

Wong Kar-Wai:  
Redefining Hong Kong Through and Aesthetic of In-Between

Sarah Yeonkyung Choi

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Lorraine Audric

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*The past is something he could see, but not touch. And everything he sees is blurred and indistinct.* This is the inter-title that ends *In the Mood for Love* (2000). Along with atmospheric lighting, late-night cityscapes, kinetic camerawork, saturated colors, and sensuous soundtracks, nostalgia is central to the cinema of Wong Kar-wai, a renowned contemporary Hong Kongese film director so avant-garde and distinctive in his style that his title as an *auteur* is widely agreed upon. As he is notorious for filming without a finished script and having shooting ratios so high that sometimes the entire plot is cut from the final film,<sup>1</sup> it is safe to say that his films are most likely prized for a purely aesthetic reason: “Performance in Wong’s cinema becomes integrally absorbed into a sensuous aesthetic.”<sup>2</sup> Analysis of four images from *Fallen Angels* (1995), *Chungking Express* (1994), *In the Mood for Love* (2000), and *2046* (2004) will investigate how he uses formal attributes to represent time and space. Subsequently, I will be looking into how this spatio-temporal representation evokes feelings of loss, loneliness, and nostalgia, and finally, how this sentiment fosters a new cultural identity unique to Hong Kong, given the geopolitics of Hong Kong at the time.

I would also like to present his work as an exemplar of cinema in a globalised world, of a transnational cinema. In “Film Theory and Spectatorship in the Age of the ‘Posts,’” Robert Stam

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<sup>1</sup> Gary Bettinson, *Sensuous Cinema of Wong Kar-wai: Film Poetics and the Aesthetic of Disturbance* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2014), 1.

<sup>2</sup> Bettinson, *Sensuous Cinema of Wong Kar-wai*, 2.

and Ella Habiba Shohat argue that contemporary media is “at the very core of identity production,”<sup>3</sup> for it is essential to our discourse and understanding of multiculturalism, post-colonialism, transnationalism, and globalisation today, and call for cultural heterogeneity. In spite of the fact that the majority of cinemas and of film production in the world annually belong to the so-called ‘foreign film’ category (cinemas of Africa, Asia, and Latin America), this number is not proportionally represented in film screenings around the world nor in film studies, “enabling the imperial countries to monitor global communications and shape the image of world events.”<sup>4</sup>

Wong Kar-wai’s cinema is a new approach that cultivates a new Hong Kong cinema, as his principal theme of nostalgia incessantly places the present and the future in conversation with the past. As Stuart Hall remarks, cultural identity is “a matter of ‘becoming’ as well as of ‘being’”: “Far from being grounded in a mere ‘recovery’ of the past, which is waiting to be found, and which, when found, will secure our sense of ourselves into eternity, identities are the names we give to different ways we are positioned by, and position ourselves within, the narratives of the past.”<sup>5</sup> The manipulation of time and space in Wong’s cinema shows this constantly evolving relationship with the past and the dual nature of Hong Kong, being equally representative of two drastically different ideologies. This paper will first examine Hong Kong’s socio-political situation, and then present three techniques that create contradictory imagery: step-printing and the distortion of time, mirrors and the distortion of space, and repetition and the distortion of reality.

### ***Setting: One Country, Two Systems***

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<sup>3</sup> Robert Stam and Ella Habiba Shohat, "Film Theory and Spectatorship in the Age of the Posts," *Reinventing Film Studies* (2000).

<sup>4</sup> Stam and Shohat, "Film Theory and Spectatorship."

<sup>5</sup> Stuart Hall, "Cultural Identity and Cinematic Representation," *Framework: The Journey of Cinema and Media*, no. 36 (1989).

Hong Kong is the backdrop of Wong Kar-wai's life and the four films at the focus of this paper, *Fallen Angels* (1995), *Chungking Express* (1994), *In the Mood for Love* (2000), and *2046* (2004), the former two actually filmed at the same time. The latter two are explicitly set in the 1960s, the time of Wong's childhood, when the Cultural Revolution in mainland China inspired similar riots in 1966 Hong Kong, communists challenging British colonial policy.<sup>6</sup> On July 1, 1997, the former British colony was handed over to China as a 'Special Administrative Region of China,' under a fifty year plan until full economic and political integration into the Chinese system, during which Hong Kong would act as 'one country, two systems.' The last year of autonomy will be 2046.

Yet the handover is never explicitly mentioned in the cinema of Wong Kar-wai despite the fact that most of the films produced in Hong Kong at the time did, heavily.<sup>7</sup> Nonetheless, he addresses, through imagery, a new, distinct Hong Kong identity through the deconstruction of Hong Kong as the East-West city and depiction of it as a lost city.

In one of the opening shots of *Fallen Angels* (1995) (see *Figure 1*), a street in Hong Kong is shown late at night, saturated by its neon lights—the bright blue, green, yellow, and red signs bleed over their outlines, appearing smudged and making it impossible to read. These street signs of the upper-half of the image are reflected by rain on the asphalt road, dominating over the whole frame. Because the main subject of the image is the illegible neon signs, the Hong Kong that is depicted here by Wong is one of everyday life that cannot be clearly identified. Ackbar Abbas, author of *Hong Kong: Culture and the Politics of Disappearance*, remarks the absence of any popular landmarks and the Western architecture that gives Hong Kong its nickname, the East-West city: "[A] radical deframing that allows it to float free."<sup>8</sup> The nondescript location still offers an authentic

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<sup>6</sup> Kosuke Fujiki, "Trapped in Between: Interim Space/Time in Wong Kar-wai's *In the Mood for Love* and *2046*," *Cinema Studies*, no. 6 (2011), 62.

<sup>7</sup> Ackbar Abbas, "Wong Kar-wai's Cinema of Repetition," *A Companion to Wong Kar-wai* (Chichester: John Wiley & Sons, 2016), 117.

<sup>8</sup> Abbas, "Wong Kar-wai's Cinema of Repetition," 119.

contemporary representation, as the neon lights indicate the modernization brought about by a capitalist economic system profiting from Commonwealth preferences.<sup>9</sup>

Let's address the obvious! The image is tilted. Other prominent features of the image come from camera techniques: the use of a Dutch angle, or a camera tilt, and a wide angle, a short focal length resulting in the slight curvature of the image at the edges, due to the lens' physical shape. The two work together to create a visual imbalance and are well-known as cinematic techniques that relay the psychological uneasiness of the character. An interesting theory is proposed by Carl Cassegard, who views Hong Kong "rather than something in danger of disappearing...[as] something that appears to be always already lost," based on Freud's distinction between mourning and melancholia.<sup>10</sup> This melancholia emerges from the awareness of a future loss, a subsequent active decision to keep what will be lost alive in memory, concluding with a reassurance of the person's agency. Whether or not this is the particular emotion and reasoning intended, it is evident that Wong's creation of a smudged, tilted, and warped exhibit a turbulent state of mind.

### ***Step-printing: The Lonely Cop***

Dynamic editing and cinematography are characteristic of Wong's cinema, of which, the step-printing technique is perhaps the most notable example. Step-printing is an effect produced by shooting at a slow shutter speed and then duplicating the film frame to fit the standard 24 frames per second, resulting in a sensation of slowing down and speeding up at the time.<sup>11</sup> This distortion of time, as shown in *Figure 2*, isolates Cop 223, He Qiwu (Takeshi Kaneshiro), and reflects his feeling of loneliness.

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<sup>9</sup> Fujiki, "Trapped in Between," 62-63.

<sup>10</sup> Carl Cassegard, "Ghosts, Angels and Repetition in the Films of Wong Kar-Wai," *Film International* 3, no. 4 (2005), 11.

<sup>11</sup> Shohini Chaudhuri, "Color Design in the Cinema of Wong Kar-wai," *A Companion to Wong Kar-wai* (Chichester: John Wiley & Sons, 2016), 162.

*Figure 2* shows, at the very center of the image, the side profile of a man running. Although the whole image is blurry, the man is undoubtedly the principal subject, as he is the only figure rendered somewhat visible: he is wearing a beige coat, a patterned collared shirt and tie, and a serious, hurried look on his face. His left hand is the only clear object. To his left, there are incomprehensible streaks of blue, white, and red lights to his left. To his right, the streaks are still intelligible, but evidently, characters of some kind; a written sign. The luminous quality of the colors and the darkness at the edges of the image denote that it is past sundown. The motion captured indicates that the frame is in some sort of slow motion. Abbas calls this ‘smudge motion,’ the division of real-time into discontinuous, distinct split-seconds. Yet, there is “a visual bridge between one moment and another, [that traces] the moment that slips past before it can be grasped...[the moment that is] both there and already vanished.”<sup>12</sup> *déjà disparu*. Because the film frame is doubled, the slowed down snapshot of motion that we see is a repetition of a previous image that now belongs to the past. The past moment brings out a sensation of a loss, indicative of and adding to the Cop 223’s fixation with a fraction of time. At the end of the chase sequence, he momentarily brushed shoulders with a woman in a blonde wig, regarding whom he narrates: *At closest, we were just 0.1 millimeters away from each other. In fifty-seven hours, I would fall in love with her*. He later reflects back on this moment, remarking, *We were just 0.1 millimeters from each other. I know nothing about her. Six hours later, she would fall in love with another man*. This chance encounter in the urban crowd is a common motif in Wong’s cinema, as “emblematic for the flux and unpredictability of human relations in late modernity.”<sup>13</sup> Thus, step-printing not only visibly singles out Cop 223 but also sheds light on his emotional isolation, as he places significance on the nanosecond that he knew someone else.

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<sup>12</sup> Chaudhuri, “Color Design in the Cinema of Wong Kar-wai,” 165.

<sup>13</sup> Cassegard, “Ghosts, Angels and Repetition in the Films of Wong Kar-Wai,” 14

### ***Mise-en-scene: Unrequited Lovers***

A man and woman are caught in the midst of laughter in *Figure 3*. Although the man is turned towards the side, rendering his face undetectable, a mere quarter-profile reveals the smile lines around his eyes. Something about the laughter is intimate, given the intensity of the woman's eyes fixed upon the man, presumably returned by the man. She is wearing a vibrant pink and green cheongsam, a dress featuring a high, neck-hugging collar originated in 1920s Shanghai and modernised for everyday wear in the 1960s. With the exception of the center, the entire image is obscured by brick-red contours, denoting that this image is in fact the reflection of the two in a mirror. The mirror is most representative of how the mise-en-scene in *In the Mood for Love* (2000) creates a confined space reflective of the nature of Mrs. Chan (Maggie Cheung) and Chow Mo-wan (Tony Leung)'s relationship, an 'interim space' between reality and an alternate reality.

Mrs. Chan and Mr. Chow are pictured in her rented room, door number 2046, the only indoor space where the two, both married, can be free of their neighbors' scrutiny and surveillance. Upon spending time together, they eventually fall in love, but cannot act upon it because their respect partners turn out to be pursuing an affair with each other, and they agree that they would be no better if they did the same. Consequently, most of the film takes place in cramped corridors, staircases, narrow streets, taxis, and reflections in the form of a frame within a frame. In fact, when characters enter a room from the corridor, the camera often stays outside, using the doorway to frame the room. If the inside of the room is to be shown, it is only through reflections of a mirror and/or "with visual obstruction caused by various forms of blockage."<sup>14</sup> Just as filmmakers use frames to enclose the bounds of a fictional world, the frame within a frame here is symbolic of the characters' desired narrative. Room 2046 is Mr. Chow and Mrs. Chan's only refuge to enjoy each other's company, and it is no accident that all but one scene set in this room is filmed through

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<sup>14</sup> Fujiki, "Trapped in Between," 69.

reflections.<sup>15</sup> However, the blockage caused by elements of their reality, such as the dark red shapes in *Figure 3*, withholds the audience and the characters alike from getting lost in their imagination, the image of a happy couple laughing.

Trapped feeling is further echoed by. Due to the "close-fitting classic style and high neck, the dress embodies social constraints, yet its figure-hugging contours and modern prints with bold geometric or floral designs make it amorous and sensuous."<sup>16</sup> The duality of suffocation and sensuality in the cheongsam and the contradiction of objects in reality obscuring a reflected reality in the mirror places elements visually at odds with each other. Thus, the characters are placed in a state of limbo that their impossible love, leaving them with no option but to wait.

### ***Repetition: Man In Denial***

Chow Mo-wan (Tony Leung) leisurely smokes a cigarette in a crowded restaurant, the only still subject in *Figure 4*. Seemingly lost in contemplation, his solitude is directly in contrast with the fast-pace of city life demonstrated by the step-printing technique: to his left, a waiter is transformed into a smear, and to his right, the men dining are completely out of focus. He takes no notice of them, however. The solitary individual at the subject of this image is the same character played by the same actor from *Figure 3*, still just as much in love with Mrs. Chan. Although not very apparent in this snapshot, the repetition of characters and dates in *2046* (2004) communicate Mr. Chow as a man in denial, stuck in between the past and present, and living in a realm of memory not authentic to the past but reconstructed over time.

*In the year 2046, a vast rail network spans the globe. A mysterious train leaves for 2046 every once in a while. Every passenger going to 2046 has the same intention: they want to*

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<sup>15</sup> Fujiki, "Trapped in Between," 69-70.

<sup>16</sup> Chaudhuri, "Color Design in the Cinema of Wong Kar-wai," 168.

*recapture lost memories*. The beginning lines describe the premise of a sci-fi novel, Mr. Chan's latest project. In the memory of his lost love Mrs. Chan, he tries to rent a room with the door number 2046, the same number of her old apartment, but as it was occupied at the time, he rents room 2047 and watches people move in and out of 2046. The repetition of actors, characters, storylines, and specific door numbers express an unwillingness to let go of the past, built-upon through an informal trilogy consisting of *Days of Being Wild* (1990), *In the Mood for Love* (2000), and *2046* (2004): "Each film attempts to re-describe a spatial and affective order of things that stubbornly refuses definition and resolution."<sup>17</sup> Each film returns to 1960s Hong Kong, a reoccurrence explained by Ackbar Abbas as a result of the individuals' inability to understand the past.<sup>18</sup> They cannot explain the past, so they relive it, over and over again.

This idea of revisiting is furthered by the use of inter-titles that divides the majority of the film into specific dates: *22 May 1967*, *Christmas Eve 1967*, *Christmas Eve 1968*, and *Christmas Eve 1969*, *Christmas Eve 1970*.<sup>19</sup> The repetitiveness of Christmas Eve evince Mr. Chan's successful denial of the passage of time, as he engages in multiple love affairs with little emotional attachment due to his profound loyalty to the memory of Mrs. Chan. The timelessness of his idealized love is confirmed by his creation of a fictional city in which nothing ever changes, a place called 2046. Scenes on a train destined to 2046 are cut by inter-titles reading *1 hour later*, *10 hours later*, *100 hours later*, and *1000 hours later* yet are succeeded by the same scenery with no indication of the time elapsed. Thus, *2046* (2004) is a film dealing with Mr. Chan living in a fantasized past and his future recovery.<sup>20</sup>

The past-present interim where he resides is symbolic of the "unique situation of colonial Hong Kongers—anxiously anticipating the future, nostalgically recalling the past, helpless to arrest

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<sup>17</sup> Abbas, "Wong Kar-wai's Cinema of Repetition," 115.

<sup>18</sup> Abbas, "Wong Kar-wai's Cinema of Repetition," 116.

<sup>19</sup> Abbas, "Wong Kar-wai's Cinema of Repetition," 117

<sup>20</sup> Cassegard, "Ghosts, Angels and Repetition in the Films of Wong Kar-Wai," 14.



the ephemeral present—[that] was perfectly captured by Wong's visual manipulations of cinematic time"<sup>21</sup> and space, I would argue. Whether that be the peculiar combination of fast and slow through step-printing or of reality and fantasy through the use of mirrors, the characters are constantly in a world that is neither this nor that. Yet what is central to their identity is that being this and that at the time, and as Stuart Hall mentioned earlier, identity constantly undergoes change. Regarding his common use of repetition in his films, Wong Kar-wai says there comes novelty in repeated action, through small changes that can eventually push the characters to be free of their past and regain mindfulness of the present.<sup>22</sup> It reminds me of one of Nietzsche's maxims: "Bad! Bad! What? Is he not going backwards? Yes! But you ill understand him if you complain about it. He goes backwards as everyone goes backwards who wants to take a big jump." In like manner, Wong's depiction of Hong Kong as a place of in-between does not necessarily signal that Hong Kong is hopelessly stuck, but perhaps on the brink of a major transformation.

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<sup>21</sup> Bettinson, *Sensuous Cinema of Wong Kar-wai*, 51.

<sup>22</sup> Cassegard, "Ghosts, Angels and Repetition in the Films of Wong Kar-Wai," 11.

## Images



*Figure 1. Fallen Angels (1995), still*

An opening wide angle and dutch angle shot of Hong Kong's cityscape at night. The vivid colors from the neon lights, the main subject of the frame, are blurred by jerky camera movement and reflected by the rain on the ground. The street is unremarkable and unidentifiable.



*Figure 2. Chungking Express (1994), still*

A snapshot taken from a chase sequence prompted by Cop 223, He Qiwu (Takeshi Kaneshiro) and produced using step-printing, a technique that manipulates the frame speed to create a fractured and distorted effect.



*Figure 3. In the Mood for Love (2000), still*

The mirror-reflection of Mrs. Chan (Maggie Cheung) and Chow Mo-wan (Tony Leung) in room 2046, the only space in which the two can avoid the scrutiny and judgment of their neighbors and landlords. The two are both married and with their respective partners, have rented rooms adjacent to each other, only to discover that her husband and his wife are having an affair.



*Figure 4. 2046 (2004), still*

On Christmas Eve 1968, Chow Mo-wan (Tony Leung) takes his time smoking a cigarette in a restaurant buzzing with holiday leisure. He is the only still subject in the frame, as the step-printing technique transforms the figures around him into fragments and blurs. He is the same character played by the same actor in *In the Mood for Love* (2000) and briefly in *Days of Being Wild* (1990), which along with *2046* (2000) comprise of an informal trilogy.



## Annotated Bibliography

Abbas, Ackbar. "Wong Kar-wai's Cinema of Repetition." *A Companion to Wong Kar-wai*, edited by Martha P. Nochimson, 115-134. Chichester: John Wiley & Sons, 2016. <https://doi.org/10.1002/9781118425589.ch14>

Abbas analyzes Wong Kar-wai's cinema as one of repetition, one that creates meaning through the subtle differences between what is being repeated. Although he states that Wong Kar-wai never explicitly addresses the political situation in Hong Kong through his films, Abbas claims that his use of repetition is politically significant—he creates a double logic of resemblance and disconnection by revisiting and showing what has not changed, as Abbas puts it. Abbas' focus on the *Days of Being Wild*, *In the Mood for Love*, and *2046* is particularly useful for the analysis of my last image.

Bellour, Raymond and Allyn Hardyck. "Chungking Express: Slow - Images - Ahead." *A Companion to Wong Kar-wai*, edited by Martha P. Nochimson, 345-352. Chichester: John Wiley & Sons, 2016. <https://doi.org/10.1002/9781118425589.ch14>

In his essay on the use of time in *Chungking Express*, Bellour breaks down the usage of micro series, a tiny set of still frames that reoccurs throughout the film, particularly in the beginning and once more at the very end, in creating a distortion of time to convey the character's inner emotions. One of the four images that I will be focusing on is deals with this effect of jitteriness and stillness, a technique called step-printing that duplicates a film frame to achieve a slow-motion look and isolate the character involved.

Bettinson, Gary. *Sensuous Cinema of Wong Kar-wai: Film Poetics and the Aesthetic of Disturbance*. Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2014.

The first chapter of this book gives a background on Wong Kar-wai's life and summarises the arguments made by many theorists on his work, such as Stephen Teo and Ackbar Abbas, whose works I was also looking into as a part of my research. His comments on Abbas' essay, *Hong Kong: Culture and the Politics of Disappearance* (1997) gave insight on the potential cultural allegory or Wong's works, although it remains merely a theory. Chapter three delves into the more technical aspects of Wong's stylistic choices, proving how these techniques such as blocked compositions, facial masking, canted angles, and discontinuity editing add to an aesthetic of disturbance, as the aesthetic of his films work hand-in-hand with the narrative.

Cassegard, Carl. "Ghosts, Angels and Repetition in the Films of Wong Kar-Wai." *Film International* 3, no. 4 (2005): 10-23. <https://doi.org/10.1386/fiin.2005.3.issue-1>.

In the fourth issue of *Film International* (vol.3), sociology professor Carl Cassegard of Gothenburg University looks into how Wong Kar-wai uses repetitions to evoke memory and to exteriorize internal struggles. He offers a psychoanalytical reading to the element of fantasy in regards to memory and delves into two main motifs found in Wong's filmography: chance encounters and empty apartments. This text was particularly relevant, as it takes as examples *2046*, *Chungking Express*, *In the Mood for Love*, and *Fallen Angels*, the four films that I would like to focus on in my paper.

Chaudhuri, Shohini. "Color Design in the Cinema of Wong Kar-wai." *A Companion to Wong Kar-wai*, edited by Martha P. Nochimson, 153-181. Chichester: John Wiley & Sons, 2016. <https://doi.org/10.1002/9781118425589.ch14>

This chapter focuses on the use of color in Wong's filmography, speaking not only of his work but also of his long-term contributors William Chang and Christian Doyle, breaking down the differences between Western and Eastern cultural implications of certain colors, explaining the relationship between music and color (the two prominent factors that add to the sensuous quality of Wong's films), and analyzing two visual elements that I am particularly interested in using in my paper: smudge-motion and the cheongsam in *In the Mood for Love*.

Hall, Stuart. "Cultural Identity and Cinematic Representation." *Framework: The Journey of Cinema and Media*, no. 36 (1989): 68-81. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/44111666>.

Hall speaks of the complexity of a cultural identity, dividing it into two trains-of-thought: the first being an idea of collectivity, of shared culture, and the second being a continual process of 'becoming.' In the latter, he raises an interesting point about the role of time in all of this, as he believes a cultural identity is not fixed and already established as we tend to assume, but a union of the future just as much as the past. As time, especially the narrative of displaced time, is a common theme in Wong Kar-wai's work, I thought Hall's remarks were worth mentioning alongside his films.

Fujiki, Kosuke. "Trapped in Between: Interim Space/Time in Wong Kar-wai's *In the Mood for Love* and *2046*." *Cinema Studies*, no. 6 (2011): 62-84. [https://www.jstage.jst.go.jp/article/jscsj/6/0/6\\_62/\\_pdf](https://www.jstage.jst.go.jp/article/jscsj/6/0/6_62/_pdf)

Kosuke breaks down, in detail, the use of time and space in *In the Mood for Love* and particularly in *2046*, becoming my main source of information for my analysis of the two films. He refers to specific inter-titles and even gives insight into a pun on the Cantonese and Mandarin Chinese word for 'clock,' a noteworthy detail that I would have surely never known otherwise. He also goes in depth to the political situation in Hong Kong, citing Article 5 of the Hong Kong Basic Law. This essay significantly furthered my understanding of the cultural context behind Wong's works.

Stam, Robert, and Ella Habiba Shohat. "Film Theory and Spectatorship in the Age of the Posts." *Reinventing Film Studies* (2000): 381-401.

In this chapter, Stam and Shohat explain the importance of contemporary media in creating identity and the inconsistency of the identity represented in our media to the identity present in our society. The so-called 'Third World cinema,' cinema from Africa, Asia, and Latin America, actually make the most films; in fact, films from Asian countries constitute over half of the world's yearly production. Globalization has supported a western cultural homogenisation that is in continuous dialogue with the multiculturalism and transnationalism of the post-modern era, of the post-modern cinema: 'global culture does not so much replace local culture as coexist with it.' The relationship between local and

global culture that Stam and Shohat brings to our attention is one that is very apparent in the geopolitics of Hong Kong and one which permeates through the film of Wong Kar-wai.

Yue, Audrey. "The Sinophone Cinema of Wong Kar-.wai » *A Companion to Wong Kar-wai*, edited by Martha P. Nochimson, 232-249. Chichester: John Wiley & Sons, 2016. <https://doi.org/10.1002/9781118425589.ch14>

Yue's approach to situating Wong Kar-wai's films in Sinophone cinema was extremely useful, as she broke down his filmography into three groups: translocal, minor transnational, and peripheral China. She provided detailed examples as to how Wong used dialects and specific geographic locations to demonstrate the Chineseness and non-Chineseness of Hong Kong that it central to its identity.