



WORLD OF WONG KAR WAI

The Grandmaster

(Yi dai zong shi)

Wong Kar Wai on 'The Grandmaster'

There have been numerous films made about Ip Man, by Wilson Yip, Herman Yau and others. Did you feel they had failed to capture some aspect that your own approach would achieve?

Those films were interesting interpretations of the Ip Man legend, dealing with fragments of his life, and were effective in their own right. However, my goal was always to explore the man behind the legend and the philosophy of Chinese martial arts. In the long history of martial arts, there have been many great fighters, but few who could be called a grandmaster. Ip Man is one such as he has his own legacy. It's difficult to understand Ip Man, the grandmaster, without learning about the times in which he lived. He was born to a rich family who did import and export business. He was not a typical martial-arts artist. He didn't work a day in his life until he was 40. He lost everything during the war. He arrived in Hong Kong totally broke and had to rebuild his life from scratch. What supported him through this hardship was his code of honour as a martial-arts artist, and his vision. Because of him and his students, wing chun became the most popular martial-arts form throughout the world. Through his story I was given an opportunity to capture the most critical period of the Chinese martial-arts movement of the last century. To me, *The Grandmaster* is not just a film about Ip Man, it's a 'once upon a time' of kung fu.

What's your relationship with martial arts? Is it a form you studied from afar, via movies, or have you ever practised yourself?

There's a scene in *The Grandmaster* in which a little kid appears at the school and tries to peek inside. He's supposed to be Bruce Lee, but that could've been me. When I was a kid, martial arts were extremely popular in Hong Kong. They were everywhere: movies, TV shows, radio programmes and novellas. I grew up in a street with many martial-arts schools, run by masters from different regions of China. Many of them came to Hong Kong between the wars, following a similar journey to Ip Man. In those days, martial arts were rarely practised in public. Schools like these were full of mysteries and legends. I was fascinated by that world. That was as close as I could get to kung fu, and I wanted to get closer. During my research, a master I met compared fighting to kissing. He explained that to be a capable martial artist, one needs three qualities: physical strength, technique and, most of all, courage as there is a physical intimacy involved when you are fighting someone. You can't be afraid to get close and make your move. *The Grandmaster* was my way of getting closer to martial arts.

Were you a particular fan of kung fu films in your youth? Ashes of Time fits into a tradition of wuxia films – do you see The Grandmaster as an equivalent for the kung fu film tradition?

People often ask me how long I researched for *The Grandmaster*: it was about seven years on the road for interviews and 30 years of watching kung fu films. *Ashes of Time* features a highly romanticised version of wuxia whereas *The Grandmaster* is much more realistic and closer to the wushu tradition. The Shaw Brothers – particularly the ones directed by Lau Kar-Leung – and Bruce Lee films were my reference points when it came to staging the fight scenes.

How important was it that Tony Leung, Zhang Ziyi and other stars were able to perform the wing chun moves convincingly, and how much could editing and close-ups be used to disguise the limitations in their technique?

Tony and Ziyi went through a year of serious martial-arts training. There's a saying in martial arts that 'it takes you three years to become a beginner'. Although I never expected them to become kung fu masters in a year, the training was important because it gave them an insight into the life and philosophy of a martial artist. When Tony and Ziyi are fighting in the film, it is really them. That's why Tony broke his arm twice during the shoot. As our intention was to make the fight scenes as authentic as possible, all the action scenes were carefully choreographed to capture the essence of the individual schools. In fact some of these moves have never been shown before. That explains the close-ups. They were not for the purpose of covering their limitations, but to highlight the essence of their movements.

Speaking of choreography, can you describe what it was like to work with Yuen Woo-Ping on the fight scenes? He has a legendary status.

Yuen Woo-Ping comes from a family of martial artists. Both he and his father were trained in the Beijing opera, which includes extensive martial-arts instruction for a number of years. In other words, Woo-Ping lives and breathes kung fu. We both insisted on representing the different fighting styles in an authentic way. Similar to how Bruce Lee approached his fight scenes, we wanted real martial arts to be featured in *The Grandmaster*, not movie martial arts. One of our goals in making the film was to represent these styles in a real and honest way.

How have digital effects altered the filmmaking process for you?

Some people call me one of the few surviving 35mm directors, as most of my films were shot on 35mm. As we normally work with modest budgets, I don't use many digital effects as most of the time it is very costly. I always find the sound of film rolling in a magazine is one of the most beautiful sounds in the world, and I still do. I would be happy to remain analogue if I could, but I don't reject digital effects at all, because they are a tool for a filmmaker. There is only one scene in *The Grandmaster* that relied heavily on digital effects and it's the fight scene at the train station, as to do it practically would have been too dangerous for the actors. In a time without digital effects, we would have had to have shot it like Buster Keaton, at a real train station.

Ninety-nine per cent of the film was shot entirely on 35mm. We only used a Phantom High Speed Camera for the slow-motion shots because that camera runs at 1,000 frames per second and that was the only way to capture those movements.

Were there any fight sequences that were particularly difficult to achieve?

I enjoyed shooting all the fight sequences in the film, but one of the more challenging scenes was the showdown between Tony and the baguazhang master inside the teahouse. The master was played by Zhao Benshan, who is the most popular comedian in China. He's not a trained martial artist and prior to filming, he had just had major brain surgery so he was unable to physically exert himself. I had to find a way to demonstrate the character's skill without getting into an elaborate fight scene. I would call it 'In the Mood for Kung Fu' and it is very satisfying.

Why did you select Philippe Le Sourd as your DP? Did his approach differ from other DPs you've worked with?

I've been very lucky to have worked with a few great cinematographers, and Philippe is one of them. I knew him for a number of years while shooting commercials together. At that stage he hadn't shot a feature, nor did he have any experience in Chinese martial arts. I decided to work with him on this film because I wanted *The Grandmaster* to have a different look and to make a martial-arts movie with a fresh eye, which Philippe delivered. He brought his own unique approach to the film.

During our preps, Philippe was curious about my collaboration with Chris Doyle [who shot seven features with Wong, including *In the Mood for Love*] and thought that was a lot to live up to. I explained to him that Chris, besides being a great cinematographer, as he is, is also a good dancer; not only that, he is able to dance with the camera, the actors, but most importantly to dance with me, as ours is a very intimate collaboration. Somehow, Philippe took my metaphor too literally and later signed up for a tango class with his wife.

Did you have to present Chinese authorities with a completed script to sanction? Does the finished film at all resemble that initial script?

I was lucky to collaborate with two great writers on this film [Zou Jingzhi and Xu Haofeng], and we presented our script to the Film Bureau before principal shooting. We remained faithful to the story except for a few technical changes.

In the light of the extended production period on The Grandmaster, would you prefer to return to the fast methods of your earlier films? Could you still make a film as quickly as you did then?

It really depends on the type of film you're making and the subject matter. It's like in cooking where it takes hours to make a stew and only a few minutes to fry something.

Wong Kar Wai interviewed by James Bell, *Sight & Sound*, January 2015

THE GRANDMASTER (YI DAI ZONG SHI)

Director: Wong Kar Wai
©: Block 2 Pictures Inc.
Production Companies: Jet Tone Films, Sil-Metropole Organisation Limited
This film benefited from the: Tax Rebate for International Production
Presented by: The Weinstein Company, Annapurna Pictures, Block 2 Pictures, Sil-Metropole Organisation Limited
Executive Producers: Song Dai, Chan Ye-cheng, Megan Ellison
Producers: Wong Kar Wai, Jacky Pang Yee Wah
Screenplay by: Zou Jingzhi, Xu Haofeng, Wong Kar Wai
Story by: Wong Kar Wai
Director of Photography: Philippe Le Sourd
Edited by: William Chang Suk Ping, Benjamin Courtines, Poon Hung Yiu
Production Designers: William Chang Suk Ping, Alfred Yau Wai Ming
Costume Designer: Shandy Lui
Original Score: Shigeru Umebayashi, Nathaniel Mechaly
Sound Design: Robert Mackenzie
Stunt Co-ordinators: Yuen Shun Yi, Tony Ling
Action Choreographer: Yuen Wo Ping

Cast

Tony Leung (Ip Man)
Zhang Ziyi (Gong Er)
Chang Chen (The Razor)
Zhao Benshan (Ding Lianshan)
Xiao Shenyang (San Jiang Shui)
Song Hye Kyo (Zhang Yongcheng)
Yuen Wo Ping (Chan Wah-shun)
Lau Ka Yung (Yong)
Le Cung (Iron Shoes)
Wang Qingxiang (Master Gong Yutian)

Hong Kong/China 2013
108 mins

WORLD OF WONG KAR WAI

The Grandmaster (Yi dai zong shi)
Tue 20 Jul 18:00; Thu 22 Jul 20:50; Mon 26 Jul 20:50
Chungking Express (Chung Hing sam lam)
Tue 20 Jul 20:45; Thu 29 Jul 14:30
In the Mood for Love (Fa yeung nin wah)
Wed 21 Jul 14:30; Thu 29 Jul 20:45
Ashes of Time Redux (Dung che sai duk)
Wed 21 Jul 20:45; Fri 30 Jul 20:45
The Hand (Extended Cut)
Thu 22 Jul 18:30; Fri 30 Jul 18:20
Happy Together (Chun gwong cha sit)
Fri 23 Jul 18:10
My Blueberry Nights
Fri 23 Jul 20:50; Wed 28 Jul 20:40
Fallen Angels (Do lok tin si)
Sun 25 Jul 18:30
2046
Sat 31 Jul 14:30

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