

Duo Identity: Hong Kong in Adaptation through the Len of Wong Kar Wai



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From Colonial to Post Colonial Art: A Critical Survey

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Abstract

Hong Kong is a city with a complex historical background that has developed a distinct identity as a unique east and west hybrid, which differentiate it from other British colonies in Asia.

While the beginning of Hong Kong can be traced back to Old Stone Age and had become fishing and trading port throughout the Chinese empire time, Hong Kong as we know today was arguably established and manifested from the British colonization that input in infrastructures, legislative systems, military force and so on.¹ On 1 July 1997, Hong Kong was handover from Britain to China. The influences of China and Britain are both important in founding in the traditions, culture, and values of Hong Kong.

This essay will use movies directed by Wong Kar Wai as a case study, to explore the process of formation and adaptation on this east-west duo identity that filled with concords and tension, and the negotiation on the national identity and the sense of belonging for Hong Kong citizens in the post-colonial time.

The first part of the essay will begin with introducing the key events in Hong Kong colonial history that connects to the shape-shifting of identities and the sense of belonging, under its transition in the political environment from colonization to decolonization. The essay will move onto the background of director Wong Kar Wai and the adaptation of east-west elements present in his cinematography in terms of aesthetic and conceptual representation. With Wong's dynamic character and script writing, the last part of the essay is going circulate on the subject on the search of identities as a post-colonial phenomenon.

1. Hong Kong in Transition and Adaptation

1.1 Colonial History

The region of Hong Kong is first known to have been occupied by coastal tribe about 6000 years ago with archeological findings; until Ming Dynasty, Portuguese explorer Jorge Álvares, who arrived in 1513, then established Hong Kong as a trading port between Europe and China.²

In Qing dynasty, with the high demand of importing Chinese's goods such as tea and silk in contrast to the low demand in exporting European good, the British



The Signing and Sealing of the Treaty of Nanking, John Burnet
Credit: The British Museum

sold large amounts of Indian opium to China to counter the trade imbalance. Qing Empire action in anti-opium trade that forcing the British to declare the First Opium War in 1840.³ Hong Kong Island was formally ceded to the United Kingdom in 1842 under Treaty of Nanking.⁴

With administrative infrastructures built quickly by Britain, and wealthy Chinese fled from the Taiping Civil War* and settle in the colony with capitals, the economic development and living condition of Hong Kong island was improving since.



Bodies lie on North Taku Fort during the Second Opium War on August 21, 1860 in China. Felice Beato
Credit: Getty Image

In 1860, Qing was defected at the Second Opium War and forced ceding the Kowloon Peninsula and Stonecutter's Island under the Convention of Peking.⁵ The colony was further expanded in 1898 when New Territories is leased to Britain for 99 years. Early 20th century, major industry and infrastructure were built in Hong Kong under the full control under British

colonization.⁶

Skilled Chinese migrants fled from the Japanese Invasion in 1945 and Chinese Civil War where the communist party took control of mainland China in 1949.⁷ With the rapid growth of economics, the colonial government began to improve infrastructure and public services; in the 1990s, Hong Kong has become a global financial center and shipping hubs.⁸



Thatcher and Chinese paramount leader Deng Xiaoping in Beijing's Great Hall of the People in September 1982. (Left) Hong Kong handover ceremony 1 July 1997. (right) Credit: CNN

Closer to the expiry of the lease of New Territories, United Kingdom agreed to transfer the colony when China grantee Hong Kong's political and economic system unchanged for the 50 years ahead under the principle of "One country, two systems"^{**}. Hong Kong Special Administrative Region^{***} is handover and formed in the 1st July 1997 under the Sino-British Joint Declaration after 156 years of British colonization.⁹

* Taiping Civil War was a massive rebellion waged from 1850 to 1864 between the established Manchu-led Qing dynasty and the Taiping Heavenly Kingdom began in the Guangxi region. Estimated casualties are about 20–30 million populations.

** Hong Kong remains its capitalist system that differs from China's communist system, while practicing Law of Sea (UNCLOS) by establishing Basic Law instead of China's Civil Law. Hong Kong is using its own currency (Hong Kong dollars), official language (Cantonese) and registered in the United Nation (UN).

*** Special Administrative Regions (SAR) is a type of provincial-level administrative division of China that enjoys the highest degree of autonomy.

1. Hong Kong in Transition and Adaptation-

1.2 Sense of Belongings



The Lion Rock and public housing below. Credit: etnet

Influenced by the east and west coordinately, surrounded with mixed cultures and practicing the mixed values, Hong Kong has always been in an ongoing process in adaptation and facing a continuous challenge in finding the sense of belongings, especially in the post-colonial time.

Hong Kong was formally sited and clearly defined during the British colonization so as establishing the identity as Hong Konger. ‘Lion Rock Spirit’* is a term that used to describe the core value of Hong Kong people who built the city from scratch with hard work, perseverance and solidarity through thick and thin in 1970s.¹⁰

The discussion on handover left Hong Kong in turmoil, where triggered a wave of emigration out of Hong Kong due to the government change and feared for the loss of freedom. Over half a million people left the region from 1987 to 1996.¹¹

The advancement in terms of economics, political and infrastructure development in the colonial time not just derived Hong Kong from mainland China, but also offered a sense of privilege and superiority; the differences in lifestyle, value to spoken and written language, reinforced the identity of Hong Konger that distinct from Mainland Chinese.

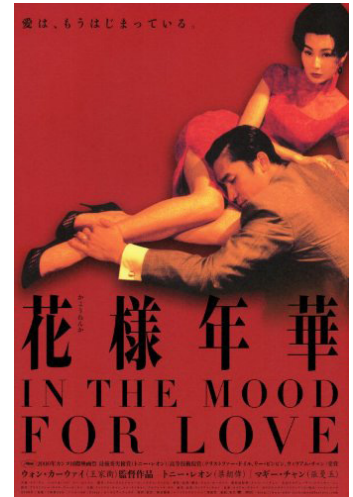
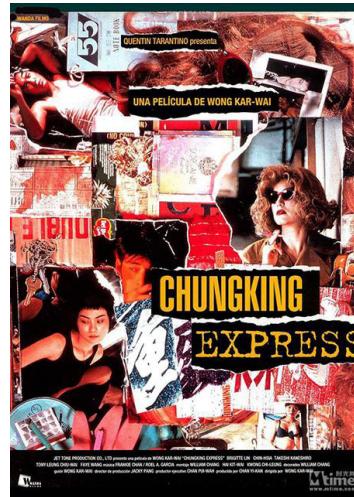
From 2000s, the tension between Hong Konger and mainland Chinese rose when the quota of mainland Chinese visitors and emigrants graduate increased, claimed as a economic boost policy from Chinese government while Hong Konger took it as a decolonization policy instead,

lead to a hostility and hatred toward mainland Chinese in response to the rise of a sense of local consciousness.¹² The Hong Kong-Mainland Conflicts lead to multiples crisis in responding to China's restriction and disruption toward Hong Kong democracy independent, including the largest local political movement Umbrella Revolution in 2014**.

* The term came from a drama series *Below the Lion Rock* in the 1973 that addressed stories of grassroots working class who worked hard to rebuild Hong Kong.

** Umbrella Revolution or Umbrella Movement was a series of sit in street protests occurred in Hong Kong from September to December 2014, regarding to the decision in reforms to the Hong Kong electoral system.

2. Case Study - Wong Kar Wai's Movies



The essay will focus on the visual analysis on **In the Mood for Love (2000)**, and later referencing his other movie *Day of Being Wild (1990)*, *Chungking Express (1994)* and *Happy Together (1997)* that refers to Hong Kong colonial timeline, as supporting materials to discuss on the post-colonial phenomenon.

2.1 Visual Language of the East and West

Hong Kong filmmaker Wong Kar Wai was born in Shanghai in 1958 and he moved to the colonized Hong Kong with his family when he was 5, in responses to the Communist party's Cultural Revolution in China.

While Hong Kong movies industry had been rising from the 60s and the demand of western film from the English-speaking population, Wong has been a cinema frequent goer and developed the interest in the filmmaking. While he was struggling to fit in the new environment, he realized that movie is an international language that everyone could understand with the magic of visual translation.¹³

He pursued higher education in the relative field and later worked in production and script-writing position in his early career, and then he made his first movie *As Tear Goes By* in 1987. Wong's movies always circulate about a specific Chinese belief in Yuan-Fen while his

cinematography is highly influenced by the western aesthetic, as a result creating and bringing this unique cinematic universe with a heavy sense of Hong-Kongness to the international audiences.

- A Chinese Tale of Love: Yuan-fen (緣份)

Despite the popularity of Kung-fu and Wu-xia movies to the international audience in the 1980s, nor the rise of comedies and police-gangster drama in the 1990s for the local market, Wong had taken on a different genre in making romance drama.

Wong had adapted the Chinese-specific belief of love, the idea Yuan-fen, as the main plot throughout all of his love stories. It only completes a relationship with the element of Yuan, meaning the intangible fate for the two people that destine to meet, and Fen, the acquired

efforts to settle together.¹⁴



In the story of *In the Mood for Love*, the main character Mr. Chow and Mrs. Chan were brought together when they moved in to the same building with their own partner; setting in the typical flat-sharing building in 60s Hong Kong that have a close relationship with the neighborhood, the two character see each other more often. Turned out this fate wasn't coincident when they found out that Mrs. Chow is cheating with Mr. Chan.

The two became closer when they first tried to figure out how their cheating partners fell in love; Yuen begins best described with the Chinese idiom “Tong-bing Xiang-lian (同病相憐)”

which means they pity each other when sharing the same pain. When they are spending more time with each other, knowing each other without physical engagement, the pity grows into love and realized that people just fall in love like that, like them.



Mr. Chow and Mrs. Chan rehearse for the farewell.

Utilizing the idea of Yuan-fen, without overly romanticizes the relationships (Yuan) and heartfelt portrayal of the pain and frustration in a relationship (Fen), makes Wong's movie extremely romantic and relatable to our own relationships. With the limited number of characters, the meticulous depiction of the entangling relationships offers an intimate journey to grow with the characters. The costume use of Qi-pao for Mrs. Chan added a sense of eastern element, as a symbol of traditional beauty in Chinese that particularly related to Wong's origin root to Shanghai*.

However, their Fen never completes when the realization only drifted them apart since they refused to become their partner and cheating together so Mr. Chow left Hong Kong to Singapore and Mrs. Chan moved on with her life while left each other the best memories of pure love.



Mrs. Chan got back with her husband and have a kid. (top) Mr. Chow went to Singapore and bury his feelings in a tree hole in Angkor Wat. (bottom)

* Typical Qi-pao in China today was popularized by Chinese socialites and upper-class women in the 1920s and 1930s in Shanghai.

- Western Cinematography: Montage and Color Palette

Influenced by the exposure to Hollywood movies, Wong's cinematography has significant stylistic references to the western way of moviemaking in terms of his lens application and narrating method. His signature cinematography creates an entirely different mood, format and aesthetic to the majority movies in Hong Kong at the time that gravitates toward the dialogical narrative and plain shooting.



Montage is well used in Wong's movie for narration purpose and creates tension for emotions. For example, the scene of the moving clock in Mrs. Chan office and overlay with a phone call conversation has appeared a few times that showing times flies when the conversation is about the critical stages of their relationship; The fragmented montage of Mrs. Chan running up and down the stairs brings out her struggles in battling whether to find Mr. Chow; using the long shot, similar in composition and fast forwarded montage helps to narrate the past of time with changes along with small details that may it be the character's expression or increase in jumping sequence that creates tension in the situation. Each stage of the film has a themed music score backing the transitional montage that the audience can easily sectioned and move back and forth with the plot.

The use of color is an important factor in Wong's narrating of curate mood and character development. The based color of In the Mood for Love is black and red, where majority screen



time is under a cold tone that leaves a grey grain over the film that tied in the lonely feeling for the plot where saturated red is used to highlight the romance scenes between the two characters. Wong has cleverly used the change of Qi-pao on Mrs. Chan as metaphor her change of emotion throughout the film: deep colored Qi-pao is used where her husband is away from home; the stripped Qi-pao symbolizing the trapped in a relationship; the bright green Qi-pao is used when she met Mr. Chow the first few time in a happy mood that symbolizing the emerge of the new relationship.¹⁵



Using primary color to heighten the emotion and set the tone is still fresh and experimental in

Hong Kong cinema back in the early 21st century, yet it is no stranger to the western director cinematography such as Pedro Almodóvar and Woody Allen¹⁶. It also adopts Wong's Happy Together (1997), the use of black and white and colored scene to distinguish past and present timeline in Christopher Nolan's Memento (2000).



Some of the Qi-pao in the movie. Further reading of the relations between these Qi-pao and metaphorical meaning: <http://classiq.me/style-in-film-maggie-cheung-in-in-the-mood-for-love>

- Scent of Hong Kong and Beyond



Using the backdrop of the late 20th century Hong Kong, choosing to tell the story of everyday characters in grass-roots society such as policeman, waitress, store staff and immigrants that core to the “Lion Rock Spirit”, emphasized the humanistic touch in Wong’s movies from a local gaze. By including environment such as the billboards, Tong-lau*, Chungking Mansions along with local subject such as the gangster, the gay community, drug smugglers that visually exclusive to the city, Wong’s has introduced Hong Kong as an aesthetically refreshment and fascination to the international cinema.

The charisma of Wong’s movies comes from the raw portrayal of the city on ordinary subjects. this minus the distance between the director and the viewer where the stories circulated the universal theme about love, which allows the audiences to enjoy the movie intimately, drawing familiarity to their own

culture or own experience regardless of one’s cultural background. This makes Wong’s movie success in transcending the boundaries of language and culture.

Wong’s movies have earned him awards for best director from Hong Kong to European film festivals, and *In the Mood for Love* is voted 9th place in BBC Culture’s poll of the 100 greatest foreign-language films.¹⁷

*Tong-lau 唐樓 is the tenement buildings built in late 19th century to the 1960s in Hong Kong with commercial use on the ground floor and residential use for the upper 5-6 stories.

2.2 Post-colonial Phenomenon

Despite the main theme of Wong's movies about love, the colonial background has influenced the development of the plot and characters. Hence, his movies share elements of doubts, struggles, desires, and longings that are charged to colonization. The birth of the postcolonial identity out of the ruins of colonial devastation is an interesting phenomenon.

- Duo Identity



Intercultural exchange happens in colonization that creates a complex dialogue between the origin and colonizer's culture; The colony becomes the tolerant ground of both cultures while with aspects that

opposition to each other, such as religions and social ideologies.

One's identity is a choice based upon their personal and social development, on cultural gravitation through the progression in the society; where no singular identity is applicable universally. The present of both cultures provides the opportunity to form the paralleled duo identity in the postcolonial time through.

The tension and struggle of choosing is portrayed through the choices in love and relationships in Wong's movies. In *Day of Being Wild*, Yuddy struggles in commitment and lost the love of his life to fulfill his imaginary of freedom by leaving his comfort life; Faye was living in her dream to be in the life of her crush's life but when he finally confronts her, she chose to leave a little longer; Mrs. Chan and Mr. Chow were chosen the moral life over love.

- Negotiation of Freedom

Colonization is always involved with the act of violence from the colonizer in the form of physical and mental abusing. Elimination of culture and religion, exploitation of rights, division of class and racial are actions taken by the colonizer to maintain their status and control over the colonies. Under the oppressing environment, the constants negotiation of freedom becomes a typical phenomenon in the colonial and post-colonial regime.¹⁸

“There was this kind of legless bird in the world that could only keep on flying, napping in the wind when it’s tired; this bird can only land once in a lifetime, the moment when it dies. (世界上有一種鳥是沒有腳的，它只可以一直的飛呀飛，飛得累了便在風中睡覺，這種鳥兒一輩子只可以下地一次，那一次就是它死的時候)”

This well-known quote from *The Day of Being Wild* main character Yuddy gives a poetic translation to the rootless-ness in colonization that leads to the desire of freedom, the imagination of wanderlust that comes along with the fear of instability.

These negotiations didn’t stop with the end of colonization; it went beyond in the postcolonial era regarding the uncertainty in political, economic and social changes; The fear of losing freedom is apparent to Hong Kong when returning to China as a relatively conventional and restricted society. This resulted in population migration and displacement in the postcolonial time.

Yuddy left Hong Kong to find her birth mother, metaphorically, his root; Faye in *Chungking Express* became a flight attendant, became the legless bird; Wing and Fai in *Happy Together* left Hong Kong before the handover to Argentina.

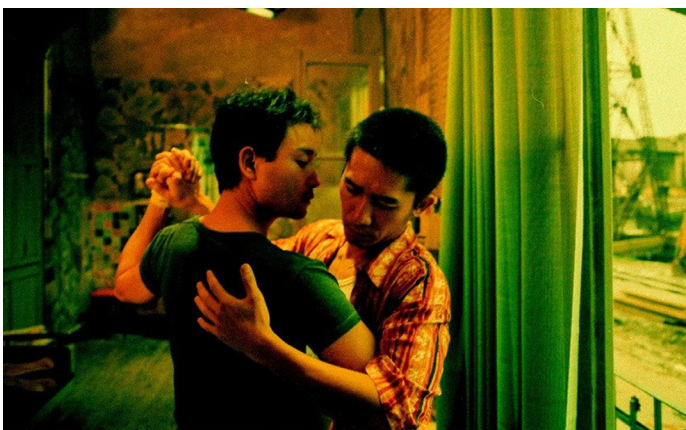
- Longing for Home

In response to the cultural exchange and the influence of globalization, the definition and boundaries of Home to the colonized land have become unclear and subjective while under an ongoing transformation. A home may refer to a physical land to a specific era, an idealized utopian imagination or the spiritual support, with elements of people to lifestyle, that construct one's home.

Old and new rivalries have reemerged in postcolonial time with the progression of new cultural and socio-political setup. The question of home and belonging in the nation's renewal has become a crucial concern in contemporary society.¹⁹



The 3 characters Wing, Fai, and Cheung are channeling the different version of Home in *Happy Together*. Wing and Fai is a gay couple so in love then moved to Argentina to start a new life before Hong Kong handover; and Cheung is Wing's Taiwanese colleague, who earns just enough to continue his one-way journey in Latin America.



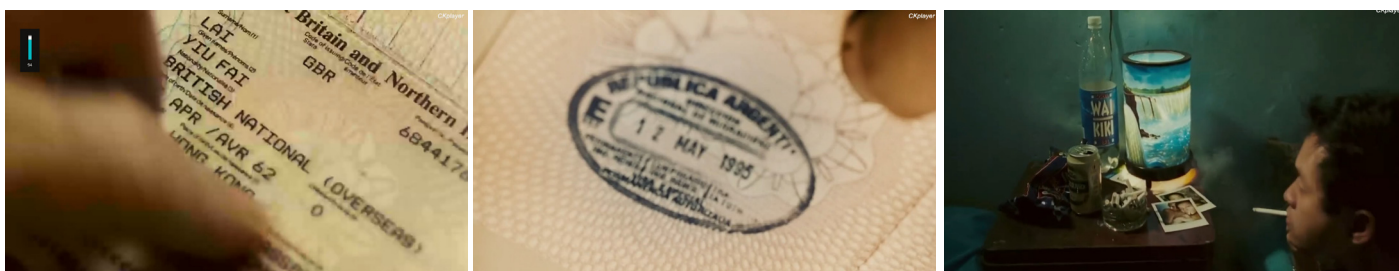
Wing is a free-spirited guy who first found Argentina his new home with the openness of the gay community and a dazzling life. While Fai is a steady guy who simply wants a home with Wing. Their differences drifted them apart, but fate has brought them back together that eventually ended up in the



vicious cycle of loving and hurting each other until Fai call this off and resolutely return to Hong Kong, the home where he resonates with the language and lifestyle and culturally. The lead to Wing's realization the only home he had was Fai. When Fai went to visit Cheung's family in Taiwan secretly, he finally realized that the reason of Cheung is able to wander the world happily without burden is because his loving family is always there for him to come home.

Conclusion: Happy Together (1997) – A Love Letter to Postcolonial Hong Kong

(Wing and Fai British National Overseas Passport* flipping, stamped with the date 12 May 1995. The film cut to Wing smoking in bed, looking at the waterfall lamp and a water bottle with “Waikiki” on. Cut to half-naked Fai standing by the mirror.)



Wing's voice comes from the back “Fai, why don't we start all over?” (不如我地由頭再黎過?)

Debut in 1997, the year of Hong Kong handover, and set in 1995 colonial Hong Kong, the first minute of the film Happy Together already gives a solitary response to the colonial changes in Hong Kong: the desperation of escaping the uncertain future, while the question “Why don't we start all over?” had been echoing the desire to start over throughout the postcolonial time, regarding the unwillingness to the changes of ‘home’.

As the majority screen time of the movie sets in Argentina, an unfamiliar aesthetic to Wong's movie as a restart, it explores the possibilities of building a home away from home, including the hype of new environment and freedom, questions of national and self-identities, struggles

to blend in, nostalgic feeling and lonesome and so on.

The relationship between Wing and Fai could be a metaphorical translation to the transition from colonization, post-colonization to decolonization; The only way to progress is like Fai, to move on but not dwell in the past.

Colonization is an irreversible process where we cannot wish it not to have happened; neither can we ignore its impacts, disarticulation over rearticulation, placement and displacement, positives and negatives. Nor live on the obsession of the pre-colonial or colonial past. Colonialism has offered the opportunity to the birth of new forms and orders in post-colonial times. We should break through these limited historical phases to facilitate progressive changes in the search of identities and home.

* British National Overseas Passport (BNO) is a passport for overseas citizen under British ruling and was first issued in 1987 Hong Kong. The passport is exclusive to citizen born before 1997 and holders are allowed to have the SAR passport at the same time.

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