

## ***The Wedding Banquet* (1993): Statements on Chinese Culture**

### **Central characters** (names in the movie)

Wei Dong, the son

Simon, his same-sex partner

Wei Wei, tenant of Wei Dong's apartment, later his wife

Mrs. Gao, Wei Dong's mother

Mr. Gao, Wei Dong's father

### **Peripheral characters**

Simon's basketball friend (at the beginning)

Simon's friends (towards the end)

Military friend of Wei Dong's father, owner of an upscale Chinese restaurant in N.Y.

Chinese guests at the wedding

### **Argument**

I would like to take a closer look at *The Wedding Banquet* (1993), a film that moved me quite deeply. I will start by giving an overview of the movie, then working down to the different characters, and finally, I will examine Ang Lee's stance on Chinese culture.

*The Wedding Banquet* has at least two zones of friction, one is the acceptance of the homosexual orientation in Chinese culture, another is the contact between the Chinese and Western cultural spheres. The movie plays in New York City, whose Chinese diaspora is the largest ethnic Chinese population outside of Asia (Source: Wikipedia), and where the director, writer and producer Ang Lee lived for quite some time.

The best time in life to bring these two differences to light is, of course, when marriages take place. Marriages are fraught with emotions and cultural norms. Starting with Wei Dong's parents, they are very observant of cultural norms, and they seem to have raised Wei Dong in the same way. They seem to be a very decent and upright upper middle-class family, with few defects. Wei Dong is a homosexual, but the parents haven't realized it until now. Both of the parents are preoccupied with their only son finding a suitable partner to carry the family line forward, both in their own way, as we shall see. Two additional central characters complete the picture, Simon, Wei Dong's same-sex partner, a Westerner of White ethnicity, and Wei Wei, a beautiful Chinese woman who is making advances on Wei Dong from the start, despite knowing about his homosexuality. These five central characters, along with numerous peripheral characters, are sufficient to convey the desired intercultural message.

Wei Dong's father is a retired officer from the Chinese Nationalist Army, the last remaining son and heir to the Gao family. It is therefore especially important to him that Wei Dong continue the family line. The way he handles the situation to ensure the continuation of the family line reveals a great amount of cunning and self-discipline, which reminds me of the 36 stratagems and is characteristic of Chinese culture. Perhaps from the fact that Wei Wei was originally Wei Dong's tenant, or from the way Wei Dong interacted with Simon, he quickly realized this marriage was set up to placate Wei Dong's parents. Instead of lamenting this fact, he knew it was

the only way for his homosexual son to have offspring, so he did not let on about his hunch in any way. Towards the end of the movie, after having told Simon in English that he had known about his son's homosexuality all along, Mr. Gao declared his strategy in Chinese (“如果我不让他们骗我的话，我怎么能抱得了孙子呢？” — “If I hadn't let them deceive me, how would I have been able to hold a grandson in my arms?”), with Simon plainly answering “I don't understand.” This must be heart-balm for the Chinese, and it is one of the instances in the film where the director shows appreciation for Chinese culture.

Mrs. Gao is a very mothering and kind middle-aged woman. Right away, she establishes a loving, trustful, and intimate relationship with Wei Wei. She was more unsuspecting about her son's homosexuality and the fake marriage, but that isn't significant; had both parents known about it, the audience probably would have had to know, as well, or it might have felt a little bit deceived at the end when it would have come to light that both parents had already known.

Wei Wei, as I mentioned before, tried to win Wei Dong's favor as a tenant and did not hide her liking for him. When Wei Dong comes to her decrepit apartment for the first time, she said she always fell in love with good-looking gays. It is also quite apparent that Ang Lee planned for Wei Wei to look rather attractive, and he features it throughout the movie, for example, through close-fitting clothing which contrasts well against the background. I think Ang Lee does this to make Wei Dong's homosexuality plainly visible, to increase the contrast between Wei Dong's lack of desire and the mostly heterosexual audience's possible feelings. This tension has to be maintained in order for the homosexual theme to stay in focus.

Wei Dong and Simon behave in a relatively predictable fashion. It seems to me that the other three characters mostly act on Wei Dong and Simon.

While Ang Lee, as we have seen, generally portrays Chinese cultural elements in a very favorable light, he certainly also tries to hint at, or stir up, its defects. Chinese cultural norms have to adapt, and they do in this movie, when the two parents accept a family of two fathers and one mother. The fact remains that this might indeed offend other Chinese, and it certainly is a message from him that Chinese culture should become more flexible in the modern world. However, Ang Lee is making it clear that he is not representing Chinese culture as somehow inferior to Western culture. At the beginning of the movie, we clearly see from the reaction of two of Simon's neighbors that homosexuality carries a similar stigma in the West as in China, so at least in this area, Western culture is no better.

One could say that Ang Lee, who lived in the West for a long time, tries to portray Chinese culture from a Western point of view, to a Western audience. In my view, he did so very successfully, making China more accessible to Westerners, and the West more livable to the Chinese, thereby promoting harmony between the cultures. (Argument: 953 words)