

# An Analyze on Intersection of two female figures in the Film *In the Mood for Love* and an Interpretation of its Metaphor in cultural Identity

Qi LI

Otto-Friedrich University of Bamberg, Bamberg, Bayern, Germany

**Abstract:** The interpretation of the film *In the Mood for Love* carried on from the perspective of the female characters: the intersection between Su and Chow's wife, and moreover, the cultural identities, which symbolizes the Hong Kong culture that was bred grew from intersection: different backgrounds assimilated in each other.

## 1 Introduction

As the inspiration for Hong Kong director Wong Kar-wai's famous film *In the Mood for Love*, the novella *Dui Dao* (《对倒》), written by the Hong Kong writer Liu Yichang, was translated into English as *Intersection*. This is a term of describing two original stamps that look exactly the same but opposite in position to each other. A translation as such reflects accurately the content and plot of novellas, at the mean time brings about its metaphorical meaning to the film as well. As Deppman Hsiu-Chuang described in her book *Adapted for the Screen*: "Stamps on Envelopes Provide a Short-lived but Necessary Connection between Sender and Recipient"<sup>1</sup>. In the novella it defines the meeting an old man and a girl, but when adapted to *In the Mood for Love*, intersection described the secret love between the two protagonists as well as „visually linking them and rhyming their devastating isolation“<sup>2</sup>. Thus we may rise the questions: to what extend does the film covers the novella and how was Wong Karwai inspired from the novella while representing his own memory?

## 2 Metaphor in the intersected appearance and outfit

As one of the protagonists of the film, Su Lizhen stands in the opposite to Chow Muiyun's wife, Ms. Chow. They fell in love with the same men and lived in the same neighborhood. Therefore, the relationship between these two women is intersected to one another. On the other hand, Su Lizhen's background as a migrant from

Shanghai can not be ignored, as was emphasized from the beginning of the film, while Ms. Chow speaks Cantonese through the film, which implicates of her being native in Hong Kong. Thus, the contrast of the both female characters can be analyzed as the representations of intersection between the second generation of Shanghai immigrants and the Hong Kong native.

These two female characters appear in opposite ways from figure to identity. Su wears a high-necked cheongsam, a traditional Chinese dress, which is in line with her cautious character, while Ms. Chow prefers western modern dress sleeveless dress with a plunging neckline. Su fulfills “the traditional expectations of being homebound, submissive, and fithful.”<sup>3</sup> Already in the first scene, when the neighborhood play Majong together, Su makes room for Ms. Chow (*In the Mood for Love* 00:05:20), which is also a metaphor for the later plot of their positions in relationship.

<sup>1</sup> Deppman, Hsiu-Chuang: *Adapted for the screen: the cultural politics of adaptation in modern Chinese fiction and film*, Hawaii, 2010, P. 104-105.

<sup>2</sup> Brunette, Peter: *Wong Kar-wai*, Urbana und Chicago 2005, P.94

<sup>3</sup> Deppman, *Adapted for the screen*, P. 112



Fig. 1. 00:05:20

The Scene presenting the affair between the intersected two families was nevertheless contrast to the reality, as easily deduced: the absent Ms. Chow and Mr. Chan(Su's husband), with only their voice heard and without their facial expressions shot, is the careless pair, whereas the protagonists, who are observed by the audience, choose to keep their love in secret.<sup>4</sup>

### 3 Metaphor in social relationships and self identification

The work of Su and Ms. Chow can also be regarded as another metaphorical intersection. Su works in a company that sells boat tickets, while Ms. Chow works in a hotel. Their jobs serve in opposite ways, one is to leave, while the other is to settle, even through briefly, in the city. The same is with their relationship with the neighborhood. Su declines her landlady Ms. Suen's dinner invitation and refused to get close to the neighborhood, who shares the same background with her. In doing so, she escapes from being observed and gossiped by the neighbors - she avoids being judged by the old-fashioned values, which she firmly stick to by concealing her love to Chow. Thus, it can be deduced, that Su's self-identity as the second generation of Hong Kong immigrants is split by the old and modern.

Since the beginning of China's war against Japan in 1937, Shanghainese moved to Hong Kong during the occupation. As the second generation from Shanghai, Su speaks Cantonese and understands Shanghainese, probably from the influence of her parents, just like the director Wong Karwai himself. Su grow up with Hong Kong being influenced by western while being educated

by the traditional culture from her family. A cultural background as such results in that, her cultural belonging can be found nowhere, whether in Shanghai or Hong Kong. It can be thus deduced, Su rejected the neighborhood on the one hand to contain her individuality, on the other hand to reject being labeled as a immigrant, or non-local. While rejecting accommodating into the circumstance that she grew up with and familiar to, she can not be counted as a modern soul either. She restrain herself with a traditional moral standard and refuses the liberal modern morality of the 60s, which liberates the individuals from condemned of having affairs or being unfaithful towards marriage. Thus, her isolation in the modern society in the 60s redounds to her being lost in the self identity or belonging to social groups.

This split in identity contradicts to Ms. Chow, a local of Hong Kong, who accepted different culture. She doesn't alienate herself from the traditional Shanghainese or the neighborhood where Shanghai culture prevailed. She doesn't find her affair with Mr. Chan problematic and by no means restricted by the old moral norms. As a native, she finds her cultural identity completely in the modern society, in the openness to all culture, in her presence. She identify herself as a free individual in admitting completely to her desire. Mrs. Chow is more independent and same as Mr. Chan plays the dominating roll in marital relationship: when playing Mahjong with the neighborhood, she replaces her husband and Su companies her husband Chan. doesn't feel shamed for being unfaithful or hurting Su. Nor does she let herself fell into the dilemma of self doubting. In this regard, it can be concluded that the two women are in completely opposite positions when it comes to constructing character or establishing personality. Thus, the identification of the two female figures appears intersected.

<sup>4</sup> Xiao Xia: The complex metaphors: The artistic feature of the film *In the Mood for Love*, in *Movie Review*, Beijing 2006(15), P.26-27.

#### 4 Metaphor of cultural backgrounds in individuals and intertextuality

The identities of the two female characters also correspond to the identities of Hong Kong, providing the audience with a glimpse of Hong Kong culture. Since the beginning of the 20th century, the colonial culture grew in China<sup>5</sup> and immigrants with different cultural backgrounds developed Hong Kong's culture in contrast and accommodation. Therefore, the new Hong Kong residents formed a culture in a unique way, which is different from any in its background. Hong Kong itself is not only a geographical concept, but a cultural context in which residents form its won way of thinking.<sup>6</sup> Just like the space in the city, the old and the new blend and converge in the same space, "as 'old' and 'new' are placed together in contiguity and continuity"<sup>7</sup>, the unique atmosphere: openness to the to the modern and conservative from the history together constitute the so-called "Hong Kong culture".

During the adaption from the novel *Intersection*, the cultural background in the two cities was hinted in the two contradicted female figures in the movie, while which was represented by the two protagonists in the novella. An old man, Chun Yubai and a young girl, Yaxing walk on the street in opposite directions and their course intersected at an cinema. While the old man with a Shanghai background reminiscent the past in his memory, the young native girl look froward to her future, while feeling anxious about the present. Their meeting represents the meeting of the past and the future, as well as the both cities, Shanghai and Hong Kong. Different from Su, the second generation of immigrant, Chun sees in his past his root and stands firmly in it. However, the culture or the place that he identifies with is actually his own creation, as well as the film *In the Mood for Love* itself. The whole is constructed by the memories, a heterotopic, as was defined by Foucault, to the real space. This term describes the a space that copies the spaces in reality but doesn't really exist. The space in the mirror for example. In this case, the scenes in the film from the memories can all be seen as heterotopic to reality. Time and space are then melted into one, a combination of time-zone, instead of being split with dichotomy.

Cultural identification located in identifying with the memories of a certain timezone or space and is bound with culture of a certain location. The figures in the novella as well as in the film identify each with intersected time-zones and stagnate in them. However, their memories and expectations don't meet up with the the presence that their life path crossed, which is the reason, why they are isolated. The blossom past of one side and the unknowing future of the other side build the utterly tremendous intersection: when the two

protagonists of the novella represents the 30s and the 60s, the film represents the 60s with Wong's memory from the perspective of the 90s. In the constant looking backs, "the nineties to the sixties as the sixties are to an earlier moment, and so on and on."<sup>8</sup> Through out the adaption, the isolation and seeking of the identity of the individuals become the everlasting theme, which is why the film still can be called as the adaption of the novella.

In the adaption from the novella to the film, the reader can observe the identical dilemma of the Hong Konger: the old generation looked back at the past, while reluctantly accept the modern culture; the new generation looked anxiously forward in the future, while facing the current problems of puberty. It is between these two states of living, the unique culture discourse of Hong Kong was formed and became independent from either its origins.

#### 5 The Intersection between identities and the post modern society in the poetical film language

The last intersection in the film and its intertextuality with other pieces lays on the intersected identified time-zones and the era on a bigger plot. By the end of the film, the protagonist Su Lizhen visited the landlady with her son and was told that the neighborhood would be moving to America for the education of their grandchildren. Chow and his wife are divorced. While Mrs. Chow regained her freedom, Su remains in the most traditional form of family with a child. The Shanghai neighborhood that represents the traditional moral moved into a whole different culture basis, through which the restrict from the past seemed no longer important. In stepping into post modernity the figures returned to their own comfort zones with less struggling. Time-zone as the centre theme of the film became more and more obvious with the ongoing of the plots.

At the end of the film, the time line is drawn to the 70s, with pictures of the protagonist Chow visited a temple of the Kampuchea while working as a journalist and reported the visit of the French president, which signalize the independence of Kampuchea. This event represents the utterly proceed of post modernity. Chow talks then his secrets into an old tree in the temple and hopping that his past would be sealed into the tree. As shown in the screen shot below.

<sup>5</sup>Akbar. p. 68

<sup>6</sup>Zheng Jiawen: *The mirror image structure of Hong Kong Culture: From Dui Dao to In the Mood for Love*, Guiyang 2007, 216.(12), P. 50-55.

<sup>7</sup>M. Abbas. Akbar, *Hong Kong: Missing Culture and Politics*, Minneapolis, 2002, P. 67

<sup>8</sup> Abbas, P. 52



Fig. 2. 01:30:42

The loneliness and split identification remain in the 60s and the confusion ended with the end of colonial era. In the scene, the figure of Chow stands not in the centre, but the ruins of the temple. The loneliness of the individuals seems unimportant and insignificant at that point, what truly matters is the time-zone on a bigger scale. The individuals are meant to accept the changing of era.

Even through Su and Mrs. Chow are not present in this scene, but they are brought up to the front. This is also the poetic in the film language of pictures. Their identifications with certain time-zones or the social norms in certain era are deconstructed by the comparison with the ancient temple. The female figures are utterly symbolized as the dilemma of the modern souls between the shackles of the past and the confusion of the future.

## 6 Conclusion

In the works, I emphasize the intersection of the social identities of the two female characters, Su Lizhen and Ms. Chan, in which the metaphor in the two cities, Shanghai and Hong Kong, was made. Moreover, the intersection is that, what Hong Kong culture is. It is bind together by the difference, accommodating to all while isolating the individual. Cultural identification related to the memories of a combination of time and space, referenced above as “time-zone” that is highly individualized. The intersection of which results to the isolation of the individuals of modern society, and the culture of Hong Kong. In the The process of studying the way the film was adapted itself opens up a artistic window to understanding the Hong Kong culture and the solitary of the individual in it.

## References

1. Abbas. Akbar, M. Hong Kong: Disappearing Culture and Politics, Minneapolis, 2002.
2. Brunette, Peter: Wong Kar-wai, Urbana und Chicago 2005, P.94
3. Deppman, Hsiu Zhuang: Screen Adaptation: Cultural Politics of Modern Chinese Novel and Film Adaptation, Hawaii 2010.
4. Xiao Xia: The complex metaphors: The artistic feature of the film *In the Mood for Love* , in *Movie Review*, Beijing 2006(15), S.26-27.
5. Zheng Jiawen: The mirror image structure of Hong Kong Culture: From *Dui Dao* to *In the Mood for Love*, Guiyang 2007, 216. (12), pp. 50-5