

Hong Kong, 2000. PG. 98 min  
Cast: Maggie Cheung, Tony Leung  
Chiu Wai; Music: Mike Galasso,  
Shigeru Umebayashi;  
Cinematographer: Christopher  
Doyle, Pin Bing Lee; Producer: Ye-  
Cheng Chan; Director: Wong Kar-  
Wai

Set in 1960s Hong Kong, *In the Mood For Love* feels like a contradiction. Though supremely stylized, it is also rich with realistic detail, from the grimy peeling paint of the city to the languid pace of everyday life. Though sparsely plotted, it is nevertheless gripping in its emotional narrative. And though its characters rarely say what they mean directly, subtle performances, brilliant editing and direction, and a soundtrack of inspired diversity leave no question about the lives and limitations of its characters.

Mrs. Chan (Cheung), a secretary, and Mr. Chow (Leung), a reporter, are neighbors in a crowded apartment building where social convention is strictly observed and personal conduct is watched over by a gaggle of friends, relations and busybodies. Though both are married, Chan and Chow are mostly left alone by spouses so absent we know them only as off-camera voices. We see Chan, in her endless array of stunningly sophisticated high-neck dresses, and Chow, with his perfectly coifed hair and simple suits, in a series of snapshots of their lonely daily lives: Chan works late, locks up the office, walks home alone; Chow works late, smokes a cigarette, and waits in line at a noodle shop.

Occasionally, they see each other in the hallway of their building, or on the stairs leading down to a restaurant. Looks are exchanged, glances cast backward over shoulders. Through small clues revealed with enormous delicacy, Chan and Chow come to understand that the frequent absence of their spouses is not entirely coincidental: the off-camera characters are having

an affair with each other. This simple fact brings the jilted lovers together. Both alone, both wounded by their discovery, they eat dinner together, walk through the city, wonder about the details of the relationship between their mates. They begin to role-play, Chow pretending to be Chan's husband, Chan playing Chow's wife (watch for the consistent placement of mirrors, making them their own audience, doubling them as they double themselves). They try to reconstruct the root of the affair. Who made the first move? Was it blunt or subtle? They go to a restaurant and each orders for the other, Chan forcing herself to eat the spicy steak Chow's wife would have eaten, even as the food leaves her eyes burning.



At times the couple's role-playing is obvious and clear. At others, the line between the relationship they are mimicking and the one they are developing, is blurred, until their sometimes humorous, often painful game becomes undistinguishable. And here we find another seeming contradiction. Unlike the Jimmy McHugh-Dorothy Fields song "I'm in the Mood For Love," from which the film presumably takes its title, their affair sexless, we are led to believe, is no starry-eyed, sugarcoated romance. Like Wong's earlier *Happy Together* (1997), the title of which was taken from a thumping 1960s love song which suggested none of the dysfunctional angst depicted in the relationship of that film's characters, *In the Mood For Love* has an abundantly level-headed understanding of the limits of human expression.

For Chan and Chow, there are no poignant breakthrough moments of confessed ardor. There are no hand holding walks under night skies, no bucolic boat rides or popping champagne corks. Instead, there are aborted questions, subverted longings. The lovers stand under an eave waiting out a surprise rainstorm. They ride in taxis. They comfort each other awkwardly, and then return to their rigid lives. They stop. They start. They turn away. There is more unsaid than said, but everything is understood. Though the story's tone is heady, it is not the swoon of new romance, but the aching regret of unrequited love.

Wong's direction is as deceptively simple as the story itself. His camera is fluid and quiet, peeking at its world from around corners, through window grates, close-up in a study of slippers under a bed or a cigarette in an ash tray, its filter lipstick-stained. He has obviously composed his shots with the utmost care, and the film's rich, ravishing colors and moody, golden light effectively suggest a world of beautifully doomed romance. But take note of his disregard for tidy chronology. While the story is strictly linear, it moves forward hours or days without ceremony or announcement, jumping from one relevant or telling moment to another, plucking the details from the stream of the character's lives. At other times, Wong speeds the pace in bursts of quick-cut editing, like when Chan meets Chow at a hotel where he has taken a room to write. And then there are the interludes, when the story suspends itself in slow-motion contemplation, like a colored glass ball turning slowly in a string: Chow smoking a cigarette in his dark office, the smoke curling up through the lamplight, or Chan climbing the stairs from the noodle shop, her thermos dangling loosely from her fingers. Behind these simple images is Wong's overriding truth in the slow, steady drumbeat of life, people live their lives, make their choices, and carry on

- Written by Lawrence Fahey