Directed and written by Wong Kar-Wai
Produced by Yi-kan Chan and Jeffrey Lau
Original Music by Frankie Chan (as Fan-Kei Chan), Michael Galasso and Roel A. Garcia
Cinematography by Christopher Doyle and Wai-keung Lau
Film Editing by William Chang, Kit-Wai Kai and Chi-Leung Kwong

Brigitte Lin...Woman in blonde wig (as Ching-hsia Lin)
Tony Leung Chiu Wai...Cop 663
Faye Wong...Faye
Takehsi Kaneshiro...He Zhiwu, Cop 223
Valerie Chow...Air Hostess
Chen Jinquan...Manager of 'Midnight Express'
Lee-na Kwan...Richard (as Guan Lina)


The innovation of this group of filmmakers was linked to the and Patrick Tam (with whom Wong worked and collaborated). Assistants to First Wave directors such as Tsui Hark, Ann Hui, and then later for films. Wong's directorial debut 1989 Cinematica's 'New Wave' movement, which rose to prominence in the 1980s Second New Wave of Hong Kong filmmakers who continued to develop the cinema as well as its relation to mainland China are distinct. Consequently, the themes connected to identity and Hong Kong's relation to China were broadened and modernised. The identity of Hong Kong is perpetually marked by its closeness to the motherland China and its Western link as a British colony. Yet in the face of its history, Hong Kong has duly created its own culturally specific identity, one that inevitably combines both elements of the West and Mainland China. The cinema of Hong Kong reflects this notion of a dual identity, combining to create a third, localised identity. Significant in this respect is Hong Kong cinema's 'New Wave' movement, which rose to prominence in 1979.

Varying from his New Wave counterparts' preoccupation with the 1997 handover, Patrick Tam's contribution to the New Wave movement came via his interest in the influence of the West and Japan on Hong Kong. His exploration of a society rapidly consuming Western and Japanese popular culture led him to reveal the "no man's land of Hong Kong's cultural, spiritual and geographical dislocation". Tam's interest in themes of dislocation and alienation can be identified in the work of his protégé Wong Kar-wai. Notably, Wong was the screenwriter of Tam's 1987 Final Victory and Tam supervised the editing on Wong's 1991 Days of Being Wild. Both directors combined their preoccupation with themes of isolation and dislocation with a striking visual aesthetic. It is this exact visual and thematic amalgamation that signifies Wong's mode of filmmaking. He works outside of the usual representational approaches that underpin classical narrative cinema and transcends artistic boundaries. Moments, questions and answers are infinite for Wong as he attempts to charter the terrain of his lovelorn outsiders. Wong's status as a postmodern auteur sees him delve into 'moments' that are linked to both history and the personal, whether directly or indirectly. Notions of identity and the ever-present fusion between East and West find context in the themes of love, loneliness and alienation that pervade his protagonists. Tension between the past and present is linked to memory, desire, time, space and environment. Hong Kong cinema's complex status as both a national and 'transnational' cinema as well as its relation to mainland China are distinct issues in the quest to define Hong Kong cinema. Wong's art of filmmaking is crucial in discussing an innovative and inimitable cinema that is at once collective and exclusive. His focus on detail over totality consolidates his talent for creating a distinct mood and atmosphere, a visual pastiche of colours and emotions.

After obtaining a diploma in graphic design from the Hong Kong Polytechnic School in 1980, Wong became a television production assistant. Following work on several television drama series, he began working as a scriptwriter for television and then later for films. Wong's directorial debut As Tears Go By (1988) marked his unique visual style and was screened as part of the 'Critics' Week' at the 1989 Cannes International Film Festival. Wong's next film Days of Being Wild, which featured several of Hong Kong's beautiful and popular young stars, won five Hong Kong Film Awards.
including Best Film and Best Director. His following effort, *Ashes of Time* (1994), varied greatly in genre, successfully subverting the conventions of the period martial-arts drama. During a break in the post-production of *Ashes of Time*, Wong made *Chungking Express* (1994), which later became a cult hit. Following this came *Fallen Angels*, which received considerable critical success when it was premiered at the 1995 Toronto Film Festival. In 1997, *Happy Together* premiered at the Cannes Film Festival where it garnered a Best Director Award for Wong. In 2000, Wong’s *In The Mood For Love* was also awarded Cannes accolades, including Best Actor for Tony Leung Chi-wai and the Technical Prize. Wong is currently completing his latest film entitled *2046*, his first science fiction film to date.

As with Wong’s other films such as *Chungking Express*, *Days of Being Wild*, *Happy Together* and *Fallen Angels*, *In the Mood for Love* dictates the arbitrary nature of romance and the notion of the ‘missed moment’. In fact, the permeating concept of the ‘moment’ is a crucial component of Wong’s oeuvre. He consistently employs a signature ‘parallelling’ and ‘intersecting’ rhetoric in which his characters arbitrarily cross paths. Wong’s protagonists are most often revealed to be a set of individuals existing within the visual array of urbanity. As in *Days of Being Wild*, *Chungking Express* and *Fallen Angels*, Hong Kong provides the ideal setting for this exposition of human contact within a buzzing cosmopolitan city that is both vibrant and brash. Wong successfully grants introspective gazes at his characters (usually in sets of twos), exploring their insecurities, personal motives and ultimately the random nature of relationships. With *In the Mood for Love*, the focus centres on the jilted figures of Chow Mo-wan (Tony Leung Chi-wai) and Su Li-zhen (Maggie Cheung Man-yuk). Their isolation and longing is transformed into a melange of intersecting paths and poignantly shared moments in which the possibility of a soulful connection is entertained. Again, Wong’s arbitrary rhetoric finds expression in the poetic and brightly drenched tones of his unique filmic aesthetic, and his much-loved themes of loneliness, isolation, and longing rise to the surface. However, whilst *In the Mood for Love* incorporates all of his usual stylistic and thematic traits, it also ascends to a new level where the cultural significance of Wong’s setting is explored in greater detail.

A title card at the beginning of *In the Mood for Love* reads: ‘It is a restless moment. Hong Kong 1962.’ This verse immediately triggers the mood of both the protagonists and the wider, social environment. At this time in 1962, 13 years after Mao and the Communist party’s rise to power in Mainland China, Hong Kong remained a British Colony. However, during the 1960s there was considerable unrest as a result of the wider social and political situation that was existing in the world. The threat of the spread of Communism inspired the Cold War between the Soviet Union and the United States that was to centre heavily on Southeast Asia as a focal point for the competition between the global powers. In addition, the Vietnam War and China’s support for the North Vietnamese Communist regime made the threat of Communism genuine. Naturally, Hong Kong’s proximity to Southeast Asia made it a serious candidate for the Domino theory of a looming Red presence ready to advance upon any territory. China’s hostile opposition of capitalism and imperialism also increased Hong Kong citizens’ fears that China would not wait for the end of Britain’s lease in 1997 to regain control of the territory. Many Hong Kong residents saw it in their best interests to leave Hong Kong and find homes elsewhere.

In both *Days of Being Wild* and *In the Mood for Love*, Wong recreates a ‘60s Hong Kong that is both nostalgic and contemporary, evoking both tradition and modernity. Significantly, the ‘60s era represents the childhood period of the directors of the Second Wave. Wong himself was five years old when he moved from Shanghai to Hong Kong. Thus, the recreation of this period is deeply nostalgic and sentimental in its theme of Hong Kong as home. Wong’s portrait of 1960s Hong Kong is both retro and commodity conscious, with clear influences from the West and Japan. The ‘restless moment’ and mood of uncertainty that defines both the protagonists and the era is significant within *In the Mood for Love*. Indeed, Wong’s films may not be directly or overtly political, however there is often an “indirect relation to the political” via Wong’s conveying of “a particularly intense experience of the period as an experience of the negative; an experience of some elusive and ambivalent cultural space that lies always just beyond our grasp”. The sense of history and nostalgia that pervades *In the Mood for Love* is a signature of Wong’s style and reminiscent of filmmakers such as Alain Resnais, Jean-Luc Godard and Krzysztof Kieslowski. With history and nostalgia, however, come change and the notion of ‘before’ and ‘after’. The protagonists are caught in a constantly evolving space where time can stand still or be momentarily captured, but will eventually succumb to expiration. The inevitability of change brings with it a nostalgia and reminiscence that often evoke melancholy. Following Chow and Su Li-zhen’s return to their former home, a title card reads: ‘That era has passed. Nothing that belonged to it exists anymore’. The characters whose identities are inexorably shaped by the past express Wong’s nostalgia for an era passed. Su Li-zhen’s Shanghaiese landlady “can’t bear to throw things away” and Chow must physically unburden himself of the past by burying his memory in an ancient monument. Reminiscent of the female leads in *Chungking Express* and *Fallen Angels*, Su Li-zhen (unbeknownst to Chow) visits his apartment in Singapore and fetishes over his
belongings, lying on the bed and taking a solitary drag from one of his cigarettes.

The notion of time is a pervading concept in all of Wong’s films. His preoccupation with capturing time is constantly evident, his camera doting on specific moments and intent on finding difference in repetition. In both Chow and Su Li-chen’s offices, there are clocks that oversee them. Particularly reminiscent of the clock in Days of Being Wild is the large Siemens clock that is prominent in Su Li-chen’s office interior. Time and again the camera studies the stark black and white face of the clock as it attempts to capture the time that is constantly advancing. In the first part of Chungking Express, Cop #233 (Takeshi Kaneshiro) obsessively eats cans of pineapple with the expiry date of the 1st of May, convinced that everything has an expiry date, including love. In Fallen Angels, the hit man Wong (Leon Lai-ming) says “I do not know who these people are and I do not care, soon they will be history” and in Happy Together, Wong effectively captures the period of Hong Kong’s return to China. Time and memory are inexorably linked, and these notions are in turn linked to both the personal and the historical. Wong depicts the transience of life and reveals that nothing is permanent in the worlds he creates. However, he also conceives characters that despite living in the present ‘moment’ are maimed by their “desperate attempt to find something stable”. His characters’ lack of roots or painful personal history means they are forced to create their own history. Consequently, Wong acknowledges the significance and pervasiveness of history, especially for Hong Kong citizens who are constantly in transition. He also observes modernity and technology as discourses that must be worked with and not against. The result is often characters with fragmented identities whose inner struggle and quests for clarity in a dynamic social world ensure their validity.

In the Mood for Love continues Wong’s tradition of capturing moments within a potentially isolating and disconnected environment and bears resemblance to his other 1960s homage Days of Being Wild, which is believed (through Wong’s own statements on both films and popular perception) to be the first installment to In the Mood for Love. Set in the ‘60s, Days of Being Wild presents young adults who are both lost and vulnerable. The film’s protagonist is an A Fei named Yuddy (Leslie Cheung Kwok-wing), A Fei being a “euphemism forbaseline-haired and rock-loving delinquents and unsavoury teenagers with gangland connections”. The characters within this film are connected to other individuals, even if arbitrarily, yet unable to initiate lasting relationships. Their sense of desolation and perceived lack of identity pervades every aspect of their lives. Yuddy is both “macho and vulnerable, sensitive and insensitive”, representing the “undefined soul of Hong Kong who seeks to find himself an identity he can respect”. Days of Being Wild is a chamber film that evokes the utmost of personal emotions through unspoken words, desire, the notion of possibility and the melancholy of detachment. The film’s constant reference to time, via repeated shots of ticking clocks, alludes to the 1997 issue as well as the sheer intangibility and fleetingness of time. When Yuddy meets Maggie Cheung’s character, he charismatically exclaims, “let’s be friends for one minute”. This same sentimentality and awareness of time permeates In the Mood for Love. Wong creates an internal world in which time is homogenous and ephemeral. His protagonists are caught in a quasi-dreamscape where time and memory cannot be secured.

Music is also a prominent and strategic element in all of Wong’s films. Musical repetition is often employed to articulate which that is unsaid or that which cannot be expressed via words and dialogue. Moreover, Wong’s “deconstructing and modernisation of genres involves re-interpreting codes, a process in which music is central”. The notion of re-interpretation is particularly evident in two of Wong’s earlier films. David Martinez asserts that ‘40s and ‘50s music is used to re-create the ‘60s era in Days of Being Wild and a score by composer Frankie Chan and “inspired by Ennio Morricone’s spaghetti western music” is used for the martial arts epic Ashes of Time. In Chungking Express music is used to evoke emotion and create atmosphere but also as an identification tool for the character of Faye (Faye Wong). The Mamas and Papas’ 1960s track “California Dreamin’” plays continuously throughout the second half of the film, and becomes a trademark of Faye’s presence within a scene. The song not only allows her to transcend her spatial and temporal boundaries and “represents her state of mind but also emphasizes her as a subject who prefers music to words as a way of expression and communication”. Notably, the Cantonese translation of Western pop songs is a favourite cultural traverse of Wong’s, as evident in the Cantonese version of The Cranberries’ “Dreams” in Chungking Express, Berlin’s “Take My Breath Away” in As Tears Go By and the re-orchestration of Massive Attack’s “Karma Koma” in Fallen Angels. It is this willingness to borrow and reformulate influences and reference popular culture that contributes to Wong’s status as a postmodern auteur and makes his films both local and ‘transnational’ in execution. The rhythmic presence in the construction of shots and the pastiche of eccentric audio-visual rhymes and coincidences also allude to Wong’s musical sensibility.

Wong’s ‘MTV aesthetic’ that finds an equilibrium between sound and image retains a sentimentality that does not succumb to an ‘empty’ spectacle, or allow it to be subsumed by a postmodern ethos. Wong effectively highlights the fact that people (who make up part of the postmodern pastiche) are in close physical proximity, but can be so far apart, and indeed are so very far apart, at the same time. The literary nature of Wong’s films is often ignored in favour of readings that focus on the visual splendour of his film aesthetic. Nevertheless, his penchant for voiceover monologues and written captions are also part of his signature compositions. The isolation of his characters often gives way to voiceover monologues in which his character’s status as outsiders is constantly reiterated. The alienating space
of the city is often the backdrop for inhabitants who struggle to mentally articulate their own sense of place and identity within the urban landscape. This translates to a visual pastiche of deeply drenched colours and stylised camera shots. Chungking Express adopts this rhetoric using MTV editing vocabulary and by constantly manipulating visuals. Wong finds “creativity in the astute articulation of the pause and rewind modes”, another postmodern emblem of the late 20th century. He effectively employs the functions of fast-forward and pause into his aesthetic repertoire, illustrating the various modes of remote control technology. Chungking Express articulates this mode with the accelerated passing of clouds and Cop #633’s (Tony Leung Chiu-wai) hastened running. The film also proposes a dual gaze through the visual juxtaposition of action versus immobility, as when a long take films the protagonist stationary whilst indistinguishable bodies hurriedly move past the camera, creating flashes of movement.

Spectators must suspend their beliefs in chronology, time and in many cases, their memories too, in order to fully experience the depth of Wong’s evocative filmic creations. Wong’s story is continual and the narrative as dependent on the context of the present as of the past. The geography, history and unique cultural identity of Hong Kong inhabitants have inevitably shaped the territory’s cinema. Hong Kong’s adaptability to change, cultural diversity and cosmopolitan lifestyle has led to a dynamic output of films that portray a distinct Hong Kong psyche. The films of Wong Kar-wai attest to this manner of filmmaking, articulating the nebulous space of Hong Kong and the ‘in-betweeness’ and possible dislocation felt by Hong Kong citizens in the face of cultural and political diversity and advances in modernity. Through Wong’s oeuvre, Hong Kong becomes a metaphor for the characters and their varied existence. It represents an urban pastiche in which individuals struggle to come to terms with a sense of detachment and loneliness despite the territory’s high-density population. Wong’s endless array of possible scenarios and the navigation of his protagonists’ internal and external journeys in turn constitute an unravelling and reconfiguring of spatio-temporal constrictions.

Hong Kong’s identity cannot always be summed up via its east and west sensibilities. Rather, in portraying Hong Kong’s culturally diverse existence, Hong Kong cinema is effectively constructing and revealing its own identity. Wong’s empirical aesthetic creates a cosmopolitan filmmaking practice that transcends cultural boundaries. His taste for popular culture, global influences and incorporation of several different music genres is explicit within his films. The origin of Wong’s filmmaking may be Hong Kong but his films cannot be categorically contained or strictly confined to a culturally specific consumer. Ultimately, Wong Kar-wai is a filmmaking poet, concerned with issues as varied as memory, identity, time and space, urbanity, mood, isolation and absence. He is also dedicated to the location of Hong Kong as an urban landscape in which his thematic concerns find expression. Hong Kong’s unique identity with its fusion of Chinese and Western culture and complex history provides a culturally diverse space in which technology and tradition co-exist in various forms. Wong’s avant-garde filmic aesthetic is composed of elliptical storytelling through the use of deeply drenched tones, slow motion, jump cuts and fragmented images. Although the notion of auteur is not entirely customary in Hong Kong where films are often shot quickly and marketed via their accessibility as popular entertainment, Wong’s status as auteur marks his position within Hong Kong cinema’s industrial environment and signifies his complete creative freedom and control of every facet of his films’ production. In Wong’s own words, his films represent explorations in which “Wong Kar-wai, the director, managed to add something into the work”.

Amy Taubin: “Chungking Express: Electric Youth” (Criterion notes).

Chungking Express (1994) was the Masculin féminin of the 1990s, a pop art movie about cool twentysomethings looking for love in the city that has replaced Paris as the center of the world-cinema imagination. What Jean-Luc Godard did for “the generation of Marx and Coca-Cola” in the mid-1960s, Wong Kar-wai did for restless Hong Kong youth during the anxious decade that preceded the handoff to China. Masculin féminin (1966) and Chungking Express were the first films in which their respective directors focused predominantly on characters who were around ten years their juniors. This generation gap imparts a sense of distance mixed with tenderness, and also focuses the films on the dominant issue for heterosexual young adults: how to negotiate the desire and confusion they feel vis-à-vis the opposite sex.

Made while Wong was taking a break from the lengthy, difficult post-production of his only martial arts period picture, Ashes of Time (1994), Chungking Express was intended as a money-generating quickie for the director’s Jet Tone company, and indeed the movie, which was made in three months, start to finish, has a wacky spontaneity that is unique in his oeuvre. Wong piled on the commercial elements: the first half is a nod to the gangster thriller, the second is pure screwball romance. The protagonists of both sections are cops, and the four main actors are all Asian box office attractions: pop music idols Takeshi Kaneshiro and Faye Wong, Hong Kong action/dramatic star Tony Leung Chiu-wai, and veteran actress Brigitte Lin Ching-hsia (the film’s only fortysomething star, coming out of retirement for a cameo appearance as a drug smuggler, fashioned as an homage to another middle-aged cult actress, Gena Rowlands in Gloria). Again comparing the film with Masculin féminin, the female leads in both are played by singers with youth culture followings. But unlike Masculin féminin’s Chantal Goya, a pop singer playing the role of a pop singer, Faye Wong in Chungking Express plays a waitress, albeit one who becomes identified with two songs—the Mamas and the Papas’
“California Dreamin’” and a Cantonese cover of the Cranberries’ “Dreams” by a singer named Faye Wong—which accompany her as she works. While the difference in strategy is minimal—at one point or another, both performers either lip-sync or dance to their own recorded voices—the difference between Godard’s and Wong’s depictions of the female characters is enormous. The Goya character is monstrous in her narcissism and vacuity. On the other hand, Wong is as empathetic with Faye Wong’s waitress as he is with the cops played by Kaneshiro and Leung.

In Asia, the film didn’t disappoint, sweeping the Hong Kong Film Awards and doing well at the box office. In the United States, however, the turnout was disappointing, perhaps because Miramax, which distributed Chungking Express as a presentation by Quentin Tarantino’s Rolling Thunder company, was perplexed about whether to market it as an art film or an Asian exploitation flick. Nevertheless, the combination of filmmaking pyrotechnics and wistful romance proved irresistible to cinephiles. Chungking Express established Wong’s reputation as a major auteur, the most glamorous and enigmatic since Godard. It also marked a turning point in his work, a shift in direction that is actually signaled within the film, when the desultory underworld revenge narrative fades away and is replaced by a love story as simple as it is delicious. Writing in 1966 about Masculin féminin, Pauline Kael observed that “Godard has liberated his feeling for modern youth from the American gangster-movie framework which limited his expressiveness and his relevance to the non-movie-centered world.” Wong makes the same move in Chungking Express, underlining the separation by placing it midway through the film.

The narrative of Chungking Express comprises two separate and distinct stories. Although they are thematically related, each has its own central characters and locations. (If you look sharply, however, you can catch glimpses of characters from the second part in a few shots in the first.) The first story harks back to the genre action elements of Wong’s first feature, As Tears Go By (1988), while the second section prefigures the romantic yearnings of his later films Happy Together (1997), In the Mood for Love (2000), and 2046 (2004). Ashes of Time, which Wong finally completed shortly after Chungking Express, is also a genre action picture but teeters on the brink of abstraction. (In the revised 2008 version, Ashes of Time Redux, Wong removes some of the stylistic links to genre, making the narrative even more abstract.) And Fallen Angels (1995), which Wong conceived as the third section of Chungking Express but spun off as a separate feature, is a hyperbolic amalgam of gangster violence and mad love, as ungeneric a noir as could be imagined, and not only because the frequent fish-eye-lensed close-ups turn its cast of beauties, male and female, into a bunch of banana noses. Wong’s reputation as an art-house director rests with the three later, increasingly operatic romances—Happy Together, In the Mood for Love, and 2046—in part because genre films have never been fully accepted within the art-film canon, and in part because Wong’s mastery of sensuous polyrhythms and lush visual and aural textures was not as fully developed in the earlier films.

Minimally plotted, each section of Chungking Express focuses on a lovesick cop who pines for his ex-girlfriend until another woman captures his attention. One might venture that the first section, which opens with one of Wong’s signature step-printed chase sequences, this one through the teeming corridors and blind alleys of Chungking Mansions—a warren of flophouses, cut-rate shops, and import-export “businesses” that is a haven to criminals and the poor of all nations—is something of a blind alley itself, one which Wong drops after less than forty minutes in favor of a more promising romantic situation. It’s as if the film itself is looking for love in the same way that its characters are—by trial and error. The protagonist of the first section is a plainclothes cop, officer no. 223 (Kaneshiro), who is seen running hard in that opening chase scene and in another, shorter chase where he makes a collar, pretty much the only exercise of his profession in the film. Mostly what no. 223 does is obsess about his girlfriend, May, who jilted him on April Fools’ Day. No. 223 has given May until May 1, his twenty-fifth birthday, to come back to him. He marks the days of this countdown by buying cans of pineapple ("May loves pineapple," he tells us in voice-over), each dated to expire on May 1. If she doesn’t call him on his birthday, the relation-ship will expire as well. It is doubtful that May (whom we never see in the film) knows or, if she did, would care at all about this ultimatum.

But like objects in a dream, the pineapple cans, and their looming sell-by date, condense multiple meanings and associations. May was no. 223’s number-one girlfriend, but he must let go of his love for her ("When did everything start having an expiration date?" he muses) in order to move on to the next stage of his life, a transition marked by his birthday. Then there is the canned pineapple itself, whose mass-produced sweetness is as cloying as the puppy love no. 223 feels. In fact, with May 1 only hours away, he tries to feed some of the syrupy stuff to his dog, who, like May, manifests no interest in such an absurd ritual of devotion. But no. 223’s eating orgy—he downs all thirty cans—transfers his heartache to hisummy, so that in puking up the pineapple he is relieved of the past and immediately fancies himself in love with the next woman he meets.

Hovering over the web of associations that defines the psyche of no. 223 is another countdown: in 1994, the handover of Hong Kong to China was only three years away. Comic anxiety about sex and romance is a front for the deeper fear that political freedom—an entire way of life—has an expiration date in the near future. The most striking difference between Masculin féminin and Chungking Express is the constant political activity and chatter in the former and its total absence in the latter. While this difference reflects a change in youth culture from the 1960s to the 1990s, it doesn’t mean that Wong is an apolitical director. Rather, like Eastern European filmmakers of the Soviet era or, more to the point, like some of his Chinese mainland contemporaries, he smuggles politics into his films through metaphor. Thus the loaded meaning of the expiration date of canned goods.

The darker aspect of the collective anxiety about the handover is reflected in the situation of Brigitte Lin’s blonde-wigged gangster. When someone slips her a can of sardines dated May 1, she gets the message: time is running out for her. If she doesn’t deliver the drugs that her two-timing couriers have stolen, she will die. She and no. 223 run into each other—literally collide—in the opening chase sequence. A smart cop would spot that her wig, dark glasses, and trench coat are a disguise, but no. 223 doesn’t realize then, or when he picks her up in a bar exactly “fifty-seven hours later,” that she is potentially the collar of a lifetime. His vision clouded, like so many of Wong’s male protagonists, by déja vu—by the nearly
forgotten “impact” of their first encounter—he fancies himself in love with her. They wind up in a hotel room, where she instantly falls asleep and he consumes four chef salads (there is hardly a scene in the film that doesn’t involve eating), and then removes her shoes and polishes them before leaving. Their relationship is utterly chaste, and yet the small acts of tenderness they extend to each other free them both—her to take care of business and him to resume his search for love.

*Chungking Express*, the title under which the film was released in the United States, is not a direct translation of the original Hong Kong title, *Chung hing sam lam* (*Chungking Jungle*). The U.S. title suggests the kind of synthetic space that only exists in dreams or movies—Chungking referring to Chungking Mansions, the primary location of the first section, and Express to the Midnight Express, the popular take-out restaurant around which the action of the second part revolves. The Midnight Express has already figured in the first section: it’s where no. 223 goes to call his answering service (his password is “love you for ten thousand years”) to find out if there have been any calls from the elusive May. The proprietor tries to fix him up with one of his waitresses, who is also named May, but no. 223 isn’t interested. When he stops at the Midnight Express after his night with the mysterious blonde, May has moved on, and the proprietor suggests that no. 223 try the new waitress, Faye (Faye Wong). No. 223 accidentally sees an Indian man washing windows and responds, “Do you think I go out with guys?” Hopelessly confused—or maybe just a bit stupid—no. 223 proves himself not yet ready for love. He leaves the Midnight Express and is never seen again. As far as the narrative of the film is concerned, his story is over.

Into his place steps uniform cop no. 663 (Leung), who routinely stops by the Midnight Express to pick up a chef salad for his flight attendant girlfriend. Wong gives Leung, who will become his filmic alter ego, an entrance to die for. The shot is ostensibly from Faye’s point of view, but as no. 663 walks into close-up, she’s not the only one instantly smitten by the most soulful set of peepers in contemporary cinema. There is, however, someone who is immune to his charms, and soon no. 663 is jilted just like no. 223. Faye (Faye Wong), No. 223 accidentally sees an Indian man washing windows and responds, “Do you think I go out with guys?” Hopelessly confused—or maybe just a bit stupid—no. 223 proves himself not yet ready for love. He leaves the Midnight Express and is never seen again. As far as the narrative of the film is concerned, his story is over.

Refitting Space-Time

The box-office failure of *Days of Being Wild* was a disaster for its production company In-Gear and thus a setback for Wong, finally costing him the second episode of his diptych. While Wong was forced to forego his project, he was at least consoled by the critical reception of *Days of Being Wild*, which applauded the appearance of a major film-maker. Wong had built up his credentials and contacts to a point that they counted for something despite the failure of his film. He had acquired not only a deserved reputation as a hot new young director but also a certain toughness of spirit (despite his perceived shyness or the softness detectable in his films), insofar as he was able to recover quickly from the setback of leaving *Days of Being Wild* an uncompleted work, or at most a half-fulfilled project.

With the backing and help of Jeff Lau, a fellow partner in In-Gear and a director of surefire hits in the form of quicksilver comedies and action movies, whose status within the industry was far stronger than Wong’s at this time (following the huge commercial successes of his Stephen Chow comedy, *All for the Winner* [1990]). Wong left In-Gear to establish his own production company which he named Jet Tone. He immediately set to work on his next project, involving yet again a major reworking of a novel, this time a classic martial arts novel, Jin Young’s *Shediao Yingxiong huan*, popularly known in English as *The Eagle Shooting Heroes*. 
The project was born against a background of the wuxia genre [martial chivalry] following the success of Of Tsui Hark’s Swordsman (also adapted from a Jin Young novel) in 1990. Wong wrote an entirely original screenplay, using nothing from his source except two or three of its characters, whose backstories he completely invented. He also invented six or seven more characters, interlinked by separate backstories, a device he had used in Days of Being Wild, but which he would push to the extreme in this new project. He started to shoot his film, entitled Ashes of Time, in 1992 as the new wuxia cycle was reaching its peak.

Once again, he was able to assemble a cast of big-name stars: Leslie Cheung, Jacky Cheung, Maggie Cheung, Carina Lau and Tony Leung Chiu-wai, all of whom had worked with Wong on Days of Being Wild, along with actors he would be working with for the first time, including Tony Leung Ka-fai, Brigitte Lin and Charlie Young. The budget was comparable with Days of Being Wild. A period martial arts movie set in old China, Ashes of Time posed certain problems for Wong in maintaining his own post-modern aesthetics standards while ensuring that the details in sets, costumes and locations still carried period authenticity. The movie was shot on location in the deserts of China, with the interiors shot in Hong Kong, but although Wong worked at his customary pace (the film was in progress throughout two years), the pressure of executing a major production after the financial failure of Days of Being Wild must have been felt by the director and his crew (by now a repertory company comprising production designer William Chang, director of photography Christopher Doyle, assistant director Johnnie Kong, producer Jacky Pang, and others).

Wong’s attention on the film was deflected by having to organize his shoot around the conflicting schedules of his stars, and by his participation in another project that his partner Jeff Lau was directing, Dongcheng Xijiu, a parody of The Eagle Shooting Heroes, meant by Lau and Wong (who wrote the script together) as a companion piece to Ashes of Time. Both films were shot back to back, and used many of the same actors, but while Lau worked very quickly and completed his film in no time, Wong was still working on his film when Dongcheng Xijiu was the Chinese New Year attraction in 1993 (Ashes of Time was released more than a year later, in September 1994).

Wong also had another project that interrupted the process of completing Ashes of Time: namely, Chungking Express. The legend of Chungking Express is that Wong shot it in under two months during a break in the editing of Ashes of Time. Wong likened Chungking Express to a film made by students who had just graduated from film school, using the most simple equipment, relying on nothing more than natural light and the documentary circumstances of shooting a low-budget movie. The budget for the film was HK$15 million: Wong stressed that after the rigours of working on two big-budget movies, making Chungking Express was like returning to his youth.

That the film feels like a frolicksome adventure is accentuated by the sense that it was shot hurriedly and spontaneously, synchronized to the ‘can do’ beat of Hong Kong and its film industry. Incredibly for Wong, it was finished quickly and released some two months ahead of Ashes of Time. Hence, while Ashes of Time is Wong’s third movie in the production chronology, it was the fourth film to be released. …

Unlike the two films that immediately preceded and succeeded it, Chungking Express is not a period film, and it differs from As Tears Go By in that it does not fall neatly into the niche of either a contemporary gangster movie or a contemporary love story. Chungking Express is far more quantified in its generic content: a sign of Wong’s increasing confidence in creating the kinds of permutations in genre he had sought to do from the very start. It tells two stories that are independent of each other (though Wong inserts into the first episode cameos of the characters who appear in the second).

The main characters are cops (Takeshi Kaneshiro and Tony Leung Chiu-wai), a mysterious lady in a blonde wig (Brigitte Lin) and two kooky women (Faye Wong’s sandwich and kitchen hand and Valerie Chow’s air hostess). These character descriptions conjure up a variety of genres: cops and robbers, detective noir mystery (the episodes in the first story featuring Brigitte Lin and Takeshi Kaneshiro), comedy and romance (the episodes in the second story featuring Tony Leung and Faye Wong). Wong prefers to call both stories ‘single love stories’ about people in the city who share the common trait of being unable to channel their feelings to suitable partners: “Tony Leung pours out his feelings to a bar of soap. Faye Wong steals into Tony’s apartment and moves things around and that’s how she satisfies her feelings. Takeshi Kaneshiro faces a can of pineapples. They project their emotions onto other things. Only Brigitte Lin’s character doesn’t have feelings. She works non-stop; survival is more important to her. She’s like a wild beast let loose in the jungle of Chungking Mansion.”

‘The Jungle of Chungking Mansion’ is a reference to the film’s Chinese title “Chongqing Senlin’ which translates as Chungking Jungle’, or alternatively, ‘Chungking Forest’, denoting the building in Tsimshatsui where the first episode is chiefly set, a hub of small business and criminal activities and also a source of cheap hotel rooms well known to travelers and backpackers. The English title ‘Chungking Express’…also serves to mark the division of the film into two episodes: ‘Chungking’ denoting the first episode, which takes place chiefly in Chungking Mansion, and ‘Express’ designating the second episode, which pivots around ‘Midnight Express’, a well-known fast-food outlet located in Lan Kwai Fong in Central, a ferry ride across Victoria Harbour from Tsimshatsui.

Wong’s chief inspiration for Chungking Express was a short story entitled ‘On Seeing the 100% Perfect Girl One Beautiful April Morning’ by the Japanese novelist Haruku Murakami. The story is about the mutability of perceptions, and
begins with the sentence, ‘One fine April morning, I passed my 100% woman on a Harajuku back street.’ Chungking Express similarly begins with a chance encounter, which becomes a motif in the first episode. Kaneshiro’s cop jostles past Brigitte Lin’s blonde during a typical cop and robber chase in Chungking Mansion. Reusing the time motif that he had developed in Days of Being Wild, Wong cuts to a shot of a clock displaying the date Friday 28 April, as the minute slot shifts to 9:00 p.m. ‘In fifty-seven hours, I will fall in love with this woman,’ Kaneshiro’s lovesick cop intones retrospectively, in the first-person monologic style that has now become a Wong-Kar-wai trademark, but which could also be a continuation of the first-person narrative in Murakami’s story. The author’s influence on Wong in therefore exerted in two ways: first, in the monologues that reflect the conversational style of the author, and second, in the narrative as a recounting of memory.

The cop eventually meets the blonde in a bar, without either of them being aware of their previous encounter. They strike up a conversation (the woman reluctantly so), and end up in a hotel room. But the vicissitudes of the chance encounter are immediately obvious; she is fast asleep in bed, while he watches old Cantonese movies on late-night TV and stuffs himself with Chef’s Salad and French fries.

Wong develops the theme of chimerical relationships with the same evanescence displayed in Murakami’s short story. People’s lives just touch but never interpenetrate (maybe they do not even touch but just brush past, mere possibilities, foregone opportunities to connect, impermanence). Like Murakami, Wong injects a magical element into everyday life but with a sense of fatal consequences. Like Murakami, he invokes icons from pop culture to suggest the part that memory plays. The casting of Brigitte Lin as the bewigged lady in dark glasses is a conscious raising of her image as a cinematic icon, famous since the 1970s when Wong was a teenager probably just about to enter high school. In Chungking Express, the iconic image of Brigitte Lin, whose persona in her early career was that of a beautiful teenager on the verge of womanhood, is suggestive of a figure of another Murakami short story, ‘The Girl from Ipanema 1963/1982’. ‘The Girl from Ipanema’, the title of a popular song from the 1960s, first reminds the narrator of the corridors of his high school, which in turn reminds him of a salad ‘consisting of lettuce, tomato, cucumber, green pepper, asparagus, onion and pink Thousand Island dressing’, and this in turn brings to mind a girl he used to know, ‘confined in an image and floating in the sea of time’. The preponderance of salad in Chungking Express is a function of Wong’s memory, linked to the iconic presence of Brigitte Lin (in the second episode, it is associated with Faye Wong, whose presence is equally iconic but without the mystique, as she is much younger than either Lin or Wong). But it is also the symbol for hunger—a hunger that arises from the longing for love, a theme that Chungking Express revives from Days of Being Wild; here, it is not so much unrequited love as lost love.

...In making Chungking Express, Wong said that he wanted to ‘experiment with shooting two crisscrossing stories in one movie’, developing the narratives as he went along, ‘like a road movie’. Correspondingly therefore, Chungking Express could also be describe as an experimental road movie, its experimental nature verified both by its style (a reliance on ‘documentary’ techniques such as hand-held camera, available lighting, in-camera effects) and the fractured narrative, creating a sense of disorientation in the viewer; except that the disorientation that results from Wong’s film comes from what Noël Burch, in Theory of Film Practice (first published in French in 1969), predicted would ‘form the substance of the cinema of the future’, when découpage ‘in the limited sense of breaking a narrative down into scenes will no longer be meaningful to the real filmmaker...and will cease to be experimental and purely theoretical and come into its own in actual film practice’. Chungking Express embodies this actual film practice, in which the formal autonomy of film is used organically by the director to illustrate, in Burch’s words, ‘a consistent relationship between a film’s spatial and temporal articulations and its narrative content, formal structure determining narrative structure as much as vice versa’....

In Chungking Express, time is about human lives, which are subject to permutations and changes: by the first of May, Kaneshiro will be one year older; by the same date, Brigitte Lin may be dead. Such is time. Time passes too in the Midnight Express, marked by changes in Faye’s T-shirts. Here, time is something you wear. Chungking Express, as the encapsulation, quantification, objectification of time might reach its use-by date at some point in the future. It will then become a skull that future generations of ‘dreamreaders’ will read, and memory will be recovered. Chungking Express is an object of time, it is space-time itself, it is something one wears, like Faye’s T-shirts—and so far, it has worn well.