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**Transcultural Sounds: Music, Identity  
and the Cinema of Wong Kar-wai**

Emilie Yueh-yu Yeh  
Hong Kong Baptist University

Lake Wang Hu  
Phoenix Television

The author welcome comments from readers.  
Contact details:

**Emilie Yueh-yu Yeh, Department of Cinema and Television, Hong Kong Baptist University, Kowloon**  
Email: [yyeh@hkbu.edu.hk](mailto:yyeh@hkbu.edu.hk)

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## Transcultural Sounds: Music, Identity and the Cinema of Wong Kar-wai

Emilie Yueh-yu Yeh  
Hong Kong Baptist University

Lake Wang Hu  
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### Abstract

This essay proposes that music, rather than images, furnishes a key to account for the transcultural appeal of Wong Kar-wai's films. Transcultural appeal, in Wong's case, resides in aesthetic evocation that obscures culturally specific, ethnic details. Appreciating Wong's films demands lesser cultural or linguistic context than works of Zhang Yimou, for instance; instead, viewers are offered moments of dreamlike sounds and imagery intended for universal sensuous delectation. Unlike cross-cultural practices in which differences are managed and power relations negotiated, transcultural contact tends to neutralize cultural conflicts and emphasizes instead multicultural deterritorialization. Transcultural, in this regard, shifts attention from politics to aesthetics and creates spaces allowing different cultures to trespass, coexist, coalesce, and be 'happy together.' Based on this notion, the essay selects three key Wong Kar-wai films--*Fallen Angels*, *Happy Together* and *In the Mood for Love*—for case studies. These all demonstrate how transcultural analysis yields insight into the shifting meanings of identity, locality and Chinese diaspora. Mobility, portable identities and historical nostalgia in Wong's films are conveyed primarily through musical channels, as well as image and performance.

### Introduction

For more than a decade, Wong Kar-wai has captivated art house audiences across various national and cultural boundaries. Through *Days of Being Wild* (1990), *Chungking Express* (1993), *Ashes of Time* (1994), *Fallen Angels* (1995), *Happy Together* (1997), *In the Mood for Love* (2000), *2046* (2004), *The Hand* (2005) and *My Blueberry Nights* (2007), Wong established himself as a leading art cinema director. Wong is particularly known for his stylistic trademarks, including such elements as intricate narrative structures, voiceover monologues, shallow focus, and elegant production design. Scholars and critics have noted the influence of Wong Kar-wai on contemporary art cinema. Tony Rayns, along with other

critics, focused on Wong's manipulations of temporality, and called him a "poet of time."<sup>1</sup> Ackbar Abbas takes Wong's early works as evoking the elusive ambivalence of Hong Kong's cultural space.<sup>2</sup> David Bordwell proposes "avant pop" to examine the development of the maverick director's style and shows that Wong's avant-garde artistry is built on assimilating and reworking formulas of popular entertainment.<sup>3</sup> Rey Chow reads Wong's treatment of nostalgia with "a fantasized state of oneness," a metaphysical juxtaposition of the present and the past.<sup>4</sup> Chow further argues that the sentiments of *In the Mood for Love* forms a kind of "capital-in-flux," turning everyday experience into global phantasmagorias.<sup>5</sup>

A more popular account for Wong Kar-wai's international appeal suggests that his work is indebted to music video.<sup>6</sup> As a dominant visual language in global networks of electronic communication, music video is characterized by nonlinear narrative, multiple and fragmented diegesis (musical performance crosscut with fictional worlds), rapid-fire, discontinuous montage marked by percussive rhythms and a broad mix of photographic textures and graphic material. These features do seem to match the stylistic motifs in Wong Kar-wai's films. But if the secret of Wong's achievement is indeed music video, how is Wong's style affiliated? Can music video sufficiently explain his popularity with audiences from Los Angeles, Tokyo, New York, London and Paris? Why are his films appealing to

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<sup>1</sup> See Tony Rayns, "Poet of Time," *Sight & Sound* 5, no. 9 (September 1995):12-17.

For other critics, see Kent Jones, "*In the Mood for Love*," *Film Comment* 37, no.1 (Jan/Feb. 2001): 22-25; Lalanne, Jean-Marc, "Images from the Inside," in *Cinedossier*, ed. Jean-Marc Lalanne (Paris: Edition du Voir, 1997), 9-27.

<sup>2</sup> Ackbar Abbas, *Hong Kong: Culture and the Politics of Disappearance* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), 22-47.

<sup>3</sup> David Bordwell, *Planet Hong Kong: Popular Cinema and the Art of Entertainment* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2000), 270-281.

<sup>4</sup> Rey Chow, "Nostalgia of the New Wave: Structure in Wong Kar-wai's *Happy Together*," *Camera Obscura* 42 (September 1999): 31-48.

<sup>5</sup> Rey Chow, "Sentimental Returns: On the Uses of the Everyday in the Recent Films of Zhang Yimou and Wong Kar-wai," *New Literary History* 33, no.4 (Autumn 2002): 639-654.

<sup>6</sup> See Larry Gross, "Nonchalant Grace," *Sight & Sound* 6, no. 9 (September 1996): 6-10; Howard Hampton, "Blur as Genre: Wong Kar-wai's Film 'Chungking Express'," *Artforum* 33, no.7 (March 1996): 90-93; Elizabeth Wright, "Wong Kar-wai," *Senses of Cinema* no. 17 (October 2006), <http://www.sensesofcinema.com/contents/directors/02/wong.html>.

viewers across so many different cultures and geographies? Is it because Wong, like other Asian directors, is adept at fashioning oriental enchantment with state-of-the-art sensations?

Since the 1950s, non-Western films have struggled for recognition in the West. Seeking prestige and respect, they have followed European and American canons in developing their art cinemas. Asian films that hope to be accepted in art houses and international film festivals often resorted to ethnographic images and sounds in order to fit predictable criteria for exotic, 'foreign' entertainment. This is one form of discursive positioning in cross-cultural situations. Inspired by Edward Said's *Orientalism*, Chinese critics condemned Orientalist tendencies in Chinese films that received attention in the West. Among a number of films charged with selling Orientalist fantasy are Chen Kaige's *Farewell, My Concubine* (1993), Zhang Yimou's *Judou* (1990) and *Raise the Red Lantern* (1991).<sup>7</sup> However, we have not seen Orientalist critiques of Wong Kar-wai. This is intriguing as *In the Mood for Love*, *2046* and *The Hand* are praised for their nostalgic sensibility, conjuring an enigmatic past alongside sumptuous, traditional *qipao* costume. If Orientalism is as Said suggests, "premised upon exteriority, that is, on the fact that the Orientalist, poet or scholar, makes the Orient speak, describes the Orient, renders its mysteries plain for and to the West,"<sup>8</sup> why are critics of Orientalism silent? Does Wong's exquisite *mise-en-scene* not proffer elaborate manifestations of Orientalist spectacle? What rescues Wong from suspicions

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<sup>7</sup> Rey Chow, *Primitive Passions* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1995), 173-202; Esther C. M. Yau, "International Fantasy and the 'New Chinese Cinema'," *Quarterly Review of Film and Video* 14, no. 3 (1993): 95-108; Zhang Yiwu, "Quanqiu hua yu dalu dianying de eryunxing fazhan" (Globalization and the binary development of mainland Chinese cinema) in *Chinese Cinemas: History, Culture and Representation*, Conference Proceedings (Taipei: Chinese Film Archive, 1996), 1-14 and Ying Hong, "Guoji yujing zhong de zhongguo dalu dianying" (Mainland Chinese films in the international discourse), *Contemporary Cinema* (June 1996): 21-29.

<sup>8</sup> Edward Said, *Orientalism* (London: Penguin Books, 1978), 20-21.

of purveying Orientalism while persisting in representations of Hong Kong as nostalgic *Chinoiserie*?<sup>9</sup>

We propose that music, rather than images, furnishes a key to account for the silencing of Orientalist critique. This silence is filled by another channel of cultural communication that makes Wong's work seem less Orientalist than say, films by Chen Kaige or Zhang Yimou. We propose to call this channel of cultural communication 'transcultural' and argue for the audio track's special agency, which provides an entry to Wong's transcultural appeal.

Here, transcultural sound is extended in aesthetic evocation that obscures culturally specific, ethnic details. Appreciating Wong's films demands less contextual knowledge; instead, viewers are offered reveries and figuration designed for sensuous delectation. In this sense, transcultural is not cross-cultural. Cross-cultural involves situations in which differences are managed and power relations negotiated, whereas transcultural neutralizes cultural conflict and emphasizes instead multicultural deterritorialization. Cross-cultural analysis is a discursive practice to confront preconception, misunderstanding and stereotype. It requires vigilance toward power relations and politics of identity. Transcultural, on the contrary, shifts attention from politics to aesthetics and creates spaces for cultures to trespass, coexist, coalesce, and be 'happy together.'

### **Defining Transcultural**

Scholars in intercultural communication and cultural studies have attempted to define the concept of transculture. For example, in his book on post-Soviet Russian culture, Mikhail Epstein envisions a utopia of cultural wholeness and describes transculture in this context as "a multidimensional space that appears gradually over the course of historical time."<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Li Cheuk-to, "Wang Jiawei dianying de haiwai jieshou" (The overseas reception of Wong Kar-wai's films) in *Wong Kai-war de yinghua shijie* (The film world of Wong Kar-wai), ed. Pun Kwok-ling and Bono Lee (Hong Kong: Joint Publishing, 2004), 238-249.

<sup>10</sup> Mikhail Epstein, *After the Future: the Paradoxes of Postmodernism and Contemporary Russian Culture*, trans. Anesa Miller-Pogacar (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1995), 14.

Transculture might also be a type of global consciousness and a creation “in the holistic forms of diverse cultures.”<sup>11</sup> Based on these notions, we add that transcultural forms should be understood as a collective and joint lived experience, a complex communication capable of transcending cultural boundaries and enriching existing aesthetic and cultural practices.<sup>12</sup>

Film, as a powerful art of emotional arousal, is a perfect medium for transcultural practice. For analytical purposes, we define transcultural here as filmmaking strategies and tactics capable of transcending geographic and cultural boundaries. Wong Kar-wai is a director consciously exploring the transcultural potential of the cinema, particularly with respect to film music. Music constitutes the backbone of Wong’s hypnotic style. Moreover, his choice of the types and arrangement of music helps construct the extraordinary auditory quality of his work. Through music, Wong renders a space of accommodation, mixing different types of languages, geographies, cultures and histories. We call this space transcultural, and argue that in this space, music performs a discursive rite of passage. First, music implies the traits, thoughts and identities of characters at their most intimate. It shuttles between character action and interior reaction. Second, musical diversity also promotes exteriority as it signals a cosmopolitan sensibility in the diegesis. Audiences of different national, cultural and age backgrounds are invited to enter this transcultural space to experience sounds and melodies outside of their musical routines. Music in Wong’s palette not only animates the overall rhythm, but performs several important transcultural functions: 1. narrative signs of identity, nostalgia, and desires for belonging; 2. a *mélange* of cultural and geographic references; 3. a synthesis of musical periods and temporalities. In the following, we analyze *Fallen Angels*, *In the Mood for Love* and *Happy Together* and discuss the use of music as indicators of narrative signs, cultural/geographic references and coalescence of musical genres and periods—all key components to the transcultural and transnational expressions of global culture. Music not only unveils the hypnotic quality of the

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<sup>11</sup> Virginia H. Milhouse, Molefi Kete Asante, Peter O. Nwosu, eds., *Transcultural Realities: Interdisciplinary Perspectives on Cross-cultural Relations* (Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications. 2001), ix.

<sup>12</sup> Germaine W Shames, *Transcultural Odysseys: the Evolving Global Consciousness* (Yarmouth: Intercultural Press, 1997).

Wong Kar-wai style, it also points to a new reading strategy in contemporary transcultural cinema.

### ***Fallen Angels and In the Mood for Love***

For a film to qualify as transcultural, it must offer materials from at least two levels. One is the cross-regional level, the overlapping cultural borders among various locales. Another level is the increasingly obscure boundaries between each locale and the rest of the world, namely the international, global communities. These two levels are juxtaposed and allowed to coalesce to create a transcultural soundscape. *Fallen Angels* and *In the Mood for Love* perform fluid crossings and juxtaposition between these levels in their uses of music. Within the cross-regional, they are transcultural because they feature music from different regional localities--Hong Kong, the Chinese mainland and Taiwan. In terms of the international, global context, these films can also be called transcultural because they incorporate a wide range of musical selections, covering different periods (from late 19th century to contemporary), genres (pop, trance, Latin music and Chinese operas), and countries (Japan, Taiwan, China, Hong Kong, US and UK).

### ***Fallen Angels***

*Fallen Angels* tells two intertwined stories of three “Angels” (lost souls) in Hong Kong. One of them is Ho Chi-woo (Takeshi Kaneshiro). He stopped talking after eating an expired can of pineapple at age five. One night Ho is the owner of a pork stand; another night, he forces a man and his whole family to finish a whole truck of ice cream. The daily ritual of breaking into different shops allows him to pretend like a normal person who not only owns a business, but also a work routine and identity that he cannot acquire otherwise. Ho’s father is a Hokkien-speaking immigrant who manages Chungking Mansions, a downtown commercial building known for budget lodging, ethnic food and cheap goods imported from Africa, the



Middle East and South Asia. One day Ho decides to stop being self-employed. He settles down with a Japanese restaurant operated by a Japanese expatriate, Sako. Sako makes a video of himself as a greeting to his son in Japan. Ho follows suit and videotapes his own father. Strangely, Ho's father suddenly dies after having been captured by his son's camera.

An old Taiwanese pop song "Missing you" (Simu de ren) occupies the soundtrack of the sequence where Ho Chi-woo videotapes his father. Like many sequences in the film, this one is composed of odd, canted angles with shaking camera movements. The camera movement corresponds to the body movement of the son shooting his embarrassed father, who constantly tries to shy away. As the son chases and corners the father in the cramped interiors of Chungking Mansions, "Missing you" helps localize the meaning of the sequence. Since the son does not speak to express his feelings, he uses a camcorder as a means to connect with his father. But the video alone is inadequate to fully express his emotion, so the extradiegetic song "Missing you" comes in to deliver the missing words. One might argue that such a device betrays a lack of confidence in the audience's ability to catch the scene's subtlety. However, we suggest the song is there to add value to the image, and render the scene more lively and fluid. As the visual track might not be sufficient to portray the delicacy of a nonverbal father-son relationship, the "Missing you" soundtrack enhances the meaning and thereby transforms an otherwise typical music video of jerky jump cuts and hand-held camera. As the scene appears, appeals, and signifies, music is there to create a rhythm, an aura, and a life. Paradoxically, when the father was 'preserved' by a video camera, he dies. In the scene where Ho repeatedly watches his father on a TV screen, the same music enters again to convey yearning for his father to come alive. The extradiegetic music is a crucial narrative agency that helps constitute an undertone of filial love.

The Hokkien song in the scene also carries an indexical meaning: the father's identity as an immigrant from Fujian province. Here we see the careful mapping of cross-regional and international difference through music in *Fallen Angels*. Three illustrations follow. First, Cantonese opera is heard as ambient sound in local tea restaurants where another Angel, a professional assassin Chan Chun-liang, executes his targets. Cantonese opera and food

specifies the regional and ethnic origin (traditional, local Hong Kong sites) of the hit. Next, Massive Attack's British trip-hot hit "Karmacoma" is the theme music for the assassin Angel, indicating the character's cultural ambiguity. On the one hand, he is 'cool,' as sung by the song's lyrics and hypnotic sounds, echoing his smooth operation around the city; on the other, he is 'transcultural,' given his character as a quasi-noir hero. Chan's job compels him to live as if he's an anonymous stranger in his city, like solitary protagonists in noir classics. This explains the oddity he feels in the scene where he is recognized by an old acquaintance, who addresses him by name. Similarly, in bar scenes where Chan receives his orders, the trip-hop motif repeats, indicating the international provenance of his environment and professional identity in contemporary popular culture.

Finally, inside the ethnically mixed Chungking Mansions we heard "Missing you," a regional, ethnic pop song. It was originally written by Hong Yifeng, a gifted Taiwanese singer-song writer specializing in Japanese colonial ballad *enka* (Japanese blues) circa late 1950s. The version used in the film is a dance remix released in 1994 by Chyi Chin, who replaced the song's Japanese (colonial) ballad flavor with the lingua franca of contemporary popular music. The contemporary remix has a wider, global appeal, closely binding image and sound, forming what Michel Chion calls "an audiovisual contract."<sup>13</sup> The remix allows entry into Wong Kar-wai's transcultural soundscape and helps form a memorable audiovisual orchestration of a Chinese father-son relationship. There are two sides to this. On the one hand, the meaning of the scene is incisively ethnic in its cross-regional emphasis on the contradictory, nonverbal expression of parental love. On the other, the scene also has transcultural significance in the way that the music is rearranged in a parlance familiar to audiences for global popular music. Cantonese opera, Massive Attack and Taiwanese pop compose a score of transcultural sounds; they are indicators of emotion and desire, cross-regional and global references and finally, an accommodation of music from different times and types.

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<sup>13</sup> Michel Chion, *Audio-Vision: Sound on Screen*, trans. Claudia Gorbman (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), xvii.

***In the Mood for Love***

Adapted from Hong Kong writer Liu Yichang's novella "Intersection" (Dui dao), *In the Mood for Love* centers on the love affair of two Hong Kong Chinese in the 1960s. Zhou Muyun (Tony Leung Chu-wai) and Su Lizhen (Maggie Cheung Man-yuk) move into their adjacent flats on the same day. For reasons unknown, Zhou's wife gets involved with Su's husband. The unfaithful couple tactfully make their relationship known to their spouses. Befuddled but afraid of confronting their spouses, Zhou and Su decide to re-enact the affair to take revenge. But once they begin their game, they discover they've fallen into their own trap. The social pressure and emotional turmoil they experience in keeping their own affair is beyond their strength. At the end Zhou and Su succumb to moral propriety and go their separate ways. Though *In the Mood for Love* is a nuanced melodrama about the struggle between desire and moral constraint, its cinematic meaning lies in its evocation of a period and its enigmatic appeal. The film's noteworthy costume, set design and orchestral music can all be attributed to a nostalgic representation of the 1960s Hong Kong.<sup>14</sup>

What kind of nostalgia? None of the landmark events of the 1960s is presented explicitly on the screen, save for an oblique reference to political turmoil, with emigration of Su's landlords to the US. Nostalgia, as Thomas Luk points out, is associated with "something more elusive and delicate that is no longer treasured in human interactions."<sup>15</sup> One may consign the elusive delicacy of *In the Mood for Love* to the extravagant visual style characterized by elaborate setting, intricate lighting, and the sumptuous display of *qipao* dresses. While nostalgia may reveal itself through style, there is an additional channel of nostalgia manifested through musical style. In analyzing the representation of history by means of music, Caryl Flinn first establishes the centrality of style: "memory and history do

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<sup>14</sup> Stephen Teo, *Wong Kar-Wai* (London: British Film Institute, 2005).

<sup>15</sup> Thomas Y. T. Luk, "Novels into Film: Liu Yichang's *Tete-Beche* and Wong Kar-wai's *In the Mood for Love*," in *Chinese-language Film: Historiography, Poetics, Politics*, ed. Sheldon H. Lu and Emilie Yueh-yu Yeh (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2005), 210-219.

not exist without a style.”<sup>16</sup> She then calls the use of music in the New German Cinema “strategies of remembrance” to qualify film’s exploration of historical memory.<sup>17</sup> Following Flynn’s suggestion, we argue it is music rather than image or *mise en scene* that works as the most important ‘strategy of remembrance’ in the film. Music discloses a transcultural dimension in Wong’s imaginary nostalgia for the old Hong Kong. This again comes down to the exploration of music’s discursive function and transcultural capacity.

The use of 1940s Mandarin pop is a case in point. Consider a sequence around 70 minutes into the film. A radio program is broadcasting “Full blossom” (Hua yang de nianhua), a request made by Su’s husband, who is away on a business trip. Meanwhile, the scene cuts to a silhouette of Su in the doorway and toying with a cup. With a deep-focus setup, we see steam coming from a pot in the distance background. The camera then slowly tracks leftward to show her lover Zhou in a similar setting next door. He is seen reading a book. In the background is a tiny kitchen stuffed with a white cabinet and black earthenware jars. Distracted, Zhou soon puts the book aside. The camera then moves rightward back to Su’s room. Leaning against the wall, she, too, seems to be drawn into a different world, completely unaware of the pot boiling away on the stove.

The long take is an alternative to crosscutting, and ties together narrative action in different locales within a simultaneous temporality. As camera slowly tracks back and forth to show the passing time, it seems to establish an emotional connection between the characters as if they’re engaging in tacit conversation. Yet without any verbal language lending explicit meaning to the *mise-en-scene*, the scene begs for understanding from spectators. “Full blossom,” a 1947 love song by singer-actress Zhou Xuan begins to play. “Full blossom” first appeared in *All-consuming love* (Chang xiang si, dir. He Zhaozhang, 1947), a sing-song romance in which the singer-actress Zhou played the lead. It describes a woman’s celebration of her flower-like youthful life. The song’s romantic lyrics suggest the

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<sup>16</sup> Caryl Flinn, *The New German Cinema: Music, History, and the Matter of Style* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004), 1.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

psychological state of the lovers and can be read as a musical discourse of loneliness and yearning. Though they are physically apart and are trapped in their own marriages, their thoughts meet in the imaginary, romantic space created by the music, a sublimated Eros transcending everyday routine.

Aside from this immediate narrative level, “Full blossom” also engages in a deeper level of meaning, to serve as an indicator of the time. Performed by China’s most celebrated singer and movie star of the 1930s and the 1940s, it functions as an aural bridge to colonial Shanghai. It at once idealizes a bygone period, a period of splendor and vitality, as incarnated by one of its legendary muses and conveyed in her sensual, delicate voice. This dedicated song is an epistle to old Shanghai, an expression of longing for an era once in “full blossom.” It is the historicity of Shanghai, filtered through homesick 1960s Hong Kong émigrés.

Shanghai (Wong Kar-wai’s birthplace) is not the only site through which *In the Mood for Love* manifests historical nostalgia. The film employs a transcultural musical repertoire to signify various Chinese diasporas, some of which remain rooted in Chinese ethnic music, some affiliated with international popular music. For instance, a famous Peking song called “The fourth son visits” (Silang tan mu) is inserted diegetically in a scene where Su comes across another neighbor. As one of most popular Beijing opera piece sung by legendary Tan Xinpei, whose performance was recorded in the first Chinese film *Dingjun Mountain* (1905), it reveals the neighbor’s identity as a mainland émigré in Hong Kong. Later when Zhou and Su dine at a comfortable Western restaurant, Nat King Cole’s “Aquellos Ojos Verdes” (Green eyes) and “Te Quiero Dijiste” (I love you, you said) fill the soundscape, suggesting the cosmopolitan character of 1960s Hong Kong. The music, together with the close-ups of steak, pork chop, ketchup sauce, forks, knives and the décor, presents the Occidental influence on Hong Kong’s middle class consumption. Conversely, when Zhou and his buddy Ah Bing eat at a food stall in Singapore, a Mandarin pop song called “The crescent moon shines over China” (Yue’er wanwan zhao jiuzhou) is featured as ambient sound. More than a musical accompaniment to their conversation, it points to the diffusion of Chinese culture in Southeast Asia. Like moonlight on the nine provinces of China (jiuzhou), Chinese vernacular

songs travel across national boundaries and shine on Singapore's most quotidian space. Transcultural sounds connect and bind dispersed geographies and distinct histories.

With a variety of historical raw materials from Shanghai, Beijing, Canton and Western music, a (failed) love affair of a bygone era salvages a temporal nostalgia that is vividly transcultural. The nostalgia is transcultural because it invokes a wide range of cultural/historical music to construct a nostalgic chronotope or time-space of the 1960s Hong Kong.<sup>18</sup> Hong Kong here is not so much a tangible site to recapture colonial remnants but a textual locus to transport imagination of a fluid, Chinese cultural treasury.<sup>19</sup> Remembering the past does not hinge on a single mythical origin, but unfolds along multiple trajectories and assumes an imagined cultural network stretching from Beijing, Shanghai, Hong Kong outward to Singapore, Cambodia and the US. Through music, the film produces a powerful sentiment, unequivocally transcultural and transhistorical.

### ***Happy Together***

*Happy Together* is Wong's statement on Hong Kong's 1997 handover of sovereignty to China. As the world's attention focused on this, the film answers in advance, the all-too-familiar question about Hong Kong. Thus *Happy Together* goes all the way to Buenos Aires and a place called "the end of the world," far from home and importunate British/American inquisition. Lai Yiu-fai (Tony Leung Chu-wai) and lover Ho Po-wing (Leslie Cheung) travel together to Buenos Aires but their journey does not bring a happy ending to their relationship. A Taiwanese man (Chang Chen), Lai's coworker at a Chinese restaurant, admires Lai. The entire film features no ethnic music to signal the identities of these characters. Instead, the music of *Happy Together* (entitled *Buenos Aires* in the Japanese market) signifies the locality and mobility of the Chinese gay men.

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<sup>18</sup> Mikhail Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*, trans. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist, ed. Michael Holquist (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981), 84.

<sup>19</sup> Hamid Naficy, *An Accented Cinema: Exilic and Diasporic Filmmaking* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 2001), 152.

Music in *Happy Together* is characterized by a broad range of styles, from *nuevo tango* by Astor Piazzolla to Frank Zappa's instrumental rock, from The Turtles' 1960s rock (covered by Danny Chung) to Brazilian ballad by Caetano Veloso. Among them we should first pay attention to tango because it plays a pivotal role in diegetic definition. *Happy Together* features two tango pieces, "Tango Apasionado," and "Milonga for 3" by the Argentinean musician Astor Piazzolla. As well, we hear three pieces of live tango music by anonymous local bands. They appear sixteen times in the film and highlight the locality of place. For example, "Tango Apasionado," heard five times on the soundtrack, is exclusively used in the on-and-off relationship between Lai Yiu-fai and Ho Po-wing. Apart from this, it also plays extra-diegetically over exterior views of Buenos Aires's cityscape, including a long shot of a desolate winter street and a fast-motion extreme long shot of the city's bustling central square.

The music, played by tango's essential instrument, the *bandoneon*, adds a strong indigenous flavor to the scene. Wong Kar-wai once stated in an interview that he employed Astor Piazzolla's music because it captures the rhythm of Buenos Aires. Considering tango (*Tanguero*), originated from poor suburbs of Buenos Aires, it has long been seen as the city's trademark, representing the city's identity. But a more telling factor may be related to the transcultural quality of Piazzolla's music. Compared to local tango, Piazzolla's arrangement is far from indigenous because it is built on a hybridized form comprised of elements taken from classical music and jazz. Wong's use of Piazzolla's music, then, is not only intuitive but also strategic.

Astor Piazzolla (1921-1992) is considered an *Argentinean* musician, though his records never circulated widely in Argentina. He is best known for introducing classical music and jazz to tango. Piazzolla was an artist living in-between. Born in 1921 in Buenos Aires, he moved to New York with his family at the age of two. Fourteen years later, he returned to Buenos Aires and did his apprenticeship as a player and arranger for local tango orchestras. The New York upbringing might have laid the roots for his experimental, synthetic style while his return to Argentina enriches his work with a decisive, indigenous

vitality. Considering the ‘glocal’ quality of Piazzolla’s music, Wong’s choice added a distinct “local color” to the film while also maintaining its hip, transcultural appeal.<sup>20</sup>

If a city (Buenos Aires) is defined by a specific local music (tango), how does it sound to its sojourners? Note the absence of Chinese ethnic music; the nationality of protagonists out of Asia is not strongly marked.<sup>21</sup> Here Wong rejects the hackneyed musical signposting widely used in Chinese-language film. Instead of the typical formula with Chinese pop heavy-handedly forging notions of cultural (be)longing as heard in Peter Chan’s *Comrades: Almost A Love Story* (1996), Wong uses a different source to create an intriguing audiovisual contract between music and the urban nomad of displaced Chinese gay men.

“I Have Been in You,” (1979) a song by Frank Zappa is heard extra-diegetically in Lai’s cruising sequence. The sequence begins with a fast-motion long shot on Buenos Aires’s landmark, the Obelisk, and cuts to a flurry of hand-held shots showing Lai’s presence in a number of gay spots. We see him comfortably chatting up local men. At one point, Lai even stares back at the camera, increasing the self-reflexivity of the social scene. Adapted from Peter Frampton’s “I’m in You” (1977), Zappa’s rendition suggests the animalistic intimacy of two entwined lovers. Here it performs a discursive role, signaling Lai’s growing entrenchment within the Argentine locales. When Lai roams around various sites searching for sexual contact, the song outlines a sense of familiarity and belonging of which he is otherwise deprived.<sup>22</sup> In this regard, the musical sequence can be seen as a re-definition of identity. If personal identity, and the sense of belonging, must be attached to a particular locale, this new audiovisual contract shows that identity is a social construction resulting from diasporic negotiations with shifting surroundings. The meaning of this malleable, mobile identity is not to be dictated by citizenship, ethnicity or heterosexual norms.

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<sup>20</sup> Natalio Gorin, *Astor Piazzolla: a Memoir*, trans. Fernando Gonzalez (Portland: Amadeus Press, 2001).

<sup>21</sup> Sheldon Hsiao-peng Lu, “Filming Diaspora and Identity: Hong Kong and 1997,” in *Cinema of Hong Kong: History, Arts, Identity*, ed. Poshek Fu and David Desser (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 281-282.

<sup>22</sup> Marc Siegel, “The Intimate Spaces of Wong Kar-wai,” in *At Full Speed: Hong Kong Cinema in a Borderless World*, ed. Esther C. M. Yau (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2001), 277-294.



*Happy Together* can also be read as Wong Kar-wai's take on the postcolonial. The world seems smaller, familiar and yet still as strange and wide as ever. Nowhere can be as alien and intimate as home, even Buenos Aires. With the locations of the three Chinese men, Hong Kong locality shifts to that of a former Spanish colony. After a full circle, Lai Yiu-fai travels to Taipei, sightseeing at a night market and samples the city's newly installed mass transit rail. This recalls the standard Wong Kar-wai ending: will he settle down with a Taipei partner, or is he ready to take off, and begin another journey? Where there is diaspora, there too is the portable and provisional global.

## Conclusion

In Hong Kong, human movement is often subject to the flow of mass transportation. Transporting human bodies is one concrete expression of modern humanity, but how to transport less concrete human conditions such as emotion and feeling? How was love, anxiety, libido, and alienation transmitted and transported, exchanged and enriched as Hong Kong approached its "expiration" day in 1997?

Diaspora is a fascinating theme to Wong Kar-wai. Wong made up his stories by centering on such motifs as "leaving," "arriving," "moving ahead," and "waiting." These motifs constitute mobility in the most practical and mundane sense. Every time the character leaves a place, he also embarks on a new journey to a new place, for a new relationship. These stories of (be)longing and (re)searching--recurrent motifs in diaspora narratives-- make Wong Kar-wai's films transcultural. In *Days of Being Wild*, *Fallen Angels*, *Happy Together* and *In the Mood for Love* all the characters must move on to a different place, country or culture to leave their failing relationships behind. Similarly, in the martial arts film *Ashes of Time* and the science fiction romance *2046*, there is a wide, interwoven world marked by a number of couples who are either unable to love, or prefer waiting than accept substitutes. Exile becomes a way of existing and a metaphor for submission to the governing laws of life. As time washes away their youth and buries their beauty, they are left with memories, nostalgia, and voiceover monologue, which indicates a provisional, sometimes deceptive

subjectivity. Wong Kar-wai privileges interior voices and musical accompaniment to external events.

With *Fallen Angels*, *In the Mood for Love* and *Happy Together*, diasporic themes are pronounced in the choice of music. Suppose transcultural cinema is the correct concept to discuss Wong's films, then these three films provide absorbing illustrations. Regional and cultural markers of people and locality are clearly signposted in the narrative. Cultural and geographical displacement is also carefully noted in the musical sounds. Lastly, the emphasis on music shows Wong's alliance with current trends of global communication and culture. This, in turn, makes Wong an attractive object for multinational corporations seeking media exposure in new, international markets. *My Blueberry Nights*, Wong's first English-language film, shows a handsome payoff in the extension of transcultural practice within shifting geographies of marketplace, culture and desire.

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