino-British Joint Declaration agreement represented a threat to this way of life. The rise of nostalgic cinema showed just how prevalent the anxiety over this threat was in Hong Kong society. "Nostalgia

cinema ... is one of the dominant forms of postmodern culture. It reconstructs, or reproduces, the past through a series of images without historical depth", Natalia Chan Sui Hung writes in her essay "Rewriting History: Hong Kong Nostalgia Cinema and Its Social Practice." (p. 259, 3).

In other words, a widespread interest in the past is more revealing of the present than it is of the past.

Wong's *Days* is evidence of this concept at work. Set in the 1960s, the notes of nostalgia in the film are present from the start. "1960 was a good year, the beginning of the a decade, a prelude to the 60s," Wong said upon the film's release. "Back in those days, the sun was brighter, the air fresher, with the sound from the wireless sets flowing down the streets, from a distance. It felt so good. It was like a dream." (11).

Indeed, the pace and mood of *Days* is often dream-like. City streets are virtually empty, a stark contrast to the frenzied commotion of the streets of Hong Kong at the film's making. Mambo and Hawaiian music is played several times during the film and serve to blanket the film's setting and events with a warm, melancholy tone. This is not an accurate interpretation of the '60s, nor is it meant to be. As piece of nostalgia, it is meant to take audiences back to a time that seems more certain and safe than the present.

But Wong does not necessarily endorse this practice; in fact, far from it. One of Wong's gifts is his ability to explore social and cultural issues through the lens of

personal relationships. "... Wong imbeds his themes of time within a bedrock formula of popular culture: young people in search of love," David Bordwell writes in his book, *Planet Hong Kong* (p. 274,1). In *Days*, Luddy is a stand-in for the tendency to romanticize the past. He is on a mission to find his real mother, even though his aunt hints that she is not the ideal mother Luddy imagines her to be. His search dominates his existence to the extent that he misses everything else going on around him.

This search for the mother also alludes metaphorically back to Hong Kong society's collective identity crisis over who they are as a nation. An important motivation behind Yuddy's drive to find his mother in *Days* is his need to find out where he came from. Without this knowledge, his identity is incomplete. Here Wong is using Yuddy as a vehicle to illustrate the uncertainty Hong Kong citizens have over their collective identity. Birthed from two radically different traditions, Hong Kong society seems motherless.

In his sixth feature, *Happy Together* (1997), Wong shows that this attempt to identify a mother of Hong Kong is actually fruitless. Identification based on a mother-like figure is conventional. But Hong Kong is a unique place and anything but conventional in the sense of the usual understanding of nation-states, so, as Wong examines in *Happy Together*, its identity must also be unique.

In *Happy Together*, a gay couple, Lai Yiu-Fai (Tony Leung) and Ho Po-Wing (Leslie Cheung)



"Days of Being Wild"

travel from Hong Kong to Buenos Aires, Argentina. Critics have lauded it for its realistic portrayal of a gay relationship that is so often missing in cinema. "Wong's unstable images of drunken, angry, sexually active characters and the public spaces where they find and lose one another suggest a depth of feeling and an imaginative array of affective relations," Marc Siegal writes in his article *The Intimate Spaces of Wong Kar-wai* (p. 291, 4).

But this is, after all, a Wong Kar-wai film so it important to recognize that the gay couple serve as a metaphor for thinking about Hong Kong's identity. As Marc

Siegal proposes in his article (as described in an article that appeared in the journal *Jump Cut*), the gay relationship is meant to suggest the queerness of Hong Kong's identity. "[Siegal's] essay leads to a reconsideration of concepts of public and private, noting that the film takes up these themes and presents the geographical displacement of the couple in *Happy Together* not only to imagine diaspora in conventional terms related to ethnic dispersion, but to imagine it queerly, that is, to challenge the normativity of the social and political forces contingent on people's lives." (10).

That is to say, Hong Kong is not a nation in the traditional sense in that it has borders. That it is a middle ground between goods that are manufactured in China and sent off to the United States makes it an arena for globalized transactions, which makes borders essentially meaningless. The gay couple travels to Argentina and exists as a gay couple outside the borders of Hong Kong (10), showing Hong Kong exists on a level that transcends its geographical borders. Hong Kong, Wong seems to be saying, is not a nation because it lacks the many of the principles behind the definition of a nation. Hong Kong is borderless and exists globally. It may not be a conventional identity, but it is an identity.

Chungking Express, Wong's third feature, is ultimately a critique of this identity. In this film, two stories tell the tale of two different cops who mourn the loss of girlfriends and their possible connections with new ones. It is also a story in which relationships revolve

around goods and commodities.

The cop in the first story collects cans of pineapples to remember his ex-girlfriend by. A new girl he tries to connect with is involved with smuggling cocaine. A girl who has a crush on a cop in the second story



tries to earn his attention by rearranging and putting new things in his apartment. In this film, Wong seems to be saying that Hong Kong is so globalized that commodities have replaced the heart in relationships. "...[T]he exchange of goods and services serves as the basis of all relationships, instead of emotional connection — a representation of cosmopolitan life in modern Hong Kong," Leong writes

(8). Nothing authentic, it seems, remains when the commodities are taken away. This may be read as a critique of the heart of Hong Kong, that globalization has taken over the city to such an extent that any traditions refugees brought with them from the East have vanished.

It is here, it seems, that Wong also turns back to the issue of moments and memory. If it is indeed moments Hong Kong citizens must learn to treasure, then how good are those if the basis of them is not authentic? But this may not be the right question to ask. Wong seems to intend the randomness and flightiness of the commodities to represent the nature of relationships in Hong Kong. This is not a metaphorical relationship, but a relationship of cause and effect. Because Hong Kong has become such a hotbed of global commodity exchange, it has affected the culture by transforming it into its own likeness. Hong Kong's identity is unconventional, borderless and global, and one Wong shows is detrimental to the spiritual and emotional health of its inhabitants.

Wong Kar-wai has been referred to as the Hong Kong version of Francois Truffaut and *Chungking Ex-*

press has been dubbed the Hong Kong version of Jean-Luc Godard's *Breathless* (p. 306, 3). His filmmaking style is similar to Godard in that he experiments with the kinetics of film, but it is his attention to feelings and emotions rather than plot that is most reminiscent of European cinema. With this in mind, and noting that he is of Chinese heritage (he was born in Shanghai), Wong is really a metaphor himself for the identity crisis shared by the people of his hometown. While what Wong may be saying with *Chungking Express* is that survival on moments is an essential fact of living in Hong Kong, ultimately it is his lyrical images that touch his audiences most. In *Chungking Express*, as the cop ponders his loss, melancholy jazz music plays while the cop moves in slow motions against a fast-moving background. Not only does this capture beautifully what it feels like to ponder loss, but the music and the vivid colors of the visuals also seem comforting. At the moment when the gay couple in *Happy Together* goes to separate, their motion is slowed, effectively capturing what that moment will look like in a memory.

It is Wong's ability to capture visually moments like these that enables him to provide compassion for his audience and their complexities with everyday living in Hong Kong. This is ultimately what audiences yearn for and what brings them to see his movies. For that reason, Wong seems like a natural leader for not only continuing the traditions of new wave filmmakers, but also for taking Hong Kong filmmaking to new artistic heights of importance and relevance.

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