

*The Grandmaster* (2013):  
A Wong Kar-wai Wuxia Film?

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# Warm-up questions

1. To what extent is *The Grandmaster* a wuxia (martial arts) film?

An adventurous story about heroes (Ip Man and Gong Er) in the community of *wulin* (武林) or in the domain of *jianghu* (江湖)

(cf. Jing Yong's *The Legend of the Condor Heroes* (1957-59))

(cf. eg. King Hu's *Come Drink With Me* (1966))



# Warm-up Questions

2. To what extent is it NOT a wuxia film?

Reading *The Grandmaster* as a Wong Kar-wai work (cf. Ackbar Abbas) –

- Hong Kong specific
- highly self-reflexive
- obsessed with repetition, themes of time, love, and memory

# Rethinking the genre

- Martial arts film:  
a celebration of action
- *The Grandmaster* (and *Ashes of Time*):  
a critique of action rather than a celebration of it (Abbas)

## Warm-up quotes

*The Grandmaster* 'is an unmistakable Wong Kar-wai film that fulfills many auteurist expectations in cinematography, stylistic refinement, and artistic finesse, yet it is also exceptionally disciplined in the sense that self-reflexive subjectivity and philosophical abstraction – the defining qualities of Wong's nostalgia films – are counter-balanced by the documentary-like historical exposition necessitated by the biographical form, even though Tony Leung's voiceover narrative that frames the narrative point of view retains the nostalgic, subjective tone of a typical Wong Kar-wai movie.' (Vivian Lee 392)







Foshan's Wing Chun began with Leung Jan.

一九五三年

葉問領取香港身份證，  
中港邊境關閉。

(1953. Ip Man gets his Hong Kong ID)

葉問一生傳燈無數，  
詠春因他而盛，  
從此傳遍世界。

(the torch of Wing Chun)  
(has been carried around the world.)

‘Given Wong’s obsession with time and memory, and his idiosyncratic approach to cinematic time and history, it is not surprising that his own Ip Man project has branched out into many different directions: reflections upon the nature and philosophical foundations of martial arts, a tribute to the Hong Kong martial arts cinema, war, and migration, the Chinese diaspora, and his signature themes of unrequited love, memory, and betrayal.’ (Lee 394)

# Close-reading of 3 fighting sequences:

1. Between Master Gong and Ip Man  
(fighting in the 'Golden Pavilion')
2. Between Ip Man and Gong Er  
(also set in the inn)
3. Between Gong Er and Ma San  
(a modern wuxia sequence set in a train station)

# I. Reading *The Grandmaster* as a wuxia film

## 1. The *mise-en-scène* of wuxia films:

- A *Bildungsroman*, a story about a wuxia hero
- Fighting in the 'inn' (Red Pavilion) (with staircases) is featured
- Using King Hu's tradition: *Dragon Inn* (1967)
- Extensive use of slow motion and voice over (NOT in the King Hu tradition)
- An imagined unified China as background (even before the founding of PRC in 1949)

# 1. Reading *The Grandmaster* as a wuxia film

## 2. The revenge motif

- Taking revenge for one's father: not a question of choice
- A duty in the Confucian order and in the wuxia tradition of “purging one's school of the disloyal and immoral” (清理門戶)
- But in *The Grandmaster*, it is a personal choice for Gong Er (a daughter and a disciple)
- Gong Er has to give up her marriage and oath not to pass on the 64 Hands in order to qualify as a proper revenger

## II (a). What are the features of the cinema of Wong Kar-wai (according to Ackbar Abbas)?

### 1. The Use of Voice-over

- dialogue gives way to off-screen voice-over
- voice-overs are as skewed as the events themselves
- voice-overs as a source of comedy or pathos

### 2. The Use of the Generic:

- 'stories [of standard genres] are crisscrossed and cut up by other more ordinary and fugitive tales, like so many loose threads' (117)



## II (a). What are the features of the cinema of Wong Kar-wai (according to Ackbar Abbas)?

### 3. Appointments are Disappointments

- the obsessive concern with an exact time and date “as if such exactness could anchor and mark the non-repeatability of an important event or erotic relationship” (Abbas 117)
- disappointment: the perception that every origin that we want to believe is unique and individual is already a repetition

### 4. The Use of Popular Songs

- Latin American songs and 1960s Chinese pop

## II (a). What are the features of the cinema of Wong Kar-wai (according to Ackbar Abbas)?

### 5. The Use of Repetition

- politics (which seem absent from Wong's film) is represented in an indirect relationship to the political frames in terms of the crisis of experience with its repetitions
  - A space of disappearance
- ruins of action:
  - action is never a question of a heroic progression, but to start over again

## II (b). Self-consciousness of its own genre

What is kung fu?

- A simple answer by Ip Man: 'the horizontal and the vertical'
- cf. Jin Yong's *wuxia* world: the question 'what is a hero' is predominant in his novels, and the novels celebrate heroism
- The definition of the spirit of kung fu is contradicted by Ip Man himself: that 'kung fu is about precision. Whoever breaks a piece of furniture loses'

## II (c). Martial Arts Philosophy

Three stages of martial arts:

1. 見自己 (To know yourself / To know myself);
2. 見天地 (To know the world / To see the world);
3. 見眾生 (To be a sentient being who knows how to act in the world / To pass on what I know).

- They are neither separate nor successive
- It is a question of repetition, of starting over (cf. *Happy Together*)
- The 'grandmaster' is the one who has mastered repetition (Abbas 129)

## Abbas on *Ashes of Time*:

- ‘The more heroic the character, the more he seems damaged by life.’
- ‘In the performance of modern life the role of the hero as traditionally understood is no longer available.’
- ‘Physical action is never autonomous; it never begins and ends with itself. It is always weighed down by affect, history, and memory.’



## Scene Analysis (33'30''-35'16''):

### 1st Fight: Master Gong and Ip Man

- 'The question of *action* is no longer one of how to win a fight, but the more complex question of how to stop, how to step down, how to lose, how to disappear' (Abbas 130).
- Ip's comment: breaking the round cake means breaking from what we know, which in turn means providing kung fu with the possibility of starting over again. It is by breaking with the kung fu tradition that we ensure its survival, and so not breaking with it.
- Doubleness in winning and losing: In order to achieve Master Gong's goal he must lose. So action is a matter of learning how to lose and disappear (reflection).





# Scene Analysis (40'45''-43'57''): 2nd Fight: Gong Er and Ip Man

- Action as inaction:
  - the winner is the one who does not break anything, a precise and self-controlled movement that allows one to stay in place:
- Action is doubled with affect:
  - Ip loses, but 'wins' Gong Er's feeling. His plan of visiting her in the North is frustrated by 'the doubling of action and affect, motion and emotion' (131).



# Scene Analysis (1.33'56''-1.38'54''): 3rd Fight: Gong Er and Ma San

- The 'negative' consequence of Gong Er's winning:
  - the renunciation of ordinary life and teaching of kung fu
- A comment on time and understanding (*Ashes of Time*)
- Ma San's realization of the Master's words about turning back and reflection
  - Understanding *always* takes place later (cf. Proust: later I understood)
- The ultimate fight is with time and repetition (Abbas 132)
  - It is not that time allows us to bridge between action and understanding, but that time *is* that gap
- Moving train as background
  - An emblem of contemporary history
  - The war against the Japanese invasion ended in 1945.

# Questions for discussion

- Ackbar Abbas argues that the ultimate master is the one who could deal with repetition. Discuss.
- What is the significance of the various portraits shown in the film?
- How is the image of time portrayed?
- What are the functions of the intertexts?
- What roles do the historical footages play in Wong Kar-wai's films?
- For a film about a kung-fu master, it shows not just the life of Ip Man, but many other masters, including a large portion of Gong Er's tragic life. Discuss the necessity of the role of Gong Er in the poetics of the film.



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一九三九年

宮二赴西北大學習醫，  
遇一線天。





一九四〇年

馬三投日，  
擔任奉天協和會會長。

(1940. Ma San collaborates with the Japanese.)

一九五三年

宮二病逝香港，  
一生信守誓言，  
不婚嫁，不留後，  
不傳藝。

(She kept her vows)





# Chiasmastic characters (Gary Bettinson)

- Ip Man
  - passive
  - stagnating
  - the master of Wing Chun
- Gong Er
  - active
  - goal-driven and revenger
  - the only guardian of the grandmaster (Master Gong)'s legacy

‘What time has made impossible is what makes Gong Er’s declaration of love possible’ (133)

Gong Er and Ip Man as a pair of dialectics:  
complementary to each other

# Wuxia and the idea of China

- *jiang hu*, 'the martial arts world', evokes an image of a wandering life, 'beyond the reach of the government...has for a long time been recognized as a key to understanding the Chinese popular imagination.' (Chan 2004, 301)
- An imagined unified China before 1949
- Hong Kong as the site of preserving 'Chinese' culture

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