

Original Paper

Analysis of the Construction of Gender Roles of Male Characters in The Wedding Banquet

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Abstract

Ang Lee is a successful director who has won the Oscar for the best director of the film Life of Pi, the Golden Bear for the film Brokeback Mountain and the Oscar for Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon. There is no doubt that Ang Lee is a milestone-like director throughout the history of Chinese film. Having been born in China and graduated from the apartment of director in New York University, Ang Lee has been deeply influenced by both Chinese and American culture. Therefore, his works creatively integrate East and West, Chinese-speaking world and Hollywood tradition, combine Chinese traditional aesthetic style with Hollywood classic expression, and show strong cross-cultural ability. Gender has always been one of the most important dimensions of Ang Lee's films. His films often put marginal gender identities-women and homosexuals-at the core of narrative. In the film, The Wedding Banquet, Ang Lee has told a story in which the homosexual son has finally made a compromise. However, due to Ang Lee's living environment and educational background, he wants to solve this problem of gender duality with a mild and non-confrontational way.

The Theory of Gender Performativity has first been raised by Judith Butler in the 1980s. It is one of the most important theories of Feminism. This theory holds the view that gender is regulated by the society. Gender itself isn't expressive, but it requires people to be performative, thus forming the stereotype of men and women.

This paper will be divided into four parts. It will get started with the introduction part-the introduction of Ang Lee and his film The Wedding Banquet and literature review. The second part is theoretical framework. In this part, the author will introduce the Theory of Performativity raised by Judith Butler and the possibility to use this theory to analyze the construction of gender roles of male characters in The Wedding Banquet. The third part discusses the construction of gender roles of three male characters Gao, Gao Weitong's father and Simon in The Wedding Banquet to show Ang Lee's rebellion and compromise against the patriarchal society. Complex and diverse male images in this film appear

in this film, which are full of personal characteristics and show rebellion against tradition. What's more, the construction of female characters will also be mentioned to illustrate that women have undergone the oppression of the patriarchal society. The last part is the conclusion part. Through the analysis of the construction of gender roles of male characters, this paper will state the truth that although the director Ang Lee has tried his best to show his inclusiveness of homosexuals, the special gender group, he has still compromised to the patriarchal tradition due to his educational background and cultural background. Ang Lee has attached great importance to family issue and talked about the gender trouble which bothered both men and women, thus eliminating the difference between men and women and criticizing heterosexual hegemony in the patriarchal society.

Keywords

The Wedding Banquet, The Theory of Gender Performativity, Ang Lee, Gender Construction

1. Introduction

1.1 Background Information of Ang Lee and The Wedding Banquet

Ang Lee was born in 1953 in China and graduated from the department of director of New York University so that he has been deeply influenced by both Chinese and American culture. When he was a child, he had not only learned traditional Chinese culture in his hometown, but also had been influenced by modern culture which was popular in Japan at that time. What's more, when he grew up, he went to the United States for further study of director skills in New York University to pursue for his own dream of being a director. Just as Ang Lee once said "My background is reflected in my works. Traditional Chinese culture and American culture have all had a great impact on me." (Zhang, p. 60) The way that Ang Lee illustrates the conflict and combination between eastern culture and western culture has a close relationship with his cultural background and life experience. Ang Lee has a strong desire for a kind of arts that can be appreciated by both the eastern world and the western world. He becomes more acceptable for the identity as a Chinese director after working in Hollywood. Although Ang Lee has tried his best to imitate the way that western directors use to make a film, his expression of emotion is traditional as a eastern director. He has made use of the strengths of eastern people by using images and situations to show the inner world of his characters. It is the western world that has the power of discourse in the film world and they have the power to dominate the formal rules and standards. Although there are a few directors talking about the stories in the eastern world, their depictions of eastern world can always be stereotypes and imagination. The appearance of Ang Lee has benefited for the spread of eastern culture and narrowed the gap of cultural differences.

Ang Lee is one of the most noted directors throughout the history of Chinese film with a number of successful works and numerous prizes. His representative works include *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* (2000), *Brokeback Mountain* (2005), *Life of Pi* (2012), *The Wedding Banquet* (1993) and so on and so forth.

The Wedding Banquet was released in 1993 in America and quickly became a hit at that time. This film

has told a story that the hero, Gao, is a homosexual and has a perfect boyfriend Simon and lives a elite life in the United States. However, one day, weitong's parents don't know the truth that their son is a homosexual, instead ,they urge their son to get married and give birth to a baby immediately. Weitong feels annoyed but he has no choice but to do so. At the mean time, an illegal immigrant Gu hopes to get the identity of being an American so that she has to get married with a legal immigrant. Then she meets weitong and they both agree to get married with each other to fulfill their goals. However, weitong's parents want to participate in the wedding ceremony so that they have to invite many people to attend their wedding banquet. At the night of wedding banquet, weitong is drunken and have had sexual relationship with weiwei and unfortunately, weiwei gets pregnant. In the end, weitong tells his parents the truth that he is indeed a homosexual and weiwei agrees to give birth to this child. Weitong can continue his life with Simon while their "Gao" family has a descendant. It seems that this film ends with happiness, however, it shows the hegemony of the patriarchal society. And just as Ang Lee has said in his biography, he holds the view that this film doesn't have a happy ending since everyone has made their own compromise to their future. Weitong has chosen to get married with Gu Weiwei. Weiwei has chosen to give birth to the child and Simon has chosen to share his lover with another person. What's worse, in the end of the film, there is a hint that even weitong's father is a homosexual and he has chosen to live his life as a "normal" person, thus it is a film that shows the critical opinions about heterosexual hegemony of the director Ang Lee.

1.2 Literature Review

There are numerous studies on the film *The Wedding Banquet* both at home and at abroad. After the film *The Wedding Banquet* won the Golden Bear prize, the researches about Ang Lee started to appear. However, most of those articles focused on the director Ang Lee instead of his works. Ang Lee's works started to gain more attention since his film *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* won the Oscar prize and reached to the peak since he won Oscar for the best director in 2012 after the release of *Life of Pi*.

Although Ang Lee has lacked of new works in recent years, people still have an active interest in his works. When the author search Ang Lee in the CNKI over the period of recent ten years, it is clear that there are a large number of papers centering on the research on Ang Lee's films. The themes of papers at home which focus on Ang Lee's films can be divided into five parts. The first part is mainly about family ethics which mostly focus on the image and position of the character of father in a family. The second part mainly focuses on the perspective of feminism, including the analysis of the images of female characters and the analysis of homosexuals in his works. The third part stresses the analysis of the style and spirit of Ang Lee's films. The fourth part throws a light on the analysis of the cultural value and commercial value of Ang Lee's films. The fifth part centers on the conflict between eastern culture and western culture and the integration of these two cultures by comparing typical social phenomena in these two totally different civilizations.

Different from studies at home, studies on Ang Lee's films at abroad mainly concentrate on some philosophical aspects such as the view of family, the view of culture, the view of ethics and the view of

value. Among them, the representative works are *The Cinema of Ang Lee: The Other Side of the Screen* written by Whitney Crothers Dilley and *Ang Lee. Harpenden: Pocket Essentials* written by Ellen Chesire. The only work related to *The Wedding Banquet* is written by an American writer Ke, talking about the differences between eastern family's ethics and western family's ethics in *Pushing Hands* (1991), *The Wedding Banquet* (1993) and *Eat Drink Man Woman* (1994). The author holds the view that the ethical value in these three movies indeed cannot be accepted by the western world. This paper will start from the analysis of construction of gender roles of male characters in *The Wedding Banquet* to illustrate heterosexual hegemony in the patriarchal society.

2. Theoretical Framework

2.1 The Theory of Gender Performativity

Gender performativity is a term first used by the feminist philosopher Judith Butler in their 1990 book *Gender Trouble*. They argue that being born male or female does not determine behavior. Instead, people learn to behave in particular ways to fit into society. The idea of gender is an act, or performance. This act is the way a person walks, talks, dresses, and behaves. They call this acting "gender performativity". What society regards as a person's gender is just a performance made to please social expectations and not a true expression of the person's gender identity.

Judith Butler questions the belief that certain gendered behaviors are natural, illustrating the ways that one's learned performance of gendered behavior (what we commonly associate with femininity and masculinity) is an act of sorts, a performance, one that is imposed upon us by normative heterosexuality. Butler thus offers what she herself calls "a more radical use of the doctrine of constitution that takes the social agent as an object rather than the subject of constitutive acts" (Butler, p. 270). In other words, Butler questions the extent to which we can assume that a given individual can be said to constitute him- or herself; she wonders to what extent our acts are determined for us, rather, by our place within language and convention. She follows postmodernist and post-structuralist practice in using the term "subject" (rather than "individual" or "person") in order to underline the linguistic nature of our position within what Jacques Lacan terms the symbolic order, the system of signs and conventions that determines our perception of what we see as reality.

Indeed, Butler goes far as to argue that gender, as an objective natural thing, does not exist: "Gender reality is performative which means, quite simply, that it is real only to the extent that it is performed" (Butler, p. 278). Gender, according to Butler, is by no means tied to material bodily facts but is solely and completely a social construction, a fiction, one that, therefore, is open to change and contestation: "Because there is neither an 'essence' that gender expresses or externalizes nor an objective ideal to which gender aspires; because gender is not a fact, the various acts of gender creates the idea of gender, and without those acts, there would be no gender at all. Gender is, thus, a construction that regularly conceals its genesis" (Butler, p. 273). That genesis is not corporeal but performative so that the body becomes its gender only "through a series of acts which are renewed, revised, and consolidated through

time". By illustrating the artificial, conventional, and historical nature of gender construction, Butler attempts to critique the assumptions of normative heterosexuality: those punitive rules (social, familial, and legal) that force us to conform to hegemonic, heterosexual standards for identity.

2.2 *Queer Theory*

Queer theory as an academic tool came about in part from gender and sexuality studies that in turn had their origins from lesbians and gay studies and feminist theory. It is a much newer theory, in that it was established in the 1990s, and contests many of the set ideas of the more established fields it comes from by challenging the notion of defined and finite identity categories, as well as the norms that create a binary of good versus bad sexualities. Queer theorists contention is that there is no set normal, only changing norms that people may or may not fit into, making queer theorists' main challenge to disrupt binaries in hopes that this will destroy difference as well as inequality.

The theorist most commonly identified with studying the prevailing understandings of gender and sex is Judith Butler, who draws much from Foucault's ideas but with a focus on gender. She argues in her book *Gender Trouble* that gender, like sexuality, is not an essential truth obtained from one's body but something that is acted out and portrayed as "reality". She argues that the strict belief that there is a "truth" of sex makes heterosexuality as the only proper outcome because of the coherent binary created of "feminine" and "masculine" and thus creating the only logical outcome of either being a "male" or "female." Butler makes the case that gender performativity could be a strategy of resistance with examples such as drag, cross-dressing, and the sexual non-realistic depiction of butch and femme identities that poke fun at the laid out gender norms in society. In her later book, *Undoing Gender*, Butler makes it clear that performativity is not the same as performance. She explains that gender performativity is a repeated process that ultimately creates the subject as a subject. Butler's work brings to light the creation of gender contesting the rigidity of the hierarchical binaries that exist and is what makes her work invaluable in queer theory.

One of the key concepts in queer theory is the idea of "heteronormativity", which pertains to "the institutions, structures of understanding, and practical orientations that make heterosexuality seem not only coherent—that is, organized as a sexuality—but also privileged. Heteronormativity is a worldview that promotes heterosexuality as the normal and/or preferred sexual orientation, and is reinforced in society through the institutions of marriage, taxes, employment, and adoption rights, among many others. Heteronormativity is a form of power and control that applies pressure to both straight and gay individuals, through institutional arrangements and accepted social norms.

3. Analysis of the Construction of Gender Roles of Three Male Characters in The Wedding Banquet

3.1 *The Construction of Gao Weitong-The Collision between a Dutiful Son and Queer Identity*

As a traditional son in a Chinese family, weitong is in the center of the conflict between eastern culture and western culture. As Ang Lee has once said in his biography " In The Wedding Banquet, I have tried

to use the theme of homosexuals to show the identity. On the one hand, weitong has the urge to be himself- conforming to his own sexual preference. On the other hand, weitong has to become a dutiful son in Chinese culture- acting “normally” and carrying on the family line. Weitong has trapped in this dilemma and has no choice but to obey the tradition of the patriarchal society.” (Zhang) Gao is a mixture of two kinds of cultures, just as Ang Lee himself. His eastern values have been weakened since he has lived in America for a long time and has been influenced by American culture. What’s more, Weitong works in New York as an elite and acts as an American queer with a homosexual partner Simon, making him have a sense of identity of being identified by American culture. At that time, he becomes a spiritual American. In *Thank You, Mom*, Ang Lee has illustrated that the hero of *The Wedding Banquet* is a homosexual, has a faithful friend and gains the identity of himself. However, his parents and culture require him to walk the right path. The wedding banquet is just like a “golden red monster” which has made him feel confused. (Zhang, p. 115) Weitong can’t bear this kind of collision, so as a result, he finally chooses to make the compromise such as redecorating his room and getting married with Gu.

What’s more, Ang Lee has also tried to talk about the gender issue by the appearance of weitong. Working in New York and acting as an elite, weitong doesn’t show too many typical characteristics of homosexuals. “Gender is a kind of culture and construction of society.” (Butler, p. 43) The construction of weitong shows the deconstruction of the stereotyped images of homosexuals under the heterosexual hegemony. Weitong’s choice of coming out of the closet shows his rebellion against the heterosexual hegemony and fight for the equal rights for queers.

3.2 The Construction of Father of Gao weitong-The Representative of Patriarchal Society

Weitong’s father has once been a military officer of Kuomintang, thus representing the power of discourse in the patriarchal society. He has the absolute power of discourse in his family. What’s more, he has gazed Gu from the perspective of the patriarchal society. When he first meets weiwei, he judges whether weiwei can easily be pregnant by observing her appearance. Then he always tells weiwei to act as a traditional wife in the patriarchal society.

However, the power of weitong’s father has been gradually deconstructed in the end. He becomes ill and one day weitong realizes that his father becomes weaker and weaker. The one who owns the power of discourse begins to become weaker and weaker. This may be a hint that although the patriarchal structure is still the main structure of the society, it inevitably dies out.

Surprisingly, Ang Lee doesn’t want to show the conflict between the patriarchal tradition and queers in the new era, instead, he tries to show the compromise. (Zhang, p. 114) So he has known the truth that his son is a homosexual, and has accepted the truth, but this must happen with the foundation that his son will give birth to a grandson, thus he pretends that he can’t understand English in order to force his son to get married with a girl. In the end, he says “I watch, I hear, I know.”, which hints another victory of the patriarchal society.

What’s more, in the end of this movie, Ang Lee gives an implication that weitong’s father is also a

homosexual since when he goes back home with his wife, there is a man's shadow behind him. So although weitong's father has to make a compromise to the patriarchal society, he is still a firm supporter of this patriarchal system.

3.3 *The Construction of Simon-The Queer Who Breaks the Bias of Tradition*

Simon, weitong's homosexual lover, is the only western character in this film. In the society of heterosexual hegemony, there is no difference between heterosexual politics and homosexual politics. In their relationships, there must be a person who acts as male while another acts as female. However, in this film, neither weitong nor Simon shows the typical characteristics of male or female. According to Judith Butler, gender is the outcome of cultural performativity. Gender is a social concept and is associated with politics and has always been naturalized by non-natural factors. "To categorize human's bodies is to cater for the economic requirement of heterosexual ideology." (Butler, p. 120) All in all, Simon represents the queer groups who break the traditional values and bias on homosexual people.

In Thank you, movie god, Ang Lee has admitted that The Wedding Banquet doesn't speak for those homosexuals, instead, he tries to treat them as normal people, thus winning the recognition of most of homosexuals. (Zhang, p. 116) His respect for those special groups makes the reconstruction of the system of discourse become possible. The construction of Simon illustrates other choices and different values in this patriarchal society, showing a vivid, diverse and special image who strives for his choice firmly. This kind of construction has deconstructed the stereotype of homosexuals. What's more, Simon has also made compromise that he has to share his lover with a strange woman. Although he tries to fight against the heterosexual hegemony with weitong, he finally makes a compromise. They both are the victims of the patriarchal society.

4. Conclusion

Ang Lee's films illustrate the truth that no one can escape from the mainstream power structure. His educational and cultural background makes him to show a moderate and non-antagonistic gender relationship which still satisfies the need of patriarchal society. Although he tries his best to narrow the gap between heterosexuals and homosexuals to establish a universal value, he avoids to solve those social issues and identity politics issues and makes compromise to the mainstream value in order to keep temporary harmony. However, he doesn't admit that this film has a happy ending as everyone is crying in the end and everyone has to make compromise to the society. This shows Chinese tradition of "harmony", which is mild but is the best way to solve this problem. (Zhang, p. 117)

Both weitong and Simon are the victims of the patriarchal society. Weitong has to obey the mainstream value of marriage and give birth to a descendant while Simon has to share his lover with another person. Gao Weitong's father is partly a victim of patriarchal society since there is a hint in the film that he was once a homosexual when he was young, but he eventually chose to get married with his wife and lived his life as a normal person. However, at the same time, he is a strong supporter of the rule of the patriarchal society. He makes use of his illness to threat his son to get married with weiwei and acts as

not understanding English to make sure the birth of the child. His understanding of his son being a homosexual lays on the foundation that his son must live as a common person even superficially. Apart from the construction of male characters, the construction of female characters also needs to be mentioned. Both weiwei and mother of weitong are made to be silent. Unlike those male characters, they act more like tools to benefit for male characters and comply with the stereotypes of women. The construction of female characters also shows the oppression of women in the patriarchal society.

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