

1993 Film *Wedding Banquet*, dir. Ang Lee

- Once again, this film by Ang Lee, awarded for the Golden Bear in Berlin International Film Festival, allows the audience to visualize what it is like that Homi Bhabha refers to as transcultural negotiations. The attitudes on homosexuality range from openness to intolerance. In pre-modern China, the euphemism for this act was “cutting sleeve addiction” (*duan xiu zhi pi* – 斷袖之癖). “Confucian attitudes to marriage and procreation tend to eliminate the possibility of any exclusive same-sex relations. The polygamous marriage system creates a social space for nonexclusive ones. In Europe, according to Foucault, the discourse of homosexuality was often used to pathologize and criminalize the practice. As a Hollywood director, Ang Lee was not the first one to take on similar issues, dealt with in *Thelma and Louis*, 1991 Ridley Scott, *Boys Don’t Cry*, 1999 Kimberly and *Carol*, 2015 Todd Haynes.
- Traditional marriage in China not only allowed men to marry multiple women but also fostered an environment that encouraged promiscuity outside marriage”. “For the majority of marriages, male homosexual relations did not necessarily pose a threat but were able to coexist in harmony with heterosexual relations, constituting a natural part of the husband’s sexuality”.¹³ Homosexuality was relatively well tolerated, precisely because Confucianism tends to rank romantic love beneath loyalty (忠), filial piety (孝), moral integrity (節), righteousness (義). In pre-modern China, same-sex desires and relations never received the cultural attention they received in the West since late 1800s.
- We do injustice to the film if we would understand the story as a China versus America issue. Such a binary opposition might be precisely what Ang Lee wants to resist. NYC is jarring with meanings and values generated in between the variety and diversity associated with cultural plentitude. The film is a “... process of cultural interpretation formed in the perplexity of living communities. ... In erasing the harmonious totalities of Culture, cultural difference articulates the difference between representations of social life without surmounting the space of incommensurable meanings and judgments that are produced within the process of transcultural negotiation.”¹⁴
- The drama reveals cultural significance that falls short and delivers a difference. The viewer sees an arranged marriage, but also elaborate wedding banquets, prenuptial horseplay in the bridal chamber, newly-weds bowing to in-laws, and so forth. For every act of obedience, there is an impulse to revolt; behind every appearance of harmony, there is jarring discord waiting to be heard. The wedding banquet in NYC as a melting pot of multiculturalism or cultural pluralism) introduces the viewer to what Homi Bhabha called “harmonious totalities of culture”.
- Father Gao is even-handed and novel. His skill in negotiating differences is evident in the way he confronts same-sex relations, which falls outside the patrilineal context and is synonymous with self-indulgence or lust (姦) as it threatens the continuation of the patrilineal tradition (不孝有三、無後為大; “the biggest of the three un-filial sins against one’s parents is the act of not producing an heir”) and prioritizes personal happiness over filial piety. This is what is meant when the retired general modifies the remark of Julius Caesar from “I came; I saw; I conquered” to “I came; I saw; I *learned*”. If this is a cultural war, then it takes learning and understanding to win it. Father Gao knows well that “All evils originate in lust; all kind deeds extend from filial piety, (万恶姦为首百善孝

當先), but in this instance “lust” or self-indulgence also brings a happy ending to the tradition that puts such a high premium on patrilineality.

- Ang Lee’s view of Confucian culture is markedly different that of Lu Xun and Po Yang (the author of *The Ugly Chinese*, 丑陋的中國人). For Ang Lee, Chinese traditions can and do contribute to the harmony and inclusiveness of this globalized world. According to [Dariotis and Fung](#), Chinese tradition is not a finished product of past history but a dynamic process spreading trans-culturally. In many ways, Lee’s films indicate a much more ambivalent and nuanced interpretation of Chinese traditions. Unlike Po Yang’s thoroughgoing anti-traditionalist stand, Lee’s films re-envision Chinese tradition in a much more sympathetic light, as something that is highly versatile and adaptive. The ‘soy source jar’ that represents Chinese traditions, is figuratively broken to reveal a new sensibility, while the fluid of the ‘jar’ is not discarded.¹⁵
- The film bankrupts the “China versus the West” paradigm to treat world cultures as separate, static, distinctive and irreconcilable. As a mainstream Hollywood story, the film celebrates intercultural and inter-racial processes that redefine individual happiness. That is the beauty of intercultural processes in which Ang Lee imagines personal identity. When the three youths arrange a fake marriage, they cannot predict the cultural dynamics would set in motion an elaborate wedding banquet where things begin to go against their original plan. The deception is foiled when Mr. Gao decides to meet Wei-tong halfway. The wedding banquet celebrates cultural diversity and new cultural sensibilities. The lavish wedding banquet, the rape of Wei-tong by Wei-Wei who has been sexually repressed, and her pregnancy out of wedlock, are all blossoms of life. This is how the soy source (Confucian values) flavors and spices up life in America.
- In rounds of fighting between traditions and generations, the essentialist idea of identity is subverted, reconstructed and trans-nationalized. Wei-tong and Simon lay a trap for the Gaos but in this cultural clash “gets out of hand”. When Wei-wei thinks that she must abort the child to be an independent artist, Mrs. Gao reminds shares her ideas of femininity and womanhood, “After all, we are all women and mothers”. When Mrs. Gao blames Simon (and the Western culture) for “leading Wei-tong” astray and turning her son into a homosexual, her bigoted view is rejected by Wei-tong telling her that homosexuality is not a disease and that homosexuals are capable of compassion, love and devotion as anyone. When Mr. Gao naively believes that his posterity is a perfect extension of himself, his encounter in NYC broadens his humanity to include children born out of wedlock and homosexual interracial couples such as Simon. Thanks to his own experience of running away from a marriage arranged by his father, and because of his son’s sexual orientation, Mr. Gao learns the importance of tolerance towards those who “transgress” against him. He does not go home empty-handed, thanks to his compromise, with his hands raised at the end as if to surrender at JFK airport.
- At the end, when all five individuals pause to look at the wedding photo album, they see their performed identities with a smile, knowing that they are not what they appear in these photos. It would not be wrong to view all of them as a new family, with Wei-wei willing to be the surrogate mother, Simon agreeing to be the white father for Wei- Wei’s child, and Mr. Gao willing to endorse the union of Wei-tong and Simon. Ang Lee’s drama, understood from a trans-cultural perspective, adds new extensions to the life in both Taipei and NYC as cosmopolitan centers, beyond the national borders.