

Rescuing Time

Fourteen years after it was made, Wong Kar-wai revives one of his first films with *Ashes of Time Redux*.

STORY Jennifer Chen

Fourteen years ago, *Ashes of Time* was screened in Venice, Italy with audience members scratching their heads to decipher the characters, story line and a genre of film called martial arts. “No one knew about the cast. They thought all the guys in the film were the same person,” says the movie’s director Wong Kar-wai at a recent press junket in Beverly Hills, Calif. “And no one had any idea about the martial arts genre.”

Fast forward to 2008: martial arts films have exploded not only in China but around the globe and Wong Kar-wai movies are requisite screenings in film school classes.

Now, his revamped version of the film, *Ashes of Time Redux*, marks a return of sorts for Wong. Born in Shanghai, Wong moved to Hong Kong when he was 5. His mother, a film buff, took him almost daily to the cinema. He credits his mother for being a major influence in his artistic life. “One of the reasons why I came into this business is because I enjoy watching a film,” he says. “I don’t think there are any jobs like this that you can be someone else from 100 years ago or you can imagine yourself in Buenos Aires.”

After graduating from Hong Kong Polytechnic with a degree in graphic design, Wong went on to pen some television programs and films, before making his directorial mark with the gritty crime drama *As Tears Go By*. He followed that with the well-received *Days of Being Wild*. Wong then went on to open his first production company Jet Tone Films. *Ashes of Time* was to be the company’s first film, but it got mired in an unfortunate delay. In the meantime, Wong wrote and released his much-lauded hit *Chungking Express*.

The plan to bring back *Ashes of Time* began in 1998 when the laboratory where the negatives and sound materials were stored suddenly went bankrupt overnight. On short notice, Wong and his crew had to retrieve the materials from the lab before it was taken over the next morning. At the lab they discovered that the negatives had been stored on the roof, not in the warehouse. Consequently, they were in terrible condition and Wong had to track down materials from overseas distributors, some European countries, and even Chinatown cinemas in the United States. Even after tracking down as much as

could, they knew that a 100 percent restoration of the film was nearly impossible, so they had to cut the film in a certain way and replace bad negatives with alternatives. Wong worked hard to “keep the film as much as it was supposed to be.” He says he felt the film deserved to be shown the way he originally intended. Some films, he adds, “develop slowly like wine while others need to be seen fresh like Coca-Cola.”

Typical of Wong’s films, *Ashes of Time Redux* is gorgeously shot and exudes emotion in every scene. The film is a tale of loss and regret, which takes place during four seasons in China, beginning and ending in spring. The film centers on a daring swordsman who doubles as a shrewd businessman, Ouyang Feng (Leslie Cheung). The martial arts version of Tony Soprano, Feng waits patiently in the desert while revenge-seeking clients visit him with their tales of woe. Brigitte Lin stars as both Murong Yin and Murong Yang, a brother and sister with a tumultuous relationship. Tony Leung is featured as one of Feng’s hired hit men and Maggie Cheung makes a special appearance as a lovelorn woman. Atypical of most martial arts films, the action sequences are shot like impressionistic paintings with most of the action blurred in a whirl of motion. “I tried to have emotions for these martial arts scenes so we decided to shoot in a different style,” says Wong.

The film is based on Louis Cha’s best-selling four-volume martial-arts novel, *The Eagle-Shooting Heroes*. Adapting the novel was a double challenge for Wong, who is well known for disliking scripts, coupled with the fact that the novel had been read by millions of people in China. “Once you have a novel and you have all these stories, you feel trapped,” says Wong. Wong and his crew filmed for six months in the desert with actor Leslie Cheung and the rest of the cast jumping in and out during shooting.

With image restoration in France, sound reconstruction in Australia and music rerecorded in Beijing, *Ashes of Time Redux* was finally ready to be screened. “For me, *Redux* was not about reconsidering the film but about rescuing it,” he says. Official screenings took place at Cannes, Shanghai and Toronto. The Shanghai screening, a benefit for Sichuan earthquake victims, was emotional for Wong who was born in Shanghai. It was emo-



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— Wong Kar-wai, about the release of *Ashes of Time* in 1994

tional for some audience members as well, as it was the first time they had seen Leslie Cheung onscreen since his death. “A lot of the crowd were fans of Leslie and some started to cry when the film began,” says Wong. Cheung, who committed suicide in 2003, starred in an earlier Wong Kar-wai film *Days of Being Wild* where he first showcased his acting talent. “He was a very dedicated person,” Wong remembers about Cheung. “Once he believed in certain things, he really wanted to go for it. And especially the way we work, you need a certain trust between the actor and director and he was very reliable in that sense.”

For a filmmaker who began his journey in 1988, the cyclical nature of his work is as much alive in his films as his career. But *Ashes of Time* was fertile learning ground for Wong who says without *Ashes* there wouldn’t have been *In the Mood for Love*, perhaps his most well-known film. “We gained our confidence and our way of working based on this film,” he says. Almost 20 years after he began making movies, Wong feels that releasing

Ashes of Time Redux in 2008 is better for the film than when it was originally released in 1994. “Today’s audience is better educated on the martial arts genre and has a better sense of the cast,” he says. “Maybe *Kung Fu Panda* put us on the map again!” he jokingly adds.

In the film, characters live and die, relations start and end, yet the seasons still pass and the film ends in the same season it began. For Wong, the film reflects a Chinese saying, “The blossom is always the same but the face looks different.” The saying is based on a story of an older man who meets a younger girl when the cherry blossoms bloom and asks her to wait for him. But when he returns to meet her again, she is gone though the cherry blossoms are still blooming. For Wong, *Ashes of Time* is about characters that regret they didn’t make the right choice at the right time. Luckily for Wong Kar-wai fans, 2008 was the right time to rescue a pivotal piece of filmmaking, not only for martial arts but also for the art of movies. ☘