



**SIGHT AND SOUND GREATEST FILMS OF ALL TIME 2022: 88=**

# Chungking Express

## (Chung Hing sam lam)

'I can honestly say, probably more than any other movie in the last two years, no movie spoke to me, got under my skin, just made me fall in love with it. I've seen *Chungking Express* several times, but the last time I just started crying, you know, tears just started falling during this movie, about three different times. And it's just because my feelings for this movie run so deep... I'm just happy to love a movie this much.' (Quentin Tarantino)

Wong Kar Wai's rapturous entertainment is not only the zingiest visit to Heartbreak Hotel in many years but also one of the first films of the 90s to feel genuinely fresh and original. It recaptures the emotional excitement and zest for cinema found in a movie like Jean-Luc Godard's *Bande à part* three decades ago. Its qualities are partly down to matching the pace of life in present-day Hong Kong – but they also reflect Wong's new-found ability to see the funny side of the space between men and women. We are still in Wong Kar Wai's patented world of solipsistic characters, private quirks and obsessions, as explored in *Days of Being Wild* and *Ashes of Time*, but the people in *Chungking Express* are better adjusted to their own loneliness, and their fundamental cheerfulness is contagious.

The film's two stories intersect very little – there are fleeting glimpses of Faye and cop #663 in the first story, and both cops patronise the Midnight Express snack counter – but the join is seamless and the mood of comic-romantic melancholy is remarkably consistent. The first story is shorter and much busier, cross-cutting from #223's forlorn attempts to rustle up a date and wrangles with convenience store clerks over sell-by dates to the women's urgent packaging of the heroin in condoms and hollow-soled shoes and her frantic search of the crevices of Chungking Mansions for the absconding drug couriers. The second story takes its time over #663's efforts to cheer himself up – not to mention cheering up his household effects like a bar of soap that is wasting away and a threadbare towel that cannot stop 'weeping' – and Faye's increasingly outrageous excuses for skipping work and invading the cop's apartment, but feels all the more engrossing for it. Motifs common to both stories (cuddly toys, chefs' salads, time-lapse photography) are of no particular significance in themselves, but help to unify the tone and suggest the universality of the predicaments and feelings.

Actually, though, virtually everything pulls together in *Chungking Express*. Chris Doyle's brilliant, fingertip-held cinematography is in perfect synch with both Wong's sense of lives on the wing and the extremely likeable performances of the four stars, two of them singers making their debuts as actors. Faye Wong and Takeshi Kaneshiro are both real finds: the rangy Kaneshiro, equally fluent in Cantonese, Mandarin and Japanese as he reveals when he tries to chat up Brigitte Lin in the bar, is a quintessential 25-year-old, clinging to his adolescence but starting to face up to maturity while Faye Wong, a Beijing girl in Hong Kong, is a tall, crew-cut gamine whose effortless ditziness simultaneously promises and refuses sex in a way that will undoubtedly cause viewers everywhere to fall in love. The two established

stars more than hold their own against these sparky newcomers: Brigitte Lin is all-but-unrecognisable in blonde wig, raincoat and shades, but nonetheless registers forcefully as a woman with more than just missing heroin on her mind, while Tony Leung (the Tony Leung of *A City of Sadness* and *Hard Boiled*, not the Tony Leung of *L'Amant*) has never been more charming or beautiful, not even in Stanley Kwan's *Love Unto Waste*.

But *Chungking Express* is finally a director's film. The level of invention in the plotting and the film language is almost profligate, and the wit of the writing leaves the average Tarantino dialogue sounding like sitcom filler. Wong gives each of his four protagonists voice-overs to articulate their inner tensions, and each is a small gem of psychological acuity. The blonde-wigged woman comments that she always wears a raincoat and shades because she's always unsure whether it will rain or turn out sunny. Cop #223, whose password for pager messages is 'Undying love', is obsessed by the thought that everything comes with an expiry date – when he isn't marvelling that the people we jostle past in the street every day may become our acquaintances, friends or even lovers. Faye, who can't hear enough of The Mamas and Papas' 'California Dreamin', recalls how she arrived early for her date with #663 in the California Restaurant only to sit watching the rain outside and start wondering about the weather in the real California. And #663 can't help projecting his feelings on the objects around him, or thinking of life in terms of long-haul air travel.

As Wong well knows, these characters (and supporting characters like the manager of the Midnight Express snack counter, played indelibly by the film's stills photographer) add up to a panorama of modern city lives and attitudes: lonely, divided between public and private personae, resigned to disappointment but never less than optimistic. Many viewers will agree that he has caught a certain mind-set and mood with absolute accuracy, and all will be grateful that he's done it with such warmth and good humour.

**Tony Rayns, *Sight and Sound*, September 1995**

### **Wong Kar Wai on 'Chungking Express'**

*What was the origin of Chungking Express?*

Once we finished shooting *Ashes of Time* we took a much-needed break and I found myself thinking that I should make a small film for myself. As a writer-director, I have many ideas for films that never get developed. You're sitting in a coffee-shop and an idea comes up, but there's no time to take it further. It might just be a gut feeling, it can easily evaporate. Anyhow, *Chungking Express* was based on two ideas that came to me like that. Originally there were three; the third is now the basis for *Fallen Angels*.

The first story changed a lot during filming. Brigitte Lin was supposed to be retiring from the screen after shooting *Chungking Express*, so we originally conceived her character as something like Blanche DuBois in *A Streetcar Named Desire*. She loved this: she was forever trying on wigs and acting to herself in the mirror. It was a very simple story: she responds to a newspaper advertisement for an actress, happens to meet the Takeshi Kaneshiro character and later stands him up. Eventually we kept the wig and the idea of a non-romance, but our model changed from *Streetcar* to John Cassavetes' *Gloria*!

*Why are the men in both stories cops?*

Partly because Hong Kong movies are supposed to be action-oriented; they're full of cops and gangsters, and I chose cops. Partly because I like the idea of uniforms and service numbers.

*Do you see the film's characters as having the same kind of symbolic dimension that the characters had in Days of Being Wild?*

*Days of Being Wild* centres on various feelings about staying in or leaving Hong Kong. That's less of an issue now that we're so close to 1997.

*Chungking Express* is more about the way people feel now. In *Days*, the characters are not happy with their solitude; it's the same with the characters in *Ashes of Time*. The people in *Chungking Express* know how to entertain themselves, even if it's just by talking to a bar of soap. They know how to live in a city.

## Wong Kar Wai interviewed by Tony Rayns, *Sight and Sound*, September 1995

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### CHUNGKING EXPRESS (CHUNG HING SAM LAM)

*Director:* Wong Kar Wai  
*Production Company:* Jet Tone Production  
*Executive Producer:* Chan Pui-Wah  
*Producer:* Chan Yi-Kan  
*Production Supervisors:* Jacky Pang, Jiang Yuecheng  
*Production Manager:* Jacky Pang  
*Post-production Supervisor:* Xiao Rong  
*Assistant Directors:* Jiang Yuecheng, Zeng Shaoting  
*Screenplay:* Wong Kar Wai  
*Directors of Photography:* Christopher Doyle, Andrew Lau Wai-Keung  
*2nd Unit Photographer:* Chen Guanghong  
*Stills Photography:* 'Piggy' Chan [Chen Jinquan]  
*Visual Effects:* Cheng Xiaolong  
*Special Effects:* Ding Yunda, Deng Weijue  
*Editors:* William Chang, Hai Kit-Wai  
*Production Designer:* William Chang  
*Art Director:* Qiu Weiming  
*Costume Designer:* Yao Huiming  
*Make-up:* Guan Lina  
*Hairstylists:* Wu Yuhao, Li Zhenglin  
*Music:* Frankie Chan Fan-Kei, Roel A. Garcia  
*Sound Recording:* Liang Da, Liang Lizhi, Chen Weixiong

### Cast

Brigitte Lin Ching-Hsia (*the drug dealer*)  
Takeshi Kaneshiro (*He Qiwu, Cop 223*)  
Tony Leung Chiu-Wai (*Cop 663*)  
Faye Wong Ching-Man (*Faye*)  
Valerie Chow (*air hostess*)  
Chen Jinquan (*manager of 'Midnight Express'*)  
Guan Lina (*Richard*)  
Huang Zhiming (*man*)  
Liang Zhen  
Zuo Songshen

Hong Kong 1994  
102 mins

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### SIGHT AND SOUND GREATEST FILMS OF ALL TIME 2022

#### Chungking Express (Chung Him sam lam)

Thu 12 Jan 20:45; Tue 17 Jan 20:50; Sat 21 Jan 14:15

**Modern Times** Fri 13 Jan 17:45; Sun 22 Jan 13:10

**Metropolis** Sun 15 Jan 14:40; Mon 30 Jan 16:30 BFI IMAX

**Once Upon a Time in the West (C'era una volta il West)** Sun 15 Jan 16:15 BFI IMAX

**A Brighter Summer Day (Guling jie shaonian sha ren shijian)** Mon 16 Jan 18:30; Sat 28 Jan 16:00

**Ugetsu Monogatari** Tue 17 Jan 20:30

**Imitation of Life** Wed 18 Jan 20:30; Wed 25 Jan 14:30; Sun 29 Jan 12:30

**Parasite (Gisaengchung)** Wed 18 Jan 17:30 BFI IMAX

**The Spirit of the Beehive (El espíritu de la colmena)** Thu 19 Jan 18:00; Sat 28 Jan 13:50

**Pierrot le Fou** Thu 19 Jan 20:30

**The Leopard (Il gattopardo)** Fri 20 Jan 14:00

**Sansho the Bailiff (Sansho Dayu)** Fri 20 Jan 17:45; Thu 26 Jan 17:50

**Madame de...** Fri 20 Jan 18:10 (+ intro by Ruby McGuigan, Cultural Programme Manager)

**Blue Velvet** Fri 20 Jan 20:35; Tue 24 Jan 21:00 BFI IMAX

**Sátántangó** Sat 21 Jan 13:30

#### Celine and Julie Go Boating (Céline et Julie vont en bateau)

Sat 21 Jan 17:00

**The Shining** Sat 21 Jan 20:30 BFI IMAX

**My Neighbour Totoro (Tonari no Totoro)**

Sun 22 Jan 10:00 BFI IMAX; Sat 28 Jan 13:40

**A Matter of Life and Death** Sun 22 Jan 11:30

**Spirited Away (Sen to Chihiro no Kamikakushi)** Sun 22 Jan 12:30 BFI IMAX

**Yi Yi (A One and a Two...)** Sun 22 Jan 14:00 (+ intro by Hyun Jin Cho, Film Programmer, BFI Festivals)

**L'avventura (The Adventure)** Sun 22 Jan 15:20; Mon 30 Jan 20:15

**Journey to Italy (Viaggio in Italia)** Mon 23 Jan 14:30; Fri 27 Jan 20:50

**The Gleaners and I (Les glaneurs et la glaneuse) + La Jetée** Mon 23 Jan 18:10

**The Red Shoes** Tue 24 Jan 18:05

**Andrei Rublev** Thu 26 Jan 18:40; Sun 29 Jan 17:20

**Sunset Boulevard** Fri 27 Jan 14:30; Mon 30 Jan 17:50

**The General** Sun 29 Jan 15:10

**Touki-Bouki** Tue 31 Jan 17:40

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