



WORLD OF WONG KAR WAI

Ashes of Time Redux (Dung che sai duk)

In all its reincarnations between 1994 and today, Wong Kar Wai's martial-arts genre-project *Ashes of Time*, a tale of soured love and swordsmen, has always been a film about change, and the trials and hold of memory, so it's fitting that its own history eludes easy grasp. The print I saw at London's ICA in the late 1990s seemed in poor condition and was edited in a deliberately confusing fashion. Whereas *Chungking Express*, made the same year, was a hip, lurching glide through present-day big-city anomie, *Ashes* was compelling largely because on first viewing it seemed so indifferent to making sense or even relying on chic allure. It was baffling to those unfamiliar with the source material.

Hugely costly at the time and two years in the making, *Ashes* has been recut, says Wong Kar Wai, for a number of reasons: several versions were in circulation, not all of them approved; the original negatives were poorly stored and needed rescuing; and only now are the technical means available to make the film he wanted. It may be that Wong's unspoken reason is that the structure of his first and more demanding edit was a tactical error if he was intending to capitalise on the unexpected cachet and momentum of the martial-arts film: if, that is, he wanted *Ashes* to reside in the same art-cult neighbourhood of *House of Flying Daggers* (2004) or *Zu Warriors from the Magic Mountain* (1983). Hence its new, more viewer-friendly and gorgeous form.

The film is based on the million-selling, multi-part novel *The Eagle-Shooting Heroes*, a classic of the *wuxia* (martial arts and chivalry) genre written by Louis Cha, the Hong Kong politician, newspaper magnate and renowned scholar of Buddhism who wrote as Jin Yong. *Ashes* focuses on the early lives of two of Yong's main characters, the malignant Lord of the East and the malicious Lord of the West. The latter, Ouyang, has secreted himself in the killer-for-hire trade and the film begins as the former, Huang, brings an unexpected gift of the 'wine of oblivion' to his friend. As a literary genre, *wuxia* is invisible in the west; as cinema, it's trapped somewhere between the exotic and the absurd, its stylised conventions often a barrier to a serious examination of its philosophies. One way into these is to contrast *wuxia*'s passion for the man-on-man duel – the honour of the finest fighter when beset on all sides – against its apparent cousin, the Western. Wong has cited *The Searchers* as a model, with its near-subliminal backstory told in glances of a lost but never-forgotten love. In its spacious, spare, heat-saturated look, *Ashes* also invokes Sergio Leone's Dollars trilogy, and Leslie Cheung's Ouyang, the main character and narrator, is not dissimilar in his taciturn isolation to Eastwood's 'the man with no name'.

Gunplay in the frontier dust (so very American) is largely about the moral complexity of the individual trying to elucidate and fight for right where law has not yet arrived. However, while the people in *Ashes* may be lonely, none is alone, and its story maps astrological archetypes in group activity by comparing and contrasting different characters. The film spans the changing seasons of a year, as marked by deadpan quotations from the Buddhist almanac, such as 'Do not christen new boats.' For all his self-possession, Ouyang seems to be passing through the stages of bereavement, from denial to acceptance, his hidden turmoil dramatised by each season's tale. These stories tell the unfolding narrative of his quest of the day – be it friend, client or hired killer.

Huang, a capricious and selfish heartbreaker, comes between Peach Blossom and her husband, a near-blind swordsman, casting them both into desperate misery and rage. The narcissistic Murong Yin/Yang, a giggly princess unable to decide if she's a boy or a girl, spends a night dreaming that Ouyang is Huang (whom she both loves and wants to kill), while Ouyang dreams she's someone else; Yin/Yang both loves and wants to kill herself and ends up duelling with her water reflection in an explosive and bizarre fantasy sequence. The near-blind swordsman forces a kiss from a peasant girl who wants her brother's death avenged, then frees himself from hurt by suicidally facing the brother's killers, a seemingly endless sea of bandits. Hong Qi, a swordsman in search of glory, wants to shake off his wife, who pads after him with sunhat and wicker backpack, but finds deeper satisfaction and a sense of honour helping the peasant girl in return for a single egg. Ouyang's bruised attempt to lose himself as a cynical mercenary is increasingly challenged. He gazes enviously after Hong Qi, who is now reconciled with his wife. Finally Ouyang intervenes in his own story as he informs Peach Blossom of her husband's death and at last grasps the truth about the woman he loved. All of these micro-tales act as prisms through which Ouyang begins to see the dynamics of his own story, which we learn about only in the fifth and final season, the return of spring.

All this could easily be exhaustingly overwrought – the women in particular act out a fair amount of mute, slow-motion agony. Two elements balance it out: the first is Cheung's sardonic performance as Ouyang; the second is Christopher Doyle's typically extraordinary camerawork, as the demands of capturing light in the desert push him outside his own, albeit extremely daring, comfort zone. The splash and glint of the fight scenes is mesmerising and the blurred-yet-detailed fluid-jerky style familiar in Doyle's city-based films is a heart-stopping representation of time slowed during violent action, the simultaneous precision and distance of life-and-death decisions made during battle. The colour of remembered (or dreamt) peach blossom, when it arrives, is hallucinatory in its sharpness. When Franky Chan's attempt to concoct a Morricone-style soundtrack is in danger of seeming pleadingly earnest, Doyle's camera supplies exactly the right amount of whipcrack estrangement. If Cheung seems impressively undemonstrative, despite the turbulence of his hidden emotions, the landscape is pitilessly indifferent. The backdrop of desert and eclipse may be pathetic fallacy, but their startling, confrontational beauty represents everything that Ouyang hides from: as he begins at last to face his feelings, he admits he has never really taken in the view.

Ashes of Time isn't about what happens onscreen, it's about human disconnection; how we choose, for the sake of honour, love or greed, to avoid the physical present. The film's style, its pacing and philosophy, place what hasn't happened, offscreen, at the centre of the viewer's awareness. This goes some way to explain the profusion of interrupted timelines in the original version, in which memory is a bewildering delirium of unintended schisms, of wounding breaks with reason and clarity. The simplifications of *Redux* diminish this argument-by-edit. Now that we know less about Ouyang's backstory, we may not twig how wrongheaded he is as a narrator or the extent to which his steady tone is an extended joke against himself. We may be left feeling that the visual aspects are more melodramatic surface trickery than emotional insight, but on the other hand the reduced demands on our memory (to make sense of the stories for ourselves) no longer distracts from much that remains extraordinary in this film.

Mark Sinker, *Sight & Sound*, October 2008

ASHES OF TIME REDUX (DUNG CHE SAI DUK)

Directed by: Wong Kar Wai
Production Companies: Scholar Films Co Ltd, Jet Tone Production, Beijing Film Studio
In association with: Tsui Siu Ming Productions Ltd., Pony Canyon
Executive Producer: Chan Ye Cheng
Producer: Tsai Mu-ho
Producer (Beijing Production Crew): Cai Rubin
Associate Producer (HK Production Crew): Shu Kei
Chief Production Manager (HK Production Crew): Chan Pui Wah
Production Accountant (Beijing Production Crew): Han Xiaojing
Unit Managers (Beijing Production Crew): Shi Fangqun, Chen Hui, Ge Tianyuan, Qin Dawei
Unit Manager (HK Production Crew): Chan Keung
Assistant Directors (HK Production Crew): Catherine Sie, Fanny Lee
Assistant Directors (Beijing Production Crew): Li Shijiang, Huang Xiaoyun
Continuity (Beijing Production Crew): Yang Yongguang, Tian Yulan
Written by: Wong Kar Wai
Based on the story by: Louis Cha
Director of Photography: Christopher Doyle
2nd Unit Cameramen (HK Production Crew): Andrew Lau, Chan Yuen Kai
Camera Assistant (Beijing Production Crew): Li Jiyu
Gaffers (Beijing Production Crew): Zhao Shuping, Xu Desheng
Still Photographer (HK Production Crew): Lai Chi Hung
Explosion FX Supervisors (Beijing Production Crew): Chen Jiakun, Huang Jianhua
Edited by: William Chang Suk Ping, Patrick Tam
Editors (Hong Kong Production Crew): Hai Kit Wai, Kong Chi Leung
Production Design by: William Chang Suk Ping
Art Director (Hong Kong Production Crew): Alfred Yau Wai Ming
Art Director (Beijing Production Crew): Yang Zhanjia
Props Master (HK Production Crew): Tam Wing Cheong
Wardrobe: Luk Ha Fong

Make-up Artists (HK Production Crew): Poon Man Wah, Or Mei Wah, Kwan Li Na
Make-up Artists (Beijing Prod'n Crew): Liu Changzheng, Wang Wanbin, Zhang Jiangzhong
Hairstylists (Hong Kong Production Crew): Lee Lin Tai, Wu Yuk Ho, Lee Po Lin
Music by: Frankie Chan, Roel A. Garcia
Additional Score/Re-arrangement by: Wu Tong
Featured Cello Solos by: Yo-Yo Ma
Production Sound Mixers (HK Production Crew): Leung Tat, Leung Lik Chi
Production Sound Mixer (Beijing Production Crew): Zhang Baojian
Boom Operators (Beijing Production Crew): Zhang Tianxiang, Guang Weijun
Action Choreographer: Sammo Hung

Cast

Leslie Cheung (*Ouyang Feng*)
Brigitte Lin (*Murong Yin/Murong Yang*)
Tony Leung Chiu-wai (*blind swordsman*)
Carina Lau (*Peach Blossom*)
Tony Leung Ka Fai (*Huang Yaoshi*)
Charlie Young (*girl*)
Jacky Cheung (*Hong Qi*)
Maggie Cheung (*brother's wife*)
Collin Chou (*swordsman*)
Bai Li (*Hong Qi's wife*)

Hong Kong 2008
93 mins

With a pre-recorded introduction by season programmer Ann Lee (Sat 10 July only)

WORLD OF WONG KAR WAI

As Tears Go By (Wong Gok ka moon)

Wed 7 Jul 14:30; Sat 17 Jul 20:30; Mon 19 Jul 20:45

Days of Being Wild (Ah Fei jing juen)

Thu 8 Jul 20:50 (+ pre-recorded intro by season programmer Ann Lee);
Mon 12 Jul 14:30; Mon 19 Jul 18:00

Fallen Angels (Do lok tin si)

Fri 9 Jul 20:50; Wed 14 Jul 14:30; Sun 25 Jul 18:30

Ashes of Time Redux (Dung che sai duk)

Sat 10 Jul 11:20 (+ pre-recorded intro by season programmer Ann Lee);
Wed 21 Jul 20:45; Fri 30 Jul 20:45

Chungking Express (Chung Hing sam lam)

Sat 10 Jul 18:15; Mon 12 Jul 20:50;
Tue 20 Jul 20:45; Thu 29 Jul 14:30

Happy Together (Chun gwong cha sit)

Sun 11 Jul 15:40; Fri 16 Jul 14:30; Fri 23 Jul 18:10

In the Mood for Love (Fa yeung nin wah)

Wed 14 Jul 20:45; Sat 17 Jul 13:30; Wed 21 Jul 14:30; Thu 29 Jul 20:45

2046

Thu 15 Jul 20:20; Sat 17 Jul 16:10; Sat 31 Jul 14:30

The Grandmaster (Yi dai zong shi)

Tue 20 Jul 18:00; Thu 22 Jul 20:50; Mon 26 Jul 20:50

The Hand (Extended Cut)

Thu 22 Jul 18:30; Fri 30 Jul 18:20

My Blueberry Nights

Fri 23 Jul 20:50; Wed 28 Jul 20:40

Presented in partnership with Janus Films and the ICA

Visit [Youtube.com/bfi](https://www.youtube.com/bfi) for a dizzying tour in the World of Wong Kar Wai, guided by season programmer Ann Lee

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