ROOM 2046: A POLITICAL READING OF WONG KAR-WAI'S CHOW-MO WAN TRILOGY THROUGH NARRATIVE ELEMENTS AND MISE-EN-SCENE

Jillian Baldwin, B.S.

Thesis Prepared for the Degree of

MASTER OF SCIENCE

UNIVERSITY OF NORTH TEXAS

December 2006

APPROVED:

Harry Benshoff, Major Professor
Joshua Hirsch, Minor Professor
Kevin Heffeman, Committee Member
Alan Albarran, Chair of the Department of Radio, Television and Film
Sandra L. Terrell, Dean of the Robert B. Toulouse School of Graduate Studies

As ownership of Hong Kong changed hands from the United Kingdom to the People’s Republic of China in 1997, citizens and filmmakers of the city became highly aware of the political environment. Film director Wong Kar-Wai creates visually stimulating films that express the anxieties and frustrations of the citizens of Hong Kong during this period. This study provides a political reading of *Days of Being Wild* (1991), *In the Mood for Love* (2000), and *2046* (2004) through analyzing various story elements and details within the mise-en-scene. Story elements include setting, dialogue, character relationships, character identities, thematic motifs, musical references, numerology, and genre manipulation. Wong also uses details within the films’ mise-en-scene, such as props and color, to express political frustrations. To provide color interpretations, various traditional aesthetic guidelines, such as those prescribed by Taoism, Cantonese and Beijing opera, and feng shui, are used to read the films’ negative comments on the handover process and the governments involved. When studied together the three films illustrate how Wong Kar-Wai creates narrative and visual references to the time and atmosphere in which he works, namely pre-and-post handover Hong Kong.
TABLE OF CONTENTS

Chapters

1. **HONG KONG AND ITS INFLUENCE ON WONG KAR-WAI** .......... 1
   Hong Kong Political and Cinematic History ........................... 5
   Visual Art Traditions and Their Effects on Color Interpretation ............................................. 17
   Wong Kar-Wai ..................................................................... 24

2. **DAYS OF BEING WILD** .......................................................... 28
   Political Forces and Cinematic Response ............................. 28
   Personal and Professional Forces ...................................... 34
   Chow Mo-Wan: The Mystery ............................................. 37

3. **IN THE MOOD FOR LOVE** ...................................................... 45
   Political Forces and Cinematic Response ............................. 46
   Personal and Professional Forces ...................................... 51
   Chow Mo-Wan: The Neighbor ............................................. 54

4. **2046** .................................................................................. 64
   Political Forces and Cinematic Response ............................. 64
   Personal and Professional Forces ...................................... 68
   Chow Mo-Wan: The Gambler ............................................. 69

5. **PROMISES OF AN UNKNOWN FUTURE** ............................. 86
   Changes for Hong Kong Filmmakers ................................. 87
   Cultural Influences on Cinema ........................................... 88

REFERENCES .................................................................................. 90
CHAPTER 1
HONG KONG AND ITS INFLUENCE ON WONG KAR-WAI

Every facet of work is independent, emerging from the particular period of time and environment from which it is developed.

- Than Zhuang Zhuang (Ju, 2002).

As a medium containing many levels of text and subtext, film provides an expressive tool for artists who want to communicate taboo ideas to other people. These works are not created in a vacuum but are often influenced by the financial, personal, and physical limitations placed on filmmakers. Directors, as citizens with homes and families, are also influenced by the political, governmental, and aesthetic changes within their societies. Hong Kong film director Wong Kar-Wai is an example of a filmmaker who has been influenced by his local environment.

During the 20th century, Hong Kong has experienced turbulent political and financial changes. Within this shifting social climate, Wong Kar-Wai has made eight films that have brought him international acclaim. Much of the critical discussions surround Wong’s attention and treatment of mise-en-scene and unconventional narrative structures. Thematically, his works are linked by the presence of loneliness, elusive love, and fading memory, as well as the agonies of romantic entanglement and the individual search of finding one’s personal identity in an unstable environment. Wong’s films also share visual characteristics such as the presence of notable South Asian celebrities as well as quick editing, nontraditional post-production techniques, and expressive image
framing. They are also similar for their lush mise-en-scenes complete with distinctive and, arguably purposeful color use.

This study suggests a political reading of the Chow Mo-Wan trilogy, directed by Wong Kar-Wai, through the analysis of each production’s historical, political, and personal context as well as elements within each story and mise-en-scene. Story elements under scrutiny include setting, dialogue, character relationships, character identities, thematic motifs, musical references, numerology, and genre manipulation. Wong uses details within each film’s mise-en-scene such as props and color to express political frustrations. To provide color interpretations various traditional aesthetic guidelines, such as the Taoist five phases, feng shui, and Cantonese and Beijing/Peking opera makeup and costume traditions, are applied to read the films’ negative comments on the handover process and the government’s involved. This study is designed to illustrate how Wong Kar-Wai places references within the Chow Mo-Wan trilogy that refer to the time and atmosphere in which he works, namely pre-and-post handover Hong Kong.

Reading politics into films from Hong Kong, Taiwan, and Mainland China is not contrived because, as one critic puts it, Chinese culture has always dealt with totalitarian power structures. So, whether feudalism or communism, “the present is all but a reappearance of the past” and politics are ingrained within the cultural subconscious (Xiaoming, 1997, p. 130). Scholars, such as Ackbar Abbas and Stephen Teo, briefly mention the presence of politics in Wong’s films but
then move on to other subjects. Youn-Jeong Chae, a graduate of New York University, has written an article comparing Chinese landscape painting traditions and their relationship to the films directed by three ethnically Chinese filmmakers, specifically Chen Kaige (from the People’s Republic of China), Hou Hsiao-Hsien (from Taiwan), and Wong Kar-Wai (from Hong Kong). His work demonstrated how traditional visual standards are related to Chinese films and began the theoretical basis for the following study. For example, he begins his dissertation by discussing "cinema’s relation to the visual history of the culture in which it is created" (1997, p. 2). Any of the film director’s examined in Chae’s writing could be looked at from a political standpoint as they are all influenced by the society and culture around them, especially Hou Hsiao-Hsien who, arguable, comments on the troubled relationship between Taiwan and the People’s Republic of China in his oeuvre. This study will solely focus on Wong Kar-Wai because of his politically related comments at press conferences, his identity as a first-generation Hong Kong citizen to Shanghai diasporic parents, and his presence in Hong Kong during the tumultuous handover period.

The three films examined here are *Days of Being Wild* (1991), *In the Mood for Love* (2000), and *2046* (2004). These are called the “Chow-Mo Wan” trilogy because of their shared main character. They were chosen for their shared politically steeped location (Hong Kong during the 1960s) and because the films show a progression of increasing style and complexity within the mise-en-scene through the employment of specific color systems. Whether the
progression is a result of personal or political forces, a correlation can be found between the increasing of governmental control with Wong’s further placement of political commentary within his works. Because the films share the same era as Hong Kong’s transition of power, they are appropriate objects to study for political commentary. Although any film from the pre-handover period may be read as potentially reflecting the political environment, Wong’s films provide such clear references to late-20th century Hong Kong society that any direct or indirect political readings of the films’ texts is not forced.

This study identifies the aesthetic trends and their political relationships put forth by filmmaker Wong Kar-Wai. By using a cultural studies methodology to analyze the visual systems within Wong’s films, this study suggests that he uses visual systems to comment negatively on the governments of both the People’s Republic of China and the United Kingdom and the roles both countries played within the handover process. By presenting an overview of Chinese and Hong Kong political and cinematic history along with the artistic and cultural traditions that create the director’s palette, a cultural context will emerge allowing for political readings of the films.

For each film analysis questions for each production focus on: the Hong Kong political and cinematic environment and the personal circumstances surrounding production as well as textual and extra-textual elements of each work that can be read as potentially political. Examining the films separately and in chronological order allows the films to be read in political context. It also
allows for the different layers in each film to be closely examined for possible political messages.

Combining Hong Kong political and cinematic history with Chinese visual art traditions creates a cultural context for the study of handover era films. The films Wong Kar-Wai creates provide examples of how films can integrate other art forms into their text while also allowing the director to create a world of personal solace in order to escape the anxieties of real life. For Wong, a safe haven can be found in his childhood memories of 1960s Hong Kong. Like thousands of people, Wong and his parents relocated to Hong Kong then to flee the Cultural Revolution. His older brother and sister were left behind in Shanghai breaking apart the family unit. The move to Hong Kong was very difficult for Wong and, as he grew, he tried to reconcile what it meant to be a Shanghai-Hong Kong citizen. His background, and that of thousands of other Hong Kong citizens, can be better understood with a background in Hong Kong political and cinematic history.

Hong Kong Political and Cinematic History

In order to read Wong’s films in their cultural context numerous areas must be addressed. Firstly, to better understand the contemporary Hong Kong political landscape, Hong Kong’s history will be summarized. In the year 1841, British merchants claimed Hong Kong as a free port of trade for Her Majesty the Queen of England (Wei, 1995, p. 28). This event added to an already estranged relationship between the United Kingdom and what later became known as the
People’s Republic of China. The 1840s were instrumental in Hong Kong becoming an international financial center, as the city was colonized because of its strategic trade and military location during the Second Opium War (1856-1860). As a port of trade, Hong Kong was a city that focused on economics where people were always in a state of transition. Some scholars have argued that it was this introduction of Western investment into Hong Kong that began the cultural divide between the southern colony and the northern Mainland.

Another reason that Hong Kong and China have somewhat differing cultures is the number of events that have caused so many Chinese citizens to migrate to Hong Kong. The nineteenth and 20th centuries were wrought with violence and unrest in China. During the middle of the nineteenth century, thousands of Mainland refugees fled to Hong Kong to escape the Taiping Rebellion (Odham Stokes, 1999, p. 4), a conflict where between twenty and fifty million civilians and military personnel died. Chinese citizens also fled to Hong Kong during the first Sino-Japanese War in the latter part of the nineteenth century and the Boxer Rebellion (1899-1901). During the latter, many Chinese and Europeans fled to Hong Kong to avoid the movement against foreign peoples, politics, religions, technologies, and finances. Ironically, although the uprising blamed the “West” for the political and natural disasters occurring in China, the rebellion ended because of an eight-nation alliance, which was composed of troops from Japan, America, Austro-Hungary, Britain, France, Germany, Italy, and Russia who came and recaptured Tianjin and Beijing for the
Qing government. Soon after the Boxer Rebellion ended, film production began in Hong Kong.

Cinema in Hong Kong began in 1909 with two short films, *Stealing a Roasted Duck* and *Right a Wrong With Earthenware Dish*. Just as productions began springing up in the colony, events occurred which hurt the business. When World War I began, film production in Hong Kong slowed due to a lack of available film stock. It completely ceased in World War II because of the Japanese occupation and because any available stock was melted down for its silver nitrate. Between 1909 and 1941, Hong Kong produced over five hundred films but of those only four remain due to flammable nitrate film stock, neglect, and the ravages of war. The film community was not the only part of the population disrupted by war and political unease.

The number of refugees in Hong Kong swelled again after the Qing Empire was defeated resulting in the 1912 establishment of the Republic of China (Odham Stokes, 1999, p. 6). After the ROC was formed, civil war erupted between the Kuomintang (KMT) led by Chiang Kai-Shek and the Communist Party of China (CPP) led by Mao Zedong. Although the two parties worked together for a short time to defeat the warlords who had conquered northern China, they became violent rivals in 1927 when Chiang Kai-Shek ended their alliance.
Throughout all this, Hong Kong found itself again full of people fleeing violent situations on the Mainland. Unfortunately, the city proved to be vulnerable to Japanese invaders, and on December 25, 1941 British governor Sir Mark Young surrendered Hong Kong to the Japanese army. Despite protests, upheavals, and guerilla tactics by Hong Kong citizens, the Japanese occupation lasted for three years and eight months. Film exhibition was limited to Japanese films and only one film was produced during this period: *The Attack on Hong Kong*, also known as *The Day of England’s Collapse* (1942). This film was a complete Japanese production with Hong Kong filmmakers serving exclusively as grips. After the bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki in 1945 ended World War II in the Pacific, Japanese forces surrendered and withdrew from the colony. This also marked the end of the second Sino-Japanese War. Fighting ensued between the KMT and the CCP until 1950. Mao Zedong and the Communist party maintained control over the Mainland and Chiang Kai-Shek went, with the KMT, to Taiwan as the post war period began.

In the postwar period, the People’s Republic of China, the Republic of China (Taiwan), and the United Kingdom government in Hong Kong all recognized the potential power film could hold over the masses. Each municipality passed regulations and goals for cinema along various political and ideological lines. The Hong Kong film community continued making films based on Cantonese and Peking opera stories and visual traditions while changing some of the themes and content. This could be partially attributed to an influx of
refugees from Shanghai who fled the PRC during the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution (1966-1976) (Law, 2003, p. 96). Furthermore, the United Kingdom placed demands upon Hong Kong cinema that also changed some of the content including the 1963 law requiring all films to be subtitled in English. This legislation was in line with the colony’s official language of English despite the fact that the majority of Hong Kong citizens spoke Cantonese or Mandarin. Changes were not only occurring to Hong Kong cinema, there were also factors influencing PRC filmmakers.

During the Cultural Revolution, filmmaking in China all but ceased due to the Communist Party’s increased focus on agriculture and industry. What films were allowed had to adhere to strict regulations and propagandist programming. Shanghai had been the Mandarin center of film and many filmmakers were persecuted because of their nonconformist attitudes and lifestyles. When Shanghai filmmakers fled to Hong Kong they brought investments and established studio systems. With their influence, films in Hong Kong began addressing political issues more directly, some supporting anti-Japanese, anti-Communist, and pro-Capitalist sentiments. The newly relocated Shanghai filmmakers also brought Western investors who encouraged local Hong Kong filmmakers to tell stories that openly coincided with Western political and ideological trends.
As films became more internationally minded, the Chinese refugees in Hong Kong experienced something of an identity crisis. Most of the refugees fled the PRC fully intending to return once the situation improved but as the Communist Party remained strong refugees realized they could never go back. Trapped in an alien place without an opportunity to return, relocated Mainlanders began finding ways to make Hong Kong seem more like their homeland. One place the diaspora found solace was at the cinema.

One way filmmakers appealed to various diasporic groups was through the language spoken by the characters. Although films created in this time period may have contained critical commentary of certain aspects or factors of Mainland and Hong Kong life, they were still produced in Mandarin, the official language of the People’s Republic of China. Southern China, including Hong Kong, was comprised of areas that collectively spoke a local dialect called Cantonese. Cantonese and Mandarin differ greatly in pronunciation and script. Both dialects of the Chinese language are monosyllabic and tonal, which means that words are identified by their tones. There are four tones in Mandarin and six in Cantonese. The disparity in tone numbers is a result of the European influence on Southern China. Tone inflection alters meaning, so it is not uncommon for films to go by different names. Movies often have Mandarin, Cantonese, and English names. For example, John Woo’s 1992 film entitled *Hard Boiled* was also translated into English as *God Of Guns*, *Hot-Handled God of Cops*, and *Ruthless Super-Cop* depending on which inflections were taken with the dialects.
(Lashou, 2006). As cinema was a key location where all of these languages interacted, the filmmaker’s choice of dialect would have political or ethical implications in itself. By maintaining film exhibition in Mandarin the filmmakers were reaching out to audiences “back home” and to peoples who felt a longing for a taste of the Mainland. The ties to “home” on the Mainland created identity crises for many Hong Kong peoples who had never traveled off of the island.

The citizens of Hong Kong were struggling with more than their identities during the 1960s (Wright, 2002) as people there demonstrated against violence in their own country and abroad. They also marched against the prejudices and financial disparities between social classes in their city. For decades, the British colonial forces treated their Chinese citizens as second-class people often denying them representational and financial opportunities. Film scholar Nancy Blake, in her article “We Won’t Be Like Them: Repetition Compulsion in Wong Kar-Wai’s *In the Mood for Love,*” mainly attributes the uprisings to the exploitation of working-class Mainlanders along with political and financial inequalities (2003, p. 343). Some protesters walked against the Cultural Revolution on the Mainland and the Vietnam War, especially when the United States began its military offensive in Vietnam in 1965. This military movement caused many refugees from Vietnam to seek solace in Hong Kong adding to overpopulation and food shortages. Many Hong Kong citizens became discontent because of the drain the new refugees were on resources. They were
also upset because the political unrest led to a withdraw of foreign investment resulting in a dip in the local economy.

In the 1970s, Hong Kong became a global marketplace and saw the arrival of the first international Hong Kong film star – Bruce Lee. Kung fu films were not new to Chinese and Hong Kong audiences but the films in the 1970s did mark a distinct break from earlier martial arts movies. Departing from the tradition to produce the films in Mandarin, these kung fu films were released in Cantonese. A Hui Brothers’ film, Games Gamblers Play (1974), used Cantonese as a marketing device aimed at luring in the younger, locally-minded generation of viewers. With the tag line “Films by devoted young people with you in mind,” this film connected to the local audience in a huge financial and ideological way. This change added to a strong new movement to redefine local culture and to distance Hong Kong from the Mainland.

The interest in localism during the 1970s could be attributed to the growing realization that the city would soon cease being a capitalistic colony and become a Communist territory at the end of Great Britain’s lease and eminent return of Hong Kong to the PRC (Odham Stokes, 1999, p. 14). Hong Kong citizens, the majority of whom were directly descended from Mainlanders, found themselves caught in the middle of a bureaucratic event and between two cultures. Despite the fact that many of the diaspora originally intended to return to China, they found the time spent in Hong Kong had given them an identity that
no longer coincided with other Mainland Chinese. Instead, the people felt they belonged to a city as opposed to any country.

In 1979, Deng Xiaoping, then leader of the People’s Republic of China, shifted the party’s focus from pure communist ideology to a form of limited capitalism (Havis, 2005, p. 58). This shift slowly began opening the Mainland to foreign investment and furthered talks with British leaders over the return of Hong Kong. Coincidentally, in the early 1980s Hong Kong was one of the richest cities in the world. However, the blue skies of financial success were quickly clouded by the arrival of Margaret Thatcher and the signing of the Sino-British Joint Declaration. This document detailed the return of Hong Kong to Mainland China in 1997 (Odham Stokes, 1999, p.142) and affected Hong Kong life and cinema for years.

Anxieties about the handover, or as Wong Kar-Wai called it the “takeover,” found expression in the local cinema (Ciment, 2001). Audrey Yue, in her article “What’s So Queer About Happy Together? A.K.A. Queer (N) Asia: Interface, Community, Belonging,” argues that Hong Kong film between the signing of the declaration and the handover event paralleled “the identity-crisis experienced by the colony” (2000, p.252). Hong Kong citizens tried clearly to define the Hong Kong experience as a way to separate themselves from their preconceived conceptions of the People’s Republic. Many viewed their “cousins” to the north as being strictly traditional, rural, and politically and financially oppressed.
An example of the PRC’s oppression of its citizens came in June 1989 when hundreds of Chinese protesters were massacred while demonstrating for democracy at Tiananmen Square in Beijing (Clarke, 2002, p. 40). Their deaths served as a warning by the People’s Liberation Army to other disgruntled Chinese. Not deterred, 1.5 million Hong Kong citizens protested this mistreatment by the PRC of its own people (Odham Stokes, 1999, p. 15). With a new sense of urgency many Hong Kong people heightened the effort to define Hong Kong identity and to preserve their unique culture for fear that a similar fate to that at Tiananmen would await their city when the handover occurred.

Hong Kong cinema expressed these anxieties by telling stories that dealt with the differences between poor rural Mainlanders and rich urban Hong Kong characters. Films, such as Ann Hui’s Boat People (1982) and Leong Po-Chih’s Hong Kong 1941 (1984), commented on the upcoming handover by highlighting events and characters from other periods of political unrest in Hong Kong’s history. Boat People dealt with the crisis in Vietnam while Hong Kong 1941 was set during the Japanese occupation of the 1940s. The technique of using past events to signify anxieties about the future, although not new, became so prevalent that they comprised a new genre that Scholar Leung Noong-Kong deemed the “1997-as-allegory” genre (Li, 1997, p. 79).

Politics found its way into films through other venues as well. Some filmmakers began placing aesthetic symbols of the handover into their films. Examples of these signifiers are clocks, calendars, and dates. For example, in
Wong Kar-Wai’s 1994 film *Chungking Express* he raises the question: “Is there anything that does not have an expiration date?” In the film this question is asked about cans of pineapple and romances but it also serves as a metaphor for Hong Kong’s way of life. As the transfer of power neared, citizens wondered what would happen when their “expiration date” arrived.

Artists and filmmakers were concerned about whether increases in state-sanctioned censorship and Mainland competition would hurt production as well as audience reception and attendance. Specific groups in the general population also had trepidations about the leadership change. Women were anxious about health care availability and social standings. The gay community was concerned about persecution because during the Cultural Revolution in the People’s Republic of China homosexuals were imprisoned and sometimes executed. In 1997, sodomy was “decriminalized” in the PRC but there was still a policy called the “Three Nos”: no approval, no disapproval, and no promotion. On the other hand, homosexuality had been legalized in Hong Kong in 1991 and there were gay-rights organizations that openly advocated anti-discrimination legislation for the city. Addressing this last demographic, Wong Kar-Wai released a film in 1997 entitled *Happy Together*, which featured two male characters who have a love affair with each other. He intentionally chose to tell their story because he felt the gay community was the group that immediately “had the most to lose in terms of individual and civil liberties” (Teo, 2005, p. 99-100).
Despite an effort culturally to distance themselves from the People’s Republic of China, Hong Kong citizens could not deny their growing dependence on the Mainland for essential items such as water and food. Hong Kong was, and is, mainly comprised of an island of 414 square miles populated by 6.5 million people (Odham Stokes, 1999, p. 1-2). Room is not available for agricultural production or water treatment facilities, so food and water has to be imported from the Mainland. Pan Asian scholars have hypothesized that as the People’s Republic supported Hong Kong with necessities, Hong Kong would financially support the modernization of the rest of the country. This relationship left Hong Kong in a vulnerable position as it again left the lives of its people, again, in the hands of a non-local government.

When July 1, 1997 came, Hong Kong found itself being passed between governing hands. Not only were Hong Kong citizens and those of the Chinese diaspora concerned about the handover, but the event also sparked talks of globalization and “open” markets because of the amount of foreign investment within the city. There seemed to be a threat to the capitalist characteristics that comprised so much of the Hong Kong psyche. As Beijing took control of the city, certain events such as recession and a SARS outbreak distracted people from politics and returned attention back to the business of making money.

Hong Kong was back to business and back to watching the calendar. When Beijing took control of Hong Kong, the government promised the citizens fifty-years of autonomy where “the judicial and educational structures would all
be preserved” (Wei, 1995, p. 49). These fifty years end in 2046. However, after making this pledge, the Beijing government began “reforming” education and suspending union rights (Odham Stokes, 1999, p. 281). With a distrust inherited from many generations of Mainland refugees, many Hong Kong people are suspicious of the 2046 “promise.” This distrust carried over from the streets into the theaters.

The culmination of the political and social pressures on filmmakers in Hong Kong resulted in new production techniques and aesthetic sensibilities. Hong Kong film scholar Ackbar Abbas credits Wong Kar-Wai with creating a new visual language that deals with the temporality and alienation of modern urban life in Hong Kong (1997, p. 36). This new visual style relies on various story and mise-en-scene elements, including symbolic color systems. Through the Chow Mo-Wan Trilogy, Wong Kar-Wai hones a visual sophistication while referring to the active political environment in Hong Kong.

**Visual Art Traditions and Their Effects on Color Interpretation**

Wong Kar-Wai, who has a background in graphic design (Lalanne, 1997, p. 120), utilizes various Chinese visual traditions to express his concerns over the transfer of power. He speaks to an audience that has various experiences with chromotherapy, Taoism, feng shui, opera, and other cultural art forms in order to interpret the color systems within his mise-en-scenes accordingly.

Films and filmmakers are under extreme scrutiny by censors and financiers which means that if politics are to find a way into Hong Kong cinema
they must do so covertly. In providing a political reading of the aforementioned films the question of director intent is raised. This study does not claim to know the intentions or personal goals of Wong Kar-Wai and his crew, rather it suggests that there is political commentary within the films. Because of the close attention censors place on Wong Kar-Wai any of his statements, whether in support for or against the former and current governments of Hong Kong, are unreliable in determining intent. Throughout the handover period Wong has said statements claiming political intent and then denied them. Art director William Chang answered the question of intent in an interview. When asked if his films were filled with symbolic meaning, he responded, “They should be, but I try my best to conceal them. They not be conspicuous…People are free to offer their own views” (Lee, 2004, p. 46).

Of the many tools Wong employs in the Chow Mo-Wan trilogy to express his views on contemporary life in Hong Kong, the most abstract are the color systems at work in the mise-en-scenes. By laying groundwork in various visual art traditions found in Hong Kong and the Mainland, a richer reading of the hues may be achieved. It is not the intent of this study to suggest that there is be only one way to read the selected colors, therefore various sources will be used to read the relationships between certain shades and their affects on the film text. These relationships, as defined by various visual traditions, reveal political commentary placed within the films. The purpose of this thesis is to investigate the relationships between certain shades and their affects on the film text.
Therefore, it is the intention of this study to highlight similarities and differences between traditional readings of the chosen colors and their uses within the selected films.

Wong Kar-Wai is not the only professional to use color for personal reasons. Western filmmakers, such as Alfred Hitchcock, in *North By Northwest* (1959), and Douglas Sirk, in *All That Heaven Allows* (1955), used color to comment on contemporary political and societal injustices. The main difference between their, and other more traditional filmmakers, uses of color and Wong's is the saturation and implementation of the hues. For example, in *All That Heaven Allows* Sirk uses color to highlight certain characters or emotive states. This can be seen in the main character's, Cary's, wardrobe which changes from grays, signifying her restraint, in the beginning of the film to the reds she wears once she realizes her passion for Ron Kirby. A similar example can be found in Wong Kar-Wai's *In the Mood for Love* but with different expression. As Su Li-Zhen realizes she is in love with Chow Mo-Wan she enters a hallway where she and the draperies are both a deep red. This differs from the Sirk example because Wong does not use the colors to highlight or direct focus. Instead, he uses them to create an overall statement. Insight into Wong's possible statements is provided by the study of various art and cultural forms.

Color has been used for centuries in various emotional, physiological, physical, and psychological situations. Victoria Yau, in her article “Use of Color in China,” describes color as “a major component in sensory perception, affect(ing)
us visually and emotionally” (1994, p. 151). Studies in chromotherapy, the use of color for healing, show that different hues have different effects on human physiology. For example, rooms painted red caused patients to experience increased muscle tone and enhanced energy (Bleicher, 2005, p. 13). Rooms in blue caused a decrease in “toxins in the body and was said to promote knowledge and self-assuredness” (Bleicher, 2005, p. 15). Green rooms cause capillaries to dilate (Bleicher, 2005, p. 13) and are used to treat “bacterial infections and stomach ulcers” (Bleicher, 2005, p. 14). Color psychology, which is in some ways similar to chromotherapy, utilizes color to effect behavior and emotion. Studies in color psychology have shown that bodybuilders can perform at a higher level in blue rooms and that infants seem distressed more often in yellow rooms. During the late nineteenth century, European artists such as Matisse combined specific shades with their opposites to create anxious qualities within their paintings. When viewed together, opposite hues cause the eye to physically vibrate resulting in observer discomfort and anxiety. As film is a predominately visual medium, the use of color can play a large role in a movie’s story, design, and message.

Regardless of its scientific or practical applications, color cues various emotional responses from audiences. Culture and society condition viewers to maintain specific interpretations of color. For example, in the United States the color red could signify blood, rage, or communism and instruct the viewer to stop. Yet to a Chinese audience, red more regularly signifies happiness, wealth, and
good fortune as well as denoting celebration. One example of the importance of color to ethnically Chinese peoples can be found in Phnom Penh, Cambodia. In 2001, when governor Chea Sophora declared that buildings would be painted yellow to symbolize development, local bar owners became outraged. Their buildings had been painted black and red to encourage drinking, dancing, and “fun.” The businessmen/women feared that the new color, which historically was associated with monks, would financially hurt their establishments. Eventually, the bars were forced to adhere to the new ordinances and repaint their businesses (Chon, 2005). This example speaks of two important points regarding Chinese color use and interpretations. First, color can, and does, contain cultural messages beyond its visual appeal. Second, the extent of these cultural beliefs is so ingrained in people that some governments feel the need to dictate or control which colors are seen in which context. This careful placement of color can be seen in many Chinese films.

Cinematographer Mark Lee Ping Bing commented on the importance of color in Chinese culture during an interview. He said, “I believe that colors mean a lot to the Chinese. Each color bears a special meaning” (Ju, 2002). Art scholar Victoria Yau believed that China “has always been shaped by an intense sense of tradition that dictates the use of color” (1994, p. 155). One of the societal and cultural factors that has contributed to China’s use and interpretation of color is religion, specifically Taoism.
Beginning in the third century B.C.E. (before the common era) with the scholar Tsou Yen, writings appeared defining the Taoist five elements. Each element had a compass direction, weather condition, virtue, emperor, ethnic group, and color associated with it. For example, Huo, or fire, is the element symbolic of the south and heat. It carries with it connotations of propriety, symbols of the emperors Shen-Nung and Yen-Ti, and references of the Han people (Ross, 2002). The color associated with this ancient fire element is red. These Taoist five elements have transcended into the modern practice of feng shui.

Used for centuries, feng shui is based on the idea of creating balance between the yin (masculine) and yang (feminine) forces, or chi, to ensure prosperity and peace. Hong Kong people are very interested in feng shui and numerous buildings, including the Hong Kong Bank, are built and decorated according to its principles. In everyday life, people fill their personal space with color combinations that would balance each other. For example, red and green together would be avoided because they are too close together on the feng shui compass. Instead, red would be with blue because they are opposite on the compass and would ensure a balance of yin and yang. Special color considerations also exist in the marketing sector.

International marketing guidelines recommend avoiding using green in Pan Asian countries because of its use by men to symbolize an adulterous wife. Red is recommended because of its celebratory nature and use within these
cultures. According to *Brandweek* contributor David Kiley, blue should be avoided because it contains few positive or negative connotations (1997, p. 22). Like many contemporary arts, international marketing draws from traditions in the operatic arts.

Symbolic use of color is also prevalent in regional Chinese opera. The two most famous types of these musical performances are auxi, or opera from Canton, and jingxi, opera from Beijing (Peking). These regional art works differ in various ways such as dialect, gender roles, set design, instrumentation, and tonal qualities. Audiences of both opera schools receive similar messages about each character through their costuming and makeup. For example, a character with a red face signifies a person with divine qualities (Yau, 1994, p. 158), a person wearing a blue robe denotes a peasant, and a person in yellow is royalty (Mackerras, p. 44-45). Details, such as the number of toes on an embroidered dragon, tell the audience a character’s status. Meaning is also expressed through the combination or presence of other colors. By this measurement, if the characters are unusual or not trustworthy, then the makeup will feature contrasting colors and bold geometric patterns (Yung, 1989, p. 12).

All of these traditions combine to create levels of meaning and beauty. Having a background in design, Wong Kar-Wai combines the nervous energy of his city with visual art traditions to comment on the various forces at work in late 20th-century Hong Kong. Through *Days of Being Wild, In the Mood for Love,*
and 2046, Wong develops a sophisticated visual style with the assistance of his core crew.

Wong Kar-Wai

The vibrant look of Wong Kar-Wai’s films is attributed to his consistent collaboration with two filmmakers: William Chang Suk-Ping, production designer and editor, and Christopher Doyle, director of photography. Although the three have worked together for over a decade, it is primarily Wong’s voice that is expressed in the mise-en-scene.

This view is based on the comparison of Chang’s production design in Wong’s Days of Being Wild (1991) with his work in Stanley Kwan’s film Lan Yu (2001). The both films feature strong hues, but differ in the amount of saturation. For example, Kwan’s film has somewhat of a diluted look whereas Wong’s is very concentrated. Another difference between the two production designs is the treatment of “reality.” Kwan’s film has a realistic visual style, evident through the lighting and costumes, whereas Wong's is hyper-realistic, where color seems to take on a meaning of its own. These differences are a result of the individual director’s narrative style. Cinematographer Christopher Doyle creates more “realistic” looking films when he works with other directors besides Wong Kar-Wai. For example, in the 2002 film Rabbit-Proof Fence the visual style is very realistic, in contrast to his work with Wong which tends to have a theatrical, hyper-realistic style.
There are a number of filmmakers from Mainland China, known as the Fifth Generation, who are regarded for placing subversive political statements within their films through narrative and visual techniques. Wong Kar-Wai, as a contemporary of these filmmakers, is an interesting director to study in this context because he is from Hong Kong rather than China. This geographic distinction may shed light on the differences between Wong’s early works and those of the Fifth Generation. Hong Kong’s handover to the People’s Republic of China may give film scholars an opportunity to see how postcolonial filmmakers respond to communist leadership. A citizen of Hong Kong during the handover period, Wong was surrounded by political events and images.

Many of the images Wong Kar-Wai has seen have influenced his visual sensibilities. His artistic tastes include photography by Robert Frank, Henri Cartier Bresson, Richard Avedon ("Wong Kar-Wai: A Portrait Of The Evolving Artist, 2004) and William Gendney (Wolf, 2004, p. 38) as well as films from the French New Wave such as those directed by Resnais, Duras, and Besson (Blake, 2003, p. 353). Wong was also influenced by the political and social events in Hong Kong during the 20th Century.

Not one to shy away from politics, Wong Kar-Wai opened the first independent production company in Hong Kong in 1994. Named Zedong, as an ironic joke referring to the Communist leader Mao Zedong, Wong uses his position outside the film community to maintain control over his films. Working with co-owner and producer Jeffery Wai, Wong is able to secure funding for his
projects without going through the traditional routes with solely Asian investors. Instead, he is able to secure monies from the “West” which makes him a controversial figure in the Hong Kong film community.

In a cinematic environment focused on revenue, there seems little room for ‘art-house’ cinema. By Hong Kong standards then, Wong should have not been allowed to make more than one film because many of his films have performed poorly at the local box-office. It is Wong’s international success and foreign investment that has allowed him to continue creating personal films within the new Hong Kong cinema market. Although the international acclaim allows Wong to stay in business, it does not protect him from PRC censors. In fact, the international attention makes him more of a target for censorship and governmental control. He, and other Hong Kong filmmakers, must work with the government in order to secure Mainland distribution and financing.

Evidence of Wong Kar-Wai’s compromise and flexibility in working within the political and financial confines of the pre-and-post handover period can be found in the Chow Mo-Wan trilogy. Although any of Wong’s eight films could have been chosen to study, all of them have their own color systems and reflect the specific time periods in which they were made, the trilogy provides an opportunity to see a progression in Wong’s visual sophistication as it coincides with specific dates in recent Hong Kong history. The trilogy is also tied together by a common character who grows in importance and complexity through the
course of the series. Audiences first meet Chow Mo-Wan at the end Wong Kar-Wai’s 1991 film *Days of Being Wild*.
CHAPTER 2

DAYS OF BEING WILD

The first film in Wong Kar-Wai’s Chow Mo-Wan trilogy is Days of Being Wild (1991). This study suggests that, through this film, Wong reflects the political pressure and uncertainty experienced by Hong Kong during the latter part of the 20th century. Citizens were surrounded by reminders of a major change for their city, namely the 1997 handover of sovereignty from Great Britain to the People’s Republic of China. The end of colonialism brought with it questions of identity and loyalty while the fear of the unknown caused many Hong Kong filmmakers’ imaginations to run wild. Wong Kar-Wai responded by creating a new visual language through color use and retreating to the time period of his childhood. Using narrative elements, props, and a specific color system, Wong expresses his, and Hong Kong’s, anxieties concerning the transition of power by placing both the United Kingdom and the People’s Republic of China in a bitter light.

Political Forces and Cinematic Response

As the heightened political environment carried over from the streets into the film studios, new genres and film movements appeared. One notable group was called the New Wave and which categorized films that worked within traditionally used genres to reflect on contemporary Hong Kong society (Law Kar in Yau, 2001, p. 31). Classified by some scholars as “post-consciousness” films (Leung Noong Kong in Li, 1997, p. 72-73), these movies began using signs and
metaphors of the 1997 handover. Many of these symbols featured images of fleeing from uncertain futures. Common signifiers were props, such as international passports and transient characters who traveled away from Hong Kong without planning to return (Odham Stokes, 1999, p. 258-259).

Filmmakers in the New Wave often studied at the Radio Television Hong Kong School (RTHK). Set apart because of their technical capabilities and desire to represent contemporary Hong Kong life, these filmmakers were known for their revisionist uses of traditional genres, such as the crime film. Alex Cheung’s Cops and Robbers (1979) and Yim Ho’s 1980 film The Happenings were acclaimed for their ability to use established genres for making social commentary. These, and other New Wave films, influenced younger generations of Hong Kong filmmakers.

A Second New Wave arrived later in the 1980s and expanded upon the First New Wave’s portrayal of contemporary life. Films in this group tended to more explicitly refer to modern life. Members of this second wave, including Wong Kar-Wai, Stanley Kwan [Rouge (1987) and Full Moon in New York (1989)] and Clara Law [Farewell China (1990) and Autumn Moon (1992)], worked to express life in pre-handover Hong Kong.

In 1984, the transition of rule began with the signing of the Sino-British Declaration by British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher and Chairman Deng Xiaoping in Beijing. Although the citizens of Hong Kong had known about the 1997 handover, the Declaration took it out of abstraction and made it a certain
reality. It also told Hong Kong citizens an unfortunate truth: that they would receive no local representation in the handover process. This lack of control over their own lives created an atmosphere of consternation and paranoia. One local filmmaker described Hong Kong as, “A site of contestation, where anxieties and tensions ignite. It is a place of fervent passions and fears of the unknown” (Odham Stokes, 1999, p. 65).

During the mid to late 1980s, the People’s Republic of China urged the British governing party to prepare Hong Kong society for communist leadership. At the same time, UK leaders somewhat loosened their hold on the colony and allowed more democratic involvement and political openness. Hong Kong citizens were allowed participation and representation in local elections as well as higher positions of power in both business and government. With the new liberties came an uneasy feeling, although, as people knew the new freedoms would be short-lived because the Beijing government would likely not maintain the same level of openness.

This is not to say that the British government was relinquishing control over all aspects of Hong Kong life. In fact, it was increasing control over the cinema. Throughout its reign, the British government had routinely censored films that featured an anti-colonial slant therefore filmmakers became accustomed to a certain degree of political censorship (Odham Stokes, 1999, p. 259). Hong Kong cinema had evolved with a sense of self-censorship and often dealt with politics
through dislocation, displacement, metaphors, irony, and subtext utilizing these
tools to get films past the Film Censorship Authority (Odham Stokes, 1999,
p. 255, 36). In the post-consciousness pre-handover arena, filmmakers were
under added pressure when the British passed the Film Censorship Bill
forbidding films that featured corrupt morals or encouraged crime (Paul Duncan
in Fitzgerald, 2000, p. 46). In 1988, legislation was passed restricting filmmakers
and censoring films that could pose a threat to Hong Kong’s relationships with
other nations; mainly the PRC (Odham Stokes, 1999, p. 259). Despite the
colonial government’s attempts, relations between Hong Kong and the Mainland
became strained in the summer of 1989.

The beginning of July saw the People’s Republic of China’s People’s
Liberation Army acting against hundreds of citizens protesting for various rights
at Tiananmen Square in Beijing (Odham Stokes, 1999, p. 36, 142; Clarke, 2002,
p. 40; Dissanayake, 1994, p. 43). After the initial shock, Hong Kong citizens
feared that the People’s Republic of China would not honor the “One country,
Two systems” plan that had been laid out in the Sino-British Declaration. This
policy stated that Hong Kong would be governed somewhat differently than
Mainland China allowing the Special Administrative Region to maintain many of
its unique practices. For some former refugees, visions of violence in the street
recalled images from the Cultural Revolution and sparked talk of fleeing the city.
Numerous Hong Kong citizens began viewing British colonization in a positive
light and nostalgia for the mid-20th century became rampant. A fondness for
items from yesteryear manifested itself in personal collections and filmmakers began responding with well known “images, poetry, and fiction” to give audiences a feeling that at least artistic artifacts can be permanent (Abbas in Yau, 2001, p. 16).

The events at Tiananmen Square added to the heightened political atmosphere. As a result, the cinema in Hong Kong became more politically sensitive. Audience members were cognizant of these issues and media programs were seen through the filter of political unease (Li, 1998, p. 58). Aware of film’s potential to reach large groups of people, the People’s Republic of China moved quickly after Tiananmen to halt production on films that addressed the incident.

The Tiananmen Square incident did more than cause PRC film censors to restrict film content. It also resulted in the repurposing of films from the Mainland, Hong Kong, and elsewhere. In October 1989, the official PRC response to the Tiananmen Square incident, declared by Li Ruihuan, spokesperson and head of the Central Propaganda Department of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China, was that sixty percent of films released from that point on must now support the educational and propagandist goals of the party before any other commercial or miscellaneous considerations would take place (Dissanayake, 1994, p. 45). This refocusing not only meant that Hong Kong filmmakers would have to cater to the new guidelines for distribution. It also meant that Mainland film directors would need to seek funding from other
sources such as Hong Kong and Taiwan in order to supplement the lack of government subsides. Thus, local Hong Kong filmmakers faced growing competition and strains on an already saturated financial market (Abbas, 1997, p. 21).

The economic market and political environment remained strained into the 1990s, as the decade began with the initiation of the Basic Law outlined by the Joint Declaration of 1984. This legislation, enacted in April 1990, stated that Hong Kong laws could remain unless they directly contradicted the legislation set out by Beijing (Wei, 1995, p. 50). Although Hong Kong would not belong to the PRC for another seven years, citizens would have to assimilate Beijing law and prepare for the changes the handover would have on their everyday lives. One public arena where changes were occurring was in the cinema.

Due to the handover, Hong Kong filmmakers found themselves apart of the People’s Republic of China’s new film quotas, which placed them in the less-desirable position of import cinema. Counting Hong Kong films as imports limited the number of films from Hong Kong eligible for distribution to Mainland audiences. The classification also forced Hong Kong films to compete against other foreign films, including films from Hollywood and Bollywood. Hong Kong filmmakers were forced to adapt to the new business structure or to invent storytelling techniques that set them a part from their rivals.

One way that Hong Kong filmmakers distinguished themselves from foreign competition was by utilizing stylistic innovation. During the 1980s, Cinema
City Film Production Company pioneered “conscious employment of advertising concepts and artists trained in commercial design for filmmaking” (Yau, 2001, p. 10). By combining visual mediums, filmmakers were able to draw from and inspire television commercials, print ads, and other film productions. This made their cultural significance greater as messages in the films could be easily reproduced or reiterated in various visual situations adding to the reach a movie could have with an audience. The combination of marketing, graphic design, and film was evident in the film *Days of Being Wild* by Wong Kar-Wai.

**Personal and Professional Forces**

Wong Kar-Wai was professionally exposed to numerous political forces during the beginning of his film career. Spending the late 1970s studying graphic design, he changed his major to screenwriting in 1980 to take classes at the Radio Television Hong Kong School. While working with politically minded New Wave directors and writers, Wong was taken under the wing of director Patrick Tam [*Final Victory* (1987)]. Tam, who used a very heightened visual style helped get him work on various film shoots, and directed one of Wong’s first screenplays. Being a screenwriter in Hong Kong is a unique employment situation because the market is so in need of good scripts. Often, there is a shortage of screenwriters so most films are shot without a script (Odham Stokes, 1999, p. 26). Curiously, even though Wong began his career as a screenwriter, he often directs films without a finished script.
In 1988, Wong Kar-Wai made his directorial debut with *As Tears Go By* under the tutorage of Patrick Tam. The film, which did relatively well at the Hong Kong box office, starred many Cantonese pop stars, such as Andy Lau, Maggie Cheung, and Jackie Cheung. *Tears* is a reinterpretation of Martin Scorsese’s *Mean Streets* (1973) set against a gritty Triad (Hong Kong mafia) background that focuses more on the inner emotions of the characters and pressures on them than on the violence between them. *As Tears Go By* also borrows thematically from the French opera *Carmen* by George Bizet and marks the beginning of Wong’s collaboration with production designer William Chang.

Working with a core crew, including Christopher Doyle and William Chang, allows Wong to repeat visual motifs within his films. Doyle, whose first film with Wong was *Days of Being Wild* (Wolf, 2004, p. 40), explains how the look is often achieved: “Chang ‘comes up with wonderful things and pushes me towards a certain imagery… we never talk about it, that’s the beauty of it’” (Odham Stokes, 1999, p. 186). This improvisational creation of mise-en-scène (Teo, 2005, p. 44) adds a sense of temporality to the films. As the settings change, the actors need to readjust to their characters’ new environment adding a level of uncertainty to the performances. This improvisational shooting technique can also prove costly as it did in *In the Mood for Love*. On the last day of shooting the scenes in the hotel hallway, Chang decided he wanted the whole hallway to be filled with billowing red curtains. When he shared the idea with Wong, the director agreed.
and called a re-shoot for the whole location delaying production and going over budget.

Although item placement and fabrics are free to ebb and flow, color systems are set in advance. Doyle, Chang, and Wong work consciously on their color choices and what they would mean to audiences. For example, for the first decade of their collaboration, Doyle and Wong made a conscious decision to avoid red. Doyle’s reason for this was due to the fact that the color has “too many associations in Asia” (Mackey, 2004). The color was omitted because it could connote too many messages to audiences.

Working with an expressive color palette allows Wong Kar-Wai to make extra textual statements within the films. Scholar Jenny Kwok Wah Lau said, “if one agrees that the mise-en-scène of most films is a product of detailed design, one can easily recognize that the use of color is yet another means for an artist to manipulate a visual aesthetic which is basically culture-bound” (Ehrlich, 1994, p. 127). For Wong’s second film, he had clear motives for the color system:

*Days of Being Wild* was a reaction against my first film, *As Tears Go By*, which was full of harsh light and neon. I told [Doyle] I wanted to do a ‘monochrome’ film, almost drained of color. It’s a film about different kinds of depression, and it needed to be very blank, very thin in texture. That created many problems for [Doyle]: many filters, few lights, very hard to control focus. That’s one reason it took so long to shoot (Brunette, 2005, “Days of Being Wild”).

Doyle also commented on Wong’s desire to make each film visually distinctive:

“As *Tears Go By* is filmed in hard blocks of red, ultramarine, and orange, all pierced by solid black shadows... *Days of Being Wild* has a more languid
rhythm, with softer lighting and much longer takes" (Bordwell, 2000, p. 276).
Manipulating lighting and other elements of the production process serves as an extra-textual tool for Wong.

The languid rhythm and soft lighting of *Days of Being Wild* are only two techniques Wong employs to comment on the political situation in Hong Kong during the post-consciousness pre-handover period. He also uses story elements, props, and a sophisticated color system in his film to share his distrust and displeasure of both the British and Chinese governments. By examining the film’s narrative elements and visual systems, Wong’s innovative visual language can be read as reflecting the contemporary pressures of life in Hong Kong while cynically relating predictions of the future.

**Chow Mo-Wan: The Mystery**

Wong Kar-Wai’s *Days of Being Wild* is a film that fits into a precisely designated Hong Kong genre: the “Ah Fei” film. An “Ah Fei” film is a specific Cantonese-language film about discontented punks who constantly search for their own identities (Teo, 2005, p. 3). These young characters serve as an allegory for Hong Kong that, at the time, was in the process of defining its own identity (Brunette, 2005, *Wong Kar-Wai*, p. 23).

*Days* tells the story of Yuddy, a disillusioned playboy searching for his real mother. Along the journey, he falls in and out of love with two women, Su Li-Zhen and Mimi; befriends Zeb and Tide; and incites a gang battle that ends in his ultimate demise. At the end of the film, a mysterious character appears in a small
room grooming himself – this is Chow Mo-Wan. Although he has no lines and is only on screen for a short time, his presence is so surprising that he lingers in the minds of the audience long after the film finishes.

With a Cantonese title that means *Rebel Without A Cause*, identical to Nicholas Ray’s 1955 film (Brunette, 2005), *Days of Being Wild* uses many devices to address the feelings in Hong Kong during the late 1980s and early 1990s. The first device placing *Days of Being Wild* in a political context is the setting of the film. *Days* is set in the 1960s, which was a decade tied to “corruption and violence” and the onslaught of Mainland China’s Cultural Revolution (Blake, 2003, p. 354). It is often the decade used in Fifth Generation filmmakers’ works to signify present political discomfort and discontent. Just as Zhang Yimou’s 1994 film *To Live* is set during the Cultural Revolution to discuss contemporary problems in modern Mainland China, *Days* is set during the 1960s as an allegorical story about the “transition to 1997” (Teo, 1997, p. 193; Brunette, 2005, *Wong Kar-Wai*, p. 23).

Originally, Wong wanted to set the film, *Days*, in 1963 because it was the year he and his mother moved to Hong Kong but changed it to 1960 because of its tie to the election of John F. Kennedy and the Apollo space mission (Brunette, 2005, “*Days of Being Wild*”). He felt that during the 1960s:

There was a sense that we were moving into a new page of history…since I didn’t have the resources to recreate the period realistically, I decided to work entirely from memory. And memory is actually about a sense of loss—always a very important element in drama (Brunette, 2005, “*Days of Being Wild*”).
More explicitly, he told Berenice Reynaud that although “Days of Being Wild is set in the ‘60s... the society as shown in the film never really existed like that; it’s an invented world of an imaginary past” (Brunette, 2005, “Days of Being Wild”). By creating the impression of the past rather than the realistic recreation of it, Wong was able to place signs of the present within the film.

Other signs of the upcoming handover of sovereignty in Days are discussions about traveling. Police officer Tide states that he has been unable to leave Hong Kong, despite a desire to, because he must care for his ailing mother. As soon as she dies, he becomes a sailor and travels to the Philippines. Su Li-zhen, who originally was from Macau, came to Hong Kong to visit her cousin. Desperately wanting to return home, she is detained because of financial reasons. Throughout the film, Yuddy tells a story about a bird with no feet who flies from place to place unable to land. This tale becomes a metaphor for his character as Yuddy feels his upbringing makes him unable to settle down. He is adopted from the Philippines by a mother in Hong Kong and returns there during the course of the film to search of his birth mother. Never intending to return to Hong Kong, Yuddy is killed shortly after instigating a gangster battle in which he stabs a man who had secured him an international passport. Aside from travel references, Wong Kar-Wai uses character relationships to comment on the contemporary Hong Kong political atmosphere.

One allusion to the Hong Kong-PRC relationship in Days of Being Wild is the relationships between mothers and sons. Tide is hindered from travel
because of his ailing mother. Yuddy has two dysfunctional relationships with mothers, the first being with his adoptive mother Rebecca Tik-Wa Poon who hides information from him in order to keep him from leaving. An ex-prostitute, she spends her days and nights looking for love with younger men. When she eventually tells Yuddy about his origins, she does it by highlighting the idea that he was “unwanted” by his biological parents. After traveling to the Philippines to see his birth mother, Yuddy is turned away and flees her home unsatisfied. It is Yuddy’s relationship with his two mothers that best illustrates anxieties felt by the Hong Kong people in regards to the handover. Feeling abandoned by their “birth” mother yet resenting their “adoptive” mother, it seemed Hong Kong was a lost city of people– people who remained unwanted, destined to perish between the two opposing forces. Aside from narrative elements, Wong also uses Days of Being Wild’s mise-en-scene to make political references.

One of the most obvious signs of contemporary Hong Kong ‘post-handover-consciousness’ in Days of Being Wild is the prevalence of clocks and watches (Wright, 2002; Teo, 1997, p. 195; Odham Stokes, 1999, p. 36). Watches appear in numerous scenes, often on the protagonist’s wrist. Yuddy starts a relationship with Su Li-zhen in the beginning of the film by sharing a minute together staring at a clock. From that moment on, they are “one minute friends” and the joyous part of their relationship seems to last about as long. Characters are always asking each other what time it is even though none of them seem to have a pressing appointment or schedule to keep. Their days are filled with
eating French fries, drinking Coca-Cola, and reminiscing about the past. By including Western food and products in the film, Wong reminds his audiences that the characters are in Hong Kong where wealth is rampant and Western luxury products are available. The presence of these products also reflects the element in the Hong Kong psyche that is neither strictly “Chinese” nor “Western.” Metaphoric meaning can also be found in other props in the mise-en-scene.

*Days of Being Wild* has two main hues in its color system: blue and green (Nochimson, 2005, p. 9; Tuna, 2005). These two hues are used so exclusively that ordinary objects that normally exist in other shades have been altered for the film. An example of this is the British telephone booth where Su Li-Zhen and Tide meet. In real life the booths are a vibrant red color, but in Wong’s *Days* they are such a deep dark blue that they almost appear black. This change in color is more than an expressive move on the part of the director (Brunette, 2005, p. 78). Taking such an iconic sign of the British government and repainting it a dark, bleak color suggests that things are not as grand as they may have seemed. In an ironic example of life imitating art, after the handover PRC employees repainted the British red mailboxes:

> These red pillar boxes had become so symbolic of Britain that when Hong Kong reverted to China in 1997, post office employees were out on the streets within days, repainting the postboxes in a new livery or emerald green and purple. Somehow the new coat of paint was a gentle symbol of the end of empire (Finlay, 2002, p. 167).
The prevalent use of blue and green makes other colors seem out of place and garish, so that Yuddy’s adoptive mother Rebecca, with her bright red lipstick, seems ridiculous and overbearing visually as well as emotionally.

Applying traditional art values to *Days of Being Wild* allows for the extra textual messages to emerge. Before Yuddy travels to the Philippines to meet his biological mother the dominant hue is blue. When he reaches his destination and is turned away the dominant hue is green. According to traditional international marketing guidelines that link green to adultery, audiences are conditioned to feel that Yuddy’s mother is untrustworthy and adulterous on a sub-textual level. Since her character serves as an allegory for the People’s Republic of China, her shortcomings are theirs – audiences should not trust her just as Hong Kong should not trust their new leaders. Examining the colors from another artistic tradition reveals other political messages.

From a Cantonese/Beijing opera point-of-view, the separated colors suggest that the story elements are clearly defined. Yuddy’s adoptive mother, who serves as an allegory for the United Kingdom, is associated with blue therefore reflecting a military and financially poor situation – quite the insult to a regime that prides itself on its financial success in Hong Kong. Yuddy’s biological mother is associated with green that reflects her character’s stubbornness and impulsiveness. Green is a secondary color therefore its use indicates that the character is less important than the character bathed in blue, which is a primary
hue. This color system reflects the Wong’s cynical views of his city’s present and future governments.

Days of Being Wild marked the beginning of Wong Kar-Wai’s relationship with international critics and the strain on his reputation as a local filmmaker. After its release, Days of Being Wild earned numerous awards, including the Hong Kong Film Award for Best Art Direction, Best Cinematography, Best Director, and Best Picture (A Fei, 2006). Despite the fact that Days was often listed on critics’ “Best of” lists, it was an “utter failure at the box office” (Brunette, 2005, “Days of Being Wild”). Wong described the film’s reception to a French interviewer as “a complete failure: In Korea, the spectators even threw things at the screen” (Brunette, 2005, “Days of Being Wild”). The film was such a disappointment financially that it would have marked the end of Wong’s career had he not been so skilled at playing local politics within the Hong Kong film industry (Teo, 2005, p. 7).

This ability to stay afloat despite having made a financially unsuccessful film made Wong Kar-Wai rather unpopular in the local film community. He is also unpopular because of the sources of his funding. Wong has a talent for procuring monies from foreign investors and appealing to the international art-house market. These two groups kept him in business during the tumultuous handover period. Another reason why Wong Kar-Wai is controversial is for the amount of time he takes in creating his films. Hong Kong films are often made very quickly (Yau, 2001, p. 3), sometimes from conception to distribution in a matter of a few
months. Since Wong secures funding from European investors he is allowed to
work at a more European pace, sometimes taking years to finish a film.
Controversies aside, Wong continued making films and explored the story of
Chow Mo-Wan.

    Time progressed in Hong Kong as the handover came closer and people’s
fears changed into realities or disappeared into paranoia. As the 1990s began,
the pressures inspired filmmakers and Hong Kong cinema gained international
attention. Wong Kar-Wai focused his energies into making four more films:
Palme D’Or - winning *Happy Together* (1997). His next film, *In the Mood for
Love* (2000), was the result of years of difficulty caused by the transfer of power,
the Asian recession, and creative/personal clashes with longtime friend and
collaborator Christopher Doyle. Regardless of the tribulations, *In the Mood for
Love* continues the saga of Chow Mo-Wan and further illustrates Wong’s growing
visual sophistication that he uses to express his anxieties over Hong Kong’s
change of government.
CHAPTER 3

IN THE MOOD FOR LOVE

Nine years after Wong Kar-Wai released *Days of Being Wild*, he continues the story of the mysterious character Chow Mo-Wan in a film called *In the Mood for Love* (2000). The two films, although joined by characters, setting, and allegory, are separated by years of political turmoil and visual sophistication. They also mark the beginning of Chow Mo-Wan’s identity as Wong’s alter ego and Hong Kong’s “everyman”. This can be attributed to the fact that Chow lacks elements of a fully developed character, such as background, and to Tony Leung Chiu-Wai’s, the actor who portrays Chow, massive presence in the Pan-Asian film community. By 2000, he had appeared in fifty-two feature films playing characters who experienced numerous hardships and were witness to many of the 20th century’s more gruesome events, such as the character Ben/ Ah Bee in John Woo’s *Bullet in the Head* (1990) who witnesses violence in the streets of Hong Kong and Saigon. As Wong Kar-Wai likens writing to filmmaking, the character of Chow, the writer, can be read as an alter ego of the film’s director. Similarly to the way Chow Mo-Wan draws from everyday life for his works, Wong draws from contemporary Hong Kong life for his films.

The most influential political event that occurred during the making of *Mood* was the transition of sovereignty in 1997. As *Days of Being Wild* deals with pre-handover anxieties, *In the Mood for Love* focuses on the uncertainty and distrust the citizens of Hong Kong felt towards their new government. *In The
*Mood For Love* expresses these suspicions through its narrative devices, props, local cuisine, and complex color system.

**Political Forces and Cinematic Response**

As preparations for the handover continued, sixty-six thousand Hong Kong people decided to leave the city to avoid being citizens of a communist country. This number was double the amount that fled fifteen years earlier (Wei, 1995, p. 68). Defectors left in time to escape the awkward reign of the last British governor of Hong Kong: Christopher Francis Patten (Clarke, D., 2002, p. 40; Wei, 1995, p. 50; Ash, 2003, p. 125). Claiming he was creating a “smoother” transition for the Hong Kong people, Patten offered Hong Kong citizens more civic liberties and participation than had previously been allowed. Dr. Michael DeGolyer, director of the Hong Kong Transition Project, described Patten as having “a near-fixation with democratizing electoral and governmental reforms” (Ash, 2003, p. 125). Patten’s actions caused a breakdown in the communication between Great Britain and the People’s Republic of China. Asian media scholar Duncan McCargo wrote, “Beijing wanted Hong Kong to step backwards politically; starting a small blaze on the way out was a low-cost strategy for the British. This was the irony of the handover: colonialism began looking so much better at the end” (2003, p. 107). Although aspects of colonialism were appealing to Hong Kong citizens, certain acts by the British government placed strains on local filmmakers.
In 1993, the Censorship Board established a film classification system. Films were now fitted with one of three “ratings.” A “one” rating meant the film was suitable for all ages. “Two” ratings were given to films not “suitable for children.” And a rating of “three” was given to movies only allowed by viewers over the age of eighteen (Wei, 1995, p. 116). These ratings were now required before distribution, which meant that all films must be screened and rated by the Censorship Board or be denied release. The new standards were just one of the social acts implemented in Hong Kong before the handover.

As trust in the British and Chinese governments fell (Odham Stokes, 1999, p. 15), new building projects were created to add services and raise citizens’ spirits. Spring 1997 saw at least ten “reclamation projects” underway by the Hong Kong/British government, including the building of the Chep Lak Kok airport (Ash, 2003, p. 142). The airport served as a distraction and confidence builder after the events at Tiananmen Square. Other construction projects included the destruction of small properties to make way for real estate that served the maximum number of occupants. The ever-changing Hong Kong skyline added to its citizens increased sense of homelessness and transience. Hong Kong dwellers often find themselves staying still while the city changed around them. Just as the architectural look of the city was changing so too was its population.

Accompanying construction, the population of Hong Kong changed early in 1997 as the People’s Liberation Army began arriving in the thousands (Odham Stokes, 1999, p. 280). As the troops crossed the borders with little attention or
fanfare, comparisons were made between the 1997 situation and the Cultural Revolution where “British soldiers were placed on full alert” expecting an invasion by the “Red Guard” that never surfaced (Odham Stokes, 1999, p. 280). The PLA may have served as an image of things to come but remained inactive throughout the pre-handover period. Although the army was inactive, the media for both the United Kingdom and the People's Republic actively discussed the upcoming transition of power.

As June 30 neared, clear differences became evident in the official PRC and UK messages about the event. Evidence of this was found in the semiotics between the two world powers concerning the event. Beijing deemed it a “resum[ing] exercise of sovereignty” whereas London claimed that Hong Kong would be “restored to the People’s Republic” (Wei, 1995, p. 49). Somewhat comforting to the peoples of Hong Kong were two separate promises made by the PRC. First, a “One Country, Two Systems” policy would be adopted. Second, Hong Kong's way of life, legal tender, language, “capitalist economic and social systems,” and laws; would be left intact for no less than fifty years (Wei, 1995, p. 49; Ash, 2003, p. 15; Odham Stokes, 1999, p. 220). This vow would expire in the year 2046 and placed people in Hong Kong with another life-altering timetable. One scholar described the situation as “1997, the end of British colonial rule, 2046, the end of capitalism” (Blake, 2003, p. 343). Whatever the future held, Hong Kong would no longer be Her Majesty’s colony but instead a
Special Administrative Region of the People’s Republic of China (Law, J., 2003, p. 46, 96).

July 1, 1997 came and with it the handover. One observer described it as the day:

A rigid and censorious regime became overseer of the planet’s most uninhibited and anarchic film center, birthplace of *The Killer* (1989), *The Bride With The White Hair* (1993), *Savior Of The Soul* (1991), *Dr. Lamb* (1992), and other pop classics, and there was not a thing the distressed cinephile could do to stop it (Server: p.13).

There were actions that the PRC could take to stop certain films from screening in their new Special Administrative Region. Beijing banned three major Hollywood films in early 1998 because of their political commentary on China: *Seven Years In Tibet, Kudun, and Red Corner* (Odham Stokes: P.291). Often the reasons for a film’s rejection were not made clear, much to the frustration of filmmakers and audiences (Server, 1999, p. 48). In the first months of PRC rule, the film community had more to worry about than censorship.

Even though the abdication seemed to occur rather quietly, the Asian “economic meltdown” in 1998 caused a lot of public outcry (Ash, 2003, p. 2). Not as devastated as some of its other southeast Asia neighbors, Hong Kong still found its dollar falling against the American dollar and European Euro. This crisis led to the first year of negative fiscal growth for Hong Kong in three decades and to a doubling of the unemployment rate (Odham Stokes, 1999, p. 282). Businesses tried to stay out of debt and media groups struggled to keep audiences.
On top of censorship and financial worries, Hong Kong filmmakers were also dealing with physical practical problems, such as studio space. In 1998, Golden Harvest Films was evicted from its studio location because the government refused to renew their land-lease contract. Therefore, after thirty years of creating films, Golden Harvest had to close its doors to make way for more "developable real estate" (Odham Stokes, 1999, p. 296).

With more requirements placed on filmmakers, media makers had to be more careful with their public personas and products. Mediated images were more closely scrutinized under the PRC than the UK. In 1999, the Law Reform Commission created a press council that added Article Twenty-Three to the Basic Law. Article Twenty-Three was a vague "ubiquitous threat" against people who may be tempted to make comments against the PRC and created an umbrella clause to catch criminals guilty of "treason or succession" (Ash, 2003, p. 9). While the government was tightening its reigns over media enterprises, technology advanced to such a degree that duplicates of entertainment property could be easily created with little to no quality loss.

Video piracy contributed to huge losses in box office returns and DVD sales (Fonoroff, 1998, p. ix; Odham Stokes, 1999, p. 37) in Hong Kong and other parts of Asia. Other technologies that added to the decline of the Hong Kong film industry were the rise in popularity of karaoke and video games (Wood, 1998, p. 6). Ironically, while the number of films produced fell, the number of Mainland exhibition houses rose; even Hong Kong's Golden Harvest Films, home to the
Shaw Brothers and Bruce Lee, opened theaters in Shanghai and Guangzhou (Odham Stokes, 1999, p. 256).

Filmmakers found ways of working around the loss of audiences, new film quotas, financial difficulties, and stricter censorship laws by telling allegorical stories or using local aesthetic clues that Beijing censors would overlook. Just as Chinese regional operas and folk arts differ, the Hong Kong film community continued to localize their works using color and cuisine as messages to their audiences. Many of them remained to be made in the Cantonese dialect as a way to maintain their local identity (Odham Stokes, 1999, p. 251; Dissanayake, 1994, p. 56). Wong Kar-Wai excelled in using local identity to disguise his anti-communist sentiments in his film *In the Mood for Love*.

**Personal and Professional Forces**

The passage of time and memories are major themes in Wong Kar-Wai’s works and, as the 1990s progressed, he dealt with these themes in films, commercials, and music videos. Through these works he honed his aesthetic skills and found an international fan base whose support continues to make Wong a controversial figure in Hong Kong cinema (Law, J., 2003, p. 94). Before making the second installment in the Chow Mo-Wan trilogy, Wong made a controversial film entitled *Happy Together* which illustrated his awareness of politically taboo subjects and allowed him and his crew to add to his already sophisticated visual language.
As mentioned earlier, Wong’s story-telling skills intermingled with his political views with his 1997 film *Happy Together*, which was shot in Argentina because of its distance away from Hong Kong and the transfer of power. Subtitled *A Story About Reunion*, Wong feared the film would be banned after July 1 because of its “sensitive” subject matter. Critics felt it would be denied release because of its “direct political statement (and) challenge to the ‘normalization’ of Hong Kong-Mainland relations” (Odham Stokes, 1999, p. 268). Regardless of the official governmental views of the film, *Happy Together* was in the Hong Kong box office top ten for four weeks (Odham Stokes, 1999, p. 269). Obviously, Wong could be shrouded with controversy yet still attract an audience both locally and internationally with his lush visuals and sophisticated color systems.

*Happy Together* is a clear example of Doyle’s expressive use of color. According to author Stephen Teo, Doyle used the camera and lighting to reflect the turmoil surrounding the characters:

> Color is the principal means of expression: the chroma is heightened; gold turns into an aggressive orange and red; there is bright yellow; the blue is hallucinatory like the light we see on recovering from an anesthetic after an operation. Doyle uses color in a Fauvist manner, basing it on feeling, choosing color to fit sensation rather than reality (2005, p. 110).

Although Doyle is credited with creating the color palette for *Happy Together*, it is Wong and Chang who create the colorful mise-en-scene for Doyle to capture.

Lesser known than his co-workers, Chang is one of southeast Asia’s most sought-after production designers. Wong describes their relationship as being
very unified, “With us, it is more like we are going to get something done and it really doesn’t matter if it is done by him or by me. We think alike” (Lalanne, 1997, p. 100). As far as the hierarchy on set, Doyle says that Chang has just as much weight as Wong; they all work together (Wolf, 2004, p. 40). One of the most striking aspects of William Chang’s designs is its vibrant color. Using color expressively (Lee, 2004, p. 33), Chang will do many tests with color and fabrics in order to find the one that is perfect (Lee, 2004, p. 32). After his selection has been made, he then presents the color schemes to Wong, often at the last minute to get an immediate and intuitive response (Wolf, 2004, p. 40). Politically, Chang is very elusive about Hong Kong’s relationship with the Mainland. In interviews he has made his dislike for China known (Scott, 2004, p. 37) and relies on his imagination as opposed to research for films that take place on the Mainland (Lee, 2004, p. 37).

As successful as Happy Together was, it paled when compared with the response for Wong Kar-Wai’s film In the Mood for Love (2000). Originally meant to be a story about two eras, the politically tumultuous 1960s and the 1990s, Wong Kar-Wai became fascinated with reconstructing the world of his childhood and dropped any direct address of the present (Rayns, 2002). Through In the Mood for Love, Wong continues to express his longing for the past and his pessimism about the future through his metaphoric use of mise-en-scene.
Chow Mo-Wan: The Neighbor

Conceived during what Wong Kar-Wai called the “takeover” period (Taubin, 2004, p. 50; Wong, 2002; Teo, 2005, p. 114), *In the Mood for Love* was filmed in various locations including Thailand (Clarke R., 2004, p. 18; Rayns, 2005, p. 22) and Cambodia. Wong became obsessed with recreating the 1960s world of a Shanghai family transplanted to Hong Kong because it was reminiscent of his and Chang’s own childhoods (Rayns, 2005, p. 22; Teo, 2005, p. 12; Blake, 2003, p. 352). The desire to animate his memory drove Wong to hire a Shanghainese cook to fix traditional dishes for the cast and crew, to play retired Hong Kong radio programs, and to quote writers from the era while on set (Chow, 2002, p. 646). These extra touches, although authentic, added to the production’s cost and delayed the picture’s completion.

The shoot lasted much longer than anyone expected, due to numerous problems within and beyond the filmmakers’ control. “*In the Mood for Love* kept on going on and on,” said Doyle (Pandey, 2005, p. 99). Wong attributed the delays to China’s censorship laws and the Asian Financial Crisis (Boltin, 2001, p. 157). Another reason for the lengthy production period could be attributed to the crew’s improvisational working style. Where some films are written, shot, and then edited, Wong’s seemed to embrace all three actions at once, often causing art director and editor William Chang to perform huge tasks simultaneously on set (Wolf, 2004, p. 40). Personalities clashed between Wong and Doyle during production because of Wong’s apparent clear visions for “framing, lighting, color

In the Mood for Love tells the story of two neighbors who accidentally fall in love while trying to come to grips with their adulterous partners. Many of the actors from Days of Being Wild return to revisit their roles. Maggie Cheung portrays the character Su Li-Zhen in both films. The Su Li-Zhen in Days is from Macau whereas she is from Shanghai in Mood. Tony Leung Chiu-Wai, who is mysteriously featured in the coda of Days, plays her neighbor Chow Mo-Wan, a newspaper writer and martial arts novelist from Hong Kong. Rebecca Tan, who portrays Yuddy’s adoptive mother in Days, plays Mrs. Suen, a Shanghainese refugee and Su Li-Zhen’s landlady.

Beginning in 1962, a year before Wong fled Shanghai with his family, and ending in 1966, a year after the onslaught of the Cultural Revolution, Wong “bookends In the Mood for Love with two years that saw the tremendous pressure that events in the Mainland could bring to bear on Hong Kong, while keeping those years of political turmoil discreetly off-screen” (Marchetti, 2002). Some scholars felt that Wong simply switched handover Hong Kong with Cultural Revolution Hong Kong (Jones, 2001, p. 24; Teo, 2005, p. 127, 141). For Wong, 1966 was a good place to end the story because he saw it as the end of an era.
In an interview Wong said:

The year 1966 marks a turning point in Hong Kong’s history. The Cultural Revolution in the Mainland had lots of knock-off effects, and forced Hong Kong people to think hard about their future…so 1966 is the end of something and the beginning of something else (Brunette, 2005, *Wong Kar-Wai*, p. 99).

Wong mentions the end of colonialism by placing a news clip of French President DeGaulle’s trip to Cambodia in 1966 (Blake, 2003, p.344). At the end of *In the Mood for Love* there is a title card that reads: “That era has passed, everything that belonged to that era has also ceased to exist” (Law, J., 2002, p. 203). This card serves as a type of warning from Wong to the people of Hong Kong that their era, the Hong Kong of their present, will disappear as well. There are also other political elements in the film.

Another element of Wong’s work that reads politically was the focus on the Shanghai diaspora community (Marchetti, 2002). People who fled to Hong Kong from Shanghai because of the rise of Communism in the mid-20th century found themselves unable to communicate with their new neighbors. Shanghainese, that has three tones, is a specific dialect much different than the local dialect of Cantonese in Hong Kong (Teo, 2005, p. 10). Wong often comments in interviews about the difficulty he and his mother had in conquering the language barrier in their new city and how they learned to speak by attending the cinema. The character Su Li-Zhen, who speaks the Shanghai dialect, often patronizes Cantonese theaters throughout *In the Mood for Love*. An autobiographical reference, Shanghai people, including Wong Kar-Wai and his mother, often
frequented theaters to learn Cantonese. The character Chow Mo-Wan, who spoke Cantonese, often found himself out of place around his Shanghai neighbors and landlord. Therefore, even before their marriages disintegrated, Su Li-Zhen and Chow Mo-Wan were without a home or sense of belonging (Marchetti, 2002). Aside from language barriers, there were financial, culinary, and cultural differences between the two communities. The fact that Wong chose to focus the film on a group of people already in exile was a technique to make the Chinese/Hong Kong issue more personal while simultaneously making it non-handover specific (Chow, 2002, p. 652; Boltin, 2001, p. 155). Even though the presence of the Shanghai community did not directly bring attention to the handover, numerous story and mise-en-scene elements did refer to the transition of power.

One of the signifiers of handover commentary in Hong Kong films is the discussion or presence of travel and “foreign lands.” In the Mood for Love features discussion and visits to Hong Kong, Singapore, Cambodia, Shanghai, France, the Philippines, the United States, and Japan. Most of the people who visit other places seemed to have no plans to return to Hong Kong. Su Li-Zhen works at a travel agency so she is often instrumental in arranging people’s travels. Su Li-Zhen and Chow Mo-Wan’s spouses are always away on business without telling their spouses when and if they would return. Eventually, the adulterers flee to Japan indefinitely. Chow Mo-Wan’s work relocates him, causing uncertainty about his return. When Su Li-Zhen returns in 1966 to visit Mrs. Suen,
she finds her former landlady leaving Hong Kong because of the “troubles” without any plan for returning to the city. The coda of the film features Chow Mo-Wan visiting a temple in Cambodia with no indication if he will return to Hong Kong. These travelers serve as reminders to Hong Kong audiences of the handover period when talk of fleeing the island was rampant. Just as people fled the Mainland during the Cultural Revolution, thousands of Hong Kong residents felt the best way to deal with the regime change was to leave their homes. These refugees are placed into states of constant traveling without any ideas on the possibility of return. The transient characters in In the Mood for Love also serve as a metaphor for Hong Kong, which is traveling away from its former societal patterns shrouded in an uncertain future. Aside from personal travel, political readings can also be made between character relationships.

In the Mood for Love is a film about various kinds of relationships. The film uses marriage as a metaphor for the relationship between Hong Kong and the People’s Republic of China. Numerous lines of dialogue in the film attest to this while Su Li-Zhen and Chow Mo-Wan try to come to deal with their current state of non-belonging. At one point Chow Mo-Wan says to Su Li-Zhen, “On your own, you are free to do lots of things. Everything changes when you marry. It must be decided together” (Wong, 2000). This line refers to the fact that Hong Kong is not given representation in the Sino-British negotiations over their own city. The adulterous spouses flee Hong Kong leaving Su Li-Zhen and Chow Mo-Wan to cleanup the remaining messes alone. Wong uses that situation to refer to the way
in which Britain abdicated Hong Kong without any form of aid. Wong also uses the destruction of marriage as a political metaphor.

Another role marriage plays in *Mood* is the creation of an “us” versus “them” paradigm through the comments made by the main characters. Su Li-Zhen and Chow Mo-Wan both say, “We won’t be like them”, literally referring to their spouses (Blake, 2003, p. 348). Metaphorically that line of dialogue can be tied to a larger relationship- that of Hong Kong and the People’s Republic. Post handover consciousness added to a social movement in Hong Kong to define local culture as different than the Mainland. Reflected in the film, the line could have been, “We won’t be like you.” References to the handover relations can also be read in the other relationships in the film.

The relationship between employee and employer is used to comment on the PRC’s “ownership” of Hong Kong. Chow Mo-Wan’s boss never appears on screen and audiences never learn of his/her identity. Instead, Chow Mo-Wan seems employed by a collective. When he is transferred to Singapore, he simply says, “They’re short of staff.” Su Li-Zhen’s boss, on the other hand, is on screen as an adulterous husband. As his secretary, Su Li-Zhen is often asked to placate his wife and mistress. These unfortunate examples of employers serve the message that employers/governments cannot be trusted and that they often work to serve their own needs, without input or thought of their employees/citizens. In the film’s narrative construction there are numerous political messages that carry over into Mood’s mise-en-scene.
As In the Mood for Love contains political elements in the film’s content, there is also a wealth of meaning found in the production design. Film scholar Gina Marchetti describes the use of objects to tell a story “beyond the tale of Mo Wan and Li-Zhen, of Hong Kong, Shanghai, and the people cast adrift by the rise of the ‘bamboo curtain’ and the tug-of-war between ‘Greater China’ and the People’s Republic” (2002). Props play a vital role in the narrative, as it is through items (a tie and a purse) that the neighbors discover their spouses are having an affair with each other. Just as Su Li-Zhen and Chow Mo-Wan know one part of their lives are over once the gifts exchanges hands, Hong Kong knows one chapter of its history ends when the transfer of power occurs. Aside from the presence of narrative-driven props, there are also items that serve more metaphoric roles.

As in Days of Being Wild, objects of time are featured prominently and reflect the fascination citizens of Hong Kong have for the handover deadline and the “fifty years” deadline. Chow Mo-Wan, like Yuddy, wears a wristwatch throughout the film. At Su Li-Zhen and Chow Mo-Wan’s places of employment, clocks are focused on for such long takes that the brand names of the timepieces can be read. In Chow’s newspaper office, there is also a large calendar with days crossed off as if to count down to an event. Wong Kar-Wai uses that prop to remind the audience that they too are counting down to something – the fulfillment or failure of the promise of autonomy. Another indicator of the passage of time can be found by examining costume and color.
Wong uses complex color systems as metaphorical tools throughout *In the Mood for Love*. By employing various color interpretations to the color systems an overall sense of Wong’s political pessimism can read. For example, Su Li-Zhen’s office is green whereas Chow Mo-Wan’s office is not overwhelmingly one hue. The color differences between the two places of work can be attributed to the presence of Su Li-Zhen’s adulterous boss. Therefore, the color green, often used to denote adultery, in that situation refers to distrust in the workplace and to distrust in government. Early in the film, when Chow Mo-Wan and Su Li-Zhen first learn of their spouses’ affair, the places they meet are a clash of red and green. These clashing colors not only express the uneasiness of the characters but also comment on the uneasiness of Hong Kong’s return to China. These readings are reinforced by other art traditions.

In Cantonese and Beijing opera, the contrasting hues symbolize distrust and anxiety. The Taoist Five Elements and feng shui both view red and green together as a bad omen. Since the two colors are direct opposites on the compass, they trap the chi and allow evil spirits to enter. Optically, the human eye processes the colors red and green with separate cones. When both hues appear simultaneously, the brain has difficulty processing the two messages at once, thus creating a vibration in the eye. This vibration causes unease and sometimes nausea in observers. Wong employs this tactic to share the characters’ unease and to cause anxiety about various situations. One situation
Wong often expresses concern about is the future, both for his characters and for Hong Kong.

A specific date in Hong Kong’s future, the year 2046 which marks the deadline of the “fifty year” promise, clearly appears within the film. Wong Kar-Wai numbers the hotel room where Su Li-Zhen and Chow Mo-Wan stay 2046 in reference to the upcoming date. Uncommented on by the characters, this extra-textual number clearly reminds the audience of life outside the theater. Wong shows the characters, and his, concerns about the future again in the coda of the film.

The ending of In the Mood for Love shows Chow Mo-Wan whispering the secrets of his relationship into a hole in Cambodia. As he bares his soul, the secrets of Hong Kong go with him. In feng shui, trees are used to create balance and dissipate ill fortunes and luck. By sharing his secret with a tree, Chow Mo-Wan creates balance for himself and Su Li-Zhen. He also makes a statement about how Hong Kong citizen’s can deal with the new government – leave. Significantly, Cambodia is the only location present in the coda of In the Mood for Love. The fact that Chow Mo-Wan has to leave his home to accomplish balance and peace is a clear message from the director. At the end, the audience is left not sad about an unhappy past but resigned about their “dismal” future (Marchetti, 2002). Despite the pessimism, Wong Kar-Wai returns to Chow Mo-Wan once more in his 2004 film 2046.
Days of Being Wild showed Wong Kar-Wai’s pre-handover anxiety received with box-office embarrassment. With In the Mood for Love, his post-handover disillusionment was well received critically and financially. At the Cannes International Film Festival, Tony Leung Chiu-Wai received the Best Actor award and the crew was awarded the Technical Grand Prize for their visual prowess (2004, “Wong Kar-Wai”; Yau, E., 2001, p. 19; Leung, K., 2005; 2005, “Christopher Doyle”, p. 97). Job offers for all members of the cast and crew came flooding in to them, adding to the already strained relationship between Wong and Doyle.

During the next four years, numerous changes and challenges occurred for Hong Kong and Wong Kar-Wai. As with the previous years of tribulation, Wong would internalize the pressures and release them in his next film, 2046. Featuring Chow Mo-Wan for a final time, 2046 expresses Wong Kar-Wai’s negative view of the People’s Republic of China in a highly stylized and more direct manner.
CHAPTER 4

2046

Four years after *In the Mood for Love*, Wong Kar-Wai released the third installment in the Chow Mo-Wan trilogy - the cynically named *2046*. Although *2046* is the third part of the series, it is primarily set in the 1960s like the other two installments. Shooting the film during the Hong Kong/Mainland China post-handover adjustment period proved difficult due to the changing Hong Kong cinematic workplace: Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome, financial crises, and avian influenza all held back productions. Although Hong Kong filmmakers had to practice self-censorship during British colonization, being a Special Administrative Region (SAR) of the People’s Republic of China placed new restrictions on filmmakers both in front of and behind the camera. Despite personal and production problems, *2046* is, arguably, Wong’s most political film to date. Adding numerology to an already complex color system and working within the science fiction genre, Wong Kar-Wai uses this film to express his distrust of the “fifty-year promise.”

Political Forces and Cinematic Response

Although the Sino-British Declaration pledged that Hong Kong would maintain its laws and economic system for fifty years, after the handover some laws were altered to better assimilate Hong Kong into the People’s Republic of China. Legislative and judicial alterations occurred removing some of the “freedoms” implemented during British Governor Christopher Patten's term. For
example, Hong Kong citizens had many of their civic responsibilities performed by political-savvy Beijing government officials.

Every amendment to the Hong Kong political and economic system was seen as a breach of the “fifty year promise” in the eyes of Hong Kong citizens. Because media companies and products have the potential to reach millions of people, they were some of the first businesses to see reforms implemented under the new regime. Insiders feared that the handover was “one of the greatest threats to press freedom in modern times” (McCargo, 2003, p. 100). With changes beginning shortly before the handover, the concerns raised about the PRC's control of the media dealt with more than censorship.

The PRC government controlled the media in China preventing potentially political materials from being seen and from being produced. To clarify any misunderstanding between PRC and Hong Kong officials, Beijing created “three nos” for Hong Kong media: “No advocacy for the independence of Hong Kong,” Taiwan, or Tibet. “No advocacy for subverting Chinese communist rule,” as well as “no personal attacks on Chinese leaders” (McCargo, 2003, p. 110, 114). The “three nos” added to the consternation felt by journalists and other media producers who wished to express their own views and those of their audiences. Hong Kong journalists were denied access, information, and a platform to discuss issues found in their own community. Having been created in a somewhat “freer” media environment, the Hong Kong Journalists Association was outraged. They stated, “If the media … becomes a tool for the pursuit of
national policies, the independence and credibility of the media will be destroyed, as will press freedom” (McCargo, 2003, p. 115-116). As media content scrutiny increased, other parts of the production process were pressured by government agencies.

The People’s Republic also employed financial “discipline” on Hong Kong media by punishing television, radio, and publishing by denying advertising opportunities and by pressuring state run banks to deny media companies financial assistance (McCargo, 2003, p. 113). Films were denied funding, access to locations on the Mainland, and freedom in distribution, as well as being forced to compete in the local market as a foreign entity. Filmmakers were forced to leave, to halt production, to secure funding and distribution elsewhere, or to play by the PRC’s rules.

Hong Kong filmmakers who remained on the island, unlike director Clara Law who relocated to Australia, found new outlets for creative expression and lobbied the PRC for some basic aid. Hong Kong film scholar and professor Lisa Odham Stokes stated that films in this era generally fit into two categories: “One group of films continued traveling the well-worn path of violence and destruction. Another path represents the ‘can’t we all just get along’ message” (1999, p. 283). The former group consisted of films like Time and Tide (2000) whose tag line was “Trust is fatal” (Seunlau, 2006). Films in the latter group included films like Beijing Rocks (2001) that used rock n’ roll to lessen the cultural gap between the People’s Republic of China and Hong Kong. Other films, such as Hero (2000,
Zhang Yimou), told stories of China’s unification or military heroes from its ancient past. *Hero* depicted the tale of the potential assassination of the first ruler in China who unified the warring states. Aside from historical martial arts films, comical kung fu films gained popularity. A clear example of this point was the film *Kung Fu Hustle* (2004) that made $100,912,445 worldwide (2006, “Kung Fu Hustle”). Although director Stephen Chow used humor in *Kung Fu Hustle* to play with the Hong Kong stereotyped image of the rural Mainlander within a Shanghai 1940s setting, the film was widely popular with audiences worldwide.

The huge financial success of films like *Kung Fu Hustle* and *Hero* caused international media companies and the Beijing government to take a closer look at Hong Kong’s cinematic community, and its economic potential. According to the *Hollywood Reporter* in 2003, Hong Kong’s total box office revenue was $110.83 million (US dollars) (Chung, 2004). Industry insiders believed that was only a fraction of the market’s potential. With a rising middle class demographic, people in the People’s Republic of China had more opportunities to patronize movie exhibition houses and purchase distributed media. With so much money to be made and so many people to be reached, the PRC relaxed some of its film censorship laws and reevaluated the Hong Kong film community’s role in the reunified China.
Personal and Professional Forces

Between *In the Mood for Love* and *2046* Wong Kar-Wai experienced four years of jubilation and tribulation. *Mood* was received positively by critics and audiences alike catapulting Wong into a higher realm of international stardom. With many fans in Europe and the United States, local Hong Kong critics demeaned his films by claiming he pandered to Western audiences with his Western style. Debates raged in the academic community between scholars who felt it Wong combined Western art-film techniques with Eastern sensibilities into a new aesthetic standard and those who felt he did nothing but produce a slick image. These latter critics simply claimed that Wong used style as opposed to substance, not acknowledging that there was substance in his style.

The debates over style and substance added to the pressures already placed on Wong and his creative team, most notably cinematographer Christopher Doyle. Doyle and Wong had experienced a falling out during the shooting of *In the Mood for Love* because of Wong's increased involvement with the photography department. His obsession with recreating his memories of Hong Kong in the 1960s made him more opinionated about the look of the films. These personality clashes only escalated during production of *2046*.
Chow Mo-Wan: The Gambler

While *In the Mood for Love* and *2046* were conceived together in 1997, their productions differed by length and government involvement. *2046* took five years to complete due to a number of problems both personal and political that affected the production. Many of the political difficulties were a result of naming the film *2046*.

During location scouting for *In the Mood for Love* in Beijing, Wong Kar-Wai decided to name its companion piece *2046* (Teo, 2005, p. 114). Referring to the final year of Beijing’s “fifty year promise,” Wong’s choice to name the film after a politically charged date was a direct attempt to raise the tempers of Hong Kong citizens. The presence of political material with the combination of no shooting script caused problems with PRC authorities that denied Wong permission to film on the Mainland (Rayns, 2005, p. 22).

After stating numerous times publicly that the title referred to the “fifty year promise” and the idea that places and people can remain unchanged (Teo, 2005, p. 134; Brunette, 2005, p. 132; 2005, “Behind the Scenes of 2046”; Taubin, 2005, p. 27; Rayns, 2002; Khoo, 2004; Lyen, 2004; Taubin, 2004), Wong was denied distribution on the Mainland by the China Film Cooperation (2004, “Wong Kar-Wai’s New Film Coming Soon”). When he recanted (Taubin, 2004), saying his “chief interest was in developing his characters and seeing them through their personal journeys” (Teo, 2005, p. 134) and that the number was just a hotel room number, the film was granted distribution by the PRC. He even went as far as to
state at a press conference at the 2004 Cannes Film Festival, “I was inspired by the situation in Hong Kong, but it has never been my intention to make films with any political content whatsoever” (Brunette, 2005, p. 103). This recanting can be attributed to the fact that Wong’s film was the only entry in the festival by China and that the PRC film censors, who still had final say on 2046’s local distribution, were closely watching him. Aside from political forces, other factors delayed 2046’s completion.

Another event occurred that shut down production on 2046 was the SARS breakout (Kim, 2005, p. 45). Due to the high concentration of population in Hong Kong, each communicable disease is treated as potentially epidemic. The popularity of the city as a stopping point for travelers to other destinations in southeastern Asia and elsewhere also places Hong Kong in the international spotlight as far as health care is concerned. With the outbreak of SARS in China during November 2002 and its subsequent spread to Hong Kong in March 2003, the entire island was shut down. People stayed in their homes, businesses were shut down, schools were closed, and cinema production came to a halt. Filmmakers were forced to postpone production or to move the production to other locations. SARS-related fatalities on the Mainland and Hong Kong numbered almost seven hundred by late 2003 (2003, “SARS: Global Hotspot”). After Hong Kong had been SARS-free for at least twenty days, the World Health Organization felt the threat had subsided and allowed filmmaking and public life
to return to normal. Once the SARS scare subsided, filming resumed on 2046 but not without other obstacles delaying production.

Another reason for the lengthy production period was the change in cinematography personnel. After reconciling for a short time to shoot principal photography for 2046, Wong Kar-Wai and Christopher Doyle seemed to have parted ways for good (Rayns, 2005, p. 25). Although neither party publicly discussed the breakup, insiders believed that tensions from In the Mood for Love combined with the lengthy film shoot for 2046 proved too much for the collaborators. The credits for the finished film cite three different cinematographers: Christopher Doyle, Lai Yiu-Fai, and Kwan Pun-Leung. The continuity between In the Mood for Love and 2046, despite the changing cinematographers, showed Wong’s influence on the visual aspects of the films. Actor Tony Leung described the working environment in an interview saying that Wong Kar-Wai is “very sure of what he wants” (Polinacci, 2005). In the case of 2046, getting the specific look Wong demanded strained his personal and professional relationships with Doyle. Aside from having a highly sought after crew, 2046 also features the work on numerous A-list actors.

2046 features many of the Pacific Rim’s most sought after talent including Gong Li, Tony Leung, Maggie Cheung, Zhang Ziyi, Faye Wong, Carina Lau, and Takuya Kimura. Although these stars garner audiences and financial investments, their busy schedules and Wong Kar-Wai’s non-linear filmmaking made production difficult. Maggie Cheung’s role was altered because of her
constant unavailability. Another cast problem was the unexpected suicide on April 1, 2003 of Leslie Cheung, who played Yuddy in *Days of Being Wild*. Since *2046* is a companion piece to *Days*, Wong had to reconsider the references to Leslie Cheung within the film. Like *In the Mood for Love*, *2046* focuses mainly on Chow Mo-Wan as opposed to *Days’* Yuddy.

*2046* continues the story of Chow Mo-Wan. After his breakup with Su Li-Zhen, he grows a mustache, moves to Singapore, works as a gambler and smut writer, and tries to reclaim the happiness he had with Su Li-Zhen through three other relationships. Although the film is set in the late 1960s, Chow Mo-Wan tries to escape the political and personal trials of that reality by writing a fantasy novel entitled *2046* set in a city called 2046 in the year 2046. In his novel, he exorcizes his personal demons in a place where promises are always kept - at least that is what is said but no one really knows because no one has ever come back. The repetition of the number 2046 reminds Hong Kong audiences of the expiration date on the promise of autonomy.

Aside from the correlation between the title and the “fifty year promise,” Wong Kar-Wai uses the science fiction genre as a way to comment on the present (Huang, 2004, p. 52; Arthur, 2004, p. 8; Johnston, 2005). According to Susan Sontag, “Science-fiction films are not about science. They are about disaster… *2046* is a vacuum touched by death” (Lee, 2005, p. 32). Numerous film and literary scholars have connected the genre with its compatibility with
political, societal, and religious messages. For Wong Kar-Wai, employing the
genre adds one more layer in which to place anti-PRC messages.

Another layer where Wong places meaning is within the film’s use of
numbers. The people of Hong Kong have a reputation for being superstitious
about numbers. This arises from a belief in feng shui, a citywide obsession with
gambling, and years of economic wealth. Numbers are like colors in that they
contain auspicious meanings beyond what the obvious number represents. For
example, if one is to give an acquaintance gifts, then the presents should number
three, eight, or nine. “Three” is important because the spoken word for the
number resembles the word for life. “Eight” sounds like prosperity and “nine” like
eternity. “Four” should always be avoided because the word for “four” is similar to
the Cantonese word for death. Evidence of these beliefs as practice on the
Mainland is evident in the preparations for the 2008 Olympics that will be held in
Beijing. The games will begin at 8 PM on August 8, 2008 to ensure prosperity for
the host country. As a Hong Kong citizen, Wong Kar-Wai knows of these
meanings and employs numbers to make political comments.

The first numerical political reference is the presence of the number 2046.
Aside from being the film’s title, the digits also refer to a hotel room number, a
city, a time, and, of course, the “fifty year promise” made to Hong Kong by the
People’s Republic of China. 2046 is not just any hotel room number; not only is it
the site of Chow Mo-Wan and Su Li-Zhen’s rendezvous in In the Mood for Love,
it also serves as a location for a murder: a night hostess/singer named Mimi/Lulu
is viciously stabbed by her jealous boyfriend. Using room 2046 for the location of a murder is no accident. Wong potentially places the killing there as a warning; the PRC should not be trusted. Knowing the statement may be a step too far; Wong quickly follows that scene with placating dialogue. For example, Chow Mo-Wan tries to rent apartment 2046 at the Oriental Hotel, but the landlord, Mr. Wang tells him it needs redecorating and suggests Chow instead lease 2047. Chow decides to wait until 2046 is ready. Wang: “Why that particular room?” Chow: “Maybe it’s the number.” Wang: “It has some significance for you?” Chow: “I’m joking.” With that he rents room 2047. The whole scene reminds audiences of Wong Kar-Wai’s cat-and-mouse game with the China Film Corporation. Wong makes the whole exchange more poignant by showing the key for room 2046 changing hands in a medium close up, directly evoking the handover of Hong Kong between the UK and the PRC. Aside from the digits 2046, other numbers contain political references.

Other politically charged numbers include 1224 and 1225, which appear in various forms depending on the time period. When on the train to 2046 they are referred to as “areas 1224 and 1225” in reference to 24 December and 25 December respectively. As abbreviations for December 24 and 25, or Christmas Eve and day (Johnston, 2005), these numbers refer to the date when the British government surrendered Hong Kong to the occupying Japanese troops in 1941. Wong equates these dates in the film with images of loneliness, despair, and emotional coldness. After spending Christmas Eve 1967 with Bai Ling, Chow Mo-
Wan and Bai share a taxi together. The scene shifts from color to black-and-white and a flashback of a similar moment in a taxi shared with Su Li-Zhen flashes on screen. Use of a flashback within that part of the film not only reminds audiences of how fleeting happiness is but also shows them that one can never escape their past. In an interview, Tony Leung Chiu-Wai, the actor who portrays Chow Mo-Wan, commented on how the past affected the present and, in turn, the present affected the future (Polinacci, 2005). By featuring a date in Hong Kong history where the United Kingdom signed over the city to a foreign government, specifically Japan, without the approval or consent of its own citizens, Wong Kar-Wai makes a blatant reference to the 1997 handover. Another example of the “coldness” of Christmas Eve occurs when Chow helps Jing-Wen call her Japanese boyfriend. As she sits inside cheerfully chatting, Chow stands outside alone smoking and looking at her. His isolation is apparent and reminiscent of Hong Kong’s situation in December 1941. Altogether, Wong clearly refers to Christmas nine different times throughout the film. References to dates also appear in Chow Mo-Wan’s futuristic story.

On the train to 2046, the androids have numerical names. The Mimi/Lulu character’s android name is CC1966, in reference to the year of the Cultural Revolution on the Mainland. Wang Jing-Wen’s futuristic name is WJW 1967 that refers to Wong Kar-Wai’s name in Mandarin, Wang Jai-Wai, and the year rioting began against the UK government’s presence in Hong Kong. Numbers do not only correlate to dates in 2046, they also relate to various cultural subjects.
While on the train to 2046, the train conductor speaks of the “five degradations of Celestial Beings.” These five decays are a reference to the Buddhist belief that immortals can perish through a series of events. First, the clothes of the beings become soiled. Then, the flowers on their heads wither. Third, their physical bodies begin to decay. Fourth, they begin to excrete body fluids and, fifth, the final stage of decay results in their inability ever to feel contentment or happiness. Jing-Wen, the landlord’s daughter, has a futuristic counterpart named Android WJW 1967 who illustrates signs of fatigue by having a delayed emotional response. As bodhisattvas and androids are “perfect” beings, their demise would be different from that of normal human beings, therefore their end would be disappointing and surprising. Wong Kar-Wai felt Hong Kong would decay under its current political situation and feared these stages occurring to his city. By focusing on the inability to gain or retain happiness, Wong uses Chow Mo-Wan’s search for the perfect woman as a metaphor for Hong Kong’s fruitless search for independence. Chow ends his search for his past love with Su Li-Zhen and accepts his unhappy future just as Wong gives up on Hong Kong ever regaining any sense of its former “glory days”.

Financial problems abound in 2046. Characters are always exchanging monies. For example, the physical relationship between Bai Ling and Chow Mo-Wan is treated as a business arrangement with the price for one night set at ten dollars. Ten dollars is also what Chow is paid per page by the newspaper for
which he works. When Black Spider assists Chow in winning back his gambling debts, she charges him a ten percent commission. Interpreting the number “ten” with feng shui principles deems these situations unlucky because of the presence of “one” and “zero”. Together the numbers represent the end of progress and the beginning of recession. These financial situations serve as a projection of Wong Kar-Wai’s pessimistic view on what the PRC’s economic plans for Hong Kong will do to the financially wealthy city. Wong’s pessimism is reinforced in 2046 by his use of familiar themes.

Many of the themes and situations found in Wong Kar-Wai’s previous films resurface in 2046. In the Director’s Statement on the official Sony Pictures website for the film, Wong Kar-Wai comments on the “multiple sources and cross references” as a technique used to illustrate feelings of loss (2005, “Sony Pictures Classics: 2046/ Directed By Wong Kar-Wai”). Cast members from his other films appear, including Carina Lau (Mimi/Lulu), who also appears in Wong’s 1994 Ashes of Time; Tony Leung (Chow Mo-Wan), who also stars in Days of Being Wild, Chungking Express, Ashes of Time, Happy Together, and In the Mood for Love; Maggie Cheung makes a cameo appearance as Su Li-Zhen and is also in As Tears Go By (1988), Days, Ashes, and Mood; Chen Chang, who plays Mimi’s boyfriend, reappears from Happy Together. Along With Tony Leung and Maggie Cheung, Ping Lam-Siu returns from In the Mood for Love as Chow’s pal Ah Ping. Cantonese pop-star Faye Wong appears after starring in Wong’s 1994 Chungking Express. Leslie Cheung’s presence is felt through
dialogue, which refers both to the actor and his character Yuddy, and through the appearance of an actor who looks eerily similar to Cheung. As his characters love and are betrayed, Wong uses their pain to remind Hong Kong of the 1997 “betrayal” by the British government and to warn of the People’s Republic of China’s future “betrayal” in the year 2046. Of all the examples of personal pain in 2046, the most common expression of turmoil is the sharing of secrets.

The most repeated motif in 2046 is characters whispering their secrets into a hole in a tree or tree-substitute (Johnston, 2005). This story or event occurs three separate times in 2046. The film opens with a slow pan to reveal a large hole in a wall textured with tree-like grain and it closes with a zoom into a black-and-white “tree.” Film scholar Tony Rayns comments on the motif as relating to the film’s title:

The conceit here is that the hole in the wall becomes 2046, a time/space where nothing changes, a site where nothing is lost and so everything can be found, a repository for everything that has been repressed, blocked, denied or deferred. By naming it 2046, though, Wong suggests that the film itself is a giant ‘hole’ into which everyone – including of course, himself – can whisper their secrets (2005, p. 22).

According to feng shui, by sharing the secret with a tree, a natural element, the characters in the film create balance within themselves and between each other. In the same manner, by sharing his secrets through 2046 Wong exercises his demons and creates a type of peace with the lack of personal control he has over Hong Kong’s future.

As in In the Mood for Love, the question “will you go with me” appears numerous times. The first time Jing-Wen appears on screen it is while she is
practicing the following phrases in Japanese: “Can I go? I can go.” Audiences discover later that her purpose for learning these words is a response to Tak, her Japanese boyfriend, asking her to leave with him. On the train to 2046, the futuristic version of Tak asks this question dozens of times, to WJW 1967, to CC 1966, and to the train conductor but never receives an answer from anyone. The frustration of receiving no answer is similar to the angst felt by the people in Hong Kong during the transition of power since their voice was not given an outlet during the negotiations. Aside from the handover period, Wong also refers to other historic moments in Hong Kong’s history.

As stated earlier, Wong Kar-Wai uses the setting of the 1960s as a political allegory for the tumultuous handover period (Arthur, 2005, p. 7). Scholar Stephen Teo said:

In the post-97 era, Wong suggests that Hong Kong now survives in a state of changeless time, which still causes citizens to drift and wander. The hidden political message of 2046 is that: Wong is really telling his Hong Kong audience that they should take the opportunity of changeless time to reflect on themselves and their history – history being rooted in the past which has given Hong Kong its period of changeless time – in order to prepare themselves for the great changes that are to come after 2046 (2005, p. 142).

Wong assists the audience in reflecting on the past by using, newsreel footage of actual riots that occurred in the colony during that era (Lee, N., 2005, p. 32; Kraicer, 2005, p. 15). On May 22, 1967 curfews were imposed in Hong Kong after riots and bombings shook the colony (2005, “Numerology of 2046”) and remained until September of that year. These clips add a sense of timeliness and realism to Wong’s highly stylized film. While the clips flicker on screen, Chow Mo-
Wan describes, in a voice-over, the situations and how, for him, it was “a good time” that did not last. References to the impermanence of modern Hong Kong life are present through dialogue.

As in Wong Kar-Wai’s other films and contemporary Hong Kong cinema, travel outside of the colony is mentioned as a pre-handover technique to address the political insecurities of Hong Kong citizens. Places mentioned in the film are: Hong Kong, Japan, Cambodia, Singapore, Shanghai, Shandong, Haerbin, Macau, the Philippines, and Thailand. Like before, the characters that travel abroad have no plans of returning to their lives in Hong Kong. Both Bai Ling, who travels to Singapore, and Chow Mo-Wan, who goes to Macau, never intend on returning to Hong Kong. Even the travelers in Chow’s futuristic novel never return. Wong Kar-Wai describes these travels as an ineffective effort to escape the characters’ pasts. He said, “I think it’s best to try to leave it [to not try and escape your past because] one day the past will leave you. That’s the theme of the movie” (Huang, 2004, p. 52-53). Traveling also plays a role in the film’s dialogue audio track.

Aside from traveling, the characters interact with people from different places who speak different dialects or languages (Leung, 2005). Often a character, speaking in Cantonese, converses with another character, speaking a different dialect, with little to no complications (Kung, 2004, p. 29). As Cantonese, Shanghainese, and Mandarin all have different amounts of tones in their language, the reality of these conversations occurring would be very slight. The
presence of a character that speaks Japanese serves more than an extension of the transnational nature of Hong Kong in that it places Hong Kong outside of the Sino-Japanese argument. As the People’s Republic of China still distrusts Japan after the Second Sino-Japanese War, Hong Kong has recovered quickly and soundly after their time as a Japanese-occupied city. Wong Kar-Wai uses the character of Tak and his relationship with Jing-Wen to give advice to the PRC on how it should deal with Japan. Despite the fact that Mr. Wang is adamantly against Jing-Wen and Tak marrying, he finally puts his prejudices aside to ensure his daughter’s happiness. It seems that Wong believes the PRC can stop arguing with Japan and solely focus on the country’s economic progress. Regardless of which country the characters are from, they all share a struggle with the past.

As in all of Wong’s films, memory plays an important role, yet in 2046 no one finds any solace in their past because it is projected onto an unhappy future (Lyen, 2004). “All memories are traces of tears” is stated numerous times within the film (Russell, 2004). In a voiceover, Chow Mo-Wan states, “Man can never escape his past…nobody can ever leave 2046. The only way is to wish it will leave you someday.” Chow wants to be free from his memories with Su Li-Zhen so he can regain some personal happiness. As for Wong Kar-Wai, he wants to forget that in the year 2046 his city will change. Along with thematic similarities, Wong also uses musical elements within the narrative to comment on the political atmosphere of post-handover Hong Kong.
In previous Wong Kar-Wai films Cantonese and Beijing/Peking opera visually play a strong role. 2046 heavily features references to “Eastern” and “Western” opera, specifically nineteenth-century Italian opera. Aside from the dramatic and emotional tension associated with Italian opera, Wong uses its traditional European three-act structure and the theme of promise and betrayal (Rayns, 2004, p. 23). He also features one of its most popular arias, “Casta Diva” from Vincenzo Bellini’s Norma, to comment on the tensions between Mr. Wang and Jing-Wen and between the PRC and Hong Kong. Bellini’s Norma tells the story of a druid high priestess who is betrayed by love and must choose between her followers or her passion for a leader of the occupying army. “Casta Diva” echoes in the halls of the Oriental Hotel numerous times, often while Mr. Wang and Jing-Wen are fighting. In the scene where Mimi/Lulu is murdered, the aria swells over the violence. Film Comment contributor Amy Taubin believes that the aria is used as a metaphor for the “political tensions between Hong Kong and China” (2004, p. 29). Aside from story elements, political readings are also found in the film’s mise-en-scene.

Like previous installments of the Chow Mo-Wan trilogy, props play an important role. Zhang Ziyi, who plays Bai Ling, states that all the props in 2046 are carefully chosen to allow the audience to “see the cultural history” portrayed in the film (2005, “Behind the Scenes of 2046”). Mirrors appear again reflecting images and creating distance between reality and creativity. Watches are featured extensively (Wolf, 2004, p. 36). Wang Jing-Wen, Black Spider, Bai Ling,
and Chow Mo-Wan all wear watches. Chow gives Bai a watch as a souvenir from his travels in Singapore. A watch is an unlucky gift in Hong Kong superstition as it symbolizes giving away of time out of one’s own life leading to a shortage of time spent with the other person. As before, these clocks mirror Hong Kong’s fascination with time during the pre-handover/pre-promise period. They also foretell the warning: time is fleeting and nothing is permanent. As in Days of Being Wild and In the Mood for Love, Wong places many political metaphors in 2046’s color systems.

2046 features many heavily saturated colors yet highlights three main color combinations for political commentary: red, green, and red/green. Whereas in Days of Being Wild and In the Mood for Love Wong worked primarily with one hue at a time, in 2046 it is the combination of the colors that contains the majority of the messages. Although political readings can be done on a scene-by-scene basis, by examining the film as a whole the color systems speak volumes about Wong Kar-Wai’s views on the PRC and the future of Hong Kong.

One might assume based on Wong’s previous works that the 1960s would appear red because of Wong’s great love for the era and 2046 would appear green because of its association with distrust. But the film text is more complex than that simple duality. The 1960s are primarily one hue, being red or green. These distinctions describe the period as one where things are simpler and less complicated. In feng shui, red and green individually both promote growing energy illustrated in Wong’s film by its association with the colony during its
economic boom. In the year/city 2046, there is an overwhelming amount of clashing red and green. As described earlier, because these two hues are opposite each other on the color wheel the result of viewing them simultaneously causes discomfort and possible nausea. Also, being adversaries on the feng shui compass the two colors together block good energy resulting in bad luck and illness. In Taoism/feng shui, red belongs to fire and green relates to wood. Therefore, together they produced a dangerous volatile situation. Using these colors, Wong Kar-Wai boldly states, again, that the People’s Republic of China should not be trusted and that under their leadership dire things are in store for the citizens of Hong Kong. Regardless of whether viewers are receptive to this message within the color because of this color choice, Wong makes them physically and biologically uncomfortable resulting in a conditioned physiological dislike for the year 2046. Aside from causing visual unease, Wong causes aural discomfort in the film’s closing credits.

The part of the film that contains the most blatant political reference is the closing credits. While the names of crew members and cast scroll across the screen on top of a computer graphic image of the futuristic city 2046, the film’s theme song plays and underneath it is an audio clip of a speech by Margaret Thatcher, former prime minister for the United Kingdom. In her own voice she says, “Hong Kong will retain its economic systems and way of life for fifty years after the first of July 1997.” If there is any doubt that Wong Kar-Wai has intended 2046 to contain political messages, it is immediately removed during the ending.
credit sequence. Overall, 2046 politically reads as a pessimistic warning of Hong Kong’s future.

One critic, who gave Wong credit for placing political themes in his past films, claimed that 2046 was “perhaps the most expensive and ineffective political campaign ever made” (Khoo, 2004). However, by examining the various levels of signifiers in Wong Kar-Wai’s 2046, a detailed and resounding message is apparent. Placing the film in context with the other two installments of the Chow Mo-Wan trilogy reinforces Wong’s pessimistic warning about Hong Kong’s future under the People’s Republic of China. Analyzing the three films together shows a filmmaker whose visual sophistication grows in the midst of political strife and demonstrates how the mise-en-scene can be used as a level to place messages and commentary that censorship boards may find taboo. Using color systems as a tool for expressing political commentary is a technique Wong Kar-Wai embraces. Time will determine if Wong will remain in Hong Kong passing political metaphors by the PRC film censors or if he will leave to create films abroad.
CHAPTER 5
PROMISES OF AN UNKNOWN FUTURE

As ownership of Hong Kong changed hands from the United Kingdom to the People's Republic of China in 1997, citizens and filmmakers of the city were highly aware of the political environment. Film director Wong Kar-Wai created visually stimulating films that expressed the anxieties and frustrations of the citizens of Hong Kong. This study provided a political reading of Wong's Chow Mo-Wan trilogy through analysis of story elements and details within the mise-en-scene. Story elements examined within the narrative included setting, dialogue, character relationships, character identities, thematic motifs, musical references, numerology, and genre manipulation. Wong used details within the films' mise-en-scenes such as props and color to express political frustrations. To provide color interpretations, various traditional aesthetic guidelines, such as those prescribed by Taoism, Cantonese and Beijing opera, and feng shui, were used to read the films' negative comments on the handover process and the governments involved.

These three films from the tumultuous handover period, *Days of Being Wild* (1991), *In the Mood for Love* (2000), and *2046* (2004), illustrated that, as the People’s Republic amassed control of Hong Kong, Wong Kar-Wai’s mise-en-scenes became more stylized and visually complex. These films contained messages and commentary on contemporary Hong Kong society and were filled with layers of cultural signifiers, such as numbers, consumer items, and color.
Analysis of the films through traditional Chinese art systems allowed for political readings of the films’ texts. Although not much time had progressed since the completion of the latest installment of this series, significant changes in Hong Kong, politically and cinematically, affected the filmmaker and influenced his next projects.

Changes for Hong Kong Filmmakers

For years, the Hong Kong film industry had requested to be “exempt from” the “import quotas” set by the Mainland film commission. Finally, an answer came in the form of the Mainland China/Hong Kong Closer Economic Partnership Arrangement (CEPA). Effective since January 1, 2005, CEPA was designed to increase Hong Kong-China co-productions from fifty to seventy percent a year and to allow co-productions to film outside the Mainland. Hong Kong producers, although grateful for more production opportunities, were still wary of the China Film Group censors and greeted these advancements with “cautious optimism.” Woody Tsung, chief executive of the Hong Kong, Kowloon, and New Territories Motion Picture Industry Association, claimed CEPA did not actually increase Hong Kong production because, although “there is no quota,” distribution was still monopolized by the PRC. Hong Kong Film Directors Guild chairman Derek Yee felt differently and believed that CEPA allowed for more “flexibility” and encouraged investment (Chung, 2004). Regardless of the effect the CEPA had on Hong Kong cinematic production, Wong Kar-Wai would not be directly affected by its adoption.
Despite the fact that 2046 ranked fifth on the list of top box office earners in the People’s Republic of China for 2004, earning almost four million US dollars (Hong, 2005), Wong seemed to have chosen to join other Hong Kong directors, such as John Woo, in making films in the United States. Recently, Wong signed a three-picture deal with Fox Searchlight Pictures to create English-language films. Rumors swirled over exactly what his next project would be and when production would begin. Preproduction for a project entitled *The Lady From Shanghai*, featuring actress Nicole Kidman, seemed to be delayed indefinitely. Another film called *My Blueberry Nights*, starring jazz vocalist Norah Jones, was announced to begin shooting in July 2006 but, to date, the project still seemed to be at the preproduction stage. Wong was also given an opportunity to direct a film about the 2005 Hurricane Katrina disaster, but work on that production had also been postponed. Whatever he decided to direct next, Wong Kar-Wai maintained a place on the world stage as a visually creative director that created films that spoke of Hong Kong’s transitional period.

**Cultural Influences on Cinema**

Just as the American school of ethnomusicology believes that the written and spoken language of a culture cannot be divorced from its music, so, too, does film cultural studies support anthropological applications. The cultural studies approach is especially useful analyzing films from transnational cultures, such as the situation in Hong Kong, because of the layers of cultural sediment that require extensive shifting. Using a cultural studies technique for film analysis
takes into account the political, historical, economic, societal, and aesthetic forces and traditions within the filmmakers’ cultural backgrounds and places the film in an appropriate context. On one level, Wong Kar-Wai’s films seem focused on the disparity of romantic love, but when studied in a cultural context one can see that all of his works to date are about his city of Hong Kong. As Hong Kong has experienced a politically active period, the effects of the changes can be seen in the city, its population, and its cinema.

Films from Hong Kong, such as Wong Kar-Wai’s, should be studied because of their transnational characteristics, popularity on the world screen, and reflection of a former colonial capitalistic economy being controlled by a Communist country. Almost as a microcosm of 20th century world events and forces, Hong Kong has so far survived a large number of revolutions while becoming one of the wealthiest cities in the world. Through Hong Kong cinema, scholars and audiences can see a meeting ground for numerous voices and ideas. Regardless of what forces affect Hong Kong cinema in the years to come, it is clear that the creative industry will survive to continue producing films that are entertaining and representative of the time and atmosphere in which they are made.
REFERENCES


“Behind the Scenes of 2046.” (2005). In K.W. Wong (Director), 2046. Sony Pictures Classics. DVD.


Ju. (2002). “Making of Springtime in a Small Town.” In Z. Than (Director), *Springtime in a Small Town*. Palm Pictures. DVD.


Li, C. T. (Ed). (1998)._Changes in Hong Kong Society through Cinema_. Hong Kong International Film Festival.


Wong, K. (2002). “At In the Mood for Love.” In K.W. Wong (Director), In the Mood for Love, Criterion Collection, DVD, Disc 2.


Wong, K. (2002). In the Mood for Love. Criterion Collection. DVD.


