



Chungking Express

BEFORE VIEWING – BEFORE READING SYNOPSIS

TASK

- With a partner, discuss and record your expectations of a film called Chungking Express which has been made in Hong Kong. After viewing the film you should compare notes with your partner to see how many of your expectations have been confirmed or contradicted.

SYNOPSIS

Cult Hong Kong filmmaker Wong Kar Wai's *Chungking Express* is a stylish combination of romance, dead-pan comedy and film noir set in and around Hong Kong's notorious Chungking Mansions, a complex of shabby hostels, bars and clubs teeming with illegal immigrants. The story centres on a small takeaway stall, the Midnight Express, which is frequented by two lovelorn Cops (223, Takeshi Kaneshiro and 633, Tony Leung Chiu Wai). They become involved with a mysterious drug dealer dressed in a blonde wig and sunglasses (Brigitte Lin), on the run from drug traffickers, and an impulsive young dreamer (Faye Wong) who works behind the counter of the Midnight Express.

The central concerns of the film are identity and our reluctance to show, or to accept, who we truly are. The Brigitte Lin character wears a wig and sunglasses to hide her true self. Cop 223 refuses to accept the fact that his girlfriend has left him. The waitress (Faye Wong) secretly cleans the apartment for Cop 633 who avoids reading a goodbye note from his ex-girlfriend and is unable to realise that his apartment is getting cleaner and cleaner.

BACKGROUND FOR WONG KAR WAI

Wong Kar Wai belongs to the mid-1980s Second New Wave of Hong Kong filmmakers who continued to develop the innovative approaches initiated by the original Hong Kong New Wave, which included directors such as Tsui Hark, Ann Hui and Patrick Tam. The Second Wave, Wong Kar Wai, Eddie Fong, Stanley Kwan and Clara Law, is often seen as a continuation of the first as many of these directors worked as assistants to the earlier directors.

After obtaining a diploma in graphic design from the Hong Kong Polytechnic School in 1980, Wong Kar Wai became a television production assistant, working mainly on television drama series. Some film critics have referred to Wong's MTV aesthetic and this is particularly evident in the rapid editing and stylised camera shots of *Chungking Express*. Wong uses fast-forward and pause in the film; we observe the speeded-up passing of



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clouds and Cop 633's accelerated running. The use of voice-over obliges the audience to identify with the narrator. This identification is further emphasised by the frequent use of long takes which leave the protagonists either frozen in time, whilst other characters move hurriedly past in a jumble of vibrant activity, or else they are filmed (usually with a handheld camera) in such rapid motion that other characters and locations smear into a blur of colours.

After his work as a television production assistant Wong moved on to scriptwriting for television and, subsequently, to films where he worked closely with the New Wave director, Patrick Tam - notably as the scriptwriter of Tam's 1987 *Final Victory* - and Tam supervised the editing on Wong's 1991 film *Days of Being Wild*.

Wong's directorial debut, a gangster film, *As Tears Go By* (1988) was screened as part of the Critics Week at the 1989 Cannes International Film Festival. Wong's next film *Days of Being Wild*, which featured several of Hong Kong's glamorous young stars won five Hong Kong Film Awards, including Best Film and Best Director.

It was during a break in the post-production of his next film, *Ashes of Time* (1994), a subversion of the traditional Chinese martial arts movie, that Wong made *Chungking Express* (1994), which later became a cult hit. Following this came *Fallen Angels*, which was well received by critics when it was premiered at the 1995 Toronto Film Festival. In 1997, *Happy Together* premiered at the Cannes Film Festival where it won a Best Director Award for Wong. Wong's romantic melodrama, *In The Mood For Love* won Best Actor award for Tony Leung Chiu Wai and the Technical Prize at the 2000 Cannes International Film Festival. Wong's latest film entitled *2046* (2004) is his first - long-delayed - science fiction film.

HISTORY

In his films Patrick Tam, Wong's cinematic mentor, dealt with themes of dislocation and alienation and explored a society rapidly consuming Western and Japanese popular culture and his protégé was to subsequently develop these ideas in his own films.

The 1984 Sino-British Agreement, which outlined the handover of Hong Kong to China, obliged Hong Kong residents and filmmakers alike to confront and examine their relationship with China. Since Wong and the other members of the so-called Second Wave of directors were linked to the social and political issues facing Hong Kong, one of the main concerns that this group of filmmakers came to address was Hong Kong's cultural identity, an identity that, although inevitably defined by its closeness to mainland China and its Western link as a British colony, had not prevented Hong Kong from creating its own culturally specific identity. *Chungking Express* offers the audience a melting pot of Chinese, Japanese and Western (predominantly American) culture that is uniquely Hong Kong's.

The multi-cultural aspects of the film are further emphasised by the fact that several different languages are spoken in the film. The Brigitte Lin character uses English to boss around the Indian drug-smugglers and Takeshi Kaneshiro (Cop 223) speaks four languages in the film: his narrations are all in Mandarin, he speaks most of his 'live' lines in heavily-accented Cantonese, when he calls one of his ex-girlfriends he speaks to her in Japanese, and he says one line in English when he approaches Brigitte Lin's blond-wigged character.

TASK

- With a partner make a list of all the consumer goods that call attention to the multicultural nature of Hong Kong. How else do you think Chungking Express emphasises the fact that Wong views Hong Kong as a cultural melting pot?

TWO PLOTS

One of the more distinctive aspects of this film is that it is really two shorter films stitched together - apparently - by only the thinnest of threads. Chungking Express was made in just three months when Wong Kar Wai was taking time off from editing *Ashes of Time*. Made partly to fulfil contractual obligations, Chungking Express was filmed very rapidly and - unusually for a feature film - shot in sequence, like a road movie, according to Wong, who wrote each scene either the night before or in the morning on the day of filming.

The movie was originally supposed to cover three separate stories, but as filming commenced, the third was done away with; it eventually turned up in *Fallen Angels* a year or so later. Both stories take place in part at the Midnight Express fast-food take-out counter. Both stories involve lovesick young cops who have just been deserted by their girlfriends, and both relate how the male protagonist strikes up a new romance. Otherwise, the two stories are entirely separate, the first taking up the first 45 minutes or so of the film and the second the remainder.

The two stories are tied together by just a single sentence at the transition point. The transition occurs when the first Cop 223, brushes past Faye, the new waitress at the Midnight Express, and observes that *'At the high point of our intimacy, we were just 0.01 centimetres from each other. I knew nothing about her. Six hours later, she fell in love with another man.'* Then, immediately, the film shifts to the story of the waitress and the second Cop 633.

The first story (Chungking House) centres on two characters, the young policeman, 223, and a mysterious woman (Brigitte Lin) in a blond wig and perpetual sunglasses (*'Somehow I've become very cautious. When I put on a raincoat, I put on sunglasses too. Who knows when it will rain, or when it will turn out sunny?'*). She and Cop 223 almost meet: *'At the closest point of our intimacy we were just 0.01 centimetres from each other. Fifty-six hours later, I fell in love with this woman.'* We learn that the mysterious woman is a drug trafficker,

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using a group of Indian immigrants to smuggle packets of white powder (presumably heroin) concealed in their clothes and luggage. At the airport, however, the Indians double-cross her. The Brigitte Lin character tracks down her betrayers and shoots several of them before finding herself in turn hunted but she eludes her pursuers by jumping onto a subway train.

The film also follows the story of Cop 223, who has been rejected by his former girlfriend, May. He still hopes that she will have a change of heart and call him, so he checks his message service frequently, calls May's parents, and otherwise just broods over his lost love. He buys one can of pineapple slices per day with an expiry date of May 1, explaining that *'We split up on April Fool's Day. So I decided to let the joke run for a month. Every day I buy a can of pineapple with a sell-by date of May 1. May loves pineapple, and May 1 is my birthday. If May hasn't changed her mind by the time I've bought thirty cans, then our love will also expire.'* He intends to eat all thirty cans on his birthday if she hasn't called. The pineapple represents May for Cop 223 and the expiration date is when his hopes for her expire. This notion, that nothing endures, that change is inevitable and unavoidable recurs throughout Wong's films. Everything, decides Cop 223, has an expiration date.

Cop 223 desperately tries to line up an alternative date, calling up one former girlfriend (who has married and already has two kids) and another girl that he knew at school (who doesn't remember him at all): *'Is Kong Siu-wai there? This is He Qiwu. We were classmates in grade four. You don't remember? Nothing, goodbye.'*

Cop 223's birthday arrives with no word from May, so Cop 223 devours his thirty cans of pineapple and goes to a bar to drown his sorrows. After throwing up in the toilet, he decides to chat up the first woman that he sees, who just happens to be the blond-wigged woman who we have already been introduced to through the drug smuggling subplot. He decides that she must be broken-hearted because she's wearing sunglasses after dark. She largely ignores his attempts to chat her up in a variety of languages (*'Excuse me, miss. Do you like pineapples?'*) but, since she is exhausted, on the run and has nowhere to go she ends up at Cop 223's flat, where she falls asleep. Cop 223 has to make do with eating salads, watching TV and cleaning her shoes.

In the morning, Cop 223 goes jogging so that he can sweat off the water he would otherwise use to produce tears. The woman leaves - to shoot the barman who set her up - but she pages Cop 223 to wish him 'Happy Birthday', something he believes he'll remember forever: *'If memory can be canned I hope it will never expire.'*

Cop 223 stops at the Midnight Express, hoping for a date with the waitress, who, like his former girlfriend, is called May. But she has - like his girlfriend - moved on and the manager (Chen Jinquan) suggests that he asks out the new waitress (Faye) but he decides that she's not his type (*'I don't date guys.'*). However, the waitress leads us into the second story (Midnight Express).

TASK

- How is the waitress, Faye, depicted in *Chungking Express*? How do we learn about her character from the way she behaves towards the customers and to her employer at the Midnight Express? We learn that Faye enjoys listening to loud music, although, considering her age, it is odd that her favourite song is an old hippy anthem from the 1960s (*California Dreamin'* by the Mamas and Papas). She explains to Cop 633 why she enjoys listening to loud music:

Cop 633: *'You like noisy music?'*

Waitress: *'Yes. The louder the better. Stops me from thinking.'*

Cop 633: *'You don't like to think? What do you like?'*

Waitress: *'Never thought about it.'*

- How is the song *California Dreamin'* used throughout the second part of the film?

Like Cop 223, Cop 633 has just been dumped by his girlfriend, who is a flight attendant (Valerie Chow). He regularly bought her a salad at the Midnight Express. But one night the manager suggested that he should try something else and the idea of another choice seemed to influence her thinking so she decides that it is also time for another choice in boyfriends.

The flight attendant stops by the Midnight Express and leaves a letter for her former boyfriend, with her key to his flat enclosed. The manager steams open the envelope and reads the girlfriend's terse farewell note. When Faye offers the letter to Cop 633 he refuses it, telling her to hold onto it for a while.

TASK

- How does the film show us the degree to which Cop 633 is upset by his girlfriend's departure? Why does Cop 633 postpone receiving the letter from his former girlfriend?

Faye takes the key to the cop's flat from the letter and later learns his address. She starts visiting his flat whilst he's at work. She starts tidying it up, putting new goldfish in the fish tank, redecorating a bit, washing and cleaning - all without his knowledge.

TASK

- Why do you think Faye starts secretly visiting Cop 633's flat? Why do you think Cop 633 fails to notice the changes in his flat? How do you think his inability to recognise that someone is cleaning up his flat connects with his failed relationship with the flight attendant?

Just as we expect, Cop 633 comes home unexpectedly and finds Faye in his flat. She runs off but when he catches up with her at the Midnight Express, he asks her out for dinner at the California Restaurant. She doesn't turn up but leaves a note for him with the manager - she's gone off to California. She returns a year later, as a flight attendant, to find that Cop 633 is running the Midnight Express because the manager wanted a change. The note she'd left included a boarding pass that is unreadable. She offers to write him another:

Faye: *'Where do you want to go?'*

Cop 633: *'Wherever you want to take me to.'*

TASK

- How satisfactory do you find the film's conclusion? Though the two stories appear to be quite separate there are many parallels both between the two stories and within the individual stories that link them together. With a partner, list the links which bind the stories together. For example, the large, cuddly Garfield toy which we see being bought as the Brigitte Lin character enters a store later appears in Cop 633's flat.

CONFUSION AND ALIENATION

In *Chungking Express*, Wong ignores the usual representational approaches that underpin classical narrative cinema. His film has two sets of protagonists and two plots. There is no attempt to offer one of these plots as a subplot. One plot finishes and another begins at an apparently arbitrary point in the film, although the two stories are linked far more subtly, as repeated viewings reveal. The random and arbitrary nature of human contact - particularly within an environment as brash, vibrant and transient as Hong Kong - is explored in several of Wong's other films, especially *In The Mood For Love*.

Another signature of Wong's films evident in *Chungking Express* is his use of voice-over monologues which tend to emphasise the status of the speaker as an alienated outsider, commenting, sometimes obliquely, on their attempts to fit into an urban landscape which is constantly in a state of animated instability. The essential paradox which Wong draws our attention to in *Chungking Express* is that, although densely populated societies like Hong Kong force us together, we are less able to communicate and form meaningful relationships with other people.

Our sense of our own individuality is maintained only by the mass-produced consumer goods with which we surround ourselves. We see inside both cops' flats and note the toys and gadgets they have assembled there to assert their own threatened sense of individuality - just as disenchanting computer operators working for faceless corporations will surround their workstations with toys, mascots and charms.

Hong Kong is not just a backdrop for the characters in *Chungking Express*; in many ways it is another character within the film. Within this confusing, garish and pulsating city Wong plays a dangerous game. Aware that much of his audience is not Asian (his films aren't particularly popular in Hong Kong), in *Chungking Express* he seems to trade on the traditional/racist view that it is difficult to distinguish one Asian individual from another. His two cops are made similar by their jobs and the locations we view them in; the staff of the *Midnight Express* confuse them at one point in the film. The first female protagonist is disguised and we are uncertain what she looks like without her disguise so that she might be the woman who we see in the second section of the film serving behind the counter at the *Midnight Express* café.

HONG KONG AND CHINA

A sure sign of the cult status of *Chungking Express* is the fact that it has produced several theories which attempt to explain some of the film's apparent mysteries. One of the more plausible suggestions is that the first part of *Chungking Express* deals implicitly with Britain's handing over to China of Hong Kong on July 1, 1997.

The argument is as follows:

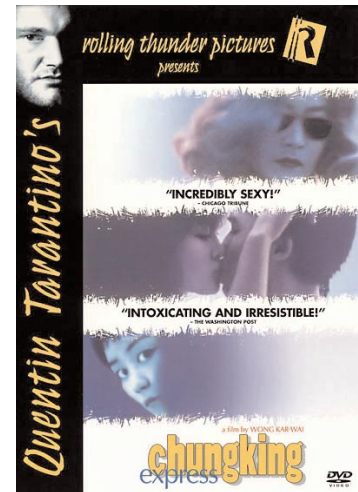
At the start, Brigitte Lin, the drug smuggler, represents China whilst Takeshi Kaneshiro (Cop 223) represents Hong Kong. An English bartender/drug-dealer persuades Lin to cut a deal with some Indians to smuggle drugs. But they cheat her by running away with the drugs. Hong Kong was initially founded because the British East Indian Company wanted the lucrative trade with the Chinese and one of the main items traded was opium. The girlfriend who has dumped Kaneshiro is called May (Ah Mei) which is a common name for girls in Hong Kong. He makes two phone calls to other girls, one of whom is Japanese; the other girl was a girl he knew from childhood (perhaps in Taiwan). This could mean that Hong Kong tried to make long-term relationships with other countries but failed. Kaneshiro counts the number of pineapple cans that he has, as many Hong Kong residents counted the years, then months and then days to July 1, 1997. It's also been suggested that Wong chose pineapple rather than another fruit because pineapple is both sweet and sour and before July 1, Hong Kong will endure both happy and unhappy events!

Kaneshiro tries to get to know Lin in a bar, just as, before 1997, many Hong Kong residents tried to befriend influential officials in China. Lin tells Kaneshiro that he is young. China has always placed emphasis on its history and Hong Kong will always be a younger place than China. Kaneshiro invites Brigitte to his apartment where she falls asleep; the only thing that Kaneshiro can do for her is clean her shoes. In the years before 1997, Hong Kong attempted to get Beijing more involved in its activities, although China is already self-sufficient and the addition of Hong Kong would only have a very marginal affect on such a huge and powerful country as China.

Meanwhile, the English bartender gets much friendlier with the Filipino waitress (who also puts on a blonde wig), suggesting that once Hong Kong has been handed over to China, the West will become friendlier to other nations. Lin shoots the English bartender and throws away her blonde wig. This represents China telling Great Britain to remove all signs of its country's influence on Hong Kong.

THE TARANTINO CONNECTION

On the cover of the US DVD release *Chungking Express* it says (in larger letters that the film title) Quentin Tarantino's Rolling Thunder presents *Chungking Express*. After the success of *Pulp Fiction* (a film which, like *Chungking Express*, has generated numerous theories to explain its quirky plot elements and cryptic verbal exchanges), Miramax Films rewarded Quentin Tarantino by letting him set up his own subsidiary label, Rolling Thunder, which he uses to distribute relatively obscure foreign films and American cult features. Tarantino, a keen fan of Hong Kong cinema, certainly raised Wong's profile in the States, when he selected *Chungking Express* for his new label's inaugural release.



SUGGESTED READING

Stephen Teo, *Hong Kong Cinema, The Extra Dimensions*. London: British Film Institute, (1997). An authoritative work that locates Wong's films in their historical and artistic context.

SUGGESTED VIEWING

Blade Runner (Ridley Scott) (1982)

The opening sequence of this film offers us a vision of the future that looks remarkably similar to the way in which Wong presents contemporary Hong Kong.

In The Mood For Love (Wong Kar Wai) (2000)

Superficially a romantic melodrama. The film pursues Wong's favoured themes of loneliness, isolation and perpetual transformation. A title card at the beginning of the film reads: 'It is a restless moment. Hong Kong 1962' which indicates that the director is keen to ensure that his Western audience remain aware of the historical shifts which have produced the film's apparently exotic backdrop. A later title card reads 'That era has passed. Nothing that belonged to it exists anymore.'

Crash (Paul Haggis) (2005)

This well-intentioned but heavy-handed Oscar®-winning Hollywood movie makes for an interesting comparison with *Chungking Express* since it is, in many ways, its exact opposite. It is carefully plotted, its concerns are explicit and all subplots are meticulously meshed together so that there is little room for the audience to form their own views about characters or themes. Its introductory voice-over explains the whole film!

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