

# Wong Kar-wai's *Jianghu* as Method: Reimagining Hong Kong in The Grandmaster

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## Abstract

Chen Kuan-hsing's "Asia as method" is "a critical proposition to transform the existing knowledge structure and at the same time to transform ourselves" (212). The prerequisite here is to first identify and excavate the "base-entity" of a culture, which has to be overcome for transcendence. However, the temptation to indulge in enunciating such base-entity is enormous. The rise of China seems to signify an insidious regression into essentializing her own base-entity and thereby muting the multitude. In view of this, this article aims to reveal that Wong Kar-wai's career is a struggle to transcend such regression, which is "the myth of consanguinity" against which Rey Chow asks us to battle (24). Wong's status as an era-defining auteur resides in how he uses his *jianghu* (江湖) as method to reimagine the identity of the people in Hong Kong and beyond. Before *The Grandmaster* (2013), Wong's *jianghu* had always been an allegory of the nativization of a fetishized identity. A lost love and a usually primordial, archetypal and absent *femme fatale* represent a perfect, imaginary past that the protagonists want to repeat but in vain. In *The Grandmaster*, however, Wong moved on from the obsession with base-entity and realized that the *wushu jianghu*, the martial art universe in Ip Man's time, could be a method to reimagine Hong Kong beyond Chen's call for ethnic essentialization. In the inheritance of different martial art traditions during troubled times, Wong sees Hong Kong's vitality in cultural hybridization. After long years of representing the *femme fatale* in his films, Wong enunciates an identity of essence-transcending family resemblance.

## Introduction

Wong Kar-wai's films are different variations of *jianghu* (江湖). Literally meaning "river and lake," *jianghu* is a concept that resists Western conceptual frameworks. The most common misconception is that *jianghu* is comparable to Western concepts such as "state" and "civil society." John Christopher Hamm oversimplifies *jianghu* by referring to it as merely "the margin" or "the bandits' shadow society," as opposed to "the orthodox order" (17–18), but he fails to indicate clearly if *jianghu* is civil society itself, or if it is on the fringe, or simply beyond the pale of civilization. Chen Pingyuan offers a more comprehensive definition by looking into the literary origins of *jianghu*. *Jianghu* should be understood as opposed to "the temple/the court/the palace" (*miaoting*

廟庭). Geographically and politically, *jianghu* is “beyond the emperor’s whip.” Composed of not only *youxia* (遊俠, the vagrant martial art hero), *xiake* (俠客, the martial art hero), and “unsuccessful literati and warriors, [...] *jianghu* is just a place where they can temporarily rest before they are promoted to officialdom [which is represented by *miaoting*]” (Chen 160). However, *jianghu* is no “*shanlin*” (山林) where hermits retire either, nor is it “*lulin*” (綠林), where warriors militarize to overthrow the temple (166–69). People in *jianghu* abide by two codes of conduct: “the spirit of justice” and “the spirit of brotherhood,” i.e. *yiqi* (義氣) (181–82). In sum, “[i]mmensely successful people probably would not dream of *youxia*; only those who have walked along the hard road in life would have any depth of feeling towards the value of having *youxia* in the world” (171). In triad and crime films, triad brothers and sisters, as well as transgressive police officers and criminals, negotiate between such spirit of brotherhood (*yiqi*) and the spirit of justice, deep in strife to retrieve what is lost. *Jianghu* is thus a place for wanderers who have lost something they cherished, where they seek peace and quiet to ponder on the point of retrieving what has been lost. It is crucial to highlight, then, that *jianghu* in this article’s understanding does not only refer to the world of *wuxia* (martial arts) and kungfu often portrayed in novels or films; *it can be extended to modern urbanity as well*.

*Jianghu* can also be a romantic space, inhabited with lovelorn drifters looking for the one lost love in every new encounter.<sup>1</sup> In this sense, starting from his debut *As Tears Go By* (1988), up to *2046* (2004), Wong Kar-wai’s oeuvre presents one consistent and continuous *jianghu* in which the triad drifters and sojourning love-sick masters are bound by the same obsession of an origin myth, invariably in the persona of a *femme fatale*, or a primordial father/mother figure. Such yearning for a lost love resembles Chen Kuan-hsing’s excavation of the “base-entity” or “*muti*/mother” in his seminal work *Asia as Method* (248–53). Quoting the Japanese scholar Mizoguchi Yūzō, Chen argues that in order to create knowledge that is truly Asian without reliance on Western concepts, a culture or a people must first excavate a “base-entity,” a “pre-modern ‘*muti*’ [mother’s body, matrix, or originating basis]” that “imminently inherits the historical specificities of the pre-modern” (248). Without denying that this is a kind of cultural essentialization,<sup>2</sup> Chen asserts that such essence-seeking is necessary for “inter-referencing” among Asian countries. Asians should learn from each other’s “indigenous” concepts as encapsulated in Partha Chatterjee’s “political society,” as opposed to “state” and “civil society” in subaltern studies, or the concept of “*minjian*”

<sup>1</sup> Please refer to Berenice Reynaud for further elaboration of *jianghu* (80–81).

<sup>2</sup> In order to avoid Mizoguchi’s mistake of cultural essentialization, Chen’s optimistic advice is that essentialization is acceptable as long as one does not assume the superiority of any culture, when engaging in “inter-Asia” dialogue and concept-exchange (255).

in China, instead of learning from “the West” such as via Marxism<sup>3</sup> (212–37).

However, I will argue that in *The Grandmaster* (2013), Wong Kar-wai breaks away from such search for a *muti* and evokes a completely new *jianghu*. This new *jianghu* in Hong Kong does not need the support of a “base-entity,” nor is there any yearning for a lost past. Under Ip Man’s sang-froid, disinterested, but mindful gaze, the thriving *wulin* (武林, the martial art universe) in Hong Kong manifests itself through hybridization, not mutual annihilation (which is often the result of asserting one clan’s superiority and dominance). Hong Kong is the “Third Space” where different martial art clans commingle, coexist and hybridize. To hybridize is for every competent *jianghu* survivor to prove his or her worth and establish a name and a home in Hong Kong. They do not forget their *sifu* (師父, teacher), but no one is obsessed over a lost past either. Ip Man’s *jianghu* is precisely an allegory of how Hong Kong can be reimagined as method.<sup>4</sup> Wong’s previous old *jianghu* had in its core, in Rey Chow’s words, “the myth of consanguinity, a myth that demands absolute submission because it is empty” (24, italics original). The martial arts form *Wing Chun* in Hong Kong is a kungfu that helps one “unlearn [this] submission to one’s ethnicity such as ‘Chineseness’ as the ultimate exchange is put in doubt when both the so-called ‘Eastern’ and ‘Western’ ideas are equally alien to one’s culture.” (25) and a new *jianghu* will then materialize. Hong Kong is a compressed and vertical *wulin*, a new home to the previously horizontal *jianghu*. Among tightly-packed blocks of flats where a plethora of martial arts schools are stacked on top of each other, the grandmasters give up chasing after the forever receding “base-entity” and achieve a *wulin* where global *wushu* thrive alongside each other, transcending northern and southern boundaries. Hong Kong may be a vertical *jianghu*, but it remains a problem if its height would be dwarfed in face of the unending horizon of China. Hong Kong as a *jianghu* is the proverbial “river and lake” that cannot be stepped into twice.

### The Excavation of “Base-entity” and *Jianghu* as Method

Chen Kuan-hsing’s archeological work to unearth a base-entity is indeed daunting. Not only is the identification of essence difficult and not at all

<sup>3</sup> However, in the case of Hong Kong for example, Chatterjee’s “political society” and China’s “*minjian*” could be as alien as Marxism. The point of “inter-Asia” knowledge exchange is put in doubt when both the so-called “Eastern” and “Western” ideas are equally alien to one’s culture.

<sup>4</sup> Such hybridizing method can also be conceptually grasped as Ludwig Wittgenstein’s “language game” (*Philosophical Investigations* sections 65–78), where Homi Bhabha and Chen Kuan-hsing converge. A Hong Kong identity or subjectivity as method should be understood in terms of family resemblance, instead of the endless pursuit of essence that is distinctive in Wong’s “pre-Grandmaster” old *jianghu*.

unproblematic, the archeologist may also succumb to *muti-* or mother-essentialization, thereby failing to transcend as method and inter-reference with other Asian entities.<sup>5</sup> In their attempts to evoke the *jianghu* of martial arts and/or triads, filmmakers and scholars alike are not spared from such temptation. The essentialization of one's culture is epitomized by the origin myth common to both martial arts and triads: "The Burning of the Shaolin Temple."<sup>6</sup> To this day, this myth remains the most commonly known origin and point of dispersion into different streams and clans of both martial arts and gangs. However, the story is as fictional as it is popular. It is a paradigm case of "national allegory": newly-established clans need a "backstory" to authenticate their lineage (*Hong Kong Wulin* 669–75; Mak 28; Morgon 28–50).

Many succumbed to Chen's base-entity essentialization. Law Wing-sang's analysis of triad films borders on distilling the entire colonial and post-colonial experience of Hong Kong to the essence of "collaborative colonialism." Indeed, the mindset of "being a snitch," or a "*ji-ng*" (二五) or "*ji-ng zai*" (二五仔) in Cantonese,<sup>7</sup> constituted the worldview of the "elite Chinese" who made British colonial governance in Hong Kong possible (Law, *Collaborative* 1–30; Carroll 1–15). It is also accurate to assert that the successful film genre of triads and undercover cops can reveal much about the "structure of feelings" from the early 1980s to the 2000s (Law, "Hong Kong Undercover" 36–38). However, it would seem rather reductive if any new development of said genre is summarily dismissed as the same manifestation of collaborative colonialism.<sup>8</sup> Similarly, a recent ambitious attempt to compile a complete history of martial arts in Hong Kong also reveals an essence-reductionism, when "inventing tradition" is met with scorn (see *Hong Kong Wulin* 669–75). These attempts to explain a "Hong Kong identity" can be seen as equivalent to Chen's base-entity essentialization.

<sup>5</sup> The rise of China presents precisely this risk, given its formidable market hegemony. Chen's "inter-referencing" appears too idealistic and thus blind to insurmountable geopolitical hierarchies.

<sup>6</sup> For example, the martial art clan South Shaolin was in fact *Tiandihui* (天地會), literally the "Society of the Heaven and the Earth," also called *Hongmen* (洪門). The myth of the burning down of the Shaolin Temple was made up for boosting morale and asserting historical authenticity. For more details on where martial arts and triads intersect, please see Ricardo Mak King-sang's *Zigwo Waimou*.

<sup>7</sup> In *The Grandmaster*, Ma San (馬三) is precisely such a "colonial collaborator": a traitor who betrays his *sifu* and works for the Japanese. But it is quite inconceivable that this "collaborativism" can explain the mentality of anyone else in the film simply because of the fact that they escape to Hong Kong. The explanatory power of collaborative colonialism is thus very limited.

<sup>8</sup> In particular, Law argues that Leon Lai's Yeung Kum-wing and Chen Daoming's "Shadow" Shen Cheng in *Infernal Affairs III* are merely the same reincarnations of collaborative colonialism, despite their remarkably different mannerism and idiosyncrasies (*Zikman* 36–38).

### Yearning for Essence: Wong Kar-wai's Old *Jianghu*

Wong Kar-wai's "pre-Grandmaster" *jianghu* demonstrates Chen's *muti*/mother-essentialization. Jeremy Tambling sums up Wong's old *jianghu* very well in his analysis of *Happy Together* (1997): Wong is obsessed with "the desire to find a ghost, to locate in the past another possibility denied by the facts" (100). This search for "a ghost" can be seen everywhere, from *As Tears Go By* (1988) to *2046* (2004). Bérénice Reynaud beautifully captures this ghost from three angles: *jianghu* as "phantom space/lost space," as "intertextual space," and as "space regained." *Jianghu* before *The Grandmaster* was indeed "an antithesis of home" (81). *Jianghu* being an alternative reality is sustained by an obsession with a primordial father/mother figure or unrequited love. However, what Reynaud seems to have missed is that *The Grandmaster's jianghu* is not trapped in this complex, as I will demonstrate in the latter half of the article.

Wong Kar-wai's *jianghu* before *The Grandmaster* is an unhomey, "phantom/lost" space sustained by an elusive/illusory passive-aggressive *femme fatale*. Reynaud's analysis of his *jianghu* could have been more complete if she had recognized the symbiosis between the phantasmagoric *jianghu* and the yearning for lost love. In this sense, Wong's transient *jianghu* is built on Jacques Lacan's "the Thing" (*Das Ding*).<sup>9</sup> To look for lost love is to look for such impossible Thing. Yet, neither *jianghu* nor the Thing can be called home. In *As Tears Go By*, Maggie Cheung's character, Ngor, presents the promise of an idyllic romance (as she comes from Pui O on the south of Lantau Island), an impossible fantasy for Andy Lau's character Wah to escape to. This romantic fantasy functions as a phantom space that sustains the adrenaline-fueled triad *jianghu* in Mong Kok. Pui O and Mong Kok are merely symbiotic fantasies that celebrate the eruption of impulses and the absence of home.

In *Days of Being Wild* (1990), there is a legion of passive-aggressive *femme fatales* that populate the world of Leslie Cheung's character Yuddy. Yuddy's antics with the ladies, including his toy-boy-keeping stepmother, constitutes his *jianghu* of a legless bird. Near the end of the film, his failed attempt to meet his biological mother in the Philippines signifies the realization that the primordial mother is not to be had. Contrary to Reynaud's interpretation that such realization opens up an orphan's epic fantasy (89), Yuddy is actually walking away from the

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<sup>9</sup> "The Thing" (*Das Ding*) is defined as the "object that is nowhere articulated, it is a lost object, but paradoxically an object that was never there in the first place to be lost" (Lacan 58). "Never [having been] there in the first place" does not suggest that this primordial father/mother or lover did not actually exist. They did, but it is the position they occupied that had never existed. Long years of yearning makes one fetishize one's lost love as an ideal and imaginary essence around which everything else acquires meaning.

camera in slow motion, not to a world of his own creation unbound by reality, but to his death. *Jianghu* implodes when the search for the Thing goes futile.

In *Chungking Express* (1994), there is a gender switch in the role of the *femme fatale*. Brigitte Lin's nameless character is dressed precisely like a *noir femme fatale*, with her blonde wig, trench coat, and dark glasses, but she ends up being the dupe instead. Her *Chungking jianghu* is sustained by her romance with a treacherous lover—a white man who sets her up and would make love with any woman wearing a blonde wig. Her adventure in *jianghu* also ends after she shoots the lover dead for the betrayal. At the end of the film, she takes off her *femme fatale* disguise while walking away from the camera. Tony Leung's character, Cop 663, is dumped twice by two women who sustain his illusion of globality: Valerie Chow's character of a flight attendant and Faye Wong's "California Dreaming" character who also becomes a flight attendant at the end. Both are birds without legs, lovers not to be had. Kaneshiro Takeshi's Cop 223 has to literally "eat his feelings" by eating all the canned pineapples with the same expiry date that he has collected to sustain his fantasy for his lost love, May.

If there is such a thing as the "antithesis of martial arts film," *Ashes of Time* (1994) should be it. The symbiosis of *jianghu* blood feuds and the yearning for lost love is even more pronounced here. Wong ingeniously devotes an entire film to the static "waiting-out" time between fancifully choreographed sword fights in *jianghu*—the flipside of *jianghu* bloodbath—during which the martial art masters are mostly in a motionless pensive mode, sulking over lost love. The transience of both stasis and action is further enhanced by Wong's signature "stop-action style"<sup>10</sup> that captures the sword fights. Actions are too fast to be comprehensible because the heroes/heroines have been static for too long.

As sequels to *Days of Being Wild*, Wong's *In the Mood for Love* (2000) and *2046* continue with Chow Mo-wan's romantic saga. After the heartbreak in *In the Mood for Love*, Chow has become a detached voyeur of his own casual affairs with women, again sustained by his pining for the lost So Lai-chun.<sup>11</sup> Chow pens his sci-fi *opus magnum* *2046*, an epic version of Cop 223's canned pineapples: "Everyone who goes to 2046 has the same intention, they want to recapture lost memories. Because in 2046 nothing ever changes. But, nobody knows if that is true or not

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<sup>10</sup> Wong first used this technique for capturing action in *As Tears Go By*. According to David Bordwell, it is "the technique of shooting action at only eight, ten, or twelve frames per second and then 'stretch-printing' the result to the normal twenty-four frames. The comparatively long exposure during filming makes movement blur, while the printing process, repeating each frame two or three times, produces a jerky pulsation" (277).

<sup>11</sup> For the sake of consistency, I am using the Cantonese pronunciation So Lai-chun here, instead of the commonly used *pinyin* "Su Li-zhen."

because no one has ever come back.”<sup>12</sup> Like Yuddy, Chow glides as a legless bird, airborne by a phantasmagoric So Lai-chun in the forever receding hotel room 2046.

As can be seen from the analysis in this section, Wong Kar-wai’s old *jianghu* are phantom/lost spaces that feed on each other. The unreality of *jianghu* is supported by an origin myth reminiscent of Chen’s “base-entirety” idea. But in Wong Kar-wai’s *The Grandmaster* in 2013, Tony Leung’s character Ip Man claims *jianghu* as home by abandoning essentialization.

### Wong Kar-wai’s New *Jianghu* in *The Grandmaster*

Near the end of *The Grandmaster*, there is a revealing sequence that epitomizes Wong’s new *jianghu*. After Ip Man has taken a photograph for his Hong Kong identity card, he sits with a cigarette in hand, lost in reminiscence. His wife looks back at him in the rain, and his voice-over, subtitled in English, says, “After that I only had the path ahead. There was no turning back, and no road home” (從此我只有眼前路，沒有身後身，回頭無岸). This shot is followed by a scene in which Ip Man and his first group of disciples in Hong Kong are posing for a formal photograph. It then cuts to real footages of the Hong Kong population celebrating Queen Elizabeth II’s coronation, followed by a shot of Ip Man’s disciples waving to the rain of confetti from the balcony of their Wing Chun school. The conflicting messages from the sequence, the voice-over, and the English subtitles signify something new in Wong’s oeuvre. The images indicate a hopeful and joyful beginning to be celebrated, whereas the English subtitles suggest overwhelming regret. What Ip Man says in the Chinese voice-over should be more accurately translated as follows: “After that I only had the path ahead. There was no one behind my back/there is only the ‘I’ who exists now. Previous possibilities of me are now gone, and there is no shore to return to.” What is lost in the English subtitle accidentally accentuates Ip Man’s idea of home. Indeed, it is sad that he does not manage to see his wife again before she dies, but to say, in my translation of that line, that “there is only the ‘I’ who exists now. Previous possibilities of me are now gone” suggests liberation from the crippling nostalgia that has plagued everyone else in Wong’s old *jianghu*. Instead, Ip Man realizes that “home” is up to him to create by fiat. He sees Hong Kong as home by turning Hong Kong into a truly existing *jianghu*, in which Wing Chun can thrive alongside a myriad of other kungfu clans. Wong’s previous symbiosis of fantasies is gone. *Jianghu* is real, and it is here and now. Ip Man does not need a phantasmagoric wife, Cheung Wing-sing, to sustain a fantasy of *jianghu*, and he certainly would not be looking for Cheung in every woman he meets. This heroic

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<sup>12</sup> Unless otherwise stated, the official English subtitles from the American DVD version are quoted.

attempt to let go of his past completely and to establish his name in Hong Kong is an excellent example of reimagining Hong Kong as method. Such method must involve cultural hybridization, as other memorable scenes in the film reveal.

The opening fight scene sets the tone of a new *jianghu*. Ip Man explains what it takes to establish one's name in *jianghu*: "Don't tell me how well you fight, or how great your teacher is, or brag about your style. Kungfu—two words. Horizontal. Vertical. Make a mistake—horizontal. Stay standing and you win. Isn't that right?" This is precisely the "enunciation" that opens up a "Third Space." According to Homi Bhabha, one's identity "is never simply an act of communication between the I and the You designated in the statement" (53). This opening fight scene is such a "statement" through which the enunciation—that is, the declaration—of "Wing Chun, Ip Man" opens up a new, Third Space of the previously "unrepresented" Wing Chun. The non-lethal battles of honor between different kungfu clans can be understood as thus. This *jianghu*, "though unrepresentable in itself, constitutes the discursive conditions of enunciation that ensure that the meaning and symbols of culture have no primordial unity or fixity; that even the same signs can be appropriated, translated, rehistoricized and read anew" (Bhabha 55).

Having no "primordial unity or fixity" does not imply that one can forget one's *sifu* or one's lineage, as Ip Man explains after this opening fight of honor: "I lived through dynastic times, the early republic, warlords, Japanese invasion and civil war. What kept me going was the martial arts code of honor," represented by the sash around his waist. The trick is to hybridize without fetishizing one's *sifu* as base-entity. The grandmaster Gong Baosen's adopted son Ma San, and daughter Gong Er, represent two extremes. Ma San disrespects and forgoes his lineage completely, as he justifies his collaboration with the Japanese right before the fight with Gong Er, "better to advance than to stop" (寧可一思進，莫在一思停). Caught in the blood feud, Gong Er has no choice but to swear never to marry or to teach "64 Hands," the Gong family's style of martial art, so that she can defeat Ma San to avenge their father. This is what it means to be fixated on *sifu* as a base-entity, as she says in the last meeting with Ip Man: "a great age offers a choice: stay or move on. I choose to remain in my era, the times when I was happiest." Ip Man's new *jianghu* is precisely the path between Ma San and Gong Er.

The Gold Pavilion in Foshan also marks another trajectory of change of Ip Man's *jianghu*. In Foshan, the Gold Pavilion before the Japanese invasion should be considered a good example of Reynaud's *jianghu* as "phantom space." To extend Reynaud's analysis, one could see that towards the end of the film, when Ip Man settles down in Hong Kong after the Second World War, Hong Kong becomes a symbolic Gold Pavilion. Ip Man describes the Gold Pavilion as follows:

In 1936, Foshan was a prosperous city. Life was peaceful and good. Back then, men socialised in brothels. Such places were popular in the South. Foshan's finest was Republic House. Its walls were covered in gold, so we called it the Gold Pavilion. It was the first to have an elevator. Enter a prince, exit a pauper. You'd spend money like water. It was like a social club for martial artists. Good men can be found among rogues. And hidden masters too. People saw it as a pleasure palace. But to us, it was a battleground.

With the exception of "socializing in brothels," the same could have been said about Hong Kong after the war. The only significant difference between Hong Kong and the Gold Pavilion is that Hong Kong as *jianghu* is a place that all martial artists call home. What was isolated as phantom/lost space in the Gold Pavilion in 1936 is the reality that Ip Man lives in after the war. Hong Kong's prosperity and hedonism are foils to bring out the glamorous heroism of making a name and starting anew against all odds. Just as Ip Man made a name for himself in Foshan's Gold Pavilion by being nominated as the representative of southern *wushu*, he also makes a name for himself in Hong Kong by punching out the barbecue pork and rice from the landlord's stomach, or dealing five kicks to the gang that challenge him on his turf.

The "battle of ideas" between Gong Baosen and Ip Man, which determines whether the latter is a worthy successor, also shows *jianghu* as method. Gong challenges Ip to break the cake in his hand and asks him the same question that a previous grandmaster, Ip Yun-biu, has asked, "Kungfu divides into North and South. Must the country divide as well?" Ip wins the battle by this reply:

Why limit it to North and South? It holds you back. To you, this cake is the country. To me it's much more. Break from what you know and you will know more. If the Southern arts go far, what boundary is the North? Would you agree?

(其實天下之大，又何止南北？勉強求全等於固步自封。在你眼中這塊餅是一個武林，對我來講是一個世界。所謂大成若缺，有缺憾才能有進步。功夫駛得，南拳又何止北傳。你說對不對？)

The imprecise English subtitle here is indicative of the problem of Chen Kuan-hsing's "Asia as method" formulation. The original Chinese lines stress the globality of *jianghu*, in my own translation here: "if one's kungfu is good enough, Southern martial arts will spread to all corners of the world, not just the North." This may be so, but even the path to an "inter-referencing globality" is beset with traps of geopolitical hierarchy and lineal seniority. Kungfu practitioners must first perfect their basic skills by following strictly their *sifu*'s teaching. They should not be limited by their lineage as they go further, but at the same time they should still

be mindful of hierarchy and seniority.<sup>13</sup> To hybridize *wushu* in this sense is not to kill everyone else to prove one's worth, but to establish a name and earn respect from other equally worthy names. This "live and let live" attitude is even more pronounced when diverse clans converge in a very small city like Hong Kong. Ip Man's *jianghu* thus provides a solution to Chen's problematic idealism. A new identity can be conjured more successfully if such *jianghu* is conceived as a "tactical globality," in the sense of Rey Chow's interpretation of Michel de Certeau's "tactic" and "strategy": "strategy" merely "repeats what [one seeks] to overthrow, whereas "tactic" is "a calculated action determined by the absence of a proper locus" (16–17). Chen's call for the excavation of a nation's base-entity, without which inter-referencing would not be possible, amounts to Rey Chow's "technocratic strategies." In other words, the search for a national base-entity would only establish a hegemony that will end up bullying other hegemonies: one will become a monster to kill a monster, to paraphrase Nietzsche in *Beyond Good and Evil*. If Hong Kong as *jianghu* should be a method at all, it is best conceived as de Certeau's "tactics," which "use, manipulate, and divert" spaces imposed by bullish hegemonies (30). This also sheds light on what Gong Baosen means by "see yourself, see the world, see the multitude" (見自己，見天地，見眾生)<sup>14</sup> when he explains to Gong Er the path to be a grandmaster. "To see" suggests a certain level of reflexivity. It is seeing by presenting one's self, one's lineage, and one's skills in order to earn acceptance and respect. Ip Man does precisely this, first in Foshan's Golden Pavilion,<sup>15</sup> then in Hong Kong.

What is also new in this *jianghu* is Ip Man as a detached protagonist who views *jianghu* dispassionately, almost voyeuristically. Wong's previous heroes/heroines are usually trapped in an irrecoverable past that sustains their illusory present. For example, Chow Mo-wen in *2046* condemns himself to voyeurism because his life is anchored at the lost So Lai-chun, and in this way his scopophilia extends from his flings to his own life. By contrast, Ip Man's heart is solely in the martial arts. His *jianghu* is solid reality, lacking the symbiotic fantasies that plagued Wong's old *jianghu*. Ip's firm hold on his real *jianghu* is best reflected in what he says to Gong Er at the tryst near the end of the film. Gong Er at

<sup>13</sup> In the film, Ip Man, too, needs to stress the hierarchy of "senior" clans (namely the Hungs, the Laus, the Choys, the Lees, and the Moks) before he can accept the invitation to represent Southern kungfu. Also, before meeting Gong Baosen, Ip has to learn from the masters of Bagua, Xingyi, and mixed martial art in the Gold Pavilion.

<sup>14</sup> With gratitude to Professor Stephen Chu Yiu-wai for this more accurate translation. The American version erroneously rendered the line as "being, knowing, doing."

<sup>15</sup> Wong Kar-wai exercises his poetic license here since the Ip Man in real life was largely unknown until he came to Hong Kong.

this point is in ailing health. In this most heart-wrenching scene of the film, Gong Er confesses her love:

Mr. Ip, to tell you the truth, I cared about you. I don't mind telling you that. It's not a crime to love. But that's all it can ever be. I never said that to anyone before. Seeing you tonight, I don't know why, it just came out.

In face of this emotional deluge, Ip Man seems unperturbed. His expression is best described as showing wooden concern and plastic perplexity:

Let's say we suspend this game of chess between us. Take care. In life, as in chess, a move once made stays on the board. What we have is simply fate.<sup>16</sup> Your father once said, never give up the faith. Keep the light burning. I hope that one day I'll see the 64 Hands once more.

This is a plea to Gong Er to not forget about her blood oath of never marrying and to remind her that whatever love there was between the two of them, it was brief and best forgotten as “a move made.” The chess metaphor captures Ip Man's will to create his own *jianghu*, a beautiful answer to Gong Baosen's lamp metaphor.<sup>17</sup> Ip Man's *jianghu* is unbuoyed by any fantasy. Ip is a bird with very strong legs.

The verticality of Hong Kong's cityscape is also a distinctive feature of this new *jianghu*. Hong Kong's unique verticality and volumetricity are first foreshadowed by the stacked-up indoor balconies inside the Gold Pavilion. Just as the female prostitutes and hidden female kungfu masters looked down from the Gold Pavilion's balcony to observe Ip Man exchanging skills with various masters, Gong Er at the end of the film looks up to the stellar plaques of a plethora of martial art schools that decorate the sky between the façades of *tong laus* (tenement buildings) in Tai Nam, Hong Kong, and says, “Just look up here, isn't this the martial art world [*wulin*]?” (一眼看上去, 這就不是武林嗎?)<sup>18</sup> Diverse clans from a “horizontal” China converge on a “vertical” Hong Kong and survive alongside each other. This vertical *jianghu* is a method of co-existence without forming an annihilating hegemony, or becoming Nietzsche's proverbial monster.

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<sup>16</sup> Or “serendipity,” to be more accurate.

<sup>17</sup> Earlier in the film, Gong says, “Hold onto an idea and light a lamp, because when there is light, there will be people” (憑一口氣, 點一盞燈。有燈就有人; my translation).

<sup>18</sup> My translation here. Again, the original American subtitle is inaccurate: “Is this street of schools all the martial-art world has come to be?” The original Chinese lines, however, suggest great hope.

## Conclusion

Wong Kar-wai's *The Grandmaster* marks a significant break from his previous *jianghu*, which may be defined by Chen Kuan-hsing's base-entity essentialization. By contrast, Ip Man's new *jianghu* is a solid reality that does not feed on illusions. He envisions a commingling *wulin* in Hong Kong that he can call home. Identity starts anew and evolves from the exchange among martial art masters. *Jianghu* becomes a method to reimagine Hong Kong through hybridization, without recourse to essentialism. To reimagine Hong Kong as a new *jianghu*, the grandmasters must cease fetishizing over a lost past in Chen's fashion. They must enunciate their presence to open up a Third Space, so that new identity can evolve through hybridizing with clans from the four corners of the world, or "the five lakes and the four seas" as the Chinese saying goes. Wong Kar-wai has spent his entire career looking for "home." In *The Grandmaster*, he has finally realized that Hong Kong is *jianghu*, and *jianghu* is home.

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