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Hong Kong

# The Film and the Reality: Inside Hong Kong’s Chungking Mansions

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By [Mitch Blatt](#), July 4, 2013, no comments

 chungking-mansions

People are drawn to the Chungking Mansions for all kinds of reasons. Some people come to do business: Africans, Indians, Pakistanis, and Southeast Asians come to the Chungking Mansions en mass to trade cell phones and other items. Some people come to eat curry at one of the many Indian restaurants. Independent young travelers come to stay at the cheap guesthouses.

In 1993, director Wang Kar-wai came here to film Chungking Express. The colorful backdrop of this down and dirty building bustling with people of the world was the perfect setting for his independent masterwork that won the Best Picture at the 1995 Hong Kong Film Awards and established Wang as a leading figure in Hong Kong’s artistic second wave film movement.

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There is something about the fast-paced camera movements, the rush of people running in all directions in the opening scene, the artsy, philosophical, some might even say corny, lines spoken by the characters that appeals to the hopeless romanticism of artsy foreigners like myself. (Like how after the police officer gets dumped by his girlfriend, May, on April 1, he buys pineapple with an expiration date of May 1 every day for the rest of the month. "If May hasn't changed her mind by the time I've bought thirty cans, then our love will also expire").

I came to the Chungking Mansions to see the hallways Lin's anonymous character ran through while she was being chased by a drug gang, the small back rooms where tailors sewed drugs into Lin's clothing for a drug deal, the restaurant she ran off to with a kidnapped child... Apparently, Wang's filmmaking style can make anything look beautiful.

In fact, many of these scenes were shot next door at the Mirador Mansions. One of the places that shows up a few times in the background is the Garden Hostel. The sign is sticking out from the exterior as Lin walks by and stuck to a wall in the background as Lin pursues a drug lord in a dark hall.

That's the image of the Chungking Mansions Wang created. Behind the door of the Garden Hostel, what are the real Chungking Express mansions — the Mirador Mansions — like?

Open the door at 7:30 pm on a Tuesday night, and you'll see a line of men sparring and drilling kung fu. This is the hostel run by Sam Lau, out of which he runs his school Yip Man Martial Arts Athletic Association.

\*\*\*

Ip Man came to Hong Kong in 1949 because the Communist Party won the Chinese Civil War. He had been a police officer in Fo Shan, a city just outside of Guangzhou, and a soldier in the Nationalist army opposing the Communists. After arriving in Hong Kong, he had no job, and he approached a local restaurant association looking for work.

"What can you do?" they asked him.

The only thing he knew was Wing Chun kung fu, he said.

So the chairman of the association took him as his master, and he taught him kung fu.

Wing Chun was new in Hong Kong, but it caught on quickly. Ip Man's clientele grew quickly, and one of them was a man named Bruce Lee.

\*\*\*

When you're walking through the streets of Hong Kong you feel like you are experiencing the scenes of a Hong Kong movie. In a way, you are. So many of Hong Kong's films are shot on location, and Hong Kong's vibrant daily life makes up the subject matter for its films — presenting the stories of the city that are unfolding in real time. This isn't like China where all the films about the Cultural Revolution were made decades after the events happened.

 [Garden Hostel Sign\\_DCE](#)

In Hong Kong, you can walk through the halls of the Chungking Mansions where Bridgitte Lin worked drug deals and hear migrants and immigrants whisper offers for hash. On Temple Street, where Andy Lau played a triad boss in *The Prince of Temple Street*, mah jong gambling rooms and houses of ill-repute still stand. On Tung

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life. Sam Lau should know. He drank tea and sparred with Ip Man himself.

“A real fight is not like the movies,” he said. “In the film, they pretty it up. In a real fight, you don’t have time to think. It’s all instincts. And it can look ugly.”

In 1966, Lau was a young man living on Tung Choy Street just a short walk from Ip Man’s residence. One day at a barbershop, there was Ip Man getting his hair cut. A man told Lau, That’s Ip Man, and Lau begged him to teach him kung fu. Ip Man was too busy teaching others, but he recommended Lau to one of his students.

Early on, Lau would try out his new techniques, sometimes finding people in the street who looked shady and fighting them.

“There are 2 kinds of fights,” Lau said. “Some people dress like bad boy, so we try to look for them on the street and hit them.”

“Or you can find someone else who you know they has a good style and arrange a competition. This kind of fight is dangerous, because we don’t have gloves, we don’t have equipment.”

When Ip Man found out, he invited him to his home and told him not to give up Wing Chun. From then on, Ip Man began teaching him personally.

\*\*\*

In 1977, Sam Lau went to the Chungking Mansions to earn some money. On the 16th floor, he opened the Travelers Mansion guesthouse.

“I did everything myself.”

At the start he was working long hours, cleaning, accounting, and doing all aspects of running the guesthouse.

Now he owns 10 flats in the Chungking Mansions, serves as chairman of the Chungking Mansions guesthouse association, and runs the Taiwan Hostel and Garden Hostel, which he has renamed the Kung Fu Garden Hostel.

 [Sam Lau Teaching\\_DCE](#)

“Some people from Shanghai came here 20 years ago and imitated my name — New Garden Hostel or something. And the touts on the street, they will pretend to be the manager of a hostel. They even print fake name cards.”

None of his hostels are listed on his name card. His business card shows a long list of mostly kung fu-related expertise:

- International Dragon And Lion Dance Sports Federation
- Chinese Dragon And Lion Dance Sports Association
- Traditional Wushu Committee of the Chinese Wushu Association
- Yip Man Martial Arts Athletic Association Limited
- Children Wing Chun Kung-Fu Association
- World Wing Chun Kuen Do Association
- Chinese Kung-Fu International School
- Time Travel Services Limited
- Shoestring Travel Limited

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with little expertise teaching, so some people who learn from one of these frauds are turned off by Wing Chun. In his studio, there are a few foreigners who have come to Hong Kong to learn the real thing. Lau is trying to promote a more unified form of this martial art.

“If I don’t do it, we will lose the culture,” he said.

He identified the five points a kung fu master should have to successfully teach and promote the art.

“One: Generations. I learned from Ip Man, and now students are learning from me. Two: Good experience. Three: Heart. You must develop and maintain Chinese culture. You must have this goal in mind and develop your technique. Four: Good connections. Five: Money: You need financial support to promote it.”

 [Sparring\\_DCE](#)

Lau satisfies most of the criterion, but he doesn’t have nearly enough money.

“I spend my own money promoting it,” he said.

He takes fees from his students and earnings from his guesthouses and travel agencies like Shoestring Travel, but in the end, he comes up about 600,000 HKD a year short.

If you are waiting in line for the upper floors at the Chungking Mansions, you will see his ad playing on the TV screen above the elevator — a video of Lau sparring with a foreign student with the text “China Visa Service” advertising his other business.

 [Sam Lau's Ad\\_DCE](#)

The first time I saw that ad in the mansions last year I wondered if it was a bad sign that an ad for self-defense classes was getting so much play in a place known by locals for being so dangerous.

When the Chungking Mansions first opened, Lau said, the management was bad.

“It was not well organized. There might be drugs, or some funny business like whore houses.”

“I didn’t see the movie [Chungking Express]. Wang Kar-wai is an artist. He’s not telling the facts all the time. ... I know Chungking was messy. Everybody was afraid to go there, especially Hong Kongese. But it’s so cheap, so a lot of backpackers go there. That’s why I had a famous guesthouse there. Now they have better management.”

Wang Kar-wai has a new film out now. The Grandmaster tells the story of Ip Man. But some early reviewers have pointed out that the film mythicizes some of the characters and emphasizes cinematography and artistry over piety to the literal contours of Ip Man’s life and Wing Chun.

It’s not an academically true portrayal of kung fu, but is the portrayal not a true film in the tradition of cinema?

*“Academia is the death of cinema. It is the very opposite of passion. Film is not the art of scholars, but of illiterates.”* – German new wave director Werner Herzog

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