

# KUNG FU CINEMA

## Ashes of Time

Review Score: ★★★★★

Origin: Hong Kong

Genre: Swordplay

Director: Wong Kar Wai

Action: Sammo Hung

Director:

Studio: World Video

Date: 1994

Cast: Leslie Cheung Kwok Wing ... (Ouyang Feng)  
Tony Leung Kar Fei ... (Huang Yaoshi)  
Brigitte Lin Ching Hsia ... (Murong Yin/Murong Yang)  
Jacky Cheung Hok Yau ... (Hong Qi)

Distributor: World Video/CAV

Format: Region 1 DVD

Time: 95 min

Languages: Cantonese, Mandarin

Subtitles: Fixed English & Chinese

Sound: Dolby Digital Stereo

Video: Standard 1.33:1

Tony Leung Chiu Wai ... (Partially Blind Swordsman)

Charlie Yeung Choi Nei

Carina Lau Kar Ling ... (Peach Blossom)

Maggie Cheung Man Yuk

Bai Li ... (Hong Qi's Wife)

Lau Shun

### Synopsis

In a series of interposed, non-linear scenes we learn that Ouyang Feng is a disenchanting swordsman who left his home at White Camel Mountain to run a tavern in the desert. His real business is to hire mercenaries for people who need assistance and can pay the price. He is visited by a number of colorful characters including his friend, Huang Yaoshi who is involved with Feng's former love interest, Murong Yin and Murong Yang, being one and the same love and loath Huang Yaoshi. Others include a swordsman with failing sight who wishes to see to his love and his home one more time, a determined young woman who seeks vengeance for the death of her brother, and Hong Qi, a swordsman who comes to her aid.

### Review by Mark Pollard

A beautifully filmed tale of love lost and people desperate to find resolution in their lives. Wong Kar-wai is better known as a director of art house films such as *Days of Being Wild* (1988) and *In the Mood for Love* (2000). His trademark style of seemingly freeform narratives and creative imagery were masterfully combined with Sammo Hung's seasoned choreography. In Wong's only martial arts film to date, there can be found a depth of character development and genuine emotional motivations which provide the true meat of the film.

The action varies slightly from Sammo's previous work in that most shots are extremely close. Wong's focus on facial expressions and tight camera work results in the viewer feeling more attached to the people on screen. Although this coziness is offset by a narrative that courses through the events of several character's lives who are distant, lost in their own selfishness or remorse.

The soundtrack deserves mention as one of the best I have ever heard for a martial arts film. It captures the mood perfectly and contains exotic tones to match the gorgeous landscape. This particular DVD transfer from Mei Ah is highly recommended over other versions available. Other editions suffer from poor video and audio transfers, cropping and only being available in standard, pan and scan format. This is not your standard kung fu fare. Many reviews I have seen, aside from the poor quality of other versions often complain about the confusing narrative that is hard to follow. I will agree that you have to concentrate, but that certainly isn't a flaw. On the contrary, the film gains points for layering a thick stew of emotion, heady imagery, and a visceral expression in its action which is reminiscent of Sergio Leone's classic Westerns. This is a film to be seen over and over. The acting is excellent, the cinematography beautiful, and the action sequences while not on par with the best kung fu films is well done and plentiful. I recommend renting this title and seeing just how good an action movie can be, seen through the eyes of an cinematic artist.

## **Ashes Of Time**

May 17, 1996

*Ashes of Time: Long Journey Through Testing Terrain*

By Lawrence Van Gelder

Mythic, melancholy and mysterious, *Ashes of Time* is a philosopher's movie.

Set mainly in vast deserts or rolling landscapes all but barren of people, this rambling meditation on love and loss, on conflict between chivalric calling and domestic life, lays out its lessons of costs and consequences against the traditions of the Chinese martial-arts novel.

*Ashes of Time*, written and directed in a surreal style by Wong Kar Wai, came out of the Beijing Film Studio to compete at the Venice Film Festival in 1994. The film, its distributor says, amounts to a prequel to "The Eagle-Shooting Hero," one of the popular martial-arts novels of Jin Yong, in which all three of the film's principal characters appear in subordinate roles and in their old age.

Foremost among these younger selves in *Ashes of Time* is Ouyang Feng (played by Leslie Cheung), the film's central figure, who, like a samurai, is an itinerant sword for hire. Now, in early middle age, hardened, solitary, beset by memories of the love he abandoned for his vocation, he is mainly an agent, seeking work -- murder -- for other swordsmen.

There is his old friend, Huang Yaoshi (Tony Leung Kar-fai, the star of *The Lover*), who visits once a year. He has his own sad love story, and he stays in touch with Ouyang's lost love. One year he arrives with a bottle of wine said to possess the magical power to make one forget. Huang drinks; Ouyang declines.

The third of the principals, the swordsman Hong Qi (Jacky Cheung), appears well into the film, after Ouyang has sternly refused a poor young woman's offer of some eggs and a mule to avenge a brother murdered by horse thieves. Hong Qi, who has left behind his own wife, finds the impetus for redemption in his encounter with Ouyang and the poor girl.

For those who seek metaphors, *Ashes of Time*, which opens today at Cinema Village, presents the eye as well as the illusions of vision. One character is nearly blind. Another, a swordsman, goes blind in the middle of a horrendous battle. Two characters, Yin and Yang -- one presented as a man, the other as his sister -- are identical. And there is a brief appearance by a legendary sword fighter who hones his skills against his own reflection.

For those who seek battle, *Ashes of Times* offers intermittent blurs of action, streaks of flying figures, flashing steel, and rare spatters and gouts of moist crimson, all washing across the screen like hurried brush paintings.

Like the attainment of wisdom, *Ashes of Time* requires a long journey through testing terrain.

### **From the The New York Times**

Love, death, hate, revenge, longing, remembering, forgetting, swordplay, and .. well you just kind of have to see this one.

AWARDS: Nominated for NINE Hong Kong Film Awards.

Best Art Direction (William Chang), Best Cinematography (Christopher Doyle), Best Costume & Make-up (William Chang). Best Action Choreography (Sammo Hung Kam-bo), Best Director (WKW), Best Editing (Kit-Wai Kai, Patrick Tam), Best Original Score, Best Picture, Best Screenplay.

ADDITIONAL: Because of the star-studded cast (who ISN'T in this?), the film took nearly two years to complete and many scenes were shot but never released. Maggie Cheung's roll was an un-credited cameo.

### **Ashes Of Time**

Wong Kar-Wai, arguably Hong Kong's most exciting and complex director working today, has been making contemplative character studies in self-imposed loneliness brought to life with style very different from what we've come to expect from Hong Kong since 1988. In this film Wong turns a period adventure epic centered around two feuding swordsmen into an introspective existential essay with a complex narrative structure full of flashforwards and flashbacks, enigmatic characters, and stunning visuals (courtesy cinematographer Christopher Doyle). The film is so rich and dense, with narrating chores split between its central protagonists, that it may take repeated viewings to unpack it all.

Easily the most ambitious picture of last year, this epic, action melodrama from director Wong Kar Wei (*The Days of Being Wild*) is so structurally complex in its unfolding of plot and characters, not to mention

so ruthlessly revolutionary in its destruction of typical narrative techniques, that films like *Pulp Fiction* look like simple A-Z storytelling by comparison. Based on a classic Chinese novel, the plot follows hired assassin Leslie Cheung (*A Chinese Ghost Story*) and the unusual characters that cross his path: A wandering friend suffering from amnesia, a visually impaired swordsman, a kind-hearted warrior turned hired-killer, and a curiously asexual stranger with a split personality (appropriately named "Yin" and "Yang") all visit Cheung at one time or another, and as the movie progresses, their web-like connection to one another is slowly revealed. The story itself really isn't all that complicated, but is told in such a fractured style that subtle details and character relationships aren't at all clear until the gloriously anticlimactic finale, and, even then, it may take multiple viewings to get the whole thing straight. The all-star cast is absolutely tremendous (with the possible exception of pop *singer-cum-actor* Jackie Cheung), with all of them delivering solid, textured work. Tony Leung Chu Wai's blind swordsman and Bridget Lin's lovelorn schizophrenic are particularly worthy of mention. Other pluses include the fine electronic music score, Samo Hung's energetic fight choreography (deliriously photographed in a variety of slow-motion and step-framing techniques), and last, but not least, the astonishingly rich and inventive cinematography by Christopher Doyle, whose expert realization of Wong Kar Wei's imagery earned the award for best cinematography at last year's Venice film festival. As I said before, *Ashes of Time* is a film designed for multiple viewings, and therefore, may not be everyone's cup of tea. (A fellow viewer dubbed it, with deliciously overblown hyperbole, "the most inaccessible movie ever made!") But Wong Kar Wei's film is definitely one of the most challenging to come along in quite some time -- reason enough to give this wildly ambitious picture a look, or two, or three... or until you think you've got it. \*\*\*\* Joey O'Bryan