



Against-Diaspora: The Cultural Identity of Wong Kar-Wai's Martial Arts Films

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Abstract. Wong Kar-wai's martial arts films cross the borders of commerce, genre and art, contain features of the times and tradition. By invoking related theories and methods of James Clifford and Shu-mei Shih, etc., targeting Wong Kar-wai's martial arts films as the research subject as well as a special case, this paper aims to discuss how cultural identity is represented in auteur Wong Kar-wai's martial arts films from the perspective of against-diaspora. In terms of text analysis, a necessary comparison and interpretation is made for Wong Kar-wai's two martial arts films: *Ashes of Time* (1994) and *The Grandmaster* (2013). The author argues that the films taken up for study, reveal the juxtaposition of nomadism and nostalgia, both as an approach and a representation in pursuit of cultural identity and cultural belonging.

Keywords: against-diaspora · cultural identity · martial arts film · Wuxia · Wong Kar-wai · *Ashes of Time* · *The Grandmaster*

1 Introduction

Wong Kar-wai (hereafter referred to as “Wong”) is an internationally renowned director whose films have attracted wide attention from cinephile to film researchers for their novel audio-visual aesthetics, fragmented narratives and emotional expressions of marginalized characters. So far, he has made two martial arts films: *Ashes of Time* (1994), and *The Grandmaster* (2013). The two films overlapped and interlaced in their themes and cultural representations to some extent, emanating the traditional Chinese view of the destination of the world's nomads. So there are possibilities that could be explored from the perspective of against-diaspora.

The term “diaspora” originates from the Greek verb “diasperien”, where “dia” means “to cross” and “sperien” means “to disseminate”. Diaspora as a whole can be translated as “dispersal of people or widespread migration”. In *History of Peloponnesian War*, the Greek historian Thucydides (about 460–400 B.C.) recorded how, after the island of Aegina was captured by Athens in 459 B.C., its inhabitants had dispersed from place to place for more than 50 years before returning in 405 BC. Later on the term was used to discuss the Jewish exile after 70 A.D., when the Roman Empire expelled Jews from the Holy City Jerusalem. In connotation, diaspora signified the memory of nomadism and nostalgia of a particular community [1]. According to James Clifford, diasporic people

is differentiated from the local citizens, in some cases, they are reluctant to practice their own traditional and cultural norms for fear of repression and alienation [2]. The diaspora literature is correspondingly assumed to express the ambivalent position of identity and belonging in the context of globalization.

The above is a very concise explanation of diaspora in the Western context. By contrast, concerning the Eastern context, David Der-wei Wang points out that although sharing something in common, the diasporic situation in the East is distinct from the West [3]. He cites Chinese immigrants to demonstrate this point. Many Chinese emigrated overseas over the past century, especially to America, Europe, and Southeast Asia. They have established various communities and formed a localized cultural temperament. The so-called “diaspora Chinese” is no longer appropriate to summarize all situations. Thus, “against-diaspora” is coined by Shu-mei Shih [4]. She argues that study should not only focus on the diasporic mindset of overseas Chinese, but more on their efforts of localizing Chineseness after they have settled down.

Both diaspora and against-diaspora has thrown up the significance of cultural identity and cultural belonging time and again. People form identity through representation, in other words, identity is a matter of representation [5]. Therefore, the issue to be discussed in this paper is the way that Wong represents cultural identity and cultural belonging in his martial arts films. Wong went through regional migration and cultural conflicts in his growth, which brought him not only the sense of nomadism, but also the nostalgia of homeland. From the shadowy alleyways of Shanghai to the tropical rain forests of the Philippines, from the far-end beacon of South America to the boundless Route 66 of North America, the complicated identity and problems encountered in seeking his cultural attribution are well reflected in Wong’s films. By reviewing Wong’s auteur career and comparing his extant two martial arts films - *Ashes of Time* (1994) and *The Grandmaster*(2013), this paper argues that, in the context of worldwide globalization, the cultural identity represented in forms of vagrancy-and-nostalgia in Wong’s martial arts films, shows another route of legitimacy of cultural identity for understanding contemporary Chinese language cinema.

The term "cultural identity" used in this paper, refers to both a psychological trait and a cultural production that undergoes constant transformation [6]. As argued by Stuart Hall, the cultural identity reflects “the common historical experiences and shared cultural codes which provides us with stable, unchanging and continuous frames of reference and meaning, beneath the shifting divisions and vicissitudes of our actual history [7]”.

2 Ashes of Time: Undefined Hero

“I’m made in Shanghai and processed in Hong Kong [8].“ In interviews, Wong was fond of linking his success to two specific cities - Shanghai and Hong Kong. Wong was born in Shanghai in 1958, and moved to Hong Kong with his family when he was five years old. In Hong Kong, the Wong family kept their old habits of life, such as playing Mahjong and speaking in Shanghainese. They didn’t think of Hong Kong as their home and thought they would go back Shanghai one day. Wong spent much of his childhood in the theater of Kowloon with his mother, immersing himself in all kinds of films from home and abroad [9]. In 1981, Wong enrolled in the training program for television

director of Television Broadcasts Ltd. (TVB) of Hong Kong. After graduation, he first worked as a production assistant, and then turned into a screenwriter in 1982. However, Wong felt incompatible with the commercialized operation of film industry, and finally abdicated the office after failing to finish the screenplay on time.

Ping-kwan Leung once said that "the complicate entanglement between the indoctrination of British colonial ideology and the political alienation of Hong Kong people resulted in distorting interpersonal relationships and cultures, and various unequal communication and contact with powers" [10]. People who are sensitive to the colonized situation are supposed to feel anxious about their cultural identity and cultural belonging. So refusing to be defined is a better strategy. From the 1970s-1980s, the Hong Kong film industry is dominated by a few major film companies, such as Shaw Brothers and Golden Harvest, which follow a purely commercial route. In order to gain a foothold in the fierce competition, in 1992, Wong set up Jet Tone Film Production with his friends. He wanted to be in charge of an independent film production company to handle the funding, licensing and distribution without distractions and constraints of assembly line model. The main marketing strategies adopted by Jet Tone are star system and melodrama (*wenyi pian*). In 1994, Jet Tone produces *Ashes of Time*, which was Wong's first attempt to represent the emotion of modern urbanite through the genre of martial arts. It is cast by gold-plated stars from Hong Kong and Taiwan, including Leslie Cheung, Brigitte Lin, Maggie Cheung, Tony Leung Chiu Wai and Jacky Cheung, etc. The film is adapted from Jin Yong's martial arts masterpiece *Legends of the Condor Heroes*, but the main storyline has become the Villain Ouyang Feng in the original book.

Ashes of Time is essentially anti-heroism, reflecting Wong's critical thinking on the binary subject of good-or-bad. Wong had no intention to abide by the values of dualistic opposition between hero and villain, and the narrative mode of the genre film. For example, Hong Qi, known as the Beggar, nearly gets himself killed for fighting against assassins for a strange girl, not for the sake of chivalry or revenge, but just because of fearing to lose himself. Although Ouyang Feng and Hong Qi are both vagabonds roaming wherever they please, the discrepancy between them is stark. Ouyang Feng lives in the past and maintains his fragile sense of being through remorse and reminiscence. While, Hong Qi lives in the present and upgrades himself by accepting each challenge. Ouyang Feng asked Hong Qi, "Is it worth?" Hong answered, "It is not worth it. But I feel good about it. This is who I am. Because I know, you would never risk your life. That's the difference between you and me." The reluctance to be defined as someone else, incidentally, has been one of the themes of conflicting identities in Wong's films, which recurs in *Happy Together* (Hui: "I thought I was different from him. But everyone is the same when lonely.") and *In the Mood for Love* (Zhen: "I won't be like them.").

It is worth noting that *Ashes of Time* has a tendency to romanticize diaspora:

1. In plot, it has no such "chivalrous" themes as other martial arts films do. It breaks away from the common plot of gratitude and resentment, and explores the disillusionment of personal emotion.
2. In subject, Ouyang Feng is taken as the narrator of the film to elicit entangled emotion and dissociative identity among a group of swordsmen.

3. In narrative, scenes are edited by the logic of memory, rather than the chronological order. Every time Ouyang Feng recalls his own repressed memory from each scene, it pains him very much.

Non-diegetic sounds and monologues play an indispensable communicative function in *Ashes of Time*, connecting the storyline to the character's inner world. Most of the classic lines in the film are from Ouyang Feng's monologues. In the middle of the film, when Ouyang Feng met Hong Qi for the first time, he told to himself, "Everyone will go through this stage. When they see a mountain, they want to know what is behind it. I really want to tell him that maybe you will find nothing special after crossing the border. Looking back, you might think this side is better." As the story draws to a close, Ouyang Feng finally disillusioned with his life and his love. He says to himself, "I once heard someone said that when you could not have it anymore, the only thing you could do was not to forget."

In postmodern terms, border is considered as a line of demarcation that marks differences or symbolizes differences, and provides the basis for the developing and maintaining social norms [11]. Transgressing border is considered an expression of the fluidity, mobility and diversity of subjective identities. Globalization has made it easier for people to cross borders through travel, exile and other displacement activities [12]. People are broadening their horizons to develop a more powerful and diversified subject, forming what is called "incongruous cultural syntheses" by Clifford [13], as opposed to an identity derived from the physical affiliations of family and place. But what Wong is trying to convey through Ouyang Feng's monologues is a kind of disappointment after crossing border, a sense of hopelessness and helplessness based on the experience of nomadism. Wong disguised himself as a shepherd in the cold hard Wulin, he is constantly reminding his followers of the emptiness and construction of their nomadic identity.

3 The Grandmaster: Imagined Homeland

Since a large number of overseas Chinese have been dispersed and nomadic globally with diversified historical experiences and social realities, it is impossible for their identity to be governed and integrated by a single word "diaspora". The desire to indigenize and localize is a practice to rebuild their faith towards cultural identity, which inevitably engenders against-diaspora. Gungwu Wang and other scholars have reiterated the resilience and coherence of Chineseness. They claimed that once the overseas Chinese settle down, they will spontaneously connect to the local culture, and form a "localized Chineseness" [14]. If the typical colonialism discourse were applicable, the overseas Chinese culture would be "anglicized" and become an unwitting accomplice of colonial hegemony. But this is not the case at all. The overseas Chinese established a Chinese-language-based system of cultural norms to write about the homesickness and hardships of nomadic life, forming a new cultural identity that is now seen as a form of against-diaspora. As pointed out by Yingbin Ning, language actually is a set of independent symbolic system, which is internalized in thought, culture and society [15]. Born in Shanghai in the 1950s, grown up in Hong Kong, Wong's knowledge of different languages, such as Mandarin, Shanghaiese, Cantonese and English, also greatly affects

his cultural identity. Taking the year 1997(Hong Kong's handover) as his watershed, Wong's earlier films highlighted the diaspora situation from nomadism and exile, while his later films highlighted the against-diaspora situation from bygone days [16]. (The "bygone days" refers to Wong's another masterpiece *In the Mood for Love*).

When Wong was filming *Happy Together* in Argentina, he came across a magazine featuring Bruce Lee on the cover and marveled at the martial arts superstar's continued fascination 20 years after his death. After returning home, he happened to see a video of Bruce Lee's master, Ip Man, practicing Kung Fu Wing Chun three days before his death, and was struck by the man, who was hale and old. Starting from the character of Ip Man, he set out to find martial arts masters of all sects in China's North and South, and the whole film took more than a decade to prepare. In 2013, Wong finally revealed *The Grandmaster*, which is Wong's re-exploration of martial arts genre after *Ashes of Time*. But it is an unusual martial arts film in the Wong's manner previously displayed in *Ashes of Time*.

The Grandmaster portrays the twist and turns of the legendary life of Chinese Wing Chun master - Ip Man (played by Tony Leung Chiu Wai), as well as many Kung Fu masters from other sects of northern and southern regions during the Republic of China era. It displays a panorama for all Kung Fu masters in China at the same time, not just Ip Man's life route to become the grand master of Wing Chun. The so-called "never forget, there will be echoes" is not only for the memory of the Northern and Southern Kung Fu masters, but also a kind of sadness and nostalgia for the past years for the film audiences. Unlike previous protagonists in *Ashes of Time*, Ip Man consciously internalizes the whole set of cultural discourses into a moral compulsion mechanism of ethical disciplines. After all, what gives rise to the disputes of those Kung Fu masters is not only for the inheritance of Kung Fu lineage, but also for the undone love affair between Ip Man and Miss Gong. Miss Gong (played by Ziyi Zhang) is a martial arts descendant from northern China who is cool in temperament and gentle in heart. Ip Man and Miss Gong had undone affairs. At the end of the film, Ip Man euphemistically turns down Miss Gong Er's confession: "Life is just like a chess game. We play it safe. There is no gratitude and resentment between us. Only serendipity (yuanfen)." Thus, the film works as a Kung Fu epic-cum-melodrama, alluding to moral education and integration and completing the leitmotif shift from diaspora to against-diaspora. Wong's *The Grandmaster* is not to highlight IP Man as a hero, but to let the audience rediscover an IP Man with unique life values and personal pursuit, co-existing with the whole Wulin in the Republic of China.

Martial arts film, or say Kung Fu genre, is a combination of traditional Chinese philosophy, aesthetics and manners, showing the multifaceted national spirits. It draws on Chinese philosophical ideas derived from, or based on, Confucianism, Daoism, Buddhism, and other schools of thought such as Mohism and Legalism [17]. Apart from being an action-oriented entertainment medium, Kung Fu genre is inherently moral and ethical, which has the potential to counterbalance the departure between diaspora and against-diaspora. *The Grandmaster* expresses a deep attachment to old tradition and restores the scenery, detail and character of that time. Because of this attachment, the excellence in mise-en-scene gives this film a poetic quality. It is said by Ang lee when asked about the setting of "China" in *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*, that "the cinematic China was a fantastic imagined one that I dreamed of when I was a boy [18]." Such

a view of home/country discourse comes from the interweaving of two ideologies: on the one hand, it is the struggling between the East and the West in political and cultural power; and on the other hand, it is the imagined homeland by overseas Chinese. From the spectacle of Kung Fu to the attachment of home/country, martial arts film features the times and nostalgia for tradition, as well as the national spirit and regional cultural characteristics. In this sense, Chinese martial arts film can be seen as the projection of the Oriental and local subject striving for the rejuvenation of cultural identity, and the reflection of nomads looking back at their homeland in a dilemma.

4 Conclusion

From the above analysis, it is discovered that both diaspora and against-diaspora, like two sides of a coin, are narrative and thematic extensions in Wong's martial arts films, constituting an important aspect of legitimacy of the cultural identity for understanding contemporary Chinese language cinema. Last but not least, there is still a hint of humanism in the Wong's belief that if cultural identity is not an eternal truth but a process of being, then we must keep exploring, memorizing, and representing ourselves into existence.

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