

WONG KAR-WAI'S **Ashes of Time**

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with

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HKU
PRESS
香港大學出版社

Hong Kong University Press
The University of Hong Kong
Pokfulam Road
Hong Kong
www.hkupress.org

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ISBN 978-962-209-584-7 (*Hardback*)

ISBN 978-962-209-585-4 (*Paperback*)

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British Library Cataloguing-in-Publication Data

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2

Printed and bound by Condor Production Ltd. in Hong Kong, China

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1

Introduction

Ashes of Time (Dongxie Xidu) by Wong Kar-wai was made in 1994. It is a martial arts movie, loosely based on the popular novel, *Eagle-shooting Heroes* by Louis Cha (Jin Yong). It took two years to make and cost 47 million Hong Kong dollars. Wong Kar-wai himself wrote the screenplay. Christopher Doyle is the cinematographer and William Chang is the art director. These three people form a well-known trio, having worked in some other films such as *Chungking Express*, *Fallen Angels* and *Happy Together*. The cast consists of eight of the most popular actors and actresses in Hong Kong — Leslie Cheung, Tony Leung Kar-fai, Brigitte Lin Ching-hsia, Tony Leung Chui-wai, Maggie Cheung, Jacky Cheung, Carina Lau and Charlie Young. The celebrated martial arts instructor Sammo Hung choreographed the fight sequences.

Despite this highly esteemed cast and the reputation of Wong Kar-wai as an innovative film director, the film was not a commercial success. Initially, even the critical views were of a mixed nature. However, over the years, the weight of critical opinion has shifted and has begun to support the film and make important

claims for it. It is a visually remarkable film, and even its most unforgiving critics admit this fact.

It is our conviction that *Ashes of Time* is a very significant film and that it marks an important point in the growth of Hong Kong cinema. Our interpretation of the film has been powered by this conviction. Although Wong himself has stated that in making this film he was inspired by John Ford's *The Searchers*, the connections between the two are somewhat tenuous. We have sought to discuss what we consider are important aspects of the text as well as a number of other related topics that we hope would illuminate the film, including the response of viewers. In the appendix, we have included excerpts from interviews given by Wong Kar-wai himself as well as by the director of music, the art director and the editors, in the hope that they would add further to our understanding of the film. Some of these were originally published in Chinese newspapers and journals, which would ordinarily be unavailable to English readers. Dorothy Wong translated these materials from the original Chinese.

Wong Kar-wai is not an easy director to engage with. He shuns facile connections and stereotypes. He is not a director who encourages reading his works in a hurry; his films need time — time for reconfiguration and time for reflection. He discourages ready-made categories and pigeon-holes into which his films might be quickly inserted. He wants us to respond to his films as a distinctly and independently evolving corpus, intertextually connected, and not as examples of prefabricated categories. As a filmmaker, Wong Kar-wai is not afraid to break rules. That is because he takes rules with the utmost seriousness. He is a difficult filmmaker because his ambiguous style resists easy comprehension, a style resulting from disjunctions between narratives and images, and signifiers and referents. The lexical slippages as well as his self-referential aesthetic and his frequent practice of making the creation of the film itself the object of a metacommentary add to

the difficulties. The density and intensity of the visual registers, and the shifting meanings within them, can be demanding, even enigmatic. His films lead to other films by him, thereby making each of his films a reflection or extension of the others. Each of his films is in continual dialogue with his other works. *Ashes of Time*, which, like many of his other films, puts into play the memory of ruins and the ruins of memory, adds to the panorama of futility that obsesses him and adds to the complex dignity of cinematic art. In his films, Wong is not interested in creatively mapping life as it is or should be. His concern is with mapping life as it brushes against the senses and intellect. Wong Kar-wai is a name that signifies simultaneously success and failure in the realm of Hong Kong cinema. This book will explain some of the reasons why this is so.

In this book, we have sought to examine *Ashes of Time* in relation to the creativity of Wong Kar-wai. One does not have to be a staunch supporter of the auteur theory to recognize the importance of this director in filmmaking. At the same time, we have tried to pay equal attention to the historical, social, cultural discourses that inflect his creativity. In any case, looking back on the development of film hermeneutics during the past four decades, it becomes evident that the battles between the proponents and opponents of the auteur theory were largely irrelevant. We think the concept of signature and countersignature proposed by Jacques Derrida is far more relevant to the issue of authorship. Derrida points out that a signature needs a countersignature, and most often the countersignature precedes the signature. By countersignature he means the 'conventions, institutions, processes of legitimization'¹ that are vital to the foregrounding of authorship. Hence, while focusing on *Ashes of Time* as the work of Wong Kar-wai, we have sought to locate it in the larger social, cultural, historical and conceptual contexts which it both reflects and inflects.

Many viewers have stated that *Ashes of Time* is a difficult film.

It is a difficult film not because we cannot derive a meaning from it but rather because we are compelled to derive more meanings than we can comfortably handle. The way Wong Kar-wai translates lives into images demand close scrutiny. How he converses with reality and reads society has implications that go beyond the perimeter of his personal reference; it has deeper social and cultural resonances. His films demand multifaceted readings. For example, the problematic interconnections of time and memory and the complex ways in which memory constitutes and de-constitutes characters in *Ashes of Time* invite the kind of detailed analysis that we cannot undertake in this short book. Freud's confession that 'no psychological theory has yet succeeded in giving a connected account of the fundamental phenomenon of remembering and forgetting' only underscores the impossibility of examining these topics successfully within a brief compass.

In the following pages we have sought to broach a number of what we think are important facets of the film. Again, given the brevity of the book, we can only hint at certain lines of inquiry and angles of exploration that could be productively pursued but it is impossible to do full analytical justice to them. While writing this book, we were reminded of Oscar Wilde's quip that 'there are two ways of disliking art ... One is to dislike it. The other is to like it rationally.'

2

Background

Wong Kar-wai is a filmmaker who is closely associated with the second phase of the New Wave in Hong Kong cinema. However, while he shares many features in common with the second phase New Wave film directors, he is also different from them and stands out with his signature traits. While his own films share many features in common, and constitute an evolving oeuvre, *Ashes of Time* is also different from the rest of his works. A recognition of these similarities and differences opens the doorway to understanding *Ashes of Time* and locating it in its true discursive context.

Hong Kong has had a vibrant film industry for many decades. Hong Kong's growing economy and increasing recognition as an international financial center was conducive to film production, as clearly seen in the 1970s and 1980s. According to film historians, *To Steal a Roasted Duck* was the first narrative film made in Hong Kong. The film was directed by Liang Shaobo and produced by the American theatre owner Benjamin Polanski in 1909. Since that date, the Hong Kong film industry has grown rapidly — with a few ups and downs — and confronted new challenges and shaped itself in

response to them. The people of Hong Kong are enamoured of their movies, and it was said that there have been years when as many as three hundred films were made in a year in this tiny territory.

The Hong Kong film industry and film culture received a substantial impetus from film industry workers from China who migrated from the Mainland both before and during World War II. Those who were bent on making films in Cantonese were impelled by a variety of motives and were quick to take advantage of the financial resources available in Hong Kong. Some made films with the objective of defying Japanese aggression, while others were reacting against the Guomindang government's decree that Mandarin should be the medium of all films. From the perspective of the present essay, another important reason was the banning of martial arts films by the Guomindang in the 1930s because they were perceived to be reactionary glorifications of feudal ways of life that hampered social progress. As a consequence of these trends, the late 1940s witnessed a sharp rise in the number of Cantonese films that were produced in Hong Kong. It was only a decade earlier, in 1933, when the first sound Cantonese film was produced. When one charts the evolution of Hong Kong's film industry and film culture, the crucial role played by the Shaw Brothers and Golden Harvest studios becomes readily apparent. It is to the credit of these two institutions that they were able to secure a firm industrial footing for film and turn it into an important segment of popular culture in Hong Kong.

When moviegoers outside of Hong Kong think of Hong Kong cinema, they automatically think of martial arts (kung fu) films because kung fu has become so closely identified with the film culture of Hong Kong. This is, of course, a misleading picture. There were other works of cinema made in the territory that display diverse styles and techniques which seek to explore a variety of themes and experiences. The martial arts film grew out of its deep roots in traditional Chinese culture, however, as the genre evolved,

directors sought to challenge, absorb and undermine new social forces such as modernization, resulting in interesting trends. The kung fu film began to emerge as a distinctively Hong Kong art form with the production of the Huang Feihung series in the 1950s. The efforts of such artists as Zhang Che, Wang Yu, King Hu, Bruce Lee, Ng See-yuen, Liu Chia-ling, Yuen Woo-ping, Sammo Hung, Jackie Chan, Tsui Hark, and Wong Kar-wai resulted in its diverse growth. The view of many critics that the majority of martial arts films are designed to provide trivial and escapist fantasies for most filmgoers is indeed true. However, it must also be recognized that filmmakers like King Hu and Zhang Che have used it with great imagination to create memorable experiences as in *A Touch of Zen*. Two filmmakers who have used this genre with much skill to attain serious artistic purposes and to raise important issues related to nationalism, imperialism, cultural modernity and technology are Tsui Hark and Wong Kar-wai. The latter's *Ashes of Time* is the subject of this study.

It must be noted that during the last fifteen years or so, a distinct form of Hong Kong cinema that seeks to combine elements of the popular and the artistic traditions has made its appearance. Film directors such as Tsui Hark, John Woo, Stanley Kwan and Wong Kar-wai represent this tradition. As Ackbar Abbas pointed out, "The new Hong Kong cinema is interesting ... not essentially because it has caught up in terms of technical competence and sophistication with the rest of the world; what is really interesting about it is the way film is being used to explore and negotiate a problematic and paradoxical cultural space without abandoning its role as popular entertainment."¹

In order to understand the evolution of the New Wave in Hong Kong cinema it is perhaps useful to see it in two phases. The first phase started in 1979 and soon after a number of innovative films were produced. Among them Ann Hui's *The Secret*, Alan Fong's *Father and Son*, Patrick Tam's *Nomad*, Tony Au's *Last Affair*, and

Yim Ho's *Homecoming* deserve special mention. In the first phase of the New Wave films, the emphasis was on capturing a slice of reality. Instead of stereotypical characters and melodramatic story lines, the New Wave film directors focused on social issues of consequence. The second phase of the New Wave began in the late 1980s. Works such as Mabel Cheung's *An Autumn's Tale*, Clara Law's *Autumn Moon*, Stanley Kwan's *Rouge*, Lawrence Ah Mon's *Queen of Temple Street* and Wong Kar-wai's *As Tears Go By* represent the second phase. These film directors sought to combine the essence of the artistic and popular traditions in Hong Kong filmmaking with the avant-garde films of the West to create a new and vigorous form of cinema.

No film movement emerges out of a social vacuum. All film innovations bear the traces of specific social and cultural contexts that they inhabit. The period between 1984–97, in which much of the exciting work of the New Wave directors in Hong Kong was accomplished, was also a period which was vitally connected with the handover of Hong Kong to mainland China. The year 1984 marked the signing of the Sino-British declaration announcing the return of Hong Kong to China and 1997 was the year of the return. This was a period characterized by complex emotions of anxiety, hope, worry, uncertainty, national pride and a sense of loss. Any evaluation of the films made during this period cannot afford to ignore the social anxieties and the emotional qualities of this period. They relate in interesting and complex ways to the content of the films. In addition, one has to keep in mind the interactions between global capital, local culture and the transnational space that Hong Kong cinema has opened up. The financing, production, consumption and distribution of films as well as international film circuits, and the defining alterity of Hollywood have to be taken into consideration in assessing modern Hong Kong cinema.

It is against this background that one has to examine Wong Kar-wai's films in general and his *Ashes of Time* in particular.

Wong Ka-wai was born in Shanghai in 1958. He came to Hong Kong in 1963 with his parents. He spoke only Shanghainese and hence encountered great difficulties in adjusting to the Cantonese-speaking environment of Hong Kong. Initially he studied graphic design at Hong Kong Polytechnic University and displayed an interest in photography. In 1980 he enrolled in the training program for television drama production at TVB. Before long he emerged as a scriptwriter. He wrote over 50 scripts although only about 10 carry his name. The first film that he directed was *As Tears Go By* which was made in 1988 — it is a film that brings to mind Martin Scorsese's *Mean Streets*. He was the writer and director of the film. It is an exploration into the gangster genre. His intention, though, was to deglamorize the genre and lay bare the waste and violence that are endemic to gang life. The film deals with a gangster named Ah Wah in the rough neighborhood of Mong Kok. He is the guide and protector of his younger friend Fly. Fly is clumsy, making Ah Wah's life in the crime syndicate more complicated. Ah Wah's life is further complicated because of his affair with a distant cousin who wants him to forsake the violent life of a gangster. Wong Kar-wai explores this situation through striking imagery to deconstruct the very form of gangster movies.

Wong Kar-wai's second film, *Days of Being Wild*, was made in 1991 and gained wide critical recognition. The story, as in many of his films, is set in the 1960s. It portrays a young man named Yuddy who is given to violence and has an affair with two women. He later abandons them and goes off to the Philippines looking for his birth mother. Yuddy is a wealthy, carefree man who is confused and confuses others. He is an egotist who is afraid of entering into deep human relationships. His fears, anxieties and alienation can be explained by the fact that he grew up in an environment devoid of maternal love. His biological mother left for the Philippines and does not wish to see him, while his adoptive mother is an irresponsible alcoholic. This film highlights, in terms of content,

some of the themes expressed in his later films — including *Ashes of Time* — such as alienation, solitude, fear of rejection, and rootlessness. His trademark style features fragmentation, episodic narration, discrepant spatial and temporal registers, the frequent use of voice-overs and the stressing of the visual over the verbal. There was to be a second part to this film but, because of the commercial failure of the first part, the project was abandoned. *Days of Being Wild* juxtaposes the feel of the 1960s with the pulse of the 1990s in an interesting way. In 1994 Wong Kar-wai made his third film, *Ashes of Time*. In the same year, in between the filming of *Ashes of Time*, Wong made his third film, *Chungking Express* (Chongqing Senlin), which became both a commercial and critical success. It is a light-hearted comedy unlike his other three films. It won for itself, not only financial success, but also widespread critical acclaim. The film deals with two loosely connected stories about two policemen abandoned by their girlfriends. In the first story, Takeshi Kaneshiro on his birthday goes to a bar firmly resolved to fall in love with the first woman he chances to meet. As luck would have it, he picks up a heroine smuggler wearing a blonde wig, played by Brigitte Lin. The second story deals with Tony Leung whose ex-girlfriend has left her keys at a fast food restaurant. He is so caught up in his own dejection that he fails to realize that the girl at the counter, who is interested in him, is stealthily redecorating his flat in his absence. Wong makes use of this somewhat strange story to focus on aspects of capitalist modernity in Hong Kong. The action of the film takes place in the famous Chungking Mansions, which have come to epitomize the hubris, crass consumerism and the throw-away culture associated with capitalist modernity.

In the same year, Wong Kar-wai also made *Ashes of Time*. Following this film, which was a commercial failure but a critical success, he made *Fallen Angels* (Duoluo Tianshi) in 1995. It was originally conceptualized as a sequel to *Chungking Express* and

bears similarities in terms of style and visual rhetoric. *Fallen Angels* deals with the lives of a number of characters from the underworld of Hong Kong. They comprise a hit man and daring ex-convict who runs businesses at night. The film once again focuses on the modernized world of Hong Kong. The film contains many elements that we have now come to associate with the work of Wong. Moreover, the intertextual and self-referential qualities of the film give it added interest. A woman dyeing her hair blond, a character eating a can of pineapples which has already expired, a woman in a flight attendant's uniform nervously awaiting the arrival of her lover, and a fast food restaurant called 'Midnight Express' all recall episodes from *Chungking Express*.

In 1997 Wong Kar-wai made *Happy Together* (Chungguang Zhaxie), a story set in Argentina. This won for him the director's prize at the Cannes Film Festival. The film is subtitled, 'A Story About Reunion'. The film deals with the aftermath of the break up of a relationship between two gay men. It also contains interesting pointers to the handover of Hong Kong to mainland China. The film stars Leslie Cheung and Tony Leung Chiu-wai as lovers and stirred up controversy among certain groups. Loosely based on a somewhat obscure novel by Manuel Puig, this film explores a favorite theme of Wong's — the ambiguities of intimacy. As in many other films of his, popular songs provide a kind of frame of intelligibility. Being 'happy together' is a central topic of the film, but the film also shows the impossibility of this goal. The narrative of the film commences with the voice-over of Lai Yiu-fai, who confesses to us about his continuing relationship with Ho Po-wing. Both of them have come to Buenos Aires, halfway around the world, to see the famous Iguazu waterfalls, which stand as a dominating and controlling symbol in the film. During their travels they argue, bicker, break up and experience immense agony. Having been separated for a while, Ho Po-wing says, 'Let's start over again.' What the film repeatedly demonstrates is the impossibility of that

undertaking. Nostalgia, and the problems of intimacy that are depicted in many of Wong's other films find echoes in *Happy Together* as well. If *As Tears Go By* can be termed a gangster movie, and *Ashes of Time* a martial arts movie, *Happy Together* may be regarded as a road movie. In all three cases, of course, the director undercuts the genre from within.

In 2000, Wong Kar-wai made his latest film, *In the Mood for Love* (Huayang Nianhua). It can be described as his most delicate film in terms of emotion and eroticism. The story is set in Hong Kong of the early 1960s. Tony Leung Chiu-wai and Maggie Cheung play next door neighbors. They are attracted to each other almost immediately. However, it is only after they realize that their spouses are involved in an affair that they decide to spend time together. The film can best be described as a study of sexual desire and its tensions, tenderness, ambiguities and repressions. The nostalgia for the 1960s that pervades the film is very real and compelling. We see in this film, as in many others, the organizing role played by dominant symbols. The telephone booth in *Days of Being Wild*, the birdcage in *Ashes of Time*, the waterfall in *Happy Together* and the carefully photographed walls in *In the Mood for Love* are cases in point.

What we have sought to do, through this quick survey of Wong Kar-wai's films, is to situate *Ashes of Time* in the larger context of his total oeuvre and the social and intellectual currents of the time. Unlike most other filmmakers, Wong's works are connected to each other in complex and subtle ways. Wong's early films offer useful pointers to the understanding of later films, while his later films enable us to revisit the earlier works with a new eye. Hence, in our effort to understand the nature and significance of *Ashes of Time*, it is of the utmost importance that we relate its themes, topics, tropes and visuals to those of his other films. The idea of simultaneously celebrating and indicting existence runs through all of his films. Let us, for example, consider the theme of self-

deception that finds articulation in many of Wong's works. This theme certainly figures very prominently in *Ashes of Time*. Raphael Demos, in his seminal article, characterizes self-deception as follows: 'Self-deception exists, I will say, when a person lies to himself, that is to say, persuades himself to believe what he knows is not so. In short, self-deception entails that B believes both P and not-P at the same time.'² In our view, Demos is here focusing attention on a significant aspect of self-deception and not its totality. Explorations into self-deception should come to grips with questions of consciousness, rationality and irrationality, cognition, cognitive relativism, categories of belief, epistemic foundations, wish-fulfillment, structures of desire, incontinence, hypocrisy, irony, rhetoric of self-justification and others. In other words, it is a many-sided concept. Wong Kar-wai's characters often succumb to it. For example, Ouyang Feng believes that he has transformed himself into a new person and obliterated his past, when in fact neither is the case. Huang Yaoshi thinks he visits his friend Ouyang annually in the spring to renew acquaintances when in fact it allows him the opportunity to meet Ouyang's former girlfriend with whom he is in love. Murong Yin creates her alter ego Murong Yang as a way of transcending herself only to plunge even deeper into herself. Hence, self-deception is a recurrent theme in *Ashes of Time*. It is also a theme that finds articulation in his later works like *Happy Together* and *In the Mood for Love*. In *Happy Together*, the two estranged lovers believe that they can start all over again while fully realizing the impossibility of that undertaking. Similarly Tony Leung Chiu-wai and Maggie Cheung in *In the Mood for Love* repress their sexual desires and overtly pursue an ideal of pure love knowing full well the implications of their behaviour. Hence self-deception forms a part of the meaning of these two later films by Wong. What is interesting to note here is that our understanding of how self-deception works in *Ashes of Time* enables us to develop a more comprehensive framework of cognition to comprehend the dynamic

between the two pairs of lovers in *Happy Together* and *In the Mood for Love*. In this way, *Ashes of Time* gains meaning when we connect it to the earlier and later works of Wong. It is for these reasons that we decided to locate *Ashes of Time* in the totality of his oeuvre.

When one considers *Ashes of Time* against the backdrop of his total output, interesting thematic patterns and pointers begin to emerge which are useful in decoding the meaning of the film. For example in *Ashes of Time*, the pair Ouyang and Huang are introduced very early and constitute an interesting duality. Similarly, in *As Tears Go By*, the Big Brother and his minion, in *Days of Being Wild*, Yuddy and the sailor, and in *Fallen Angels*, the assassin and his helpmate, in *Chungking Express*, the two policemen and their paramours, in *Happy Together*, the two gay lovers and in *In the Mood for Love*, the man and woman in love and their spouses constitute similar dualities. In each of these films, Wong sets up these pairs, these dualities, only to subvert the binary logic.

The background to *Ashes of Time* involves social and cultural discourses, historical moments and conceptual as well as aesthetic spaces. It is not only the social background that one has to examine in considering the background to a film. For example, the aesthetic informing *Ashes of Time* has to be looked at in relation to his other works. It seems to us that the aesthetic that governs many of his films can be characterized as an aesthetic of difference. This operates at a number of levels of artistic understanding. For example, Wong makes use of different genres — gangster films, love stories, martial arts movies, road movies — only to subvert them from within. In other words, Wong's intention is to display his films' differences from the conventional forms. Similarly, he makes use of the aura surrounding the actors and actresses such as Leslie Cheung, Tony Leung Chiu-wai and Maggie Cheung to invigorate their performances. But in doing so, he also underlines

the fact that their roles are different entities from themselves. Indeed there is a very intriguing ambivalence at work here. Moreover, the very semiotics used in Wong's films gain their vitality through their differences from their avowed intentions. This touches on the question of self-deception that we referred to earlier. Characters in *Ashes of Time* such as Ouyang, Huang, Murong Yang, the Sunset Warrior and Ouyang's sister-in-law think that they are occupying spaces, following emotional trajectories and pursuing cognitive maps that are, in point of fact, are different from what they understand them to be. Moreover, to add another layer of complexity, the film is different from itself, thereby making it inevitable that to seize the film is to lose it. We earlier emphasized the importance of recognizing the complex and evolving unity of Wong Kar-wai's cinematic output. However, it is important to take note of the fact that difference presupposes sameness and continuity; the experience of the continuum is also the experience of difference. Hence, it is against the background of similarities and continuities among Wong's works that one has to discover and identify the differences. In our judgment, then, the aesthetic of difference opens an interesting window onto the textual terrain of *Ashes of Time* as well as his other films. The depictions of continuity and difference set in motion a dynamic that forms a vital part of the conceptual and aesthetic background of Wong's films. One obvious difference that we need to bear in mind is that *Ashes of Time* is his only period-costume drama to date. While the stories in all his other films take place in the late 20th century's consumer, metropolitan societies, the story of *Ashes of Time* takes place in a remote desert around the 10th century.

In discussing the background of *Ashes of Time*, it is important that we focus on the state of the film industry at the time. We made a few references to the nature of the industry earlier on in this chapter. From the 1980s to mid-1990s, the Hong Kong film industry was making steady progress and inspiring investor

confidence in the ability of Hong Kong's cinema to thrive as a commercial proposition. For example, during this period box office collections from locally made films far outpaced that of foreign films, including those from Hollywood. Just to give a representative example, in 1984, of the 22 most popular movies shown in Hong Kong, 20 were made in Hong Kong itself. It is interesting to note that *Raiders of the Lost Ark*, which grossed the largest amount of money among foreign films, was beaten in the popular ratings by five other films made in Hong Kong. The second most popular foreign film that year, the James Bond movie *Never Say Never Again* was only the 14th most popular film. This gives us a sense of how local films were performing in relation to foreign films.

In the years 1990, 1991 and 1993, 247, 211 and 234 films were made in Hong Kong, respectively. While in 1997 and 1998, the figure dropped sharply to 94 and 92, respectively. During the past six years or so, foreign films have begun to make more money than locally produced films. This period witnessed a catastrophic drop in both output and investment. A number of factors contributed to this deplorable situation. The popularity of forms of low-cost, in-home entertainment (including VCD's), piracy and lax enforcement of intellectual property laws, increasing popularity of American movies, the incorporation of Hong Kong film styles and techniques by American producers in the action-film genre, rising ticket prices and the consequent drop in movie attendance, and the difficulties encountered in competing with big-budget Hollywood films are some of the reasons for the decline in Hong Kong's film industry.

The following figures indicate the nature of the change over a ten-year period. The box office collections are given in HK\$ millions.

	<i>Local Box Office of Hong Kong Films</i>	<i>Local Box Office of Non-Hong Kong Films</i>
1990	936	468
1991	994	294
1992	1,240	312
1993	1,133	406
1994	957	427
1995	776	563
1996	659	563
1997	548	608
1998	422	544
1999	353	523
2000	383	531

During the period in which *Ashes of Time* was made, Hong Kong's film industry, as is seen in the figures above, was still commercially vibrant. As a consequence, filmmakers such as Wong Kar-wai were able to make innovative films that took risks and *Ashes of Time* is certainly a good example of this. There were 192 films made in Hong Kong in 1994 — the year in which *Ashes of Time* was made. It was a big budget film featuring a large number of some of the most well-known actors and actresses in the territory. However, it was not commercially successful. It was number 34 in the popularity chart, grossing around HK\$9 million. The ten most popular films that year were *God of Gamblers' Return*, *Drunken Master II*, *From China with Love*, *It's a Wonderful Life*, *Treasure*, *Love on Delivery*, *Hail the Judge*, *He's a Woman*, *She's a Man*, *I Have a Date with Spring* and *In Between*.

In discussing the background to *Ashes of Time* it is also important that we pay some attention to its production history. The story of the making of *Ashes of Time* is, in many ways, as interesting as the film itself, filled with tension, anxiety, despair

and ultimately, relief. *Ashes of Time* was presented by the Taiwan-based Scholar Films Company Limited. It was a Jet Tone Production in association with Tsui Ming Productions Limited, Beijing Film Studio and Pony Canyon Inc. The Scholar Film Company, which was responsible for the funding, was interested in making two films based on the popular series of novels *Eagle-shooting Heroes* by Jin Yong. The two films were to be different from one another; one a serious and artistic film and the other a more popular comedy, a parody of the martial arts form. Wong Kar-wai was to be responsible for the artistic film and Jeff Lau for the more popular one. From the 1980s onwards, the Scholar Films Company had made a reputation for itself as a high-powered production and exhibition company.

At that time, as it is in many ways now, the common practice among Hong Kong producers was to pre-sell their products in Taiwan and Southeast Asian countries such as Singapore and Malaysia before the films were made, on the basis of the story, the genre and the reputation of the cast and director. The producers of *Ashes of Time* followed suit, pre-selling it in Taiwan, Singapore, Malaysia and Korea. However, as the shooting began, it became evident to everyone concerned that the production costs were excessively high and continued to rise, and were going to be well over original estimates. The Scholar Films Company became deeply anxious.

It was at this time that the well-known film critic, filmmaker and distributor, Shu Kei was called on to mount a rescue operation. (He is also responsible for the English subtitles in the film). He was successful in pre-selling the film in France and Japan and raising about half-a-million American dollars from each of the two countries. One of the conditions imposed by the Japanese was that Pony Canyon (Japan) should be credited as one of the producers. However, as the making of the film progressed, and with it the mounting costs, this money was quickly used up and the Scholar

Film Company had to pump in more. Ultimately, the film was made; but there were several moments of intense anxiety regarding the viability of the project.

Ashes of Time gained international recognition in the ensuing years. Its showing at the Venice Film Festival in 1994 greatly aided this recognition as a visually remarkable film. The chain of events leading to its showing in the Venice Film Festival is an interesting story by itself, shedding light on Wong Kar-wai's work habits, intensity and priorities as a film director. Marco Muller, the representative of the Venice Film Festival, saw parts of a version of the film edited by William Chang, and was greatly impressed by it. He recommended it to the Festival Organizers and a date was set for it to be shown to the panel. An subtitled tape of this version was sent to Italy for the committee to view. The director of the Venice film festival, Gillo Pontecorvo, decided to invite the film for competition. But a week later, he changed his mind and decided that the committee should see the final edited version before they could accept the film. However, Wong Kar-wai was constantly making changes to it, re-editing and seeking to give the story a sharper focus, so he could not meet the deadline. The organizers decided to extend the date; but Wong still could not make it because he was busy with last minute changes that he thought would add to the effect of the film. The Festival was to start soon and the organizers demanded that the film has to arrive by the first day of the festival, or else it would not be shown. It was decided that the film be taken to Venice by hand. The organizers as well as the producers were getting more and more worried, while Wong was still doing the final touches. All the reels except the last were given to the courier. The courier was at the airport awaiting the final reel while Wong was still working on it. Finally, just minutes before the airplane took off, the final reel was delivered. There are similar stories that are revelatory of Wong Kar-wai's temperament and work style.

During the course of making the film, several important changes were made regarding casting as well as technical assistance. For example, Leslie Cheung was originally slated to play the role that Tony Leung Kar-fai ended up playing in the film and Tony Leung Kar-fai played Leslie Cheung's role. After some weeks of shooting, it was decided that they should switch roles. Similarly, according to the original plan, Charlie Young, who is a skilled martial arts performer, was to play the role of a ferocious horse thief instead of her present minor role in the film. Some sequences were shot of her playing the role of a horse thief, but later Wong decided to give her the minor role in the film. Joey Wong, who recently appeared in *The Peony Traveler*, appears in one shot in the last action montage. She was in the original cast when the film was pre-sold to Korea. Wong decided to drop her later but had to keep that shot in the final version released in Asia simply to fulfill his contractual obligations to the Korean distributors. *Ashes of Time* was originally assembled by Patrick Tam, but later William Chang was entrusted with the task of editing the film along with the help of Hai Kit-wai and Kwong Chi-leung. Similarly, Peter Pau, the cameraman behind *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* was the original cinematographer, and later Christopher Doyle took over.

Ashes of Time was released in 1994 and the general reaction to the film was one of bewilderment and disappointment. This was not the martial arts film that many had hoped to see. Despite the glamorous cast and the beautiful photography, many in the audience were less than enthusiastic about the film. They felt that it was over their heads. People walked out of the theatres in droves in the middle of the film and people from the industry were appalled. Critics like Shek Kei found the film perplexing. A few critics liked it, and there was a furious battle in the pages of newspapers and journals, between those who liked it and those who did not, with an intensity that had hardly been witnessed before. However, with the passage of time and partly due to the

informed explanations of critics and scholars, as well as the impact Wong's later works had in generating intertextual energies, there emerged among some viewers a more favorable impression of *Ashes of Time* that was appreciative of the powerful, if flawed, imagination, and the vibrant, critical intelligence inscribed in it. This is the kind of film that grows on you. It must be seen more than once to understand its meaning. This point was well articulated by Maggie Cheung, who plays a significant, although a small role in terms of screen time, in *Ashes of Time*. She remarked in an interview, "The first time I saw it I thought "What's it about?" But the second time I thought, "Actually it's quite good." And the third time I really loved it when I understood the meaning of the film.'

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