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The Memories of Journeys: Spatialization of Time in Wong Kar-wai's Nostalgic Films

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Abstract: There is usually an agenda behind the rewriting of history. As an acclaimed Hong Kong director, Wong Kar-wai has made several nostalgic films set in 1960s Hong Kong, namely, *Days of Being Wild* (1990), *In the Mood for Love* (2000), and *2046* (2004). Relating to Hong Kongers' anxiety over the 1997 handover, Wong's films are part of a wider symptomatic cultural phenomenon in Hong Kong cinema. In his nostalgic films, time is often spatialized. With his constant interest in mobile space, such as hotels and trains, he creates an alternative perspective to question the grand narrative of history. In his reconstruction of the past, there is never any cultural purity or origin to revisit. Rather, the past is presented with itinerant characters, mobile space, and cultural ambivalence, enabling multiple narratives of history. Focusing on the use of space, this paper analyzes how Wong's films engender a reflective form of nostalgia, and challenge both official history and the linear concept of time. Wong's nostalgia, I argue, is not only a response to Hong Kong politics, but also a paradigmatic text illustrating nostalgic writing's resistance to official historical discourses.

Keywords: nostalgia; space; time; historical discourse; Hong Kong cinema; Wong Kar-wai



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1. Introduction

"The rewriting of history itself is never without an agenda" (Lee 2008, p. 8). The current socio-political conditions are usually the main incentives driving a society to produce historical narratives. There is usually a contemporary motive behind the narration of the past. Hence, when nostalgia emerges as a trend, it is necessary to examine contemporary society.

Since the nineteenth century, nostalgia, a yearning for the lost past and an escape from the present, has been a response to the trend of modernity (Boym 2002). As a contemporary cultural symptom, nostalgia is critically contested. Its conservative side has been noted. It is seen as "necessarily static and unchanging in its attempt to retrieve a lost utopian space" (Huffer 1998, p. 19). With its resistance to change, Huffer argues, nostalgia is at its core conservative. It is also described by a lack of authenticity and the production of a degraded version of the "real" event, which obscures our understanding of politics and society (see Cook 2005, p. 2). However, nostalgia's critical quality has also been asserted. For example, Cook (2005) argues that nostalgia can inspire viewers to rethink and reflect on the past.

The conservative and progressive sides of nostalgia are included in Svetlana Boym's (2002) theorization. For her, nostalgia can be restorative or reflective. The intention of the former is to invent an "origin", a "lost home", or an imagined community, and to connect past and present. Stressing the "absolute truth", it constructs an exclusive, singular historical narrative without conflict, complexity, or divergent meanings (Boym 2002, pp. 42–43). On the contrary, reflective nostalgia does not aim for home or root searching. Rather, from a distance or in an ironic way, it emphasizes a meditation on history and the passage of time, problematizing the relationship between past, present, and future. While restorative nostalgia enforces patriotism and national spirit, reflective nostalgia challenges them by opening up a multitude of potentialities and possibilities of history development (Boym 2002, pp. 49–50).

Seen as the "chief carrier of historical messages in our culture", visual media is a legitimate platform for historicizing (Rosenstone 1994, p. 3). Despite its unofficial status,

cinema is important in historicizing, and nostalgic cinema has the historicizing power of fiction. In Hong Kong, cinema is seen as the core platform of Hong Kong culture, identity, and even history (Lok 2002; Ma 2007). From the 1980s, Hong Kong directors have made a considerable number of nostalgic films to construct historical discourses. As a representative Hong Kong director, Wong Kar-wai has a particular obsession with the 1960s. His films, namely, *Days of Being Wild* (Wong 1990), *In the Mood for Love* (Wong 2000), *2046* (Wong 2004), and *The Hand* (Wong et al. 2004)¹, are set in 1960s Hong Kong, full of nostalgic atmosphere with music, color, costume, and decoration from that era. *The Grandmaster* (Wong 2013) recounts the stories of several kung fu masters from the 1930s to 1960s.

Rather than being an isolated case, nostalgia in Wong Kar-wai's films is part of a wider symptomatic cultural phenomenon. The 1980s and 1990s see a nostalgic stream in Hong Kong cinema (Li 1993; Chan 2000). In the late 1980s, nostalgic films began to surface in the market in Hong Kong. This nostalgic trend is adopted and intensified by Wong's films, which take the trend further to a critical and even radical plane by delivering alternative ways of viewing history. When he reconstructs the past, it is never with any cultural purity or origin to revisit. The time-journeys in his films show the impossibilities of roots, origin, and cultural purity in a city like Hong Kong. According to Boym's (2002) theory, his films demonstrate reflective nostalgia.

Despite the emphasis on time, space still plays a crucial role in today's nostalgia. The fear or lament over the lost place contributes to nostalgia, and the creation of a fantasized past often involves spatial elements. Restorative nostalgia is crystallized by institutionalized spaces, such as museums and urban memorials, in which temporality is encased and clearly classified in archives, display cases, and curio cabinets (Boyman 2002). On the contrary, reflective nostalgia explores side shadows and back alleys, allowing us to take historical detours (Boyman 2002). Employing varying spaces, these two kinds of nostalgia conceptualize time and the past differently. In other words, the ideological stance of a nostalgic text is relevant to how time is spatialized therein. In Wong Kar-wai's films, space functions as a protagonist, not only as a setting (Wang 2016). Significantly, time is often spatialized to produce a new sense of time and a new form of the past in his nostalgic texts. He often displays dark rooms, dim alleys, and old buildings in which no progression of history or bright future is seen. Via these spaces, the films detour around the official narrative of history. In addition, with his constant interest in mobile spaces, such as hotels and trains, he creates an alternative historical perspective.

The reading of Hong Kong cinema in Western academia, Chow (1999) argues, tends toward reflectionism that presumes Hong Kong films made around the 1997 handover are socio-political documents that necessarily reflect the political change. Her view is shared by Bettinson (2015), who explicitly rejects examining Wong Kar-wai's oeuvre within the framework of social reflectionism. To revise and extend this "reflectionism", I propose a wider angle that is not limited to considering the relationship between Wong's filmic texts and Hong Kong. Beyond understanding Wong's nostalgia as a specific case about Hong Kong, which is still a necessary critical move, I attempt to explore his films as paradigmatic texts that show how the writing of an alternative past is resistant to both official historical discourses, and the linear concept of time. Through the use of space, the director creates a reflective nostalgia, whose significance is not limited to Hong Kong. Thus, there are two layers in my discussion: the first layer tends to treat his texts as cultural pathologies which reflect Hong Kong's political predicament; and the second layer sees his nostalgic films as paradigmatic texts that speak to a wider world. In the following sections, I will first discuss the reasons for the director's obsession with the 1960s, to provide the socio-cultural contexts of his nostalgic texts. Then, to explore how his films present a cultural symptom in Hong Kong as well as a paradigmatic text, I will examine Wong's presentation of journeys and Shanghai, and how time is spatialized by the use of a hotel and a train in his films.

2. The Obsession with the 1960s

Wong Kar-wai has been acclaimed as a “poet of time” for his artistic and philosophical portrait of time (Rayns 1995). His films share the motif of time and memory, which is manifested by his suffering characters besieged in the limbo between remembering and forgetting. In *Days of Being Wild*, So Lai-chen suffers from the memory of that one minute she spent with Yuddy; in *Ashes of Time* (Wong 1994b), the wine named Zuisheng Mengsi, meaning “live to drink and die in dreams”, with the allegedly magical power to make people forget, does not erase Ouyang Feng’s painful memory but only intensifies it.

Wong Kar-wai’s obsession with the past expresses a generational need and cultural necessity. Hong Kong cinema’s constructions of the past reflect not only an intention to write the city’s history, but also an attempt to tackle anxieties over the looming changes in the city, and to question as well as establish the problematic identity of the Hong Kong people. Cinematic nostalgia plays an important role in mediating Hong Kongers’ crisis consciousness (Cheung 2016). It is important to note how a city like Hong Kong, as an ex-British colony with little education about history (Wong 2000) and a modern metropolis whose history is hardly seen from the cityscape (Abbas 1997), suddenly experienced an urge to narrate the past. The nostalgic trend emerged at the time of rapid urban change in the 1980s, when “we have seen how high-investment buildings in Hong Kong are threatened by demolition, how what looks very permanent is in fact very temporary” (Abbas 1997, p. 75). In addition, the Sino-British Joint Declaration, signed in 1984, set the date of the 1997 handover, which was expected to change Hong Kong drastically. These factors explain the trend of nostalgia in Hong Kong cinema, which questions modernization and contemplates the expected radical changes brought about by the handover. Facing such a de-historicized present and uncertain future, the past suddenly became a popular temporal site. In a city with a modern outlook, as the city itself was crossing a historical threshold, film directors traced the past and explored Hong Kong’s culture.

Wong Kar-wai has talked about how he consciously preserved the past with his films: “[t]he lifestyle of Hong Kong in certain periods, maybe the sixties or seventies or eighties . . . I’m trying to preserve it” (see Brunette 2005, p. 118). In his films about the 1960s, he deliberately reconstructs the old Hong Kong through the details of clothing, properties, architecture, and music. Even when making a film about the current Hong Kong, he tends to capture the old part of the city, such as an old residential area in central Hong Kong in *Chungking Express* (Wong 1994a). In *Fallen Angels* (Wong 1995) he shoots in a Cantonese teahouse, a Shanghainese barbershop, and a Mahjong parlor, all of which are old-styled locations that he thinks might possibly disappear in one or two years. Wong himself believed that Hong Kong’s uniqueness would be gone after 1997 and “it will be just another city in China” (see Brunette 2005, p. 121). However, Wong’s films function as more than cultural preservation. Expressing the anxiety over the disappearance of the city’s uniqueness after its merging into mainland China, his films respond to the de-historicized and globalized Hong Kong by constructing a reflective nostalgia.

A crucial question about Wong’s nostalgia is: Why are the 1960s his obsession? To answer this question, the director’s own history is pertinent. At the age of five in 1963, during mainland China’s troubled times, he moved to Hong Kong from Shanghai in a stream of migration. His nostalgia for the 1960s has an apparently personal reason. He has talked about how he cherishes his memories of the 1960s (see Ngai 1995, p. 27). In *Days of Being Wild* and *In the Mood for Love*, Teo (2005) notes, Wong re-creates the Hong Kong of his childhood. His life exemplifies the diasporic experience of many Chinese immigrants in Hong Kong: he needed to learn a new dialect, Cantonese; he was exposed to a more liberal environment, where he could watch all kinds of films that were not available in mainland China at that time (see Brunette 2005). Having a sailor father, Wong’s childhood was further connected to travel and foreign countries in the 1960s (Teo 2005).

In the history of Hong Kong, the 1960s mark the beginning of the city’s modern transformation (Lee 2016). The year 1967 is recognized as a turning point in Hong Kong’s contemporary history and culture, followed by the emergence of a local identity in the 1970s

(Lui 1997). Influenced by the disastrous Cultural Revolution in mainland China, a group of nationalists launched a protest against the colonial government in Hong Kong, which ended with riots and deaths and pulled people even further away from mainland China (Lui 1997). After this “1967 Riot”, the government changed its style of management and introduced a series of conciliation policies, such as public housing and free education. Concerning the needs of local citizens, these policies made the city a homely place (Lui 1997). Significant plans for the city’s infrastructure were then initiated by the government, enabling Hong Kong to become a major modern city in the East. In that era, Hong Kong began its industrialization. In the 1960s, Hong Kong was only a temporary residence for the migrants from mainland China. One of the most famous film lines at that time was: “I can just go back to my hometown if something bad happens in Hong Kong” (see Lam 2009, p. 154). Especially for the elderly, the mainland was still seen as the roots they could return to. However, from the late 1960s, given the ongoing poverty and social unrest, mainland China was no longer a homeland to go back to, and Hong Kong as home became the subject of local films (Chan and Chu 2008).

On the other hand, internationally, the 1960s in the West was a time of liberation and social movements—the reference point for the protagonist Yuddy’s rebellion in *Days of Being Wild*. Teo (2005) links *Rebel without a Cause* (dir. Ray 1955) to *Days of Being Wild*, whose Chinese title (*A Fei Zhengchuan*) is the same as the former’s, and Yuddy resembles James Dean’s character, Jim. The film borrows the title, the character, set design, and mood from the American film (Lee 2016). At this point a kind of locality was established in relationship to the world outside, which might be the crucial reason why Wong chose the 1960s, when everything was in its becoming.

As mentioned, if a bygone era is stressed because of its linkage to the present, Wong Kar-wai’s long obsession with the past can be related to the parallel between the 1960s, 1990s, and even the 2000s, all of which were transitional periods in terms of the city’s culture and identity. In Wong’s creation of the 1960s, Chan (2000) contends, *Days of Being Wild* highlights the social insecurity of 1990s Hong Kong. The protagonist Yuddy’s identity crisis and fruitless journeys manifest a sense of uncertainty and restlessness, which I will examine later. In the 1990s, Hong Kongers were anxious about the upcoming changes caused by the handover. This ambivalent stage is implied in *Days of Being Wild*. In this film, “What time is it?” is a recurrent question: when Yuddy flirts with So Lai-chen in her work kiosk, they look at the watch and it is 3 p.m.; when Mimi is staying in Yuddy’s flat for the first time, she asks about the time and it is 3 a.m.; when Yuddy and Chiu meet in the Philippines and share one hotel room, he asks about the time and it is again 3 a.m. Leung Ping-kwan observes the ambivalence of time in the film, pointing out that both 3 a.m. and 3 p.m. are ambiguous and transitional because they cannot be clearly categorized; 3 a.m. is midway between midnight and dawn; 3 p.m. is midway between noon and evening (see Lok 1995). This temporal ambiguity, I argue, hints at the political ambivalence of the transitional period in the 1960s, as well as the 1990s. Even in the 2000s, in fear of “mainlandization”, Hong Kongers’ anxiety over the loss of their local culture and identity was not resolved. Connoting a kind of in-between-ness, this ambiguous time is not only about Hong Kong’s cultural politics, but also carries transnational significance in terms of history writing, which I will analyze later.

3. The Memories of Journeys and Mobile Space

Travel is a pervasive subject in Wong Kar-wai’s films (Provencher 2016). Most of his characters live in mobility, such as Yuddy in *Days of Being Wild*. His life seems to be all about searching; he hunts for love and sex, as well as for his identity. However, as with his unsuccessful relationships, his desperate attempt to search for his roots is doomed since his birth mother in the Philippines refuses to see him. After that, Yuddy’s status as an “orphan”, just like Hong Kong’s status as “political orphan”, is confirmed. I argue that it is a declaration of rupture with roots and origin, and Wong uses a long take to stress this moment. Walking away from his birth mother’s grand mansion, which I regard as a symbol

of roots and enviable status, Yuddy knows that she is watching him from the window, yet he keeps going without looking back. “I just want to see her. She didn’t give me the chance, neither do I”, he says. A shot shows him walking into the woods from behind, shifting from normal speed to slow motion, for about one minute. The audience, just like his birth mother, cannot see his face. The sight of Yuddy’s back manifests his determination to create a point of rupture. The scene is set in the woods in which the trees are native to Southeast Asia and are foreign to Yuddy. In this natural environment, Yuddy cannot find a sense of belonging.

It is noteworthy that after his failure to see his birth mother, Yuddy stays in the Philippines and tries to get a fake US passport from a local gang without paying for it. The gangsters then chase after him and shoot him to death in a train. Wong Kar-wai does not reveal why Yuddy wants a fake passport so desperately, nor does the film make it clear where he plans to go with that passport. Instead of going back to Hong Kong, which does not seem homely to him, he desires a passport and another journey, for which he risks his life. At a time when 1997 was fast approaching, and the identities conferred by legitimate Hong Kong Chinese passports were promised, Wong’s character attempts to obtain a foreign passport. Yuddy’s desperate action in trying to meet his birth mother, leaving Hong Kong and obtaining a fake passport in the Philippines, suggests the ambivalence and conflict associated with a Hong Kong identity: an identity is important yet disposable in certain circumstances. Hence, if Hong Kong’s situation is comparable to that of an orphan, the passport scenario indicates the political reality that when one’s roots are impossible to find, it is pragmatic to get a foreign passport, even a fake one. The film is preoccupied with the political state in Hong Kong: Yuddy is dying to gain a passport in the 1960s, and so were Hong Kongers in the 1990s. Today, we see another wave of emigration in Hong Kong because of the changing political climate.²

In the 1990s, when people in Hong Kong were struggling to find an identity, Wong depicts an orphan figure that belongs neither here (Hong Kong) nor there (the Philippines). He experiences constant conflict with his foster mother in Hong Kong and is rejected by his biological mother in the Philippines. He is destined to travel. Despite Yuddy’s fruitless search and tragic death, an ambiguous Hong Kong identity surfaces, which is rootless and mobile. The physical mobility in the 1960s represents a cultural ambivalence.

The spatial elements in the film convey a sense of fluidity. Yuddy’s flat in Hong Kong, from which the two female protagonists come and go, is dark and gray. His foster mother’s home, in which she and Yuddy always quarrel, is not a loving place. Moreover, the mobile space in Yuddy’s journey is a crucial component in Wong Kar-wai’s nostalgic writings. In the Philippines, he lives in a small hotel in Chinatown. This hotel is as dark as his flat in Hong Kong, without warmth and hospitality. In the street, his money is stolen when he is drunk. This foreign space is hostile to him. His biological mother’s mansion is grand, but he is denied access to it. Eventually, he is killed in a moving train, whose destination is unknown to him. Another character, Chiu, a policeman, always patrols the streets in Hong Kong. Later, he travels to the Philippines, ready to become a sailor. All these spaces are mobile and temporary, suggesting their fluid life and unsettled identities.

In her writing about nostalgic films in Hong Kong, Lok (2002) notes how the characters’ spatial experiences reveal the fragmentation of historicity. For example, in *Rouge* (dir. Kwan 1987), the time-journey of the ghost, Fleur, is intended to arouse memory and history in Hong Kong (Lok 2002). Traveling from the 1930s to the 1980s to look for her lost lover, she is shocked and alienated by the drastic changes in urban space that point to the disappearance of historical evidence and the rupture of time in Hong Kong. Her tragedy is demonstrated by her unpleasant spatial experience. Focusing on mobile space, *Days of Being Wild* recounts stories about journeys and fluid identity in Hong Kong. Instead of constructing the past as a safe and warm haven, Wong stresses that fluidity and changeability have been unavoidable in Hong Kong’s history. The nostalgic theme in *Days of Being Wild* about a Hong Kong man being rejected by his mother, risking his life to obtain a fake passport, belonging to nowhere, and living a mobile life can be read as Hong Kong’s

cultural pathology. However, the portrayal of such a rootless position bears meanings not limited to Hong Kong culture. Rather, this kind of fluidity and ambivalence is against cultural homogeneity and official ideologies, whose significance is paradigmatic in our age of globalization and nationalism. Created within the post-colonial context of Hong Kong, Wong's nostalgic texts speak to a wider world.

In fact, after Yuddy's failure to reunite with his family, the characters in Wong's subsequent nostalgic films live even more mobile lives, and their identities are even more fluid. In *In the Mood for Love*, almost all the characters' lives are driven by a sense of mobility. They travel from Hong Kong to Singapore, Japan, the US, and the Philippines for various reasons. In Wong's depiction of the 1960s, there is no political unity and cultural purity to go back to (in the past) and go forward to (in the future). Wong has been telling stories about how Hong Kong people travelled in the past. It is a past full of journeys. If nostalgia is about searching for home, home itself for Wong's characters is often homelessness (Lei 2021), which is not only a cultural symptom found in Hong Kong, but also a phenomenon seen in other regions in our time of global travel culture.

In Wong's construction of the 1960s, his hometown Shanghai is a haunting shadow (Teo 2005). Even though the real Shanghai is never seen in his films, Wong is still regarded as the contemporary Hong Kong director with the most explicit "Shanghai complex" (Lit 2006, p. 90). The 1960s Hong Kong in his films echoes the 1930s and 1940s Shanghai. His cinematic imagination owes a debt to the style of Shanghai, which is an absent presence in his nostalgic texts (Marchetti 2016). In *Days of Being Wild*, a Shanghaiese-speaking foster mother has a Cantonese-speaking son, Yuddy. In *In the Mood for Love* and *2046*, Hong Kong in the 1960s bears a close resemblance to Shanghai with its dialect (Shanghaiese), costume (Shanghai-styled Cheongsam), music (the famous Shanghai singer Zhou Xuan's song), and interior design (the colors and setting of Shanghai style). The relationship and comparability between Shanghai and Hong Kong are noteworthy. Shanghai was once the most prosperous and multicultural city in China, before this status was transferred to Hong Kong after the Communist Party took power in 1949. During the 1950s and 1960s, a large number of people fled to Hong Kong from Shanghai. The decline of Shanghai offered Hong Kong several remarkable legacies: population, wealth, and talent. Immigrants from Shanghai stimulated the development of Hong Kong in many respects, including filmmaking (Lent 1990, p. 95).

Shanghai's culture and position are comparable to those of Hong Kong. As one of the earliest Chinese cities that was opened to and partly occupied by the West in the nineteenth century, Shanghai's prosperity relied largely on foreign investment and the co-existence of local and foreign culture (Chow 1991). Culturally and ideologically, Shanghai, as a metropolis with a transnational atmosphere, was seen as a strange land since the city was quite incompatible with "authentic" Chinese culture (Chow 1991). Given its international position and metropolitan culture, Hong Kong's distance from "authentic" Chinese culture is no less than Shanghai's. Because of the linkage and interchangeability between the two cities, Shanghai is always a significant presence and is the second most depicted city, next to Hong Kong itself, in Hong Kong cinema (Lit 2006). As the only city in mainland China that Wong refers to repeatedly, the cultural hybridity and internationalism of Shanghai are stressed. In other words, when Wong makes a cultural connection between Hong Kong and mainland China, what he chooses is not a city with a Chinese tradition, but one with a cosmopolitan culture. His choice constitutes an essential part of his nostalgic writing. While the object of nostalgia is a culturally hybrid city, the past is shown without roots or a purified history. Wong's preference displays a cosmopolitan touch of nostalgia, which not only connects Hong Kong to Shanghai, but also bears transnationalism that problematizes the restorative form of nostalgia. With hybrid, diverse cultural memories, the past is thus transnational, allowing little room for the construction of an exclusive form of historical discourses.

4. Spatialized Time: Hotel and Train

In Wong Kar-wai's films, space functions as a protagonist. His selection of locations bespeaks his thematic concern (Wang 2016). The accentuated spaces in his films, such as hotel rooms and modes of transportation, imply a way of historicizing against the rigidity of a grand narrative. Engendering discourses to legitimate certain forms of ultimate explanation of a "universal truth", grand narrative, as a reductionist notion, produces historical meanings with great heroes, great goals, and great voyages (Lyotard 1979). However, this does not concern people's actual lives and local perspectives. Nationalism, which guarantees a bright future for the nation, and modernity, which emphasizes progress and advancement, can both be understood as grand narratives with their focus on the idea of progress and the linearity of history. Wong's nostalgic texts can be seen as counter-discourse to the official narrative about Hong Kong history. According to the dominant nationalist narrative, Hong Kong's handover to mainland China is considered as an action of home-coming and a linear historical progression, marking the end of colonialism in China as well as the beginning of a bright future (Wong 2000). However, by showing marginalized, mobile space with ambiguous images, Wong offers a historical perspective against the grand narrative.

The Golden Pavilion brothel in *The Grandmaster* is used as the witness to history. In Wong Kar-wai's portrayal of 1930s Foshan, this splendid brothel is not presented as a place for sex, but a popular rendezvous for local martial artists. In the brothel, they gather, appreciate traditional music, exchange skills, fight a duel, and discuss the philosophy of kung fu. The kung fu master Ip Man's wife, Cheung Wing-sing, enjoys visiting the brothel for singing performances. Peripheral social groups, such as prostitutes and female martial artists, find their place in this brothel. For example, a nameless female fighter, whose feet are bound, challenges Ip Man. Even though she fails, her confidence and superb skill are presented in a respectable fashion. The film does not disclose her background, but this female fighter embodies the history of Chinese women, including the brutal tradition of foot binding and the modern history of women practicing kung fu in China. The marginalized history is found in this marginalized space, a brothel.

At the beginning of the film, the northern kung fu master, Gong Baosen, brings his daughter, Gong Er, to this brothel to watch his competition with Ip Man, telling her: "Things in the world can disappear anytime. If you don't take a look, they can be gone in a sudden." In his eyes, this brothel possesses a certain importance. After Ip's triumph over Gong Baosen, Gong Er fights Ip Man and wins. Again, their fight takes place in the brothel, which witnesses this young female martial artist's major achievement as a momentous event in the film. Gong Baosen's words seem to foresee the tragic change in this place. Later, in the wake of the outbreak of the Second Sino-Japanese war, the Japanese army occupies the brothel, and the kung fu masters' lives fall apart. The vicissitudes of the brothel echo the history. In contrast to the official space of government offices and the masculine space of battlefields, this seemingly "indecent", insignificant space, presents history and cultural details from an alternative perspective.

Instead of reproducing the good old days, Wong's films often create a defamiliarized and aestheticized past (Lee 2009). Another nostalgic film about the 1960s, *2046*, starts with ambiguous images that do not refer to the past. Through special effects, the opening scene displays a futuristic city with certain elements of Hong Kong's cityscapes, such as the neon lights. Then, a train station and a running train are shown. It looks like Hong Kong, but it is not Hong Kong. In this city, everything is on the move, and all the images are abstract. Inside a train in futuristic style, a man speaks in Japanese. By using these elements, the film's intention is not to reproduce the past as a comfortable place to revisit. As the visualization of a novel written by the protagonist Chow Mo-wan, these images present an uncanny space and a defamiliarized, multicultural past that do not function as home.

2046 is an interesting case in which the meanings of time and space are reversed. While the title *2046* seemingly indicates the year, 50 years after 1997, when the political

promise of Hong Kong's unchanged status will culminate according to the Sino-British Joint Declaration,³ what Wong presents is not the year 2046, but a hotel room numbered 2046 in the Oriental Hotel. Time is spatialized. In general, a hotel room is a space for itinerant people. In the film, the characters come and go from the hotel. This hotel varies from holiday hotels today because the residents (usually not tourists) live there on a comparatively long-term basis. Returning to Hong Kong from Singapore in 1966, right before the "1967 Riot", Chow decides to live in a hotel because of the social upheaval. Therefore, it is hard to define the Oriental Hotel, which is a place for neither a few nights' stay nor a long dwelling.

This hotel suggests Hong Kong's version of instability in a symbolic way. For the residents, the hotel rooms are their places yet not their own places. It is private, but not domestic. In addition, this hotel is not peaceful. At the beginning of the film, the hall dancer, Mimi, is killed by a drummer in her room. Living in the hotel, Jiewen and Jinwen are the daughters of the hotel owner. The teenage Jiewen runs away from home, and Jinwen falls in love with a Japanese man. However, their relationship is opposed by her father, who hates the Japanese. Bailing, a prostitute from mainland China, chooses the hotel as her temporary shelter. Murder, a runaway girl, a migrant, and forbidden inter-racial love are found in this hotel, which is dim, shabby, and confined. Wong's bold use of the hotel as a key space of Hong Kong stands in for the city's social upheavals, migratory history, and changing culture in the 1960s. The marginalized space of a shabby hotel embodies an alternative version of history, which can be seen as a symbol of resistance to any forms of grand narratives. Hence, its significance is not limited to Hong Kong's cultural politics.

If space and time are interchangeable concepts, time is spatialized by Wong Kar-wai as highly mobile space to refer to the changeable, contingent, and ambivalent characteristics of history. Via the use of space, *2046* demonstrates its way of viewing the past: Hong Kong's handover is far less than "the end of history". It is just another ambivalent point in history's contingency and changeability. Hence, while the film does not seem to address politics, it indeed challenges the linear concept of history. If there is a belief about history in Wong's films, it is the necessity of history's contingency, not progress, just like the unstable space in a hotel room. In fact, after the 1990s emigration wave from Hong Kong, another stream of emigration has happened in recent years as mentioned. History repeats itself, while Hong Kong people's anxiety and floating life continue.

In *2046*, there are layered temporal meanings about 2046. First, the film takes place in the 1960s, and the "1967 Riot" is mentioned as a reason for the social unrest. Second, when Wong made this film after the 1997 handover, the unstable space and itinerant characters from the 1960s have their implications for the current Hong Kong situation—the haunting anxiety brought about by the handover continued. Third, via the room 2046, this kind of anxiety is projected to the year 2046, connoting that there is no happy promised land in the future. In other words, chaotic history recurs. Therefore, by using the space as a metaphor for time, the film blurs the past (1967), the present (the 2000s [the film was made in 2004]), and the future (2046) within the dark hotel room 2046, which is both a critical reflection on Hong Kong's past and a skeptical vision of Hong Kong's future. Unlike restorative nostalgia that erases the ambivalence and complexity of history and stresses the continuity with the past (Boym 2002, pp. 42–43), Wong's nostalgia interrogates the idea of a linear history of the nation-state, which stresses advancement. Thus, the historical discourses delivered by his films should not merely be seen as a reflection of Hong Kong's cultural pathology, but also be treated as paradigmatic texts that challenge the grand narratives of nationalism and modernity.

Trains are a recurrent object in Wong Kar-wai's oeuvre. In *Days of Being Wild*, Yuddy is shot to death on a train in the Philippines; at the end of *Happy Together* (Wong 1997), Fai, on a running overhead train, anticipates returning to Hong Kong with uncertainty; in *The Grandmaster*, Gong Er is captured taking the train between different provinces in China. Trains, embodying a sense of mobility, are a motif in Wong's films. In *2046*, 2046 is not only a room number, but also the name of a mysterious place to where people can only take a

specific train. Via the depiction of this futuristic train, the blurring of the past, present, and future is again spatialized. *2047* is a novel written by Chow about the place 2046 in which “nothing ever changes”. This fictional world presents an inauthentic space that parallels Chow’s life (Bettinson 2015). In this novel, all the characters are embodiments of the people encountered by Chow in his life, such as Jinwen and her Japanese lover.

Instead of taking the passengers to any geographical location or bright future, the train’s destination is lost memory. Inside the train, a Japanese man is painfully obsessed with the past. With its futuristic style and its name’s political implication, the train does not head for a better tomorrow. Hence, the point where the past, present, and future overlap is a running train. When history is spatialized in an ever-moving train whose destination is obscure, there is no physically or ideologically stable place to settle down in this time-journey. Therefore, in the face of the political discourse about Hong Kong’s promising future after the handover, the film questions the notion of progression of history. At the end of the film, the future is literally referred to. After rejecting Bailing’s invitation to “go back to the way we were”, Chow is wearily alone in a taxi, and the film ends with the lines from the Hong Kong writer Liu Yi-chang’s novel *Drinker* (Liu [1963] 1979): “It was as if he’d boarded a very long train, heading for a drowsy future.” It might be the most political moment in the film: under the title *2046*, it ends with an unsure future.

2046’s cinematic style, as Lee (2016) observes, has a denaturalizing effect. The director’s use of skewed perspectives, visual imbalance, and violation of conventional shot compositions turns nostalgia into a subject of inquiry. When such techniques are employed to present mobile space as the train and hotel room, Wong’s nostalgia destabilizes our relationship with the past. This reflective nostalgia cherishes the fragments of memory. Focusing on its instability and contingency, this conception of history, via the spatialization of time, is in sharp contrast to restorative nostalgia that focuses on goals and progress.

5. Open Endings and Alternative Space

In Wong Kar-wai’s films, the characters often have an urge to seek a foreign space, such as the rainforest in *Days of Being Wild* and the ruins of Angkor Wat in *In the Mood for Love*. While the national narratives rely on nationalized public spaces such as monuments and museums, these accentuated spaces in Wong’s films do not refer to any imagining of modern nation-states. Rather, they appear to be mystic and pre-historical. For example, the rainforest first appears in the *Days of Being Wild* as a foreign, unreachable, and dreamlike space. It does not seem to belong to any period of history; thus, it is beyond the grand narrative of the nation. The only way to get close to this space in the film is via the character’s innermost feelings and psyches. It is an illusory space for Yuddy, who longs to find his biological mother in the Philippines. The landscape of the rainforest is presented by the camera from a flying bird’s point of view, which resonates with his floating life. This personal approach contradicts a grand narrative of history that often excludes individual memory and suppresses alternative narratives.

The reflective quality of Wong Kar-wai’s nostalgia is enhanced by the unconventional, non-closure endings of his films. The ending of *Days of Being Wild* introduces a new character who is supposed to be the protagonist in its sequel, but there was no sequel because of the film’s commercial failure.⁴ The ending scene presents a tiny, dim room with a very low ceiling, in which an unidentified man in a suit is ready to leave. After he turns off the light and leaves, the film finishes abruptly without telling the audience where he goes. Thus, strangely, the opening of a new chapter becomes the actual ending. This case coincidentally exemplifies how the making of films is as contingent as history.

It is noteworthy that some of Wong’s films end with journeys. *Ashes of Time* ends with Ouyang Feng burning his cottage and traveling to the western region in the desert; *Happy Together* ends with Fai taking an overhead train in Taipei before his uncertain journey back to Hong Kong. These endings are spatialized by ambiguous locales. At the end of *In the Mood for Love*, Chow visits Cambodia and hides the secret past—his unspeakable affair with So Lai-chen—in the ruins of Angkor Wat, the mysterious site in a foreign land. Before this

journey, Chow mentions an ancient myth about people finding a tree hole to confess and bury their secrets. Instead of a tree, he uses the ruins. Since the content of his confession is not revealed in the film, doubts remain about his secret, which is “history as a secret hidden in the ruins” (Berry and Farquhar 2006, p. 17). No one will ever know it. What people know, document, and remember, as shown in the film along with Chow’s hiding of his secret, is the official visit of the French president Charles de Gaulle to Cambodia in the 1960s. The news clip in the film displays an official colonial history of Cambodia, while Chow’s secret, the story of ordinary people, will remain unknown and silent. Indeed, the ruins in the film indicate an ancient time, which is mysterious, without the existence of modern nation-states. In addition, the folk myth of confessing to a tree is connected to a pre-historic era (Cook 2005). These traces, as pieces of time, do not refer to any official history. In this scene, high and low angles and dolly tracking are employed to capture the bleakness and desolation of the ruins, and a close-up shows the hole being filled by grass after Chow’s confession. Chow stays there until the sky darkens. Resembling a big cemetery, the ruins conceal the past, which is incomprehensible. This ending conveys the mystery of history.

Involving journeys, the so-called “endings” in Wong’s oeuvre do not offer traditional dramatic resolutions, often leaving the audience with doubts and questions. By challenging the linearity of storytelling and history, such endings distance Wong’s films from the discourse of a grand narrative. With such endings, the past in his films is never a comfortable site to revisit.

6. Conclusions

As mentioned, Hong Kongers’ anxiety has never been resolved until today. In the past decade or so, under the changing socio-political climates in the city, Hong Kong filmmakers have continued to make nostalgic films, such as *Gallants* (dir. Kwok and Cheng 2010), *Echoes of the Rainbow* (dir. Law 2010), *Ip Man: The Final Fight* (dir. Yau 2013), and *Anita* (dir. Leung 2021). Despite the differences between the films’ styles and subject matters, space is still a key element in these texts. For example, focusing on local communities, *Gallants* and *Echoes of the Rainbow* express affection for vanishing old neighborhoods in Hong Kong (Cheung 2016). The recent *Anita*, a biographical musical drama film about the late superstar, Anita Mui, vividly reconstructs several demolished urban landmarks in the 1960s and 1980s to provoke collective memories about the city’s golden era. Nostalgia in today’s Hong Kong cinema still prioritizes space in its narration of the past.

Wong Kar-wai’s films enable the multiple narratives of history and demonstrate the necessity of creating Hong Kong’s past from a reflective perspective. While his films can be seen as pessimistic in revealing the cultural pathologies of Hong Kong—concrete identity, stable space, and singular history are all impossible—they also positively produce space for cultural multiplicity. The nostalgic films in Hong Kong, best exemplified by Wong’s works, show the ambivalence of history in the post-colonial context (Chu 2004). Chu argues that there is no “pre-colonial” identity to set against the colonizer in Hong Kong (p. 332). Thus, there is never the binarism of “colonizer vs. colonized” or “colonial vs. native”. Since there is no pre-colonial past and native culture to return to, Hong Kong’s identity is rootless, and even nostalgia does not evoke an “original” or “pure” history of Hong Kong (Chu 2004, pp. 333–34). Wong’s films exhibit the creativity of Hong Kong cinema when the city has experienced anxiety in the past decades. By constructing the past, Wong articulates Hong Kong culture, which is resistant to grand narrative and political propaganda.

Seldom directly addressing political issues and social realities, his way of dealing with the past is through cultural ambivalence rather than political antagonism. His nostalgia, one might argue, does not go far enough in terms of political dissent. Yet here, I agree with Abbas’s (1997) argument that Wong’s approach of ambivalence is more powerful than the realist style in presenting Hong Kong. This strategy of cultural politics is well demonstrated by the spatialization of time in his films. Christina Lee (2008) correctly states that the nostalgia in Wong’s films is not only a reaction to the 1997 handover, but also

self-narrativizing amid colonization and globalization. On top of that, I would add that these texts are also responsive to nationalist discourse, in which restorative nostalgia is imbedded to construct a purified past.

From this angle, Hong Kong cinema can be understood in a global context. Today, the discourses of nationalism and globalization are increasingly powerful globally; the former tends to construct a singular form of history, and the latter often erases the traces of history. Resisting these trends, as I have argued elsewhere (Lei 2021), Wong Kar-wai's reflective nostalgia enables the pluralist writing of histories and the articulations of pluralist identities, which challenge these dominant ideologies. Hence, Wong's films are about Hong Kong but not only about Hong Kong. In our time, nostalgia is a global phenomenon. Wong's nostalgic texts, I argue, are globally significant because of the paradigmatic nature of the specific Hong Kong culture which they explore. Hong Kong's cultural symptom, driven by the anxieties regarding the narratives of time and the past, is in effect an intensified form of global culture that is brought about by the rise of nationalism and the power of globalization. His strategy of nostalgia, thus, is key in inspiring the reading of nostalgic texts within the present-day ideological landscape.

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Notes

- ¹ This short film is part of an international cooperation comprising three stories directed by Michelangelo Antonioni, Steven Soderbergh, and Wong Kar-wai under the title *Eros* (Wong et al. 2004).
- ² Before the 1997 handover, from the late 1980s to the 1990s, there was a wave of emigration, with more than 400,000 Hong Kong citizens moving to foreign countries (Huang 2005). In 1990 alone, 62,000 Hong Kong emigrants were documented (Welsh 1993, pp. 527–28). In recent years, especially after the Anti-Extradition Law Amendment Bill Movement in 2019, and the legalization of the Hong Kong National Security Law in 2020, the city saw another wave of emigration. According to the statistics released by the Census and Statistics Department of Hong Kong government, a net outflow of 75,300 people was recorded from mid-2020 to mid-2021.
- ³ According to the Sino-British Joint Declaration, the “one country, two systems” policy allows the city to enjoy a high degree of autonomy and continue its capitalist system and way of life for 50 years after the handover in 1997.
- ⁴ *In the Mood for Love* is vaguely related to *Days of Being Wild*, with the 1960s setting and the female character named So Lai-chen in both films. However, despite the connection, they are still different stories.

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