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ESSAY

The Grandmaster: Socio-Political Plurality in Contemporary Hong Kong

Tom Cunliffe

In the era of twenty-first century Hong Kong-mainland China co-productions, there have been several cops-and-robbers movies featuring politicized images of a Hong Konger kneeling down before a mainland cop, including *Lady Cop and Papa Crook* (Felix Chong, Alan Mak, 2008) and *Drug War* (Johnnie To, 2012). In the local production *Election 2* (Johnnie To, 2006), a shadowy mainland Chinese security chief official towers over a Hong Konger. These images suggest the possibility of conciliation between Hong Kong and mainland China to be a pipe-dream and visualizes the vertical hegemonic relationship between China and Hong Kong. In *Lady Cop and Papa Crook*, a mainland cop pointing a gun at the Cantonese-speaking Hong Konger barks out, “Ten years after the handover and you still don’t understand *Putonghua* [Mandarin language]?” This reflects the Chinese Communist Party’s (CCP) dislike of Cantonese, since it dislodges the national China imaginary, and also considers the increasing emphasis on *Putonghua* over Cantonese at Hong Kong schools and the attending concerns over local Hong Kong culture and identity waning. In *Drug War*, a Hong Kong gangster on his knees begs a mainland cop not to be given the death penalty. Yiu-Wai Chu points out that the relatively independent and impartial legal system has become the “pride of Hong Kong”¹ but *Drug War* ends with the state execution of a Hong Kong drug dealer, graphically depicted to the extent that it reveals that Hong Kong’s political autonomy and civil liberties are in danger of being compromised by the hegemonic power of China. The climax of *Election 2* contains what is perhaps the strongest political statement in a post-1997 film about the Hong Kong-China relationship. On top of an apocalyptically dark

mountain, a mainland Chinese security chief condemns Louis Koo's character, recently chaired triad chief, to lifelong servitude to a new triad system, ruled by China. The security chief spouts, "Your help will make Hong Kong a safer place" and "Hong Kong can only prosper" under this new Chinese rule, receiving a blow from Louis Koo's character after each of these typical pro-Beijing slogans. By the end, however, resistance has crumbled as Louis Koo's character collapses on the ground and the security chief standing above him thanks him for his cooperation. As Stephen Ching-kiu Chan points out, in the postcolonial conditions of Hong Kong, resistance is a space that forms in an estranging context where historically leftover "universal" concepts and values like democracy, social justice, and human rights are sought after by previously colonized locals but are not accepted by those close to power in pro-Beijing circles for fear of destabilizing "prosperity" and "stability."² This ideological minefield is exactly what is being negotiated around in the scenes described above.

Unlike the more overt examples of resistance above, I argue that Wong Kar-wai's *The Grandmaster* (2013) fits into a growing number of Hong Kong-mainland China co-productions that appear to be complicit with the current Chinese state national discourse yet curiously share similar sentiments to those that spurred on recent protests in Hong Kong, including against compulsory national education and for true universal suffrage. These films have appeared from Hong Kong filmmakers self-consciously aware of their own politics in response to the increasingly encroaching political culture of mainland China in Hong Kong, whose autonomy was supposed to remain largely unchanged for fifty years after 1997 under the "One Country, Two Systems" formula. Hong Kong's core values, including a free press, freedom of speech, and transparent law system, are gradually eroding. These films resist being "mainlandized" because they are directly tackling issues related to Hong Kong itself becoming "mainlandized." In different ways, they suggest there is not just *one* way to see things (Beijing's) but different possible constellations in a constantly changing environment and world, offering a pluralistic conception of China rather than the (failed) national imagination of a unified China.

For example, scholar Yang Yuanying has illustrated how *Bodyguards and Assassins* (Teddy Chan, 2008) was calculated to touch mainland audience sensitivities but ultimately, due to the way the common Hong Kongers who die to save Sun Yat-sen are depicted as doing so for their own undefined reasons rather than for revolutionary reasons, the themes of nationalism and revolution to save-the-nation that the film wants to fully affirm are vague and weak. Thus, *Bodyguards* exposes the problem that Hong Kong identity is not compatible with national survival or nation building, Yang's implication being that Hong Kong does not fully fit as part of a unified national China.³ In *The Taking of Tiger Mountain* (2014), Tsui Hark adapts a classic communist text that became the source

material for one of only eight model operas allowed to play during the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976). This makes Tsui's film outwardly appear to adhere to Chinese propaganda filmmaking, but Tsui takes this opportunity to address the socio-political implications of the CCP's form of constructed history through the contemporary opening/closing structure of the story set in 1946 that features CCP rhetoric of "saving the nation." This structure challenges the authenticity of the CCP's triumphant historical narrative and reveals the constructed nature of it by making it clear we are watching fabricated history. This negotiates ideological tensions between Hong Kong and mainland China in regards to constructed history within nationalist education. In doing this, the film fails to support the collective Chinese national identity that mainland state propaganda films aim to enforce. Tsui also finds ways to subvert the standard historical narrative tropes of Chinese history and creates a dazzlingly violent, ideologically indeterminate world that undermines official CCP historiography.

While the latter two films construct Chinese nationalism and history from a Hong Kong perspective through the funnel of the historical film, director Wong Kar-wai selected the martial arts genre and re-worked the biography of the famous martial artist Ip Man to peer back into Chinese history and generate political allegory. Through the funnel of Chinese martial arts and the attendant philosophies, *The Grandmaster* explores and debates differing modes of leadership and ideas related to the transmission of tradition within martial arts circles that become a metaphor for the political arena at large. This exploration links to a more pluralistic vision of the idea of nationalism and ways of life in "China" today based on the values of the traditional Chinese culture of Chinese martial arts, reflecting contemporary calls for cultural and political plurality and representative democracy in Hong Kong. This focus places an equal amount of importance on dialogue and action. The dialogue deals with these values allegorically and is often spoken in hazily perceived puzzles, for the audience to dwell on and work out the meaning themselves. This gives the film a poetic quality, enhanced by the exquisitely atmospheric visuals. I will demonstrate that the film's discourse is not against there being a unified China but that floating toward the surface is an argument from the Hong Kong perspective of Wong Kar-wai for the necessity of socio-political and cultural plurality in Chinese society, as opposed to the all-encompassing national discourse currently promulgated by Beijing. It argues for opportunities and chances for multiple (young) voices rather than just one (old one) in leadership, and finally, for a need to transcend the national boundary altogether to encompass humanity. This subtly conceived argument permeates the film and hinges on the idea that inheritance and transmission of these past sociocultural values applied progressively today is crucial in the current climate.

The strong bonds historically connecting Hong Kong with China are shown

around halfway into the film by several martial arts masters from the mainland, including Ip Man (Tony Leung), fleeing to Hong Kong. This represents the large-scale immigrant rush into Hong Kong from 1949 to 1950, when many mainlanders began to help build Hong Kong. Yet, as symbolized by Ip's arrival in Hong Kong, where a screen caption tells us it is 1950, many were escaping the communist regime. While never mentioned directly in the film, for obvious reasons, the CCP took power in 1949, and so Ip's reasons for leaving the mainland here are fairly clear. The audience is being asked to think through the history of "China," while resting the film's foundations in the different socio-political and historical formations that separate Hong Kong and China. Wong Kar-wai highlights this focus on and relevance of Hong Kong to the film when he says that some of his films are about Hong Kong in the 1960s and the Second Generation of immigrants from the mainland. He wanted to know more about where they came from, and so in *The Grandmaster*, "we went to the early days, of the Republic (1912–1949). . . . When you look at the film, you see a lot of people end up in Hong Kong *for different reasons*. That's how Hong Kong has become [what it is] today"⁴ (my emphasis).

Existing scholarship tends to see this film as both pandering to a nationalist sentiment and as showing the amalgamation between politics and commerce in the Hong Kong-mainland China co-production model. For instance, Paul Bowman quotes Rey Chow as reflecting in 1995 that "the very Chinese filmmakers and intellectuals who might most easily be viewed as critical or oppositional are in fact complicit with official Chinese state discourse."⁵ Chow states that this is due to what Hungarian poet Miklós Haraszti calls "the Velvet Prison," which refers to the way a post-communist state assimilates the individual and silently directs the artist to self-censor and produce work conducive to soft power. Still a prison, but a far more comfortable one. Bowman then states that an ambiguous (nationalistic) form of this complicity arose in Hong Kong film especially after 1997, in response to Hong Kong's new relationship with China. He argues that this happens through an ideological re-appropriation of Bruce Lee, through Lee's teacher, Ip Man, and through Chen Zhen, the fantasy Chinese nationalist played by Lee in *Fist of Fury* (Lo Wei, 1972), these characters appearing in many recent films. Bowman then generalizes a little by saying these characters are "always not only a mainlander but a Chinese subject and a fervent patriot."⁶ This may be true in varying degrees with the plainly more nationalistic films Donnie Yen starred in as both these characters, such as *Ip Man* (Wilson Yip, 2008) and *Ip Man 2* (Wilson Yip, 2010), which both construct a form of Chinese nationalism against colonization. It is against Japanese colonizers in the former, where Ip has a series of fights with ruthless Japanese villains, and British colonizers in the latter, where he fights an arrogant British boxer. Bowman, however, only mentions Herman

Yau's *Ip Man: The Final Fight* (2013) in passing. This film is set against a backdrop of labor disputes, colonial repression, and police corruption in 1950s–1960s Hong Kong. However, its loving depiction of Hong Kong fits it into a series of post-1997 (nostalgia) films that Gary Wong describes as showing how, because of different governance and economic opportunities, the “colonial era is better than the post-Handover period, [while] not blindly glorify[ing] colonization without reservation.” These films construct a cultural identity coming from the colonial era that “continues to complicate the identity debate in Hong Kong . . . by demonstrating the discontinuity between Hong Kong and China.”⁷ Ip in *The Final Fight* is depicted as humbleness personified, and has assimilated into Hong Kong life. He is far from a “fervent patriot.” In *The Grandmaster*, Ip suffers greatly during the Japanese invasion of China for not collaborating but does not fight back against the Japanese. As Vivian P. Y. Lee points out, Ip throughout the film is portrayed not as a super-hero type grandmaster who upholds justice but more as an average man navigating his way through the social and political convulsions of history, albeit with extraordinary martial arts skills.⁸ This approach highlights minor histories of ordinary people during historical turbulence, which makes history human. The film spends very little time on Ip Man's experience during the Sino-Japanese War (1937–1945) compared to the majority of the film that stays in the pre-1937 Republican era or in post-1949 Hong Kong, which is another way the film avoids the typical propaganda tactics of constructing nationalism and patriotism through depictions of fighting against the Japanese. As mentioned above, Ip enters Hong Kong in 1950. Bowman's essentialist definition of Chinese nationalism makes all these films give in to a nationalist (CCP) discourse, yet he does not question whether every Hong Kong filmmaker would necessarily agree with this. He concludes by stating that *The Grandmaster's* world, while seemingly subversive, “is also arguably quite comfortably contained within the velvet prison.”⁹ Gary Bettinson argues in a similar vein, while leaving the door open for potentially different readings: “*The Grandmaster* evokes contemporary CCP rhetoric toward a unified nation state . . . [albeit in a way that should not] be seen as an avatar of conservative CCP propaganda.”¹⁰

I see *The Grandmaster* as actively looking for alternatives to the current essentialist national discourse directed under the CCP, which would allow China to better fulfill its modernity project, especially in terms of democratic reform. By looking back to analyze specific aspects of traditional Chinese culture's values and their potential applicability today, it implicitly states dissatisfaction with the current CCP-led national China imaginary. These values and spirit conveyed and discussed in the film come from martial arts circles in the Republican Era (1912–1949), before the CCP took power. The film also demonstrates how Hong Kong's system allowed these various Chinese forms of martial arts and attendant

values to be transferred to, and blossom in, the city and later around the world, during tumultuous times in the mainland, subtly suggesting that it would be beneficial for China if Hong Kong's more open and tolerant system travelled north.

The political dimension in the film is cloaked in allusion and allegory, most probably due to a mix of SAPPRFT (State Administration of Press, Publication, Radio, Film and Television) censorship requirements and Wong's contention that "the so-called *jianghu* and *wulin* (martial arts circles/society) were a type of court (made up of highly skilled martial artists) who did have connections to politics but, as a whole (different styles from different regions), kept a distance (from politics)."¹¹ Wong depicts Ip as a character staying outside of politics but whose major life events are shaped by them, an innovative way of side-stepping fervent nationalism. The world of the *jianghu* has long offered a space of resistance against arbitrary power to writers and filmmakers. It is a marginalized cultural space where "an alternative socio-political system" exists in which martial artists, outlaws, knight-errants, and other characters roam around with their own idealistic senses of loyalty and justice.¹² It is utilized in *The Grandmaster* in the way it is a liminal space separated from the established political order, and so within it socio-political activism can take place allegorically. Wong Kar-wai looks back in time to the Republic of China era (1912–1949) to, in part, see how this past connects to what Hong Kong has become today. The *jianghu* becomes almost like a metaphor for the political arena, and as a space within which can be carved ideas to an alternative to the chaos of the politics of the outside world.

Ideas around the nature of the North-South divide that the film evokes strengthen its relevance to the contemporary situation between China and Hong Kong. The geographical divide in martial arts disciplines reflects the disharmonious nature of "China." Gong Yutian (Wang Qingxiang), the Grandmaster of the North, is due to retire, and while his top pupil Ma San (Zhang Jin) will succeed him in the North, Gong wants to offer the best Southern fighter a chance to take the southern Grandmaster title. Ip is selected to represent the South. Gong says he had hoped to take the southern styles north, but sadly his time has run out. He embodies a desire to unify China into one whole but has failed to do so. This suggests his ideal of "unification" between North and South (styles) is an unattainable ambition.

Though an insular vision, Gong's thoughts on transmission and relinquishing power are related to the current political impasse in Hong Kong. His daughter Gong Er (Zhang Ziyi) tries to dissuade her father from fighting Ip. Gong replies, "If the old never let go, when will the young get their chance? Not to see the good in others, not to admit their talent, is to lack generosity." In another scene set in a fiery flame-lit dungeon-like space that glows golden from the flickering flames of a wooden log fire upon which a snake stew is cooking, Gong and his martial brother



Figure 1. Master Gong and his martial brother discuss ideas on leadership of the martial arts schools within the context of the political upheavals of China, in a flame-lit dungeon that visually represents the *jianghu*.

(Zhao Benshan) hold a discussion on Gong's upcoming challenge against Ip. They talk in metaphors as Gong's brother elaborates on the necessity of the fire to be at the right temperature for the stew, before telling Gong to leave. Gong replies that he will wait before leaving until the fire can take the wooden log he is holding. The image accompanying this line of dialogue is a close-up of the wooden log he is holding in front of the crackling golden fire. The camera cuts to close-ups of the two faces, sometimes separate, sometimes together, which are lit up by the golden glow of the flames in the shadowy dark room. At times they sit behind the flames that envelop and create golden splurges of light across the screen.

Referring to the ongoing political crisis then happening in China, Gong's brother says, "The South may secede. It's no time for diplomacy. We're getting old. Don't risk your reputation. Ip is more than he appears. Force it, and things could go wrong." The camera here captures both men in a close-up, the brother in focus as he talks on the left and slightly behind Gong, Gong himself out of focus. As Gong replies, the camera re-focuses on Gong and his brother blurs out of focus. This technique, which Wong has used since at least his second film *Days of Being Wild* (1990), creates an intimate yet broken connection between the two. When each speaks the other is out of focus, speaking to their differing views that seemingly cannot be bridged. Gong, now in focus, replies that he is creating opportunity by giving Ip a chance because "this fire today needs new wood." The message here is that the order must change from time to time, and leadership should be relinquished to the more able party in a fair fight, to enable growth, new ideas, and prevent a monopoly on power. This power is magnificently represented by the golden, yet potentially deadly, flames of the fire that dominate this space and endow this scene with an atmospheric potency. Ip's different martial arts style

becomes a metaphor for a different (political) party, his Southern origins, and later exile to Hong Kong, strengthening its contemporary relevance. The entire scene has a mythical aura created by the crackling sound of the fire and the golden light flickering against the darkness. This space also visually represents the *jianghu*, as do other spaces, like the luxurious Foshan brothel where the martial arts masters gather to debate and hold tournaments. Gong's brother's words here show how what is happening in the *jianghu* relates to the wider political events taking place outside as Southern China is attempting to secede. In the scene previous to this, there is a radio broadcast that states that the Southern armies have started to march North, claiming autonomy. While the Central Army has blocked their advance, the situation is explosive. In this context, Gong's brother fails to understand Gong's desire to give the Southern Ip a chance.

Suzanne Pepper points out that in 1987, Deng Xiaoping's views on democracy were wedded to the CCP's system, putting the democracy movement at a disadvantage from the beginning. She quotes Deng as saying that Hong Kong people would need to administer Hong Kong affairs, "but it wouldn't do for them to be elected by a general ballot because such people should be 'patriotic' and patriotic candidates would not be the guaranteed winners of open free-style elections in Hong Kong."¹³ The CCP today are content to keep their enclosed fire blazing, and the youth of Hong Kong who inherit the democracy movement from their elders will in no sense have a fair fight on their hands. As Edmund W. Cheng points out, this is especially so when an increasing political consciousness and collective participation, that is generally viewed as leading the way toward democracy, has, paradoxically in Hong Kong, led to "a growing polarization between the state and civil society and within civil society."¹⁴

"Decolonization" can only be a contested term with regards to Hong Kong since the standard process of acquiring political and economic independence from the former colonizer did not happen; rather, Hong Kong was returned to the PRC under the "One Country, Two Systems" formula that was decided in 1984 when the Sino-British Joint Declaration was signed. Along with this, democratic reforms began to be introduced by the colonial regime. The Hong Kong Bill of Rights (1991) was included in the legal system to protect human rights, and, along with the rule of law, these have ensured the protection of civil liberties and the freedom of speech and assembly in Hong Kong. A scene in *The Final Night of the Royal Hong Kong Police Part 2* (Lau Shing-Hon, 2002), set on the eve of the handover of Hong Kong back to China, attests to the desire that Hong Kong has in maintaining its own identity formed by the rights and freedoms that distinguish local Hong Kong. The scene, based on real events, dramatizes Hong Kongers mobilizing and chanting, "Patriotism is no crime, massacre is a crime. Rehabilitate the 1989 democracy movement! Account for the massacre. Fight for Democracy.

Release Wei Jingsheng . . . end one-party dictatorship . . . down with the selection committee, general election for the legislature!” These fears and anxieties relating to the 1997 handover are now reigniting in reality, as the mainland political system appears to be exerting increasing amounts of pressure on Hong Kong. The line, “end one-party dictatorship,” particularly hits at the heart of the struggle to come to terms with how the transfer of sovereignty will affect Hong Kong via China’s political system.

The July 1, 2003, demonstrations (half a million people took to the streets) to block Article 23 also shows this resistance. If it had passed, this national security bill would have prohibited treason, subversion, secession, and sedition, such as intending to overthrow or intimidate the CCP government. This clearly would have had a large impact on freedom of speech and Hong Kongers’ civil rights, and would have allowed the political will of the CCP to roam freely to crackdown on anything it saw as a political threat. On May 27, 2017, the National People’s Congress Chairman Zhang Dejiang called on Hong Kong to enact this controversial national security legislation in the run up to the twentieth anniversary of Hong Kong’s handover from Britain. Zhang mentioned the ways the central government would proceed toward consolidating its power over Hong Kong, “Including the pace of political reform, Beijing’s power over the city’s chief executive and its ability to appoint and dismiss key officials.”¹⁵ On the same day, Chief Executive-elect Carrie Lam reiterated her election manifesto stance that legislating Article 23 was a constitutional obligation, but “past experience tells us that the subject is highly controversial and could easily cause social disturbance.”¹⁶ Due to the inherently unjust way the democratic system works in Hong Kong, whereby thirty of the seventy seats of the Legislative Council are not democratically elected but rather are chosen by predominantly pro-Beijing trade or interest groups, Edmund W. Cheng points out that organized protest in Hong Kong is a vibrant and popular conduit through which activists and politicians can put pressure on the ruling regime, and is a necessary appendage to the sphere of conventional politics that increasingly fails to defend citizens’ existing rights and freedoms. This “effectively combines street politics with electoral politics and extends the realm of contention towards normalization.”¹⁷ Naturally the major figures in the governing regime do not accept this normalization. Similar to Pepper’s description of Deng Xiaoping above, the Central People’s Government “continues to perceive protests as signs of disloyalty, inferring that the “people’s hearts and minds have not returned” (renxin wei huigui 人心未回歸).”¹⁸ It remains to be seen if *The Grandmaster’s* thesis of extending “the realm of (socio-political) contention to normalization” by looking into the past to seek alternatives to the current regime will come to fruition or not.

Returning to the film, a key political allegory occurs in a dance-like fight sequence that will decide whether Ip becomes Southern Grandmaster, in which



Figure 2. Ip Man questions Gong's limiting vision of placing boundaries around the nation and takes a universal outlook in his philosophical fight to become Southern Grandmaster, a figure of plurality.

Ip questions Gong's parochial conception of nationalism. Gong suggests to Ip they have a battle of wits rather than of fists. He quotes a southerner he once fought who asked him: "If kung fu divides into north and south, must the country divide as well?" Asking this question, Gong challenges Ip to break the cookie in his hand. The most intellectual fight of the film leisurely erupts, as Gong and Ip begin a dance-like duel. The camera circles around them as they twirl around each other. No punches or kicks are thrown, and instead, it becomes a battle of two minds, visualized in the swirling symphony of movement. Upon conclusion, Ip says, "The world is a big place. Why limit it to north and south? It holds you back. To you this cookie is the country. To me, it's much more. Break from what you know, and you will know more. If the southern arts go far, what boundary is the north?" Explicitly this questions what the exact values of southern (martial) arts are, and if they are indeed an expression of local identity. One can also read the "southern arts" as here equating to Hong Kong (cinema). Hong Kong (cinema) has previously found success worldwide, and the city's core values are "universal," thus this boundary, constructed by something like "mainlandization" coming from the north, is limiting. Here, Ip and the film take a universal outlook, arguing the nation can be strong within a system and values outside of the CCP's nationalist discourse that is currently eroding Hong Kong's core (universal) values. Implicitly, it speaks of dislocation, not just among the Chinese diaspora living away from the "motherland" but also the increasingly transitory world in general, of which Hong Kong was in some ways an early representative. The transitory, fragmented nature of life many people experience today is a global phenomenon, which Ip's response knowingly alludes to. "Nation" becomes an abstract idea once the world opens up. Certainly attachments to "homeland" remain in some form or other.

But to construct a national character today becomes harder. In this sense, the swirling movement of camera and bodies around the cookie, representing either China or the world, expresses the increasingly elusive boundary between self and nation. Upon gracefully accepting defeat, Gong acknowledges the limits of his own vision, which he foresees before the fight begins. Before the fight, Gong Er asks her father why he brought her from the North-East of China to the Golden Pavilion brothel in Southern Foshan where the fight takes place. He replies: “I asked you to come to the South . . . to let you see how I step down.”

At the film’s core lies a tension between “looking back” and the necessity to move on with the times. Hong Kong itself is the hidden subject this tension negotiates around. The “One Country, Two Systems” framework was supposed to keep Hong Kong’s way of life and culture largely *unchanged* for fifty years. Yet how can a culture be embalmed in such a way as to stay the same in a constantly and rapidly changing environment and world? It would be like mummifying certain aspects of society. However, Wong insists on the need to look back at the vitality of Hong Kong’s past, for the purpose of transmitting some of that into the present and future.

For instance, Master Gong tells his top disciple Ma San that the key to his supreme move is to look back in reflection. “Not the upward move, but the turning back.” Ma is the character in the film who most exploits the martial arts for his own personal and political gain, and to satisfy his lust for power. He has become a Japanese collaborator by this time and replies, “A warrior moulds himself to the times. What if I can’t look back?” Gong’s response carries a heavy meaning in the present day: “Never put yourself first; to yield is not to lose,” before Ma kills Gong. Ma, a puppet for the Japanese, is like those present-day Hong Kong politicians whose sycophantic behaviour towards Beijing is currently precipitating the erosion of Hong Kong’s core values. They are simply “moulding themselves to the times” for political and economic gain. Later, Gong Er defeats Ma in a stunning fight sequence between the two set in front of a never-ending moving train. As he lies dying, he tells her that her father told him the secret to his ultimate move was to look back, and Ma adds, “At the time I thought he just couldn’t keep up with the times.” Ma realizes, too late, that his selfish, power-hungry actions are detrimental to progression.

We see this key thesis of the film—absorbing the strength of the past to utilize it in the present—visually in a few brief documentary shots of 1950s Hong Kong when Ip arrives. Beautiful trams bathed in golden light, differing architecture, and a bustling sense of life in a cosmopolitan city stand in sharp contrast to the cold, muted atmosphere of the mainland these shots precede. Hong Kong cinema has long had trouble in constructing any type of national narrative of its own, due to Hong Kong’s contested history of residing somewhere in-between two different



Figure 3. Wong Kar-wai's romanticism makes the duel and first meeting between Gong Er and Ip Man become "love at first fight."

sovereign forces and never having political autonomy of its own. Kwai-cheung Lo suggests that history in Hong Kong cinema "can only be represented in terms of constructed identities, not of pure national identity."¹⁹ This may be why Kwai-cheung Lo elsewhere suggests that the way the characters in Wong's *2046* (2004) "are transfixed by a 'future' that resists any ultimate signification" could open up interesting political readings.²⁰ Yet, these documentary images of 1950s Hong Kong, set against the fictional representations of the mainland, if only briefly, point towards a shared local history bound up with a local subjectivity, which rest(ed) outside of the nation-building project underway in mainland China.

The dangers of wallowing in the past for too long, however, and refusing to look forward and create change, is elegiacally visualized in a sequence where Gong Er, having defeated her father's killer, seems to have given up on the present. In order to fight Ma and reclaim her father's art and name, she had to vow never to marry, have children, or teach her father's art. She symbolizes a stubborn stasis, unwilling to move on. Her subtly depicted relationship with Ip, of gestures and unfulfilled love, links *The Grandmaster* to the feelings of shared regret and sorrows that throb beneath the surface of Wong Kar-wai's previous films. After a romantically inclined fight between the pair that she impetuously initiates after her father's defeat, the two are drawn to each other and communicate via poetry precipitated by the feelings that developed between them during their duel.

Yet the chaotic historical period keeps them apart until they meet again in Hong Kong over a decade later. In their final meeting in Hong Kong, she tells Ip that she cared for him and the strong feelings between the two rush to the surface through their gestures and words to each other. But Gong Er's manner suggests she has already given up on life, and she says she has forgotten the 64 Hands style taught to her by her father. She tells Ip: "We have a saying in the North: A



Figure 4. This image of a beaming Gong Er in her opium-induced recollections of her happiest times encapsulates the way she is unable to move forward.

tiger never quits the mountain. These past few years we've been living on foreign soil. I'm so very tired. I want to go home." Ip's life too has changed in becoming a humble teacher, but he seems more willing to adapt to life in Hong Kong in order to disseminate and spread the martial arts around the world. Ip tells Gong Er something her father once told him about never giving up the faith and keeping the light (of martial arts) burning and adds: "I hope that one day, I'll see the 64 Hands once more." At this, a tear runs down Gong Er's cheek as she looks down. This moment encapsulates all that she has lost, from her father and the 64 Hands style and values behind it that her father taught her to the time gone by without Ip. And she highlights that "living on foreign soil," here meaning Hong Kong, has worn her out. It is one of those moments in Wong's cinema that somehow ties together a yearning for a home that perhaps no longer exists with irrevocably doomed love. This links to the divide between North (China) and South (Hong Kong), and touches on the complicated relationship between colonialism and nationalism during this period of Hong Kong history. While Hong Kong feels alien to Gong Er, she is also there due to the historical and political upheavals then happening in the mainland. Right at the end of the film, there is a caption that tells us Ip Man got his Hong Kong ID in 1953, after the border to China was shut.

In the final sequence with Gong Er, the screen clouds over as she enters an opium-induced fever alone in her room, and a cut transports us to images of soft snow, where a much younger Gong Er in the past is practicing her 64 Hands style of martial arts in a fairytale-like white snowy forest in the North-East of China, a world away from the dark streets of Hong Kong that fill the film. This could either be a dream, a memory, or her imagination, most likely a mix of all three. Her style is so powerful that when she sweeps her hand to the right, the camera gently whooshes in the same direction. We hear a monologue over these

delicate images: “A great era offers a choice. Stay or move on. I choose to remain in my era, the time when I was happiest” (a beaming smile on her face), before a sudden cut to white text on a black screen informs us Gong Er died in 1953, in Hong Kong. The lush visuals suggest the ease of slipping into a past reverie and the irretrievable loss of that precious time for her. But her death, coming instantly after these images, makes clear the impossibility of remaining in a past era in a constantly changing world. To stay mired in some past golden-age thus leads to (its) death. To artificially preserve a culture leads to its death. But to draw from and transmit positive aspects of culture and tradition and their attached values, and apply them to the present day, could lead to something potentially positive and transformative.

It is worth briefly recounting one recent case in which Hong Kong’s autonomy is being threatened and how the response to it is linked with *The Grandmaster’s* message of transmission. Johannes Chan is the former dean of law at The University of Hong Kong (HKU) and is known for his liberal, pro-democracy political stance and for being the former boss of Occupy Central movement leader Benny Tai. According to reports, the search committee unanimously nominated him for the post of pro-vice chancellor at HKU in December 2014. However, pro-Beijing newspapers attacked his integrity, due to his liberal political stance, and the appointment was consistently delayed and eventually voted down. This is widely believed to be due to political pressure and interference exerted on the HKU Council by the China Liaison Office and pro-Beijing government forces.²¹ This HKU situation is a microcosm of what is gradually happening to Hong Kong society as a whole. It is another attack on free speech and independent thinking. In response to why he did not back down, Chan said this was a chance to prove that HKU will not accept any form of political pressure: “Man’s position in history is insignificant, and easily forgotten. In around twenty or thirty years (I and others) won’t be around any longer but HKU will still exist, the spirit and values of HKU will still exist and that is what is important.”²² It is remarkable how much this statement embodies *The Grandmaster’s* thesis that the dissemination of knowledge and transmission and protection of past (core) values into the present and future is what is essential to create a vibrant, strong, and progressive society.

After the “cookie fight” discussed above, Gong tells Ip: “Today I have made you famous . . . in the future, I hope you will be like me, and pass on the torch . . . (to) keep the light burning.” It is essential, the film contends, for a certain spirit and (core) values to stay alight and remain secure for future generations. For this to happen, teachers like Ip, who secured the succession of Wing Chun by taking it to Hong Kong and diligently teaching it, are needed. Ip’s approach to teaching is also important. In *The Grandmaster*, once he arrives in Hong Kong, he insists

that he will not engage in “tricks” like bone-setting or teach layabouts or lion dancers, “because kung fu isn’t a sideshow.” Independent, creative, and critical thinking are to be taught and valued as much as the fighting style itself, and for culture’s substance to remain, it should not become commodified. It is a whole philosophy. This is a method of teaching that exists outside of any party control.

The Razor (Chang Chen) is a side-character in the film, and his story links to the way Ip moves away from the political nationalism on the mainland to Hong Kong to “keep the light burning.” The Razor is first seen as a Kuomintang (KMT) agent, wounded on a train. Gong Er, a stranger to him, helps him hide away from Japanese soldiers. The rest of his presence in the film takes place in Hong Kong, where he moves after the KMT lose the Chinese Civil War in 1949. He has left his former status as a KMT agent behind him. His former KMT allies read out an oath to him in Hong Kong that he accepted upon joining the KMT that says he must be loyal and obedient to the KMT, or face death. This subplot in the film alludes to the fact that the CCP and the KMT were engaged in a political and ideological war in Hong Kong during the 1950s and 1960s, when each party claimed their regime as the sole, rightful Chinese government. The Razor replies to his former KMT allies that the Chinese Civil War is now over and, “This is Hong Kong.” He dispatches the KMT members in a bloody street fight in the rain, opens a barbershop in Hong Kong and continues to teach his Bajji martial art style. The Razor becomes the only other character in the film who is able to continue teaching his style and “keep the light burning”. He does this by casting aside his political affiliation and the national discourse that accompanies it, as Ip Man implicitly does by entering Hong Kong in 1950. The Razor’s major fight scene takes place during heavy rainfall at night, just as the fight scene that opens the film showing off Ip Man’s Wing Chun skills does. This visual echo links the two characters together, despite the fact they never meet.

Another strategy the film adopts in its argument for the necessity of a pluralistic society in “China” is its multilingualism. The Southern characters all speak Cantonese among themselves, as the Northern characters do Mandarin, but crucially, the Southerners speak Cantonese to Mandarin-speaking Northerners, who themselves reply in Mandarin, as if one understands the other without any linguistic obstacle. Victor Fan describes this phenomenon as engaging the Cantonese-speaking spectator in an active process of reconnecting these fragmented conversations into a believable reality. This precipitates “a process in which the spectator begins to take a new shape and form with a renewed awareness as an individual that constantly instantiates and performs the failure of any kind of sociopolitical imaginary unity.”²³ This also operates as a differentiating device accentuating the North-South divide between Gong Er, who speaks Mandarin, and Ip Man, who replies to her in Cantonese, which highlights how they each



Figure 5. Ip Man's fight that opens the film takes place in a heavy downpour at night.



Figure 5a. The Razor's fight also takes place in a heavy downpour, with a similar bluish light illuminating the darkness. This visual echo links the two characters and their approaches to martial arts and the national discourse together.

represent the two largely separate spheres of the North (China) and the South (Hong Kong).

Toward the conclusion, Gong Er tells Ip that her father said mastery has three stages, the final stage being 見眾生, which can be translated as to see or appreciate all living creatures or humanity. This idea transcends notions of the national and is notably similar to Enlightenment values related to human emancipation—freedom, democracy, human rights, and so on. This is also what Ip alludes to in his cookie speech, to look beyond the North and embrace “universal values.” It testifies to a desire to complete Hong Kong’s unfinished stage of modernity—the frequently stalled and aborted democracy movement in Hong Kong, which remains conspicuously absent in China. The values, and their potential applicability to the present, within this Chinese tradition of martial

arts are progressive, as opposed to say the way the CCP have recently co-opted aspects of Confucianism to suit authoritarian rule. The idea of the final stage of mastery comes from Gong, who believes in unifying China, but whose ideas of what constitutes a unified China are far removed from what present-day China has become. To master a (martial) art, one must see or appreciate humanity in all its colors, have the foresight to allow the mantle of leader to be challenged by a different style (party) through a winnable contest, and bear the difficulties of bringing a culture, and its attendant modes of thought and values, through tumultuous times into the present day. Gong Er, with tears in her eyes, tells Ip she couldn't pass on what she knows. Her obstacles were insurmountable. But she says she hopes Ip will be able to do so. The film closes with text reading: "Ip Man was a huge inspiration to others. Because of him, the torch of Wing Chun has been carried around the world." *The Grandmaster* articulates a view of a bigger picture incorporating humanity and universal values rather than an essentialist definition of nationalism that results in the wanton destruction of different cultures, heritages, languages, and ways of life that "fail" to give in to the national imaginary.

Wong's film seeks an alternative to the current regime, by looking back at one Chinese heritage to see how its values and spirit were transmitted into Hong Kong and could be applied today to create a more open, tolerant system based on democratic reformist values. Wong seems to have been attracted by the biographical story of Ip Man, the martial arts genre, and the waning days of the vibrant martial arts world toward the end of the Republican Era that relates to the geopolitics of this period, in part due to the way these elements offered him a space to analyze the intimate relationship between historical and metaphysical questions and problems connected to the notion of "China," and how Hong Kong fits into this. The film also features his trademark narratives of unrealizable love inextricably bound together with dislocation. The geographical trajectory of Ip's life, as well as Gong Er's, allows the focus to be placed on how this relates to Hong Kong and China. This fans out into broader questions of Chinese diaspora, which Ip's biographical story is a symbolic marker of.

There are many imaginations of what constitutes a "unified China." Today, the boundaries of national sovereignty and China's territorial integrity are strictly defined by the CCP. But for Ip, in some ways a representative of the Chinese diaspora at large, the boundary around the nation is ambiguous, as demonstrated by his desire to look beyond the North (China) and out into the world. While the film may appear to be complicit with the current national discourse, a conception of "China" emerges from a Hong Kong perspective that creates intelligent undercurrents that appeal for the urgent necessity to re-think, and come to understand, why territories such as Hong Kong desire socio-political autonomy.

Yet, the opposite is currently happening and Hong Kong is now being gradually submerged in Beijing's political system. Accompanying core values of Hong Kong—including a free press, freedom of speech, and transparent law system, which all aid the possibility of there being an accountable government—are currently being eroded. *The Grandmaster* is reacting to this collision and negotiating around it, in various ways, in a seeming spirit of hope towards a future of reform, and of wanting to pull China toward that goal. *The Grandmaster* is a subtle embodiment of Hong Kong's current resistance against the dehumanizing effects of Beijing's political encroachment, adding to Hong Kong cinema's long history of negotiating the city and its people's relationship with China. Films in this vein will likely continue and develop, in response to Hong Kong's present needs, as the socio-political spheres of both Hong Kong and China continue to transform, and mutually impact each other.

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