



The Paradox of Romance in Tango

A Close-Reading of Wong Kar Wai's Films of *Happy Together*, *In the Mood for Love*, and *Fallen Angles*

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Abstract. Tango, a partner dance, has been widely seen in romantic films. Hong Kong film director Wong Kar-wai is renowned for his depictions of intense, complex romantic relationships infused with dramatic conflict. Tango is one indispensable element that is repeatedly used in Wong's films. By exploring the role of tango in the film *Happy Together*, compared with two of Wong's films, *In the Mood for Love* and *Fallen Angles*, this paper provides a cross-reading of Wong's films better to understand the characters' behaviors and inner impulses. This paper argues that the "embrace and resist" movement of tango crystalizes the characters' practices of complicated love. Emotional feelings are established and undetermined through role-playing in dance and everyday life. Repressed sexual energy can be a symbol of taboo. Bodies are highly sexualized to evoke passion.

Keywords: Wong Kar-Wai, Tango, Happy Together, In the Mood for Love, Fallen Angles

1 Introduction

Tango, a dance form originating in Argentina, plays a vital role in the world of artistic expression, enabling artists to evoke "mood, atmosphere, action, and character type"^[1]. Hong Kong film director Wong Kar-wai is renowned for his unique sensibility and complex storytelling style^[2]. The use of tango is particularly apt in Wong's film *Happy Together*. In a shabby kitchen in Buenos Aires, two young men wrap each other's bodies in their arms and move delicately in a harmonious rhythm. Under the saturated golden glaze, they dance cheek to cheek, skin to skin, until a suffocating desire urges them to touch and kiss (Fig.1). This tango scene is not just a beautiful moment in the film *Happy Together*; it also crystalizes the intense emotions between the two characters. Ho Po-Win and Lai Yiu-Fai are a gay couple travelling from Hong Kong to Argentina in the film. As resentment and anger invade their intimacy, they experience frequent fights and are trapped by immature, destructive passion. In tango, dancers need to enter the other's space to resist and keep enough space for themselves while respect

ing them ^[3]. In this vein, tango implicitly narrates the delicate relationships of the characters in this film, reflecting Po-Win and Yiu-Fai's struggle to manage the tension between simultaneously embracing and resisting one's partner.



Fig. 1. Po-Win and Yiu-Fai dancing in the kitchen

While *Happy Together* makes the greatest use of its tango scenes, Wong's other films also capture complicated relationships that show similarities with *Happy Together*. This paper takes *Happy Together* as an example to analyze how tango resembles the complexity of partnership in all of Wong's romantic films. This paper also explores the complicated relationships between characters in *In the Mood of Love* and *Fallen Angels* to better understand Wong's cinematic techniques for expressing delicate emotions and modes of communication.

2 Movement as Embrace and Resist

A tango practitioner once told me that her tango teacher gave the following instructions for holding one's partner: "embrace, and resist." The advice is both choreographic and psychological. Historically, tango dance has been closely related to themes of "drama, a heady mix of violence and love" and intricate physical and emotional emotions ^[4]. Passion establishes the tension in both films and dance, attracting the audience with an intense emotional response. Specifically, tango has been frequently involved with conflicts, such as anger, joy, love, humiliation, disrespect, dignity, jealousy, and pride ^[5]. Through repeated, foreseeable and reassuring movements and actions, tango allows dancers to interact constantly with certainty and possibility ^[3]. In essence, Tango requires an intimate physical connection with the partners and usually begins with the movement of the embrace ^[6]. This relation, as two persons and one dyad, collaborates as a whole while maintaining differences ^[3]. When entering an embrace, the dancers surround their arms around the other's body skin to skin while the other hands sustain a resisting force against each other. This controversial movement can be employed as a cinematic technique. Specifically, every movement exposes dancers to the emotional risks of vulnerability while maintaining intimacy ^[7]. Thus, dancers establish tension in partnership and negotiate with the confronting desires.

In *Acting and Being*, the author explains that the volatility of passion is more likely to release desires and disguise emotions ^[8]. Hate is also an expression of passion with destructive energy. Hess also describes love as a practice that requires courage, whereas hate comes with the fear of something that is unknown, excluded or uninterpreted ^[8]. Her idea of love and hate is helpful in understanding the characters' objectives and reactions in Wong's films, in which the expression of passion is always embodied as embracing and resisting.

In *Happy Together*, the complicated homosexual love between Ho Po-Win and Lai Yiu-Fai is portrayed in their tango dance. Wong utilizes a melodic popular song to narrate the story, indicating the "tortuous relationship" between two men and revealing the "actual gap" and "discontinuity" of the two lovers ^[9]. Through the suggestive narration, such as Ho Po-Win stealing a watch for Lai Yiu-Fai, but finally being badly beaten, and Yiu-Fai's stealing of Po-Win's passport to keep Po-Win with him forever, it is clear that both of them are urged to sustain this relationship, but their actions only push the other person away. The impulse to love and care turns out to be hurt. When Po-Win is injured and cannot go outside of Yiu-Fai's apartment, Yiu-Fai says that "I hoped he would never recover because this would be our happiest moment together" (00:55:47-00:55:51). It is because of the fear of losing their loved ones that hostility, jealousy, and anger dominate their relationship. In this circumstance, the typical tango movement of embracing and resisting perfectly reflects the complicated relationship between characters.

Specifically, tango dance emphasizes "a strong empathic and bodily connection" to follow a certain sequence of movements ^[10]. In this process, dancers have to follow steps of each other so as to achieve balance and harmony. Accordingly, the movement of embracing or resisting can delicately reflect the characters' emotions. In *Happy Together*, the movement of embracing and resisting can symbolize the intimate relationship and final fate of the two characters. Precisely, their love lures them to start over again and again, which is consistent with the steps of embracing in tango. By contrast, their constant fights suggest their departure in the end, which is aligned with the steps of resisting in tango.

Embracing and resisting movements are also incorporated in the film *In the Mood for Love*. Specifically, Su's steps moving back and forth reflects her inner struggle. On the one hand, her love impulses her date with Zhou. However, morality forces her to hold back. Back-and-forth movements are just like movements of embracing and resisting in tango dance. Similarly, in the film *Fallen Angles*, partners' feelings being together and away can be typical movements of embrace and resistance. Thus, the tango movement of embrace and resist can be regarded as a sign of the complicated relationships of characters in Wong's films, signifying their closeness and departure in the story plots.

3 Role-Playing of Tango

There is a discussion around the difference between "performatic" and "performative" in the discipline of Performance Studies. The word "performative" is often misused as

the adjective of performance, whereas “performatic” is rather the appropriate word ^[11]. Crucially, performative focuses on doing something ^[12]. In particular, tango has established social roles, including the leader and follower, asking dancers to cooperate to play steps and maintain harmony closely ^[10]. This demonstrates that tango allows dancers to play their social roles. Dancers move in a way that they do not normally behave when they are not considered dancers. The “performatic” of tango invites the dancers to become someone different from their off-stage social roles. In other words, the role-playing of tango affects the dancers’ routines and image, which becomes “performative.”

The social meaning of role-playing tango is classical in Wong’s films. In *Happy Together*, Yiu-Fai plays different roles in front of his lover. In their tango dance, it can be seen that Yiu-Fai is caring and aggressive at the same time when he approaches Po-Win. He is responsible and calm in his life. However, in a romantic relationship, he becomes extreme and aggressive. The complex of social roles of characters can be implicitly embodied in their dance steps. In *The Mood for Love*, Su and Chow put on social roles as married persons, but role-playing allows them to establish a connection under the disguise of rehearsal (Fig.2). They often have dinner together, role-play as their spouses, and co-write science fiction. Their relationship is just as vague as fiction because they never admit their feelings for each other. In terms of tango dancing, the sensual and erotic experiences, as important elements in tango performance, are also subtle and rich ^[3]. The exploration of those experiences is the same as the complicated love between characters. Furthermore, stuck in the ethics of marriage, Su repeats the line “We won’t be like them” (00:54:41-00:54:43), dragging them back from a fictional romance to reality. Through the lens of role-playing in tango dance, they resist falling in love and becoming like ordinary spouses.

In the play with the fiction and the real, their feelings are expressed in a vague style. The rehearsal of love is hard to distinguish from the real when Su cries for their separation, and Chow embraces her, saying that “It’s just a rehearsal. Don’t cry. It’s not real” (01:11:34-01:11:44). After years of separation when Chow is working as a journalist in Burma, the secrets are whispered in a tree hole and never leave a trace behind. The myth of the tree hole and the unheard murmuring are haunting and mysterious. These ending echoes that of tango, indicating that dancers have to make efforts to deal with their complicated emotions, especially for controlling their passions for the duration, which can last until the end of the dance ^[13].

In Wong’s films, characters perform multiple roles, as friends, writing partners, neighbors, or married persons betrayed by their respective spouses, but never as a couple. The characters repeat the other roles over time, articulating an ongoing repertoire in their embodied actions. This aligns with the idea that performance is a repertoire of being represented and reactivated repeatedly without intention ^[11]. Alternatively, it is a process of continuous run-in and progress. He also adds that the repeatability of behaviors or actions promotes the production of specific movements and practices, which is called performance, and it would not change with the shifts of rhythms and moves ^[11]. The rehearsal for love validates itself in the repetitive acts, blurring the boundary between performance and life and thus convincing the audience that their rehearsal is an alternative truth.

Wong also adopts formal techniques to establish the restrained characters under the social gaze. In the film *In the Mood for Love*, the framing often provides a perspective of outsiders peeking into the character's secrets. When they go out for noodles and accidentally run into each other, the two protagonists are usually at the corner of the stairs; in the restaurant, part of their bodies is hidden behind the chair. The use of space also emphasizes the conflict between the social gaze and the forbidden love affair. The interior scene in the rented building is presented as a tiny and crowded space where they easily run into other neighbors and barely have any privacy. When they write the fiction together, they are usually in Chow's bedroom or a confined hotel room where nobody could find out. As Wong says, the movie is about interpreting that time and period, not the affair [14].



Fig. 2. Su and Chow rehearsing in the restaurant, reflected in a mirror

The agent and the killer in *Fallen Angels* perform the role of murder business partners. The agent says that “good partners should not be emotionally involved” (00:00:38-00:00:42). When the killer decides to terminate their business, her facial expressions and words are as indifferent as her usual style, only the shaky hands holding the cigarettes reveal her emotional turmoil. If she does not obtain the love in turn she wants, then killing him is her way to get this relationship under control. By testing the boundaries, she plays with the power dynamic in partnership.

In both *In the Mood of Love* and *Fallen Angels*, intimacy is allowed when they perform the roles of partners but limited when they perform as the married or the killer. The performativity of role-playing sets self-censorship on their expression and desire, asking them to make conscious choices of behaviors and language and believe that their roles are not supposed to fall in love. It is interpreted in tango with the exploration and “interactive attunement” to their desires and expectations [15]. They satisfy the changes with their simultaneous actions in response to the demand. Technically speaking, they increase their awareness of rhythms, timing and obscure signals [15]. The code in the tango salon, which can control the realization of tango passion and the constraints also changes how dancers perform and how to manage the tension in partnership [13]. At the same time, the dances can be intimate until the end of the milonga but have to separate as soon as the Cortina begins. They acknowledge the limits of tango, knowing that the development of intimate relations is due to the dancer's identity in that context rather than being a person [13]. As fleeting as a milonga, the characters' connections can only

last in one short rehearsal or a murder business. The passion is no longer justified as soon as they put off their roles. Thus, roles identify their performance and actions.

4 Libido and Forbidden Desires

The intimate embrace in tango is often associated with sexual connection. There is no dying that sexual desires and gender roles play a crucial role in tango^[16]. The eagerness for sexual union is the basis of tango's attractiveness^[7]. Moreover, it has a close relationship with its historical context. In the 1860s, the abandoned female immigrants were forced to manage the prostitution business, and it interacted with the macho and violence, driving the development of the sex industry^[17]. A public space which is inundated with violence and crimes nourishes the desire and seduces of males and females^[17]. The interplay between sexual desires and the external environment shapes more intense and passionate intimacy. Wong's films also demonstrate the same features as tango. In *Happy Together*, Wong describes the explosive desire of Po-Win and Yun-Fai by presenting their sex scenes. The roving life and the expectation for love make two people connect closely. Their highly distinctive responses towards human nature, especially when such desire is forbidden, tell the audience about the dynamic in partnership.

Tango involves exchanging physical and mental processes^[18]. Specifically, it provides opportunities for dancers to make interactions, such as touching and entangling, so that they can obtain inspiration and make creations with the companion of music^[13]. Beyond that, it embodies the nature of male and female energies. Dancers are the physical externalization of it^[19]. There are moments when they act violently towards each other, not through physical fights but through abusive words and psychological manipulation of the other. Sawyer and Thomas state that tango is a means of communication in that the leader poses a persuasive argument and waits for a response from the other^[7]. It illustrates that the dancer has an impact on the other's psychology when they are coordinating. It shares the same with the film. In the film *Happy Together*, for example, Yiu-Fai is insecure and tries to satisfy all Po-Win's needs, even stocking cigarettes to maintain his stay at home. He intends to manipulate Po-Win's behavior to get the expected response, while Po-Win feels pressure and attempts to escape his control. Dancers also face differences and insecurities. Tango requires mutual communication between the persons dancing together^[20]. Therefore, tango and the film contain physical and spiritual interactions, exploring effective communication.

Equally, tango builds a space that offers comfort and illusion for dancers. An American dance therapist, Jeanne Castle, demonstrates that the embrace in tango arouse the original desire and longingness for intimacy in infancy^[21]. Concerning the unlimited imaginary and invisible feelings, *Fall Angels* are also accessible to reach that target. In *Fallen Angels*, Wong depicts the illusion through the character's actions. The agent is infatuated with the killer, so she builds the connection by masturbating on the killer's bed (Fig.3). In doing so, she satisfies her fantasies and cravings for the killer. In her statement, "find out too much about a person, and you lose interest. I'm the practical kind. I know how to make myself happy" (00:15:24-00:15:35). Her masturbation is not

merely for self-pleasure but for the fantasy of the unreachable. Wong's films always convey a sense of optimism towards the character's singleness, uncovering energetic possibilities [22]. That is to say, Wong gives characters more space and takes approaches to exhibit their willingness and translates it into the satisfaction of their desires, creating a comfortable zone for the characters and the audience. Thus, Wong portrays his characters without limitation. His interpretation differs from the prevailing prejudices of romantic love - a happy ending [22]. It concerns about the identity of characters and how they perform to define themselves. The characters make efforts to build a safe space. In addition to the agent, Po-Win also attempts to establish emotional dependence to prove his existence. In this way, they can comfort themselves. As a result, tango and Wong's films afford opportunities to accomplish what dancers and characters want.



Fig. 3. The agent masturbating on the killer's bed

The sense of alienation and loneliness is throughout the film *Fallen Angels*. Keeping her distance from the killer, the man she is obsessed with but who never responds to her love is not a conscious choice but a result of the difficulty to establish a mutual connection. The tears on the killer's bed after the masturbation and the melancholy in her eyes after listening to the song *Forget Him*, are both signs of the hidden yearning for intimacy. Her desire for love is nothing different than that of the blond girl, who is miserably afraid of being abandoned and so dyes her hair and bites on the killer's arm to leave him an unforgettable impression. The cinematography is even more stylistic than the other two films. The large use of wide shots emphasizes the characters' psychological state of beings. The background is usually out of focus, distancing the characters from their surroundings. The distorted angles, violent scenes, and sound effects of gunshots, in contrast with the agent's and the killer's indifference, facilitate telling the sense of urban alienation (Fig.4).

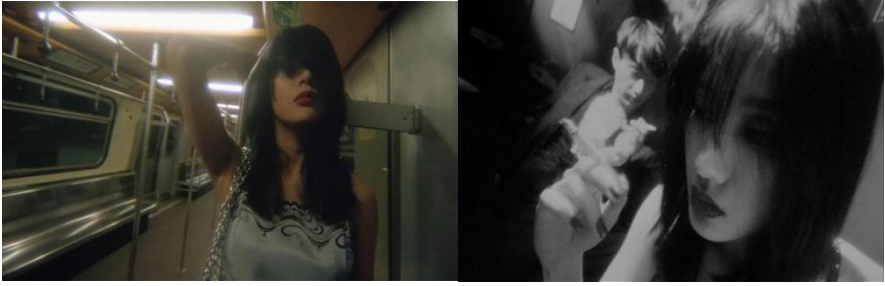


Fig. 4. Distorted angle and wide shot in *Fallen Angles*

Rather than showing sex explicitly like in the other two films, Wong depicts the desires of Su and Chow as vague and repressed. Without any sexual scene, the most intimate contact between them is Chow embracing Su and tapping her back when she cries for the separation rehearsal. Through their behaviors and speech patterns, Chow and Su are developed as conservative characters who cannot face and react to their inner desire. The two characters often express themselves implicitly. For example, in the scene where the protagonists find out about the affair, they only talk about the clothes without mentioning it straightforwardly. They reach a consensus without speaking it out loud, implicating feelings of shame about infidelity and the value of marriage. The lack of sexual scenes and the character development both convey the message that the lovers never meet their objectives in this film.

Su: Actually, my husband has a tie just like it. He said it was a gift from his boss, so he wears it every day.

Chow: And my wife has a bag just like yours.

Su: I know. I've seen it...What are you getting at, actually?

(Chow stays in silence.)

Su: I thought I was the only one who knew (00:29:12-00:29:52).

The paradox of desire and morality is similar to that of tango – boundaries become an effective approach to forcing someone to surrender ^[13]. This conflict is presented through qipao, a Chinese dress in the 1920s and 1940s that simultaneously restricts women's bodies and sexualizes femininity, revealing women's elegant and seductive bodies ^[23]. In this film, Cheongsam tells us more than just the character's appearance. On the one hand, the dress symbolizes the conflict in Su as both a traditional married woman and a woman with authentic sexual desires. On the other hand, it shows how Su is always gazed at by others. In this entire film, she changes 26 dresses ^[24] (Fig.5). One of the neighbor gossips about Su when she dresses up just for noodles. As a married woman, she is judged by the social morality and gender code that represses her desire.



Fig. 5. Su's various dresses

In these three films of Wong, different desires of the "traumatic encounters" between the homosexual couple competing for power, the agent and the killer escaping from their emotions, and the married man and woman suffering from the affair are exposed. Through their different approach to sex, they narrate the common human struggle of the desire to love and the desperation for love.

5 Performing Gender and Sexuality

Tango emphasizes the partner relationships and the emotional expression, not the steps [25]. Scholars have been exploring the relations, mainly how gender is performed in the movements of tango. Kathy Davis summarizes that tango manifests the subordination of men and women in the traditional perspective [13]. Nevertheless, they present it in a different way. It is a performance of representing and amplifying femininity thoroughly and immensely to highlight sexuality [13]. The U.S.-Argentinean theorist Marta Savigliano points out a different presentation of gender in tango history. She situates tango in the uncertain position of gender, being discussed and examined. The definition of sexuality can be extended and reconstructed during tango dancing. An Italian tango therapist Massimo Habib explores the female and male polarities through studies. He perceives that the female and male parts embodied in every dancer can be balanced with the help of practices, and they can adjust their tango modality to determine which sexual parts to be performed [26].

In the course of how gender is expressed, it concerns the female role in tango history. During the first half of the twentieth century, females in Argentina became independent and stepped into public areas [13]. Savigliano argues that tango lyrics are evidence of women's rebellion to pursue their desire for independence [13]. However, from the anecdotes, these women's pleasure mostly comes from being chosen by another man. Men are more likely to act in the leader role, and women follow them. Davis further clarifies that women seek an experience of great recognition and popularity, not limited to dance itself [13].

Tango is a kind of dance showing the hierarchical differences between men and women [13]. In both tango and Wong's films, women often make conscious choices in their appearances to be feminine, attractive, and desired. Women are hardly to act as

the real subject in the dancing performance when impractical clothing and stiletto heels have already immobilized them ^[13]. This gender code in tango also appears in the previous example of *In the Mood for Love*, Qipao constructs women's identities. Certain movements are in slow motion because the body implies much information, even a movement of hanging around, and the people in the pressroom decide how to express it ^[14]. The handbag is another symbol of men's appreciation of women. Su's husband is always abroad for business, bringing handbags to Su after each trip to maintain their marriage how Su finds out about her husband's affair with the neighbor because they have the same handbag. In *Fallen Angle*, the blond girl dies, her hair blond because of the fear of being forgotten. These women struggle with the desire to dance/love. By presenting their bodies in a certain way, they wait for another man's choosing them and becoming the desired ones.

6 Conclusion

To maintain the tension with the dance partner, one has to embrace the other and resist at the same time, keeping both dancers fully invested in this moment in tango. "Embrace and resist" mirrors the characters' actions in Wong's films and summarizes their practices of love. The paradox of human feelings is central in these three films, in which the characters push their loved ones away, either consciously or instinctively. Lai Yiu-Fai is terrified that when Ho Po-Win hangs out on the street, he might never return home, so Yiu-Fai steals Po-Win's passport. The fear and resentment are too painful to manage, trapping them in an abusive and manipulative relationship. For Su and Chow, desires must be swollen up instead of spitting out. The sense of morality, like their bodies restrained in Cheongsam and tie, has to be presented in a certain formula in the sacrifice of love. The agent loses her power when the killer decides to leave, so she kills her obsessed subject/object to gain control over her life. Through these two opposite actions, the characters' greatest fears of being abandoned, betraying one's social image, or being unloved can be vividly exposed. In Wong's films, such conflict completes the characters' emotional journey and creates dramatic tension in the plot.

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