

1997 Film, *Chinese Box*, directed by Wayne Wang

Chinese Box (1997) is directed by Wayne Wang 王穎 (Wáng Yǐng). Wang was born 1949 in HK, a Chinese American film director who studied film California College of Arts and Crafts in Oakland. The year of the film release coincided with HK reverting to Mainland China. One could not find a more opportune time to observe the dynamics of cultural identity which is by nature fluid and nonconforming to any essentialist idea of nations or cultures. In 1997, the whole political system of Hong Kong was in a state of flux when the British colonial rule was coming to an end. As the title suggests, identity is like a multilayered onion, or a set of boxes with graduated size, with no substance or essence inside.

Wang reveals the tension and complexity of the relations between the colonizing white race and the colonized Hong Kongers. In this historical context, identities are just masks that people wear according to political climates; the people of HK would behave toward the mainland Chinese taking over Hong Kong in 1997 the same way they had done toward the British for the past 150 years. John is an English gentleman whose attitudes towards the Chinese come straight from Kipling's poem "Take Up the White Man's Burden" (1899). His cultural superiority and condescending attitude over the indigenous people are emblematic of the civilizing mission "To serve your captives' need" and "To seek another's profit and work another's gain". Dying of leukemia, John marks the exit of the British on a high note. As a white man, John has to take "the blame of those ye better, the hate of those ye guard". By the same token, the Chinese are "a sullen people, half devil and half child", a "fluttered folk and wild".

He never forgets his mission to look out for the interests of the natives such as Jean and Vivian. Acting on behalf of Jean, he arranges a meeting for her to meet her ex-boyfriend William for the last time. He cautions Vivian that Mr. Chang may be using her as a prostitute. But his good intentions always seem unwanted and, as a journalist, he is frustrated by his inability to access how the natives think and feel. What he does not realize is that his search for truth about the natives is doomed from the start because his presence as the colonizer changes what he investigates. Identities often overlap.



There is the scene in which John and his friend Rick are viewing the video clip Jean has made filled with lies of her past as a victim of rape, incest and violence, because she believes that is what John wants to hear when he pays her for "all the nitty-gritty details" that he expects of the colonial subject. This act of mimicry that Jean does not fully satisfy John as the bringer of civilization to the savages, John asks Rick if he believes what Jean says, only to be asked back: "Did you fuck her?" John would not dignify the question with an answer. The question is not subtle if we remember the violence of colonialism that may explain the scar on her face (wounded civilization). When Rick turns the projector and points it to John, the face of Jean overlaps with that of John leaning against the wall.

The hybridity of a Hong Kong identity is one of the characteristics of cultural politics that is not any less complex with the end of British rule. The colonized, as Fanon analyzes, "identifies himself with the explorer, the bringer of civilization, the white man who carries truth to savages—an all-white truth. There

is the identification—that is, the young Negro subjectively adopts a white man's attitude". But beyond John's field of vision, things are not what they seem. There is no authenticity or true essence to achieve for cultural identity in the post-colonial Hong Kong when the race factor is taken out of the equation. Chang also feels superior to the HK residents whose Chinese-ness, to Chang, has been compromised during the colonial occupation. Mr. Chang is embarrassed about being seen in public with Vivian and would introduce her to his business associates only as his assistant. Post-colonial era is just another layer of Hong Kong identity. Identity politics survives the history of colonialism and continues after the power transfer to Beijing. A new social reality emerges and the people in HK have to adapt to it the way they did when HK was colonized by the British and Japanese.

The battle over history is dramatized when Jean gives an oral account of what happens to her. When she recalls to John her past, she says that her then boyfriend William used to be madly in love with her and would have married her if it were not for his father's disapproval and interference. But her account of the past is later proven less than credible when William is brought by John to confront his past with Jean. William totally fails to recall such romance ever to have taken place. For Vivian, 1997 is also an important year in which she needs to rethink her past with Mr. Chang and with John. In 1997, everybody needs to dust off their resume and create a different account of who they are to fit in society. This is the symbolic meaning of the title, *Chinese Box*. People rewrite their personal history all the time to position themselves in time and space.



The HK experience also leaves its impact on Vivian whom we see sitting in front of a television and imitating a Hollywood movie actress to adopt a white man's attitude and language. We already see this type of cultural mimicry in *Comrades. Almost A Love Story*, where Li Qiao tries to act as a Hong Konger by not speaking Mandarin. It is important for people in colonial Hong Kong to speak some English and adopt the manners and social etiquette of the colonizer. Both Jean and Vivian must repackage themselves and just to be culturally correct. Identity politics expresses itself in many forms and dictates our choices in life. In colonial HK, people had to accommodate the biases, prejudices and stereotypes that the Western Other had of them.