

Display of Third Wave Feminism in *Chungking Express*: A Chinese Film Review

Ivy Agyekum

Ho Technical University, Ho, Ghana

Chungking Express is a Hong Kong film directed by Wong Kar-Wai in 1994. The film consists of two unrelated story lines, with vibrant scenes and unforgettable music. *Chungking Express* can be discussed from different angles, however, it is the perhaps unintentional and sometimes subdued portrayal of third wave feminism, which is the focal point of this review. This review compares the depiction of female characters in *Chungking* and other Chinese female led classics. Finally, this review juxtaposes the male and female characters to actual social gender norms.

Keywords: *Chungking Express*, feminism, society

Introduction

The year 2017 was a great year for women in filmmaking. According to Iqbal of BBC News, the top three movies at the North American box office movies that year were *Beauty and the Beast*, *Wonder Woman*, and the *Last Jedi*, all of which featured women in the lead roles. According to the BBC report, something this historic only happened in 1958 (Iqbal, 2018). There seems to be an upsurge in the push for feminism in filmmaking in recent times. Yes, women have been put side by side with male actors for a long time, however, very few of these movies express or give women an edge over their male counterparts. Most films cast female roles as the sidekick of the male lead, the romantic interest of the lead, or worst a sexual distraction for both the lead role and viewers. A classic example is Marilyn Monroe, one of America's most famous actors. The mention of Marilyn Monroe primarily elicits thoughts of physical looks and sensuality, but not necessarily her skills as an actress. She was sexually objectified for the pleasure of the American public. There is a genre of film termed Women's Films directed by men. In women's films, women play the main roles in melodramas. Actresses in melodramas project society's quintessential good girl persona, while other actresses playing opposites may be cast as villains. These movies although casting women as leads put them in some sort of moral box.

Although it seems like a bright future for women in Hollywood, there may have existed feminist films in other cultures. One movie this time originating from the East, had all this covered as far back as 1994. *Chungking Express* is a film directed by Chinese Wong Kai-Wai. The film is packed with many themes, which can be interpreted in several ways. This review will analyze *Chungking Express* from the alpha female point/feminist.

Roots of Chinese Film Making

A brief introduction to the history of filmmaking in China is required before the main review. It is a fact that motion pictures did not originate in China but in France, but just after a decade of this discovery in France, Shanghai, the Pearl of the East had the privilege of premiering China's first Film: *The Battle of Dingjunshin*. Though *The Battle of Dingjunshin* in actuality is a recording of a Peking Opera, it set the precedent in 1905 for the commencement of the Chinese film industry.

It is of popular knowledge that, in China film directors enjoy celebrity status just like actors. Chinese film directors were trained in special government filmmaking institutes. These directors can be divided into the first, second, third, fourth, fifth, and sixth generations, with the most popular being the fifth generation. It is associated with famed directors such as Zhang Yimou, Chen Kaine, amongst others, who graduated the same year from the Beijing Film Academy. These directors found fame in China after the end of the Cultural Revolution. Their movies were touted as being innovative and inspired by the happenings of the past.

Chungking Express

Chungking Express is a 1994 Hong Kong film with its genre being drama. With the exception of its male director Wong Kar-Wai, directing and producing such marvellous work, it is predominately dominated by female actors. It is the female roles that keep you transfixed, seduced and craving nonstop bouts of *Chungking express* viewing.

Director and Other Related Material

Wong Kar-Wai, the director of this film is not a new face in the film industry. He was born in 1956 in Shanghai, China. He started as a scriptwriter but decided to go a different direction from the then-popular martial arts Hong Kong-themed movies. His debut was with *As Tears Go By* (1988). He was at his best when he collaborated with Christopher Doyle as his cinematographer. From that time onward he produced magic on set. His most famous movies include *Chungking Express* (1994), *In the Mood of Love* (2000), *Days of Being Wild* (1990), *Ashes of Time* (1994) and the *Grand Master* (2013). Wong Kar-Wai confessed that it was while he was taking a break from directing *Ashes of Time*, that the idea of *Chungking Express* formed. He admits that the movie was a way to relieve him of boredom. Thus, there were no pre-arranged plans to shoot this movie.

Technicalities of the Film

The set of the film is based in Hong Kong, some part in the world-renowned Chungking mansions. Wong admits that this film, is his love letter to Hong Kong. He grew up in this part of Hong Kong which has always been a magnet for foreign migrants (Sanders, 2019). The success of this movie enhanced Chungking mansions' gift of magnetism this time, in tourism. The film is quite unusual, not only because of the unconventional roles the actors play but also because it is two disjoint storylines packaged into a single film. This is not surprising since Timberg writes that J. Hoberman describes Wong as "the most avant-garde of pop filmmakers (or vice versa)" and that his movies work "by subtraction" (Timberg, 2005). *Chungking Express* garnered some six Hong Kong Film Awards, HK\$ 7,678,549 at home, and 600,200 U.S. Dollars at the Box Office in the United States. The film also features the catchy tunes such as; "Things in Life", by Brown Dennis, "California Dreams", by the

Mamas and Papas and Faye Wong's cover of "Dreams". The film is shot in a bright array of background colours. In my opinion, the soundtracks in *Chungking Express*, represent the pulse of the movie. It is the music that keeps viewers glued to their seats, and leaves certain scenes of the film forever imprinted in memory. McCorkle explains the connection between the film's songs and the actors. The songs in *Chungking Express* "do create a link between indeterminate sound sources, they also create a link between time as experienced by the characters, and by extension Hong Kong" (McCorkle, 2013).

Cast and Synopsis

The film casts Takeshi Kaneshiro as Cop 223 and Brigitte Lin as the woman in the raincoat, in the first story, and Faye Wong as Faye and Tony Leung as Cop 663 as the main cast of the second story. Valerie Chou plays the flight attendant and Cop 663's ex-girlfriend. Mandarin, Cantonese, and English are the languages of the movie. The undertones of the film are feelings of love and broken heartedness. Both cops of both stories suffer a broken heart. Cop 223 is undeterred by the pains of a broken heart and still searches for love even though he is unsuccessful. Cop 663 does not pursue love, but love comes to him unsuspectedly from Faye, who knowingly or unknowingly ensnares Cop 663 into her love web.

History of Waves of Feminism

Feminism in this writing will be defined from the perspective of standard Feminism; women breaking free from the shackles of patriarchy. Feminists campaign for equality between men and women and also, championing of women's rights and freedoms in all aspects. In all, researchers have categorised Feminism into waves. At present, the world is said to be in the throes of the third wave. Other researchers argue that the third wave is in its dying stages and the fourth is being ushered in. However, this research limits its scope to the third wave of feminism. Each of these feminist waves had its unique characteristics. The first wave of Feminism was begun in 1848. Women debunked being subordinates of men, and wanted equal rights in education and especially politics. An example of a film portraying first-wave feminism is *Suffragette* (2015). The first wave of feminism gradually lost its spark when the movement was noted to favour middle-class white women even when it was working-class and non-white women who received most of society's unequal brunt (Bouclin, 2014). Sojourner Truth made her famous "Ain't I A Woman" speech in Ohio to highlight the inequality in the feminist movement.

The Second wave began in the era of "movements" in the 1960s. While The Civil Rights Movement was in motion, women wanted more sexual rights, family, work inequalities, reproductive rights, etc. Hollywood second-wave feminist films include, *She's Beautiful When She's Angry* (2014). Synder-Hall avers that the second wave of feminism ended because of conflicts in philosophy for the movement. Sexuality was the bone of contention. The movement ended when the sides could not agree on sexuality (Synder-Hall, 2010). Third-wave feminism was then born in the 90s. Equality and sexuality were at the forefront of the movement. Women wanted to be far removed from society's good girl projection. Feminists want to live freely by making their own sexual choices, deciding whether to get married or have children, etc. *Kill Bill* (2003), is a third-wave feminist film. Female characters in *Chungking Express* can be categorised as third-wave feminists. They make their own choices, live with wild abandon, and are not afraid of the consequences of their choices.

Feminism Displayed in Chungking Express and Other Female-led Chinese Movies.

Chungking Express is not the first Chinese film that has had female lead roles. Classic Chinese movies such as *Red Sorghum*, *Raise the Red Lantern* and *Ju Dou* are all played by one of China's best female actors: Gong Li. These films have featured women in the lead roles, but it is the way *Chungking Express* plays around with social stereotypes especially in China, that makes this film refreshingly different. In *Red Sorghum*, the female lead is forced by her parents into a marriage with an old but rich leper. She is then seduced and "raped" by her rescuer. She also asks for assistance from men, to help with her husband's business.

Raising the *Red Lantern* is not much different. The female lead is a university student who is also married off to an older man with three wives. Even though she seems the most educated among the wives, she eventually conforms to the unspoken rules of the house. She is filled with jealousy and engages in petty gossip. In *Raising the Red Lantern*, the face of the husband does not make an appearance in the film. His voice is however heard, but viewers can still feel the power that radiates from the male lead's bare presence. The female characters compared to that voice, appear like pawns in the movie.

The film *Ju Dou* has a similar storyline. The female lead marries an old man she does not know, and he abuses her, but she seeks refuge in his nephew. They fall in love and she becomes pregnant with the nephew's baby. She then decides to terminate the foetus when her husband and society discover and disapprove of her infidelities.

What does *Chungking Express* do differently from the above-mentioned movies with an important female lead? *Chungking Express* depicts the women-led roles in a sort of macho perspective. The women are seen to be unafraid and uninhibited. They have very independent natures and go after what they want without caring about society's gender conventions. These characters may seem selfish to some viewers. However, they are putting themselves first similar to "women loving themselves" culture these days. This comparison is by no means belittling these other great movies but merely serves as evidence to prove the free will of women in *Chungking Express*.

Exhibition of Feminism in the First Story

The "woman in the raincoat", who plays the lead in the first story traffics drugs in a country with strict drug rules i.e., death penalty. She also carries a weapon in her purse and does not seem afraid to use it. Even though she is not portrayed as a La Madrina, when her plans of transporting drugs outside the country get botched, she is neither panicky nor afraid. She merely finds out who is responsible, which happens to be her boss, and then kills him without flinching. She then changes her wig and moves on with life.

The "woman in the blonde wig" takes another unusual bold decision and kidnaps a child just to extort information about the whereabouts of her drug consignment. She furthermore seems oblivious to Cop 223's flirtations. Though she gets drunk and ends up in a hotel room with Cop 223, she never lets herself go and sleeps with only her eyes closed but all her other senses awake. The first story is summed by Lafrance, "an interesting blend of the traditional film noir subplot, complete with a female-fatale" (Lafrance, 2005, p 1).

It is however the male lead Cop 223 who is shown as a deeply wounded broken-hearted man and an attention seeker. He often makes irrelevant calls to everyone in his phone book in order to have brief company. He is a cry-baby who tells himself "Having a broken heart, I'd go jogging. Jogging evaporates water from my body. So,

I don't have any for tears". This situation is hardly displayed publicly by a man in a real society, even if apparent. Society believes heartbreak and attention-seeking are part of a woman's so-called behaviour. "The issue is that too many times and unnecessarily, some people associate crying with being weak, effeminate, or gay" (Young, 2016, p. 1). It is even stated in most cultures that a man does not cry, and some cultures go the extreme length of forbidding men to cry. Expressions such as "to man up" during desolate and desperate times clearly explain how much society abhors men showing weakness, especially through crying.

Another interesting observation is at the "Midnight Express", a fast-food eatery, where Cop 223 usually takes his calls and grabs a cup of Coke. The Midnight Express has a waitress named May, who shares the same name as Cop 223 ex-girlfriend. May the waitress, takes a fancy to Cop 223. The owner of the fast food encourages him to ask May the waitress out. Cop 223 who has been waiting for a month to accept that his girlfriend has indeed left him for good, perhaps waits too long. When he is ready to ask May the waitress, out on a date, he discovers she has squashed her feelings for him and has left on a date with another man. She moves on and does not wait for the man she likes who does not reciprocate the feeling. In most films, the female is seen sitting and waiting for the man. The broken man after reaching the realisation then comes to her and they live "happily ever after". May the waitress, who is a supporting character is portrayed with a spine.

Feminism Repeated in the Second Story

The second part of the film was filmed in Central, a busy expat-filled district of Hong Kong. It is on this set that viewers meet Faye. Firstly, Faye spots a boyish-looking haircut and wears androgynous clothes. She is perhaps the replacement of May the waitress, at the "Midnight Express" fast food. Faye is easily the most free-spirited character in the film. She loves loud music and immortalises the sound of "California Dreamin" in the viewer's mind. She receives a breakup letter on behalf of Cop 663, which was delivered by his ex-girlfriend. Faye falls in love with the heartbroken Cop 663 but does not throw herself at him, even as he is in a vulnerable state. She instead tries to make his life better by sneaking into his apartment with a spare key contained in the letter. It was quite unusual for a Chinese female character to be shown as a stalker. She took liberties in his private space and gradually and positively modified his apartment.

When Cop 663 found Faye with a bag of fish at his doorstep, that did not deter Faye from secretly re-entering his apartment. She continuously visited his apartment to clean and make his life better. Society's girl would cower at the thought of breaking into someone's apartment and worse, being caught but that did not stop Faye's character. Faye's character although non-violent nor unthreatening can be seen as some sort of stalking, especially if the roles were reversed. Research gives evidence that male stalkers far outnumber female stalkers. Females stalk their victims because the desire intimacy with their victims (Purcell, 2001). It can be concluded that stalking is a male dominated crime, and Faye's character is an unusual woman.

Eventually, when Cop 663 realised Faye had feelings for him, he asked her out on a date to meet at the "California", a bar adjacent to the "Midnight Express". It seemed he finally wanted to try dating again. Cop 663 dressed smartly in a shirt that was unknown to him, picked out by Faye. He sits at the bar waiting for her for many hours. It was the owner of the "Midnight Express" who quietly tells him he has been stood up by Faye. The owner then hands Cop663 a letter from Faye.

One would think this is all that a girl would wish for after the man she loves finally notices and tries to give her a chance. Faye instead turns down this offer mostly because she feels she has not seen the world yet, especially California. She gives herself a year to find herself and decides not to rush into dating Cop 663. This bold move exhibited by Faye is hardly evidence of the nature of a woman in love.

Cop 663 just like Cop 223 is portrayed similarly. Cop 663 enjoys a wild time with his girlfriend who is a flight attendant. He certainly regarded their relationship as more than a sexual fling, hence was completely thrown off when the relationship ended. Everyone who knows him realises he is showing symptoms of heartbreak even when he acts normal. His colleagues tease him when he excuses himself off work to recover from a pin prick injury. He is shown almost out of his mind when he is in the private confines of his room. He talks to his stuffed toy, his kitchen napkin, the tap, and almost every item in his house. He tries to “console” them since they “miss” his ex-girlfriend and not him. In one scene he goes home one day during lunch to discover his flat flooded by an open tap. He immediately connects the incident to his flat weeping more than he does for his ex-girlfriend.

Heartbreak in men is common in men as well, but the manner in which it is dealt with is different in genders. According to Keena S., a study showed that heartbroken men prefer to go out to socialise, go on holidays or immediately want to start a new relationship (Keena, 2017). She further suggested that if a man felt self-pity and acted like Cop 663 during a breakup, society will disapprove of it and the man considered weak. Men in the society are not used to expressing heartfelt emotions like Cop 223 and Cop 663 in *Chungking Express*. Another example of the inverted gender roles of its characters.

Faye’s letter written to Cop 663 contained a sketch of a boarding pass, to an unknown destination. Faye returns to Hong Kong as a flight attendant and finds out Cop 663 has quit his job. He has acquired the “Midnight Express” and decided to refine the fast food into a restaurant. He asks her about the destination of the sketch of the boarding pass. She is surprised he kept the sketch and seems in disbelief that he has not moved on yet. In *Chungking Express* it is the male character who is shown as the one with the patience to wait for a potential lover.

It is unknown whether the director consciously wrote the female characters with this expression of independence, or it happens to be a subject of coincidence. Another female supporting character is depicted as one who can freely choose the direction of her love life. To her, it seems her relationship with Cop 663 is just a fling. She enjoys the passion they shared and does not want any strings attached. On the night that Faye stands Cop 663 up at “the California”, he bumps into his ex-girlfriend at the supermarket. She is dressed in a teenage girl style contrary to when she was with Cop 663 (she was always seen in her flight attendant uniform). When she greets Cop 663, there are no signs of regret nor sympathy for flippantly hurting him. She flirts with him and leaves the supermarket without paying for the item she picks. She tells him to pay for the item, but before that she unabashedly admits that she has moved on. She motions for Cop 663 to look out at her new biker boyfriend. He does agree that her choice of new boyfriend does suit her nature. Perhaps this meeting is what Cop 663 needs to get over his ex-girlfriend. He is immediately seen rushing to the bin where he discarded Faye’s letter and opens it to read.

Conclusion

Chungking Express is a film that could be viewed from many aspects and this write-up is just one of them. The projection of the female characters, however, is deemed remarkable. The actions of the female characters Faye, “the woman in the blond wig”, “May the Waitress” and the flight attendant, seem unfeminine-like when compared to society’s categorization, but this is done in sublimely subtle ways. This makes one wonder if this was intentional or a mere accident.

Chungking Express empowers women while making male viewers pause and think. At certain glances of this movie, it seems the women are more in control of their emotions than the men, unlike what is usually seen in most societies. Asian societies no matter how advanced, are known to have a masculine-feminine imbalance. Geertz Hofstede’s research informs us of the high inequality between men and women in Japan and China (Hofstede & Bond, 1988). Confucianism preaches and practices patriarchy. The man and then the son, are the most important members of a family. Confucianism norms evolved into standard Chinese culture; a man-centric society. This can still be seen in certain laws and conventions favouring men in China i.e., marriage, property, and laws. *Chungking Express* was a pacesetter for breaking male-female relationship stereotypes, most importantly in Chinese society.

References

- As Tears Go By*. (1988). Directed by Wong Kar-Wai. Hong Kong: In-Gear Films.
- Ashes of Time*. (1994). Directed by Wong Kar-Wai. Hong Kong: Jet Tone Production.
- Beauty and the Beast*. (2017). Directed by Bill Condon. United States: Walt Disney Pictures.
- Bouclin, S. (2014). Women’s suffrage: A cinematic Study. *Revue LISA/LISA e-journal [Online]*, XII(7), Online since 30 November 2014, connection on 25 January 2023. URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/lisa/6918>; DOI: <https://doi.org/10.4000/lisa.6918>
- Brown, Dennis. (1972). Things in life. Retrieved from <https://youtu.be/aiIjlk4U93E> accessed on 20 January 2023).
- Chungking Express*. (1994). Directed by Wong Kar-Wai. Hong Kong: Jet Tone Production.
- Hofstede, G., & Bond, M. H. (1988). The Confucius connection: From cultural roots to economic growth. *Organizational Dynamics*, 16(4), 5-21.
- In the Mood for Love*. (2002). Directed by Wong Kar-Wai. Hong Kong: Jet Tone Production.
- Iqbal, R. (2018). Was 2017 a tipping point for women in Hollywood? Retrieved from <https://www.bbc.com/news/amp/entertainment-arts-42578764>.
- Ju Dou*. (1990). Directed by Zhang Yimou. China: China Film Co-Production Corporation.
- Keena, S. (2017). The reason men and women deal with break ups differently. Retrieved from https://www.huffingtonpost.com.au/amp/2017/08/24/the-reason-men-and-women-deal-with-break-ups-differently_a_23159362/.
- Kill Bill*. 2003. Directed by Quentin Tarantino. United States: Miramax.
- LaFrance, J. D. (2004). Cinematic pleasures: *Chungking Express*. Retrieved from <http://www.erasingclouds.com/0519chungking.html>.
- McCorkle, B. (2013). Stuff that dreams are made of: Music and the future in Wong Kar-wai’s *Chungking Express* (1994). Retrieved on 25 January 2023. <https://norient.com/academic/the-future-in-chungking-express>.
- Purcell, R., Path é M., & Mullen, P. E. (2001). A study of women who stalk. *The American journal of psychiatry*, 158(12), 2056-2060.
- Raise the Red Lantern*. (1991). Directed by Zhang Yimou China: China Film Co-Production Corporation.
- Red Sorghum*. (1987). Directed by Zhang Yimou. China: Xi’an Film Studio.
- Sanders, J. (2019). “Those two characters are there, forever young”: Wong Kar-Wai on *Chungking Express*. *Filmmaker Magazine*. Retrieved on 20 January 2023. <https://filmmakermagazine.com/107448-wong-kar-wai-chungking-express/#.Y9JZ0qRxozZ>.
- She’s Beautiful When She’s Angry*. (2014). Directed by Mary Dore. United States.
- Star Wars: The Last Jedi*. (2017). Directed by Rian Johnson. United States: Lucasfilm Ltd.

456 DISPLAY OF THIRD WAVE FEMINISM IN CHUNGKING EXPRESS: A CHINESE FILM REVIEW

Suffragette. (2015). Directed by Sarah Gavron. United Kingdom: Film 4.

Synder-Hall, C. (2010). Third-wave feminism and the defense of “choice”. *Perspectives on Politics*, 8(01), 255-261.
DOI:10.1017/S1537592709992842.

The Battle of Dingjunshan. (1905). Directed by Ren Qingtai. Beijing: Fengtai Photography.

The Grandmaster. (2013). Directed by Wong Kar-Wai. Hong Kong: Jet Tone Production.

The Mamas and the Papas. (1965). California dreamin. Retrieved from <https://youtu.be/n6acks-wQ1w>. accessed on 20 January 2023.

Timberg, S. (2004, July 24). Hong Kong’s poet of regret. *The Los Angeles Times*. Retrieved from <https://www.latimes.com/archives/la-xpm-2005-jul-24-ca-wong24-story.html>

Wonder Woman. (2017). Directed by Patty Jenkins. United States: Warner Bros. Pictures.

Wong, F. (1994). Dreams. Retrieved from <https://youtu.be/B83jdOH0Q1c> accessed on 20 January 2023.

Young, S. L. (2016). Why shouldn’t men cry? Retrieved on 9-01-2023. <https://m.huffpost.com/us/entry/9358854>.