

Character Representation in *Ashes of Time* from the Perspective of Buddhist Self-Grasping

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Abstract: Wong Kar-wai's *Ashes of Time* (1994) presents the spiritual dilemmas of modern subjectivity through its distinctive narrative structure and visual aesthetics. Although the film contains few explicit religious references, the destinies of its characters resonate profoundly with core Buddhist concepts such as impermanence (anitya), non-self (anātman), self-grasping (ātma-grāha), and emptiness (śūnyatā). This study examines the film through the lens of the Buddhist doctrine of self-grasping, arguing that the existential suffering experienced by its principal characters originates not from external circumstances but from their persistent attachment to love, memory, identity, and life itself.

Keywords: Ashes of Time; Buddhist philosophy; Self-grasping; Attachment; Non-self

Online publication: October 21, 2026

1. Introduction

Since the emergence of the Hong Kong New Wave, Wong Kar-wai has established himself as one of the most influential auteurs in contemporary Chinese-language cinema. Distinguished by his fragmented narrative structures, poetic visual aesthetics, and profound reflections on temporality and subjectivity, his films consistently explore the existential condition of modern individuals. *Ashes of Time* (Dung che sai duk, 1994), adapted loosely from Jin Yong's novel *The Legend of the Condor Heroes*, departs significantly from the conventions of traditional wuxia cinema. Rather than foregrounding martial arts, chivalric heroism, or linear storytelling, the film reconstructs the wuxia genre into a philosophical meditation on memory, desire, identity, and human existence. The vast desert landscape, nonlinear narrative, fragmented temporal structure, and introspective voice-over transform the film from a conventional martial arts narrative into an exploration of the psychological and existential dilemmas of modern subjectivity.

Although *Ashes of Time* contains almost no explicit representations of Buddhist rituals or religious institutions, its thematic concerns resonate profoundly with central concepts of Buddhist philosophy, including impermanence (anitya), non-self (anātman), emptiness (śūnyatā), and dependent origination

(*pratītyasamutpāda*). More importantly, the film depicts how human suffering emerges through persistent attachment to love, memory, identity, and life itself. Such existential dilemmas closely correspond to the Buddhist understanding that suffering (*duḥkha*) originates from attachment and self-grasping. Rather than portraying suffering as the consequence of external fate or objective circumstances, the film suggests that suffering is fundamentally rooted in the subject's mistaken attachment to a permanent and autonomous self.

Among these Buddhist concepts, self-grasping (*ātma-grāha*) provides a particularly productive theoretical framework for interpreting the psychological structure of the film's characters. In Buddhist philosophy, self-grasping refers to the deluded belief in an inherently existing, permanent, and independent self. On the basis of this illusion, individuals develop attachments to emotions, desires, memories, identities, and external objects, thereby generating greed, hatred, delusion, and ultimately suffering. Early Buddhist teachings articulate this insight through the doctrine of the Five Aggregates (*pañca-skandha*), arguing that what is conventionally regarded as the self is merely a temporary aggregation of form, sensation, perception, mental formations, and consciousness, none of which possesses an enduring essence. Likewise, the Diamond Sūtra states, "All conditioned appearances are illusory," emphasizing that all phenomenal forms lack intrinsic and permanent existence ^[1]. Consequently, attachment arises when transient phenomena are mistakenly regarded as permanent realities.

2. Ouyang Feng: Attachment to love—self-enclosure and the predicament of emotion

Among the characters in *Ashes of Time*, Ouyang Feng most vividly exemplifies the existential suffering produced by attachment to romantic love. Unlike the heroic protagonists commonly found in traditional wuxia cinema, Ouyang Feng is portrayed not as a righteous swordsman but as an alienated modern subject imprisoned by an irretrievable past. Living in isolation on the desolate frontier and earning his livelihood as a broker for assassins, he appears detached, rational, and emotionally restrained. Beneath this outward composure, however, lies an enduring attachment to a lost love that continues to define his psychological existence. He once loved his elder brother's wife, yet his pride and hesitation prevented him from confessing his feelings. By the time he confronted his emotions, the opportunity had already vanished. This unfulfilled romantic experience becomes the emotional origin of his entire life and the source of the repetitive cycle from which he can never escape.

From a Buddhist perspective, suffering does not arise from external objects themselves but from attachment to those objects. As *the Saṃyukta Āgama* teaches, attachment generates craving (*trṣṇā*), craving gives rise to grasping (*upādāna*), and grasping ultimately leads to the continuous cycle of birth, aging, illness, death, sorrow, and affliction ^[2]. Consequently, suffering originates not in the loss of the beloved but in the subject's persistent refusal to relinquish attachment. Ouyang Feng's tragedy therefore lies not simply in losing the woman he loved but in his inability to acknowledge the impermanent nature of love itself. Rather than allowing the past to dissolve with the passage of time, he continually reconstructs it through memory, transforming a once-lived emotional experience into an enduring object of self-grasping (*ātma-grāha*). Instead of diminishing over time, this attachment becomes increasingly entrenched through constant recollection.

Wong Kar-wai reinforces this psychological condition through the extensive use of first-person voice-over. The audience experiences the narrative largely through Ouyang Feng's subjective consciousness, in

which memories repeatedly intrude upon the present. Everyday reality functions merely as a trigger for recollection, while the emotional center of his existence remains firmly anchored in the past. Within Buddhist philosophy, self-grasping extends beyond attachment to the notion of an independent self; it also involves attachment to what is perceived as “mine,” including love, identity, memory, and personal experience. These external objects gradually become integrated into one’s sense of self. When they disappear, the subject experiences not only loss but also a crisis of identity. Ouyang Feng cannot accept the end of his love because he has incorporated that relationship into the foundation of his own existence. The disappearance of love therefore appears to him as the disintegration of the self, giving rise to profound loneliness and existential isolation.

The recurring image of peach blossoms functions as a significant symbolic motif throughout the film. Rather than merely representing romantic love, the blossoms signify a temporal space continually reconstructed by memory. Every recollection of the peach blossoms marks Ouyang Feng’s symbolic return to the past. Although his physical body inhabits the present, his consciousness remains suspended within an imagined temporal dimension created by memory. This experience of time differs fundamentally from chronological time; it is cyclical, recursive, and psychological. Through flashbacks, fragmented narration, and repeated voice-over, Wong Kar-wai collapses the distinction between past and present, allowing memory to dominate lived reality. From the Buddhist perspective of impermanence (*anitya*), all phenomena are subject to continuous transformation. Ouyang Feng, however, resists this fundamental principle by attempting to preserve the past through remembrance. His attachment thus becomes an act of resistance against impermanence itself, constituting the deepest source of his existential suffering.

His attachment is further intensified by an equally powerful attachment to pride. Although he once possessed the opportunity to express his love, his concern for dignity, fear of rejection, and excessive self-consciousness prevented him from doing so. After permanently losing the relationship, he no longer reflected upon his own hesitation but instead elevated the experience into an irreplaceable emotional ideal. Within Buddhist thought, pride (*māna*) is regarded as another manifestation of self-grasping because it reinforces attachment to an imagined and autonomous self. Ouyang Feng’s insistence on preserving his pride ultimately prevents him from relinquishing the past and transforms regret into a permanent psychological wound.

The desolate desert setting further externalizes Ouyang Feng’s inner world. The barren landscape is not simply a geographical location but a visual representation of his psychological isolation. Although numerous travelers pass through the inn, Ouyang Feng himself never truly leaves. The desert thus functions simultaneously as physical space and as the spatial embodiment of self-grasping. He is not imprisoned by external circumstances, but by the attachments he continues to cultivate within his own consciousness.

At the conclusion of the film, Ouyang Feng burns down the inn and departs, an action that appears to symbolize farewell and renewal. Yet this departure does not constitute genuine liberation in the Buddhist sense. While he abandons a physical place, he carries his attachments with him. His movement is geographical rather than spiritual. He has neither understood the principles of dependent origination nor accepted the impermanent nature of human relationships. Consequently, he remains unable to transcend attachment or attain inner freedom.

Ultimately, Ouyang Feng’s tragedy extends far beyond the realm of romantic failure. It represents an existential tragedy rooted in self-grasping. Through fragmented temporality, repetitive memory, and enclosed spatial imagery, Wong Kar-wai portrays a modern subject incapable of accepting change and

therefore condemned to perpetually reconstruct the past. In doing so, *Ashes of Time* elevates the conventional theme of lost love into a profound philosophical reflection on time, identity, and human existence. From the perspective of Buddhist philosophy, what Ouyang Feng ultimately loses is not simply love itself but the possibility of transcending attachment and rediscovering freedom.

3. Huang Yaoshi: Attachment to memory—the paradox of forgetting and resistance to impermanence

If Ouyang Feng exemplifies attachment to romantic love, Huang Yaoshi embodies attachment to memory. As one of the film's central figures, he drifts continuously between different places and encounters, yet never truly escapes the past. His seemingly carefree wanderings conceal a profound psychological entanglement with memory, making him another manifestation of Buddhist self-grasping. Through Huang Yaoshi, *Ashes of Time* explores a distinctive form of existential suffering in which the desire to forget paradoxically intensifies attachment to what one seeks to erase.

The recurring image of the Wine of Forgetfulness (Zuisheng Mengsi) serves as one of the film's most significant symbolic motifs. According to Huang Yaoshi, anyone who drinks this wine will forget the past completely. On the surface, the wine appears to promise liberation through oblivion. Yet Wong Kar-wai deliberately subverts this expectation. Rather than freeing Huang Yaoshi from memory, the repeated invocation of forgetting continually returns him to the very experiences he wishes to abandon. The desire to forget therefore becomes another form of remembering. Forgetting is no longer the opposite of attachment but its most paradoxical expression.

This paradox resonates profoundly with Buddhist philosophy. Buddhism does not regard memory itself as the source of suffering; rather, suffering arises when one clings to memory as though it possessed enduring reality. According to Buddhist teachings, all mental phenomena are conditioned, impermanent, and continuously arising and ceasing from moment to moment. Memories, like all conditioned phenomena, lack intrinsic existence and cannot be possessed permanently. The *Diamond Sūtra* expresses this insight succinctly: “The past mind cannot be grasped, the present mind cannot be grasped, and the future mind cannot be grasped”^[3]. This teaching emphasizes that temporal experience is fundamentally fluid and that no moment of consciousness can be fixed or reclaimed. The past is not an object available for possession but an experience that has already dissolved within the continuous flow of dependent origination.

Huang Yaoshi, however, refuses to acknowledge this impermanent nature of memory. Instead of allowing the past to pass naturally, he attempts to control it through deliberate forgetting. His repeated reliance on the Wine of Forgetfulness reflects not genuine release but an illusion of mastery over memory. Ironically, the more intensely he seeks to erase the past, the more persistently it returns. Wong Kar-wai thus exposes the psychological contradiction inherent in human consciousness: deliberate forgetting often strengthens rather than weakens remembrance. Memory becomes increasingly powerful precisely because it is resisted.

This contradiction also echoes another important teaching of the *Diamond Sūtra*: “One should not cling to dharmas, nor should one cling to the absence of dharmas”^[4]. In Mahāyāna Buddhist thought, emptiness (*śūnyatā*) should never be mistaken for absolute negation. To reject all phenomena completely is itself another form of attachment. Genuine emptiness does not require the destruction of experience but the relinquishment of attachment to experience. Huang Yaoshi mistakes forgetting for liberation. By attempting

to negate memory entirely, he merely substitutes one attachment for another. His obsession with forgetting therefore remains fundamentally rooted in self-grasping rather than genuine non-attachment.

From the perspective of Buddhist philosophy, Huang Yaoshi's deepest attachment is not directed toward any particular memory but toward the illusion that memory can be controlled by an autonomous self. His constant wandering, drinking, and departure from one place after another create the appearance of freedom, yet these movements never produce genuine transformation. Instead, they reveal an individual desperately attempting to preserve a coherent sense of self through the management of memory. In Buddhist terms, such an effort inevitably fails because memory itself is dependently originated and devoid of permanent essence. The more firmly one attempts to possess or manipulate it, the more deeply one becomes imprisoned by it.

Wong Kar-wai does not portray Huang Yaoshi as a purely tragic figure. Instead, he functions as an observer whose encounters connect the destinies of multiple characters. Nevertheless, this apparent detachment never enables him to transcend his own attachments. On the contrary, his involvement in the emotional lives of others continually exposes the unresolved nature of his own psychological condition. From a Buddhist perspective, genuine liberation does not consist in erasing memory but in recognizing that memory possesses no permanent substance to which one may cling. Huang Yaoshi remains incapable of this realization. He continues to pursue the impossible desire to forget, never recognizing that "the past mind cannot be grasped."

Ultimately, Huang Yaoshi represents another distinct manifestation of self-grasping in *Ashes of Time*: attachment to memory. Through the symbolic motif of the Wine of Forgetfulness, Wong Kar-wai reveals a paradox central to modern subjectivity—that forgetting itself may become another form of attachment. From the perspective of Buddhist philosophy, Huang Yaoshi is imprisoned not by the past itself but by the self that insists upon possessing, controlling, and ultimately escaping it. His tragedy therefore lies not in remembering too much but in his inability to relinquish the illusion that memory belongs to a permanent self. Only by abandoning this attachment could he approach the Buddhist realization of emptiness and inner freedom.

4. Murong Yan: Attachment to identity—the loss of subjectivity and the Buddhist concept of non-self

Among all the characters in *Ashes of Time*, Murong Yan (Murong Yin) is undoubtedly the most psychologically complex and philosophically enigmatic. Through the intertwined identities of Murong Yan and Murong Yin, Wong Kar-wai constructs a character whose unstable subjectivity challenges conventional notions of personal identity. Rather than clearly distinguishing the two figures as separate individuals, the film deliberately blurs the boundary between them through fragmented narration, shifting perspectives, and subjective voice-over. The result is an ambiguous existence in which reality and illusion, self and other, continuously dissolve into one another. This instability not only distinguishes Murong Yan (Murong Yin) from the other characters but also establishes the character as one of the film's most profound philosophical embodiments.

Previous scholarship has frequently interpreted Murong Yan's dual identity through the frameworks of dissociative identity disorder, psychological trauma, or the identity crisis of the modern subject. While these interpretations illuminate the character's psychological complexity, they remain largely grounded in modern psychology or existential philosophy. From the perspective of Buddhist thought, however, Murong Yan's predicament cannot be reduced to psychological abnormality. Rather, it represents a spiritual crisis generated

by attachment to the illusion of a fixed and enduring self—that is, a distinctive manifestation of self-grasping (*ātma-grāha*).

Central to Buddhist philosophy is the doctrine of non-self (*anātman*), which rejects the existence of an independent, permanent, and self-sufficient ego. According to the *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā* (Fundamental Verses on the Middle Way), “Whatever arises through dependent origination is explained to be emptiness”^[5]. Since all phenomena arise only through causes and conditions, none possesses intrinsic or permanent essence. The human self is therefore not an autonomous substance but a provisional configuration of the Five Aggregates (*pañca-skandha*)—form, sensation, perception, mental formations, and consciousness. To regard any particular identity as one’s authentic and immutable self is to mistake a contingent construction for ultimate reality.

Murong Yan (Murong Yin) vividly illustrates this attachment to identity. Whether appearing as the affectionate Murong Yan or the vengeful Murong Yin, both identities revolve around Huang Yaoshi and are continually reshaped by emotional attachment. When Murong Yan fails to obtain Huang Yaoshi’s love, Murong Yin emerges as an avenger determined to restore wounded dignity. When revenge itself proves incapable of resolving emotional suffering, the two identities begin to merge and overlap. Rather than alleviating pain, the continual creation of alternative identities deepens the fragmentation of subjectivity. Identity, instead of providing stability, becomes the very source of existential disintegration.

Significantly, Wong Kar-wai never attempts to determine which identity is “real.” Instead, the film deliberately preserves ambiguity throughout the narrative. This refusal to establish a stable identity constitutes one of the character’s most important philosophical implications. The film is not concerned with diagnosing Murong Yan in psychological terms but with questioning the very possibility of a unified and coherent self. Each time the audience attempts to identify the “true” Murong, the narrative destabilizes that certainty through contradictory perspectives and shifting voices. Identity thus becomes a cinematic process of continual construction and deconstruction rather than a fixed ontological fact.

From the standpoint of Buddhist non-self, this instability should not be understood as deficiency but as a revelation of the illusory nature of personal identity. Buddhism regards the self as a conceptual designation rather than an independently existing entity. Consequently, the film does not simply present two different personalities; rather, it exposes the fundamentally unstable character of subjectivity itself. Murong Yan’s repeated creation of new identities reflects the subject’s desperate attempt to preserve psychological coherence through social roles and emotional narratives. Yet such efforts are ultimately destined to fail because every identity is conditioned, impermanent, and devoid of inherent existence.

Wong Kar-wai further develops this philosophical theme through visual form. Murong Yan frequently appears alongside mirrors, reflections, shadows, obscured lighting, and rapid editing. These visual strategies continually fragment the character’s physical presence, preventing the spectator from perceiving a unified identity. Mirrors, in particular, function as symbolic representations of self-recognition. Yet the reflected image is never the self itself; it is merely an appearance. Buddhist literature often employs metaphors such as “the moon reflected in water” or “flowers in a mirror” to illustrate the illusory nature of phenomenal existence. Wong Kar-wai’s persistent use of reflective imagery resonates strongly with these Buddhist metaphors, suggesting that the more intensely the subject attempts to confirm its own identity, the more evident its insubstantiality becomes.

The instability of identity is equally expressed through language. Murong Yan repeatedly alters personal

pronouns and self-designations, preventing the first-person “I” from acquiring any stable reference. Rather than providing the audience with a coherent narrative perspective, the film constructs a fluctuating experience of subjectivity through the interaction of dialogue, narration, and visual representation. This fluidity not only communicates the character’s psychological uncertainty but also dismantles the classical cinematic assumption of a unified and consistent subject.

From a Buddhist perspective, Murong Yan’s suffering ultimately arises not from unfulfilled love but from persistent attachment to the question, “Who am I?” She seeks recognition through romantic love, attempts to preserve dignity through identity, and continually reconstructs herself in response to emotional loss. Yet she never recognizes that identity itself is merely a provisional product of dependent origination rather than an enduring essence. Whether identifying herself as a sister, a brother, a lover, or an avenger, she remains imprisoned within various forms of self-definition. Each identity becomes another expression of self-grasping, preventing her from realizing the Buddhist insight of non-self and emptiness.

Murong Yan (Murong Yin) is therefore not only the film’s most philosophically complex character but also the one who most profoundly embodies Buddhist reflections on subjectivity. Through the continual transformation of identity, Wong Kar-wai reveals a universal dilemma of modern existence: individuals repeatedly seek confirmation of themselves through stable identities while overlooking the fundamentally dynamic and relational nature of life itself. Viewed through the lens of Buddhist philosophy, *Ashes of Time* dismantles the myth of an authentic and permanent self, presenting identity instead as an ongoing process of becoming and dissolution. Murong Yan’s tragedy lies neither in failed love nor in unsuccessful revenge, but in the endless pursuit of a “true self” that, according to Buddhist thought, has never existed in the first place.

5. The Blind Swordsman: Attachment to life—mortality and the unfulfilled return home

Compared with Ouyang Feng, Huang Yaoshi, and Murong Yan (Murong Yin), the Blind Swordsman occupies relatively limited screen time in *Ashes of Time*. Nevertheless, he remains one of the most tragic figures in the film. At the beginning of the narrative, the film establishes that he suffers from an eye disease and is destined to lose his sight completely. Aware that his life is approaching its end, he nevertheless chooses to undertake dangerous assassination missions, driven by a single desire: to return to his hometown and see his wife one last time before total blindness occurs. However, the Blind Swordsman eventually dies in the desert, and his longing for home remains unrealized. Through this character, the film intertwines themes of life, death, and return, revealing the spiritual predicament of the modern subject confronted with the finitude of existence.

On the surface, the Blind Swordsman’s tragedy appears to originate from the misfortune of fate. Yet, viewed through the perspective of Buddhist philosophy, his fundamental dilemma does not lie in death itself, but rather in his profound attachment to life, family, and emotional bonds. Buddhism regards birth, aging, illness, and death as inevitable conditions of human existence. Death itself is not the ultimate source of suffering; rather, suffering arises from attachment to life and to objects of emotional desire. The *Sutra of the Eight Realizations of Great Beings* states that “birth and death are blazing, and suffering and affliction are immeasurable” ^[6]. This statement does not deny the value of life; instead, it emphasizes that ordinary beings suffer because they cling to the permanence of life and consequently generate fear, anxiety, and sorrow.

In the film, the Blind Swordsman firmly believes that seeing his wife one final time would allow his life to achieve completion. Therefore, he continuously shortens his remaining time in an attempt to fulfill

his return before blindness overtakes him. This desire reflects his profound appreciation of familial and emotional relationships; however, at the same time, it also constitutes another form of *ātma-grāha* (self-attachment). From the Buddhist perspective, family, kinship, and romantic relationships are all conditioned phenomena (*pratītyasamutpanna dharma*), existing only through changing causes and conditions. When individuals regard these relationships as permanent realities and attempt to possess or preserve them, they inevitably become trapped in suffering.

The Blind Swordsman's repeated emphasis on "returning home" reveals that what he truly desires is not merely a physical location, but an idealized image of family preserved within memory. The homeland he seeks is not the actual geographical place but rather a symbolic homeland constructed within his consciousness—a space that remains untouched by change and loss.

The film's portrayal of the Blind Swordsman's relationship with his wife is remarkably restrained. The audience never directly encounters the wife's physical presence; she exists only through the character's memories and narratives. Wong Kar-wai deliberately avoids concretizing this figure, transforming her instead into a symbolic and spiritual presence. This narrative strategy further emphasizes the subjective nature of the Blind Swordsman's emotional world: what motivates his actions is not the actual family relationship in the present, but an idealized emotional memory continuously reconstructed within his consciousness.

From a Buddhist perspective, such memory can also be understood as a manifestation of *vipaśyanā*-obscuring delusion. When individuals remain attached to past experiences, they may mistake objects constructed by consciousness for permanent realities, thereby generating new forms of suffering. The Blind Swordsman's attachment does not arise simply from love itself, but from his inability to recognize the impermanent and constructed nature of the object of his attachment.

It is significant that the film closely associates the Blind Swordsman's loss of sight with his approaching death. Vision here represents more than a physical ability; it symbolizes the character's mode of perceiving and engaging with the world. As his eyesight gradually deteriorates, his perception of external reality diminishes, while his dependence on internal memories intensifies. The external world progressively withdraws, whereas the world of consciousness becomes increasingly dominant. This narrative structure suggests that the closer the character moves toward death, the more deeply he becomes attached to the past.

Buddhism emphasizes that all forms of existence are subject to constant transformation and impermanence (*anitya*). Genuine wisdom therefore lies not in preserving what has already disappeared, but in accepting the inevitable process of change. Although the Blind Swordsman recognizes the limitation of his lifespan, he never fully accepts the impermanent nature of existence. His death is therefore not merely the termination of physical life but also the consequence of an attachment that remains unresolved at the spiritual level.

In the film's climax, the Blind Swordsman confronts the bandits in a vast desert landscape. Rapid editing, overlapping images, and intense camera movement transform the battle into a sequence saturated with hallucinatory qualities. Unlike conventional wuxia films, where combat primarily functions as a demonstration of martial ability, this confrontation resembles the final struggle of the character's inner consciousness. The yellow sand obscures vision, bodily movements become fragmented and blurred, and reality gradually merges with illusion, presenting death as a poetic and transcendent experience.

This fusion of reality and illusion does not merely serve to create visual spectacle; rather, it suggests that life itself possesses a dreamlike and transient quality, and that all forms of existence ultimately return to the

process of continual transformation. Through this aesthetic construction, Wong Kar-wai translates Buddhist reflections on impermanence into cinematic form, allowing the experience of mortality to become both philosophical and visual.

The film ultimately denies the Blind Swordsman a genuine form of liberation. Until his final moment, he remains attached to the memory of his wife and the desire to return home, leaving his existence suspended within an incomplete journey of return. Although he completes his physical life trajectory, he fails to achieve spiritual transcendence. Buddhist philosophy emphasizes that liberation arises not from the fulfillment of desire but from the relinquishment of attachment. The Blind Swordsman's failure to return home is therefore not caused merely by external obstacles; rather, it results from his inability to release his inner attachment to the past.

6. Hong Qi: The realm of non-attachment — compassion and the freedom of life

Among all the characters in *Ashes of Time*, Hong Qi represents the most ethically luminous figure and is the character closest to the Buddhist ideal of personality. While most characters in the film are trapped within emotional conflicts and personal desires, Ouyang Feng remains attached to a lost love, Huang Yaoshi indulges in avoidance and forgetfulness, Murong Yan is confined by illusions of identity and romantic attachment, and the Blind Swordsman is unable to let go of his longing for his homeland and wife. All of them embody the suffering caused by the Buddhist concepts of “greed, hatred, and ignorance” (lobha, dosa, and moha), which generate endless afflictions. In contrast, Hong Qi maintains a simple, sincere, and open attitude toward life. He is neither obsessed with fame and fortune nor controlled by personal desires. His words and actions embody the Buddhist principles of compassion, altruism, contentment with few desires, and the transcendence of self-clinging. Therefore, he becomes the only character in the film who is able to move beyond attachment and continuously move forward in life.

Hong Qi's characterization first reflects the ethical spirit of Buddhist compassion (karuṇā). In Buddhism, compassion refers not only to empathizing with the suffering of sentient beings but also to actively relieving their suffering through concrete actions. The *Mahāprajñāpāramitāsāstra* (Dazhidu Lun) states: “Great compassion means seeing the suffering of sentient beings and being unable to abandon them”^[7]. In the film, when the village girl seeks revenge after her younger brother is killed by bandits, Ouyang Feng refuses her request according to his principle that “no payment means no service,” reducing human relationships entirely to exchanges of personal interest. Hong Qi, however, accepts this almost unrewarded commission, taking only an egg as compensation. The value of the egg does not lie in its material worth, but rather in the fact that it symbolizes his inability to ignore another person's suffering. His decision transcends utilitarian calculation and demonstrates an altruistic spirit rooted in compassion. From a Buddhist perspective, Hong Qi does not act out of a desire for reputation or personal gain; instead, his actions arise from a genuine concern for the suffering of others. This compassionate disposition makes him the character with the greatest human warmth in the film.

At the same time, Hong Qi embodies the Buddhist attitude of “having few desires and knowing contentment” (alpa-icchā and saṃtuṣṭi). Buddhism regards craving and attachment as fundamental sources of suffering. The *Saṃyukta Āgama* (Zagahan Jing) emphasizes that suffering arises from desire, while liberation from desire leads to happiness. In *Ashes of Time*, almost every character suffers because of their attachments:

Ouyang Feng longs for a love that he cannot possess; Huang Yaoshi cannot escape his inner emptiness and wandering existence; Murong Yan remains trapped by romantic attachment and identity confusion; and the Blind Swordsman is consumed by his desire to return home. They are all constrained by their own desires and unable to attain inner freedom. By contrast, although Hong Qi travels through the martial world and earns a living through his skills, his purpose is simply to sustain his life with his wife rather than to pursue wealth, power, or reputation. When Ouyang Feng attempts to persuade him to stay, Hong Qi responds without hesitation that he believes living together with his wife would bring him greater happiness. His choice to remain satisfied with an ordinary life and to resist the attraction of fame and fortune reflects the Buddhist ideal of “contentment brings happiness.” It suggests that true freedom arises not from endlessly accumulating external possessions, but from reducing inner desires and achieving spiritual tranquility.

Hong Qi’s act of sacrificing his finger to save another person further demonstrates the Buddhist ideas of *dāna* (generosity) and *abhaya-dāna* (the gift of fearlessness). In Buddhist thought, generosity is not limited to material giving; it also includes relieving others from fear and suffering through self-sacrifice, which is known as “fearlessness-giving.” In the film, while helping the village girl seek revenge, Hong Qi fights against the bandits and ultimately loses one of his fingers. Ouyang Feng considers such a sacrifice unreasonable, believing that it is not worthwhile to pay such a price for only an egg. Hong Qi, however, remains committed to his choice. What he gives up is not merely a finger, but rather his willingness to place another person’s suffering above his own interests and to define the value of life through helping others. Such an action transcends utilitarian judgments and approaches the Buddhist ideal of “unconditional great compassion and universal empathy.” Hong Qi’s behavior does not arise from a desire to prove himself as a heroic figure; rather, when confronted with another person’s suffering, he instinctively chooses the action that accords with his inner moral awareness. Therefore, his character possesses a profound Buddhist ethical significance.

Furthermore, Hong Qi is the character in the film who most successfully transcends *ātma-grāha* (self-clinging). Buddhism regards attachment to the self as the fundamental source of suffering. The *Diamond Sutra* states: “If a bodhisattva has the notion of a self, the notion of a person, the notion of a sentient being, or the notion of a lifespan, then he is not a bodhisattva” ^[8]. Most characters in *Ashes of Time* organize their actions around the self. They remain immersed in past emotions, personal regrets, and unfulfilled desires, continuously reinforcing their own suffering. Hong Qi, however, rarely centers his attention on himself. He helps others without seeking repayment, loses his finger without resentment, and leaves the desert without attachment or nostalgia. Although he deeply loves his wife, he does not transform love into possession or obsession; instead, he maintains a relationship based on equality, spontaneity, and mutual companionship. This attitude of “not being attached to gain or loss and not being imprisoned by the past” closely corresponds to the Buddhist ideals of “non-self” (*anātman*) and “non-attachment” (*anupādāna*). Hong Qi has not fully attained liberation in the Buddhist sense, but he has already surpassed the emotional constraints that imprison most other characters, revealing a wisdom of accepting conditions as they arise and acting in accordance with changing circumstances.

Therefore, from the perspective of Buddhist philosophy, Hong Qi is not only the character who most fully embodies the spirit of chivalry in *Ashes of Time*, but also the figure who demonstrates the strongest tendency toward spiritual awakening. Through the contrast between Hong Qi and characters such as Ouyang Feng and Huang Yaoshi, Wong Kar-wai reveals that the source of human suffering does not lie in fate itself,

but rather in the attachments created within the mind. Hong Qi faces others with compassion, approaches life with contentment, accepts suffering through acts of generosity, and confronts gain and loss with a state of non-attachment. As a result, he is able to continually move forward and develop, eventually becoming the legendary “Northern Beggar” (Bei Gai). This characterization not only enriches the humanistic depth of the film but also enables *Ashes of Time* to transcend the conventional heroic narrative of martial arts cinema, presenting a profound Buddhist philosophical reflection on existence, suffering, and human liberation instead.

7. Conclusion

Although the characters in *Ashes of Time* continually seek ways to overcome their suffering, none of their attempts ultimately leads to genuine liberation. Ouyang Feng withdraws into emotional isolation in an effort to protect himself from the pain of lost love; Huang Yaoshi attempts to erase the past through the symbolic Wine of Forgetfulness; Murong Yan (Murong Yin) repeatedly reconstructs different identities in search of a stable sense of self; and the Blind Swordsman hopes that a final return home will complete the meaning of his life before death. Despite the differences in their experiences, these characters share a common existential condition: they remain trapped by various forms of attachment. Their responses to suffering do not dissolve attachment but instead reinforce it, allowing it to become the defining structure of their existence. Hong Qi stands as the film’s sole exception. Although he is not portrayed as a fully enlightened figure, his compassion, generosity, contentment, and freedom from obsessive attachment distinguish him fundamentally from the other protagonists. His presence therefore functions not only as a moral counterpoint within the narrative but also as the film’s implicit philosophical response to the suffering experienced by the other characters.

Ashes of Time transcends the boundaries of the martial arts film. Through its exploration of attachment and the possibility of non-attachment, the film presents an enduring philosophical inquiry into the nature of human existence. In this sense, Wong Kar-wai transforms the wuxia narrative into a cinematic expression of Buddhist wisdom, demonstrating that the deepest source of suffering lies not in fate or circumstance, but in the attachments through which individuals continually define themselves. By exposing the fragile and impermanent nature of the self, *Ashes of Time* offers one of the most philosophically sophisticated engagements with Buddhist thought in contemporary Chinese-language cinema.

Disclosure statement

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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