

# Exploring the Controversial Philosophical Dimensions in Wong Kar-wai's Filmography

## **ABSTRACT**

The Auteur theory is a theory that says directors serve as the primary creative force behind films, shaping their narratives and imbuing them with their personal philosophies. This paper delves into the cinematic filmography of Wong Kar-wai, a renowned Hong Kong film director known for his exploration of philosophical themes within the context of Asian society. Through examinations of his films, this study investigates the subtle interplay between Wong's directorial vision and the philosophical underpinning embedded within each film. Including themes that are controversial in Asian society in the past, such as Queer and marriage affairs, prevalent in Wong Kar-wai's every work, this research explores the cultural and societal implications of these issues within the Asian community. Despite the evolution of the film industry, Wong's commitment to infusing his films with thought-provoking philosophical perspectives remains evident, and his movies are absolutely fascinating and worth studying. By analyzing Wong Kar-wai's films through the lens of auteur theory, this study could find the intricate relationship between the director's ideology and the thematic elements present in his cinematic works.

**Keywords:** Auteur theory, Films, Ideology, Filming History, Philosophy, Wang Kar-wai

## INTRODUCTION

A theory known as 'Auteur theory' originated in France, where 'Auteur' translates to 'author' in French, emphasizing the role of the director as the primary creative force behind a film[1]. While filmmaking is typically a collaborative work, considering the Auteur theory, the director holds significant importance as the one who depicts the final version of the film, influencing the reflection of how the director wants the film to be seen and impact the audience or viewers. In short, the theory says that movies are resources that include the voice of the director and his or her ideas. This is why it is not hard to discover the director's philosophical perspective and ideology through his or her movie.

There are two phrases that show the relationship between the film and the philosophy. When the director uses the film as a method to reflect his or her philosophy, the phrase 'philosophy through film' is used. This means that the purpose of the director is to illuminate some philosophical ideas or to bring changes to philosophical issues through the movie [2]. On the other hand, there is the phrase 'philosophy of film,' which represents the film about philosophy [3]. In this study, the 'philosophy through film' will be handled.

Considering the theory and idea above, this research aims to investigate various films by a Hong Kong director, Wong Kar-wai, and their philosophical dimensions. His movies usually include themes that are controversial in the past Asian community, including Queer identities and marital affairs. Investigating how Wong Kar-wai addresses these controversial issues in his films provides valuable insights into his directorial style and thematic concerns.

The purpose of this research is twofold: firstly, to investigate who Wong Kar-wai is as a director and the characteristics of his cinematic works, and secondly, to analyze the philosophical tensions embedded within each film throughout his filmography.

## ***Wong Kar-wai***

In the modern film industry, there are few well-known names that have the ability to use their film or story as a way for philosophical discussion. Introduced from Hong Kong, Wong Kar-wai crafted a distinctive cinematic language that has captivated audiences worldwide. Along with his unique visuals, soundtracks, creative storytelling, and exploration of themes such as love, longing, and urban alienation, Wong Kar-wai has established himself as one of the most influential directors of his generation [4].

Born in Shanghai on July 17, 1958, Wong Kar-wai moved to Hong Kong at the age of five due to being affected by the Cultural Revolution in China. His mother often took Wong Kar-wai to the cinema and exposed him to various films. According to him, his only hobby in childhood was watching movies. The influence of his mother and growing up in the vibrant environment of Hong Kong allowed him to develop a keen sense of observation that became a remarkable point of his filmmaking. After he studied graphic design and participated in a TV drama training program, Wong Kar-wai embarked on his career in cinema as a screenwriter and assistant director [5].

He debuted as a director in 1988 with the film *'As Tears Go By,'* which is the story of a conflicted youth who needed to watch over his impulsive friend. Although it was successful, he changed his cinematic style to one that was more personal rather than one that followed modern trends of crime and violence. After that, the film *'Days of Being Wild'* was released in 1990, and

it became the first film that revealed itself in the film industry. Although it did not succeed at the box office, the film received various awards in Hong Kong. With its lush cinematography, atmospheric soundtrack, and nuanced performances, *'Days of Being Wild'* established Wong Kar-wai's reputation for crafting visually stunning and emotionally resonant films[6].

Throughout his career, Wong Kar-wai has remained committed to his singular vision narrative structures that favor mood, atmosphere, and emotion. His films are not only visually significant but also deeply immersive experiences that people can experience in their modern daily lives. In the field of cinema, where visuals and emotions are languages, Wong Kar-wai stands out as a maestro, combining boundaries of time, space, and culture. Renowned as a philosophical director from Hong Kong, Wong Kar-wai has crafted a unique cinematic universe that delves deep into the human psyche, exploring themes of love, longing, and existentialism, disregarding the fact those themes are controversial in Confucian culture in Asia.

### ***Chungking Express***

*'Chungking Express'* is the cinematic creation of director Wong Kar-wai, marking his third directional journey, released in 1994, and it is his first film to be released in America. This film is renowned for its portrayal of Hong Kong during the early 1990s, and it encapsulates the prevailing ambiance of melancholy and depression that permeated the era. Wong Kar-wai's work film is characterized by its adept exploration of the lives of contemporary people who live in port-modern cities, and *'Chungking Express'* masterfully unveils the intricate complexities of existence before the pivotal year of 1997. Characters who mix noir and romance, characters with longing and alienation, anxiety about identity, fragmented experiences, and the struggle to confront irreversible facts are well revealed in the film [7]. Against the backdrop of urban

sprawl, these characters traverse landscapes marked by the rejection of love and the enduring specter of solitude, their lives profoundly impacted by the ceaseless specter of loneliness. The title '*Chungking Express*' comes from the Chungking Mansion depicted in the film, a nod to the bustling urban enclave that serves as a microcosm of the metropolis. Rather than diffusing the title with symbolic significance, the film utilizes the landmark as a poignant representation of the interconnected lives it portrays. According to the director, '*Chungking Express*' embraces the notion that even the most minuscule proximity within the bustling, busy city, even 0.01cm, can produce profound interpersonal connections, suggesting the potential for sustaining a relationship through the non-simultaneous sharing of space is posited [8]. Embedded within the '*Chungking Express*' lies a profound cultural subtext, encapsulating the pervasive anxiety permeating Hong Kong society in the lead-up to the historic handover from British to Chinese sovereignty. Although the movie does not include a controversial theme like other films, '*Chungking Express*' serves as a poignant reflection of the urban sentimentalism prevalent during the early 1990s, offering viewers a light yet popular cinematic experience that resonates with universal truths. Amidst Wong Kar-wai's illustrious filmography, '*Chungking Express*' stands as a luminous testament to the human condition, inviting viewers to contemplate the fragile interplay of fate and desire that defines the human experience.

### ***In the Mood for Love***

Wong Kar-wai's filmographic masterpiece '*In the Mood for Love*' stands as the seventh movie in his illustrious filmography. Within its frames, the movie delicately grapples with the provocative theme of marriage affairs, a concept that stirs controversy and intrigue within Asian communities, interwoven with profound themes of individual loneliness. Set of Hong Kong in

1962, the film begins its narrative with the serendipitous connection of two couples relocating to the same apartment on the same fateful day. As fate would have it, Chow Mo-Wan and Su Li-Zhen's interactions initiate as their paths cross through the happenstance blending of their respective furniture. Initially, their encounters are marked by formal and polite since they have their own spouse. However, the revelation of their spouses' affairs serves as a catalyst, igniting an intimate bond created between them [9]. The two people's shared discovery of each other's ties and bags carried by their respective spouses acts as a silent testament to the clandestine affair unfolding behind closed doors. Despite the mutual pain and betrayal, Chow Mo-Wan and Su Li-Zhen, were curious about the beginning of their relationship, continued meeting secretly, and tried not to fall in love with each other, but eventually fell for each other. Throughout the film, Wong Kar-wai masterfully crafts a narrative where the marriage affair remains unseen by people; however, all viewers can see is the anxious look of the two people who have just discovered the secret. Both Chow Mo-Wan and Su Li-Zhen share the pain of abandonment by their cheating spouses, but they steadfastly refuse to succumb to the same moral transgression. Their steadfast resolve stems from a conviction of their own moral superiority, a belief that they are different from them. Considering the Chinese title of the film, "花樣年華" (Huāyàng niánhuá), the title translates to 'Flower-like times' and refers to the most beautiful and happiest times in life. It serves as a metaphor for nostalgia and longing, encapsulating the wistful yearning for a past time characterized by innocence and happiness. However, despite the allure of the past, the title also serves as a stark reminder of the unreturnable nature of time, symbolizing the inevitability of change and the impossibility of returning to the past. In short, 'In the Mood for Love' transcends the confines of its narrative to explore profound themes of love, betrayal, and the inexorable passage of time. Through its nuanced portrayal of human relationships, Wong

Kar-wai invites audiences to ponder the complexities of morality, fidelity, and the elusive pursuit of happiness amidst life's transient moments.

### ***Happy Together***

The fifth movie of Wong Kar-wai is '*Happy Together*,' marks a pivotal moment in his filmmaking career. Released in 1997, it stands out as the last film of Wong Kar-wai before the historic handover of Hong Kong. Delving into the genre of Queer and romance, the film emerged as a groundbreaking piece, grappling with the themes and narratives that challenged societal norms at the moment. As the film contains controversial themes and an unconventional approach, the journey to the screen was not easy and led to delayed releases in some Asian countries. Even the promotional materials, such as posters of the film, resist the norms of the 1990s era, reflecting the avant-garde nature of Wong Kar-wai's vision. '*Happy Together*' revolves around the tumultuous relationship between two central characters, Ho Po-wing, portrayed by Leslie Cheun, and Lai Yui-fai, played by Tony Leung. Po-wing is a person who lives as he wants, including his approach to love. Despite his deep affection for Yui-fai, their relationship is constantly in severe conflict, so he tries to restore their relationship after they go on a trip together. They end up fighting while traveling and break up because of this. However, the enduring bond between Po-wing and Yui-fai transcends mere physical separation, as evidenced by Po-wing's inability to forget his loved one. So, in the end, he went to see Yui-fai again and started talking again. The film resonates with audiences on a profound level. People who watched the movie sympathized with Yui-fai and Po-wing, regardless of whether they are a same-sex or heterosexual couple, if there is a long-standing conflict, even if they start over, they will always fight over the same issue again. With continuous issues, Yui-fai gets tired of Po-

wing, and Po-wing decides to let him go. The emotional depth of 'Happy Together' lies in its unfiltered portrayal of the highs and lows of a queer couple's relationship. Historically, the film is also meaningful. Against the backdrop of pre-handover Hong Kong, the film serves as a complex and dynamic reflection of the challenges faced by LGBTQ couples during that period. By capturing the intricacies of their relationship, Wong Kar-wai sheds light on the uncertain fate that awaited LGBTQ individuals in Hong Kong at the cusp of a significant historical transition [10]. 'Happy Together' transcends the boundaries of traditional romance narratives, offering a raw and evocative depiction of love, loss, and longing. Its enduring impact extends beyond its cinematic merits, serving as a testament to Wong Kar-wai's artistic prowess and the resilience of LGBTQ communities in the face of societal upheaval.

### ***Fallen Angels***

'*Fallen Angels*' represents the fourth cinematic masterpiece of Wong Kar-wai, initially conceived as the third episode of his renowned work, '*Chungking Express*.' Similar to other films by Wong Kar-wai, the film intricately weaves a narrative tapestry rich in mood and overall atmosphere, and people think it is one of Wong's most captivating films, with his distinct cinematic styles [11]. Within its narrative structure, 'Fallen Angels' unfolds in two distinct episodes, each exploring the complexities of human emotion amidst the bustling urban landscape of Hong Kong. In the first episode, viewers are immersed in a gripping tale centered around a killer with amnesia and the agent who loves him. Meanwhile, the second episode delves into the lives of a man who lost his voice after eating expired canned food and a woman who was heartbroken. Through a masterful blend of genres, 'Fallen Angels' seamlessly transitions between hardboiled noir and slapstick madness, creating a dynamic and multifaceted cinematic

experience. The film serves as a reflective source of universal themes of love, loss, and longing within a city in Hong Kong [12]. Through its dizzying exploration of the human condition, inviting introspection on the intricacies of relationships and the passage of time. Like *'Chungking Express,' 'Fallen Angel'* received enthusiastic support from Generation X audiences upon its release. Positioned within the historical context of Hong Kong's return in 1997, the film resonates deeply with the anxious and uncertain emotions of Hong Kongers. Symbolism abounds, from the expiration dates on canned food and airline tickets to the uniforms associated with the British imperial family, all serving as the depiction of the city's collective consciousness. *'Fallen Angels'* stands as a testament to Wong Kar-wai's unparalleled cinematic prowess, offering audiences a mesmerizing journey through the labyrinthine streets of Hong Kong while simultaneously serving as a mirror to the hopes, fears, and aspirations of its inhabitants.

### ***Days of Being Wild***

*'Days of Being Wild'* is the second film by Wong Kar-wai, released in 1990 [13]. This film represents a raw and unfiltered portrayal of Hong Kong's youth grappling with the existential quandaries of identity and aimlessness. The main character of this movie is Yuddy, portrayed with captivating charisma by Leslie Cheung [14]. Yuddy, an elusive playboy, ritualistically frequents the ticket booth at 3 o'clock each day to meet Su Li-Zhen, portrayed by the mesmerizing Maggie Cheung, who works at the ticket booth. The film unfolds with a tender yet tumultuous love between Yuddy and Li-Zhen, culminating in an exploration of love and commitment. Li-Zhen even thinks about getting married, but Yuddy remains steadfast in his aversion to emotional entanglements. Their relationship, fraught with unfulfilled promises and

dashed hopes, serves as an allegory for the fleeting nature of human connections. After breaking up with Li-Zhen, Yuddy meets dancer Leung Fung-ying, who is acted by Carina Lau. Even in the foundation of new love, Yuddy remains haunted by the specter of his own emotional detachment, and the relationship doesn't last long either. He has become unable to believe in love and is wary of deep relationships. 'Days of Being Wild' emerges as a crucial contribution to Wong Kar-wai's filmography by showing the first full blooming of his signature filmmaking style. Collaborating with the visionary cinematographer Christopher Doyle, Wong Kar-wai weaves a mesmerizing tapestry of visuals infused with an otherworldly and ethereal essence. Through Doyle's expert lens, the ordinary is transfigured into the extraordinary, infusing the narrative with a tangible sense of loosely entering love and going through conflicts and loneliness [4]. This collaboration impacts 'Days of Being Wild' to be an exhilarating expression of Wong Kar-wai's trademark cinematic themes: longing, dislocation, and continuous search for human connections in the setting of vibrantly changing times when Hong Kong was returned to China.

## **CONCLUSION**

Wong Kar-wai contributes to the Asian community with uncommon style and themes. By using noir and faint cinematic scenes in the film, he established his own style to depict the complex and chaotic feelings of the people of Hong Kong before the country was handed over to the People's Republic of China. The film also shows various minor groups of people with not welcomed identities in Asian communities and their uncertain futures after the handover. Most of Wong Kar-wai's films have practical philosophical inside stories related to ethics, as well as social and political philosophies that serve as resources for people to think outside of the box.

His unique filmmaking ideology makes not only people in the 90s but also people in 2024 empathize with the loneliness and challenges of building a human connection. Although the setting of his films is about 30 years ago, today's people find a parallel between the diverse types of people living in vibrantly changing societies, with loneliness and emptiness in a part of individuals' lives. These common themes of Wong Kar-wai's films affected him to be loved until today and people to rewatch the movie.

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