

An Analysis of *Chinese Box*

MLC1002 Cosmopolitan Culture and Hong Kong Urbanscape

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Introduction

This short essay will illustrate how Wayne Wang's *Chinese Box* represent (in the sense of *representation* after Stuart Hall) Hong Kong during the handover in 1997.

Wayne Wang is the Hong Kong-born director. Since the influence of American film, he called himself Wayne after the legendary Wild West film actor John Wayne. Wang studied film directing in California's College of Arts and Sciences, then return to Hong Kong as a television drama producer. In the 1980's, Wang established his career as director in America. After the success of *The Joy Luck Club* (1993), *Smoke* (1995), *Blue in the Face* (1995), Wang became one of the influential Asian director in Hollywood.

In 1997, Wang back to his motherland, Hong Kong, to shoot the film *Chinese Box* as his private diary for the handover of Hong Kong. From *Chinese Box*, the "love-hate letter" Wang called, we can find out how the Wang's impression of Hong Kong is represented.

The Story

Superficially the story of *Chinese Box* is a love story. John (Jeremy Irons) is a journalist who lived in Hong Kong for 15 years. He loves Vivian (Gong Li), the owner of a karaoke bar, secretly. But Vivian only wants to marry with Chang (Michael Hui). In the middle of 1997, he found that he got cancer and will die very soon. Then he start to take camcorder to shoot the image of Hong Kong, a place that he lived for 15 years but still not yet understand. In his wandering in Hong Kong, he met a scared face girl Jean (Maggie Cheung). He paid Jean to interview her, and she told him her love story. At the end, John died, and the two women, Jean

and Vivian, started their new lives after John's inspiration.

However, it is hard to stop the guessing of the undertone of the film. The love of John to Vivian represents the pity feeling of losing Hong Kong; the love of Jean to William represent the unrealistic hope of Hong Kong people to the UK government (e.g. the UK citizenship).

Obvious that *Chinese Box* is not as simple as a love story only, but also a political allegory.

The love story is only a sweet coat of Wang's own manifesto on the handover of Hong Kong.

As the animation in prelude of the film, the box-insides-box structure of the Chinese box, actually is the hint that inside the story, there is still another story.

In the film, John is the center. Audience sees Hong Kong through John's eyes, and of course, his camera. From the tone of the film we can feel that the director is sympathy to John. John is a positive character that he bring the two women new lifes. It seems that Wang is trying to show his passion to the UK government. And it brought Wang some bad critics, however, it is free for anybody to have any kind of passion on anybody.

The Characters

Since the story has a parallelism with the handover of Hong Kong, the characters in the film can be regarded as the signifiers of Hong Kong, China, and the UK.

<i>Signifier</i>		<i>Signified</i>
John	→	UK (bright side), reflection of director
William	→	UK (dark side)
Vivian	→	Hong Kong,

Jean → Hong Kong

Chang → China

Under the process of signification as shown in above, we can figure out the relation between the love story and the handover of Hong Kong. John's death is the departure of the UK colonial government; the relation of Vivian and Chang represent Hong Kong will be taken over by China; the prostitute life of Vivian represent the history of being colony of Hong Kong; Jean's awaiting for William represent the unrealistic dream of UK citizenship by the Hong Kong people; Jean's scared face represent the unclear identity of Hong Kong.

Metaphors inside the Story

Inside the story, the characters made two important metaphors on Hong Kong, one is describe Hong Kong as the Pompeii; the other one is describe Hong Kong as a whore (by John in his book *How to Make Money in Asia*). Of course, the characters' metaphors are just the metaphors by the director.

The first metaphor shows a pessimistic view toward the future of Hong Kong. Since Pompeii is a rich city but destroyed by the volcanic eruption within one night. Before the volcanic eruption, nobody knows that the end of the city is coming. Just like Hong Kong, people just keep earning money and spend their luxury life. Wang seems that he want to warn Hong Kong people, the armageddon is coming, and the date is 1st of July.

The second metaphor is made in John's book *How to Make Money in Asia*. John describe

Hong Kong as a whore, anybody can help her make money, she can serve anybody, the handover of government is just the change of pimp, it is nothing matter. In this metaphor, Wang suggest that Hong Kong as a place just for commercial, there are no content inside Hong Kong, but only money. That is why who govern it is doesn't matter.

The Shots and the Sound

The shots and the sound of Hong Kong in the film are the tool for Wang to reveal the urbanscape Hong Kong.

At the first scene that John on the road to his home, most of the people shown on the screen are women. Combine with the signification of Vivian and Jean, we can conclude that in Wang's mind, Hong Kong is gendered as a female. And the two owners, John, William/UK and Chang/China are male. The national flag is a clear symbol of the penis of the two males.

The montage of the entrance of People Liberation Army and Christopher Patten's tearing shows an interesting effect that the legitimate entrance of PLA became an occupation of evil army!

Besides image, sound is also important element for Wang to construct his Hong Kong in the film. At the beginning of the rhythmic sound from the construction site give audience an impression of heartbeat of the city. It is noisy and annoying, but that built up the glory of Hong Kong. At the end of the film, Vivian went to the market, and look at a dying fish, the heartbeat of the fish is amplified to a high volume. Just a few seconds, it fade out and the

sound from the construction site fade in. The scene shows an interesting meaning, the sound of dying is away from us, and the sound of growing is coming. It shows that Wang is not hopeless to Hong Kong. However, the future is still uncertain... Who knows what will be built?

Conclusion

As a colony, the handover of Hong Kong can interpret as the liberation of Hong Kong from colonialism. But in Wang's *Chinese Box*, it seems that the handover is pushing Hong Kong to an uncertainty, and maybe the end of Hong Kong. It is clear that Wang is an Anglophilist. People maybe blame Wang that he do not have the nationalist passion, or he is the slave of colonialist. I prefer to say Wang is a nostalgic only: he miss the past of Hong Kong, and afraid of change only, especially the new owner of Hong Kong has a low reputation in the world.

What *Chinese Box* shows is the worry of Wang.

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