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Ashes of Time Redux

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One Director Reviews His Place in the Wuxia Genre’s Global Rise
By Matthew David Johnson

Six years before Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon (Wo long cang hu, 2000), Hong Kong director Wong Kar-wai was a pioneer in the genre of stylish, star-loaded, and festival-ready wuxia filmmaking. His Ashes of Time (Dung che sai duk / Dong xie xi du, 1994) reinterpreted martial arts fiction for a generation more accustomed to motion pictures and television serials than novels, at a time when Hong Kong’s economy was riding a crest of growth triggered by the opening of adjacent Guangdong to direct investment. Ashes represented a major investment for its producers, with a reputed budget of HK$40 million. Despite disappointing returns, the film’s technical merits won it top honors in Venice, Hong Kong, and Taiwan, while solidifying the reputations of Wong and cinematographer Christopher Doyle as emerging international talents.

Ashes of Time Redux is essentially the U.S. premiere of Wong Kar-wai’s 1994 film. Yet much has changed in the fourteen years since Ashes’ original release. Wong himself has become an auteur par excellence; with this newest move, he has undeniably become principal curator of his own legacy. As Wong’s introductory blurb in the Sony Pictures Classics press kit accompanying Redux states:

Over the years, I’ve come to realize that there are several different version of ASHES IN TIME in circulation, some approved by me, some not, as well as the fact that the film was never released in much of the world including the United States. To rectify this situation, we decided to revisit this project and to create the definitive version (Ashes of Time Redux press kit, 3).

During an October 2008 press conference at the New York Film Festival, Wong, Doyle, and actress Brigitte Lin shared their memories of the film, while Wong himself retold more recent adventures spent tracking down salvageable copies of Ashes’ 35mm theatrical prints for Redux. The new version, which is shorter than the original, also features a brand-new score by cellist Yo-Yo Ma and multi-instrumentalist Wu Tong. Observant viewers will also note that despite hype over Ashes’ restoration, Redux features considerably re-edited, and in some cases re-shot, opening and final sequences. Given that the digital version includes saturated colors which would have been impossible in a 35mm format, one could also argue that Ashes’ already-considerable cinematographic achievements have received a substantial “upgrade” as well, giving the film a contemporary look which challenges the dominant browns and yellows of its first studio release (many of the scenes were shot in the desert).
Throughout the twentieth-century, international distribution and re-distribution has often subverted the notion of an “original” version. Re-edits, changed title cards and subtitles, shoddy transfers, and mutated aspect ratios are as much a part of cinematic history as changes in the motion picture medium. Wong Kar-wai’s decision to release a definitive version of *Ashes of Time* in the form of a “redux” is, in some ways, an admission that no such original has ever existed. Rather, the film now being rendered intelligible for U.S audiences familiar with the director of *In the Mood for Love* (Chun gwong cha sit / Chun guang zha xie, 1997) and 2046 (2004), and reintroduced to film markets worldwide.

Why now? One clue lies in the press kit’s relatively copious coverage of the *jianghu* universe “in which martial arts fiction is set … a universe that often intersects with our own ... [and] mirror[s] the complications of real-life extended families in the Confucian tradition” (*Ashes of Time Redux* press kit, 10). This is the universe of the “wuxia epic,” or knight-errant genre now familiar to large segments of U.S. filmgoers following the success of Ang Lee’s *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*, and Zhang Yimou’s *Hero* (2002), *House of Flying Daggers* (*Shi mian mai fu*, 2004), and *Curse of the Golden Flower* (*Man cheng jin dai huang jin jia*, 2006). Whether Zhang’s films, which lack the wuxia novelistic pedigree of Wong’s and Lee’s features, can be considered proper additions to this genre is irrelevant. By blending *jianghu* tropes with fin de siècle imperial splendor, *Hero* and *Curse* in particular have established a basis for plausible consideration as legitimate heirs to the martial arts throne one occupied by Kung Hu, the Shaw Brothers, and Tsui Hark.

Press copy circulated by his U.S. publicists indicates that, in essence, *Ashes of Time Redux* should be seen as representing Wong Kar-wai’s own claim to pre-millennial wuxia pioneer status. Billing Wong as the first to bring these heroic figures and their *jianghu* “universe” to festival audiences, *Redux* is traced back to a “literary genre [which] dates back at least to the Ming Dynasty” (*Ashes of Time Redux* press kit, 11). Another historicist argument made by these materials positions the populist credentials of *jianghu* folk culture against “bans” on filmed wuxia epics imposed by successive Nationalist and Communist regimes—a narrative of anti-authoritarian rebellion which has followed mainland directors since the 1980s. *Wuxia* films have been popular with Sinophone audiences since the 1920s, when they were first released in large numbers. Yet while Bruce Lee’s first appearances in Chinatown theaters may have brought the actor to growing international awareness during the 1970s, trans-linguistic export of Hong Kong wuxia proper (distinguished by its connection to themes and characters invented by novelists Louis Cha, Gu Long, and others) has only become a big-money phenomenon in recent years. The original *Ashes in Time* is a case in point. While the film’s all-star Hong Kong cast and stylistic daring brought critical acclaim, it is often overlooked as an important film in Wong’s own early canon.

In short, “Wong Kar-wai the challenging auteur” is himself being reinvented as “Wong Kar-wai the prescient epic-maker.” The transition corresponds, perhaps, with Wong’s ongoing shift toward more linear filmmaking style incorporating Anglophone actors, as represented by *My Blueberry*
Nights (2007) and upcoming historical drama The Lady from Shanghai (currently slated for a 2010 release). Both Redux and these other releases point to his arrival at a jumping-off point similar to that reached by Ang Lee circa Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon. Having mastered and reshaped expectations within the international festival and “art house” distribution circuits, Wong is now going global at the level of more popular genres—a level which now includes, as it did not in 1994, the wuxia epic (NOTE: two of the director’s rumored upcoming projects include Two Knives, which pits a U.S. secret service agent against two female martial artists, and The Grand Master, which concerns Bruce Lee’s former martial arts teacher Yip Man). While My Blueberry Nights performed unimpressively in U.S. box offices, the film’s success in France, Germany, and Japan presumably means that audiences for Wong’s past work—in the form of DVDs and other digital media—will also continue to grow.

In this changing commercial environment, notions of directorial identity are constantly in flux. The notion of a canon reflects a critical process of selection undertaken by film reporters, informed audience members, and directors concerned with the reception of their own work. Canons are invented, redacted, recontextualized, and reinvented constantly—much like films themselves, although neither writers nor audience members have been particularly attentive to this point. Record companies have already discovered the tensions over ownership and use which arise from intensified circulation of music in the digital era. Similarly, the “definitive” Ashes in Time Redux may not supplant the original, but nonetheless serves to remind filmgoers that Wong Kar-wai and Hong Kong cinema occupy an important place in the (invented, reinvented) history of transnational commercial cinema as well.

Tags: Ashes in Time Redux, Chinese cinema, Chinese film, Wong Kar-wai