

“Marry Dead My Body” by Chen Weihao: A Case Study of Queer Subjectivity in Heteronormative Narrative

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Abstract. Several studies have been done on how queers are objectified as exotic and/or sinful spectacles in cinema, and how the embrace of queerness offers new angles of storytelling, which emphasize the importance of subjectivity in queerness representation. However, queer characters in these films often serve as a token character without a reflection of their own subjectivity. Taking the Taiwanese film *Marry My Body* (2023) by Cheng Weihao as an example, this paper examines how queerness is narrated in East Asian commercial cinema. It focuses on storytelling, mise-en-scène, cinematology, and narrative construction, exploring the redefinition of queerness by heteronormativity, and offering a critique of threats to the self-expression of queer community imposed by a heteronormative narrative. The paper thus argues that to represent queerness does not necessitate a definition of queerness, but a possibility of living differently from the binary-gendered, heterosexual majority.

Keywords: Queer representation, East Asian cinema, Token narrative, Subjectivity

1. Introduction

With the increasing visibility of the queer community in contemporary cinema, their representation becomes a complex issue. The film industry finds itself with a strong incentive to standardize queer figures on the silver screen for its commercial interests. While raising public awareness of the existence of the queer community as a minority group, these representations face queer feminists' critique for attempting to embed the queer character into a heteronormative narrative to please the majority audience. One of the main concerns comes from the possibility of queerness being modified into a component instead of a challenge to the social norms based on heteronormativity as the default setting. Queer people, in this case, are essentially silenced due to their inability to express themselves freely but submit to the heteronormative hegemony, which, in other words, signals a loss of subjectivity. Taking the award-winning Taiwanese commercial film *Marry My Dead Body*, directed by Cheng Weihao in 2023, as an example, the paper therefore attempts to examine the extent to which this phenomenon influences queer representation in East Asian cinema.

One of the main characters of the film, Maomao, is a gay ghost who died in a mysterious car accident and is incidentally married to a straight male police officer, Wu Minghan. The film focuses on their relationship as well as the detective investigation of a great scheme revealed by Maomao's death. The paper will first analyze Maomao's character development and the role he plays in the

storytelling process, laying the groundwork for the latter analysis of narrative construction. Adopting Michel Foucault's method of narrative analysis and Judith Butler's concept of otherization within heteronormative society, the paper aims to explore the hidden discipline of heteronormativity imposed on queer community through cinematic language and the redefinition of queerness, where the demand of heteronormative consumption creates a token narrative. The resistance of queer community is thus deconstructed. A question shall arise: What does it mean to represent a queer character?

2. Literature review

The representation of queer people on the silver screen has gone through dramatic changes, from individuals who are presumed to end up tragically and oversimplified gay culture to more complicated self-expressions since the movement of New Queer Cinema [1]. Books such as *Queer Encyclopedia of Film and Television* [2] have systematically recorded a chronicle of queer characters in mainstream Western films from the 1970s to the early 21st century, focusing on how films have gradually shifted from self-deprecating, stereotypical portrayals to more authentic, diverse, and positive narratives regarding their subjectivity. Buernsmeier [3] suggests that the once-ambiguous homosexuality in genre films has exceeded the mere metaphor that allows us to interpret others as homosexual and/or strange, but enables us to imagine strange subjectivities and violations of norms and values that are inextricably linked to real homosexual characters. However, as Borden [4] points out, the LGBTQ+ cinema, as a genre in the film industry, still seeks to normalize and silence queer people for several reasons, where the queer characters appear to be more mainstream-oriented, which has dual effects. On the one hand, LGBTQ+ characters in films became increasingly diverse and positive, with some even achieving commercial success. Big cultural industries such as the Korean pop music market are actively seeking the commodification of queer identity to attract their target audiences [5]. The process of commodification is even believed to be inherently undermining the dominant order from within [6]. On the other hand, homophobia and conservative thinking within the industry continued to profoundly impact the careers of openly LGBTQ+ actors [2]. Filmmakers may be forced to adopt a non-threatening way of delivering queer identity in societies where same-sex love is/was seen as taboo [7]. There are also films featuring how queer people deal with their complicated relationship with mainstream values [8], which, from the narrative level, provides a necessity for filmmakers to include traditional values that are rather conservative in their concern. By embedding queerness in the local sociocultural system, the film can better succeed in representing queers as ordinary people [9]. Overall, data has proven that the films with LGBTQ+ elements have better market performance [10]. Ultimately, the success of the boom in LGBTQ+ cinema among general audiences brings more investment from the industry to independent filmmakers, laying the groundwork for more diverse queer representations in cinema in the long term [11].

These compromises with mainstream society present a new problem of queer representation in cinema. As the feminists' critique of the representation of women in cinema has pointed out, women are often deprived of their own voice and desire to be placed in a male-dominant order [12]. Queer characters may face a similar dilemma where their stories, though still exist, are not told in their voice. For example, popular culture often portrays desirable lesbians in a heterosexual norm of female desirability, denying their possibility of being queer and non-feminine [13]. Following Butler's concept of gender performativity [14], LGBTQ+ people who perform in a heterosexual way will unavoidably be reinterpreted and essentialized in accordance with stereotypes constructed by

heteronormativity, contributing to a reproduction of heterosexual narrative on homosexuality instead of a narrative belonging to queers themselves.

Therefore, due to the lack of analysis specified in the commercialized queer films in Taiwan, this paper would like to take the LGBTQ+ blockbuster, *Marry My Dead Body* by Chen Weihao, as the subject to explore the representation of queer subjectivity facing the dilemma between its commercial need to attract mainstream audiences and its target to portray a convincing queer character as a movie.

3. Methodology

This paper aims to adopt several methods to better analyze the target film, *Marry My Dead Body*, focusing on analyses of pivotal scenes in the film to identify the information delivered through mise-en-scène and dig into the possible influence they have on the film as a whole, such as the “Fitness Studio” scene and the “Ghost Marriage” scene. The paper would also like to offer a general analysis of the plot line regarding character development as a supplement to the reading of the entire film. Then, with an emphasis on Foucault’s narrative theory of narrative, power, and knowledge [15], this paper will deconstruct the story the film intends to tell on a narrative level, primarily concerning how Maomao is constructed as a queer person regarding his relationship with the heteronormative majority.

3.1. Character development as a deliverance of the theme

In *Marry My Dead Body*, the story starts with Wu Minghan, a male police officer, accidentally marrying a dead gay man, Maomao. The film then focuses on the two characters’ complex relationship, blending comedy and detective mystery, which eventually reaches the climax of Wu Minghan and Maomao helping to reveal the mastermind behind a drug connection, and Maomao saving Wu Minghan from a fatal wound. Superficially, it is precisely the inseparable bond of the “Ghost Marriage” that directly propels both characters forward along their respective paths of growth, forcing them to confront their differences and refining their behavioral patterns through repeated clashes. For instance, after repeatedly making flawed judgments due to his impulsiveness in the second act of the film, Wu Minghan begins to recognize the advantages of Maomao’s more detailed analyses and starts to actively seek advice from Maomao, signaling a milestone in his transformation from a homophobic straight male with toxic masculinity to a more considerate and responsible police officer. Followingly, the film powerfully mocks masculinity by exaggerating the consequences of Wu Minghan’s failure due to his overconfidence and misunderstanding of queer community and females, explicitly disagreeing with the traditional image of linking “good police officer” to a figure of masculine, powerful, and bold males. Rather, Maomao’s character as his contradiction becomes more vivid and attractive by displaying the bravery and skills in logical thinking, which is opposite to the stereotype of gay men only being emotional and weak. Conversely, Wu Minghan’s exceptional drive propels Maomao’s personal growth as well, helping him overcome his hesitation toward dilemmas that remain unsolved due to his sudden death. Unlike Wu Minghan, who has more screen time, Maomao’s growth is more subtly conveyed through numerous directorial cues throughout the film. Initially, he cannot ascend to heaven due to his unfulfilled wishes in the material world, primarily resentment toward his boyfriend’s infidelity and his father’s acceptance of his sexuality. As the plot unfolds, with Wu Minghan’s support, he confronts his ex-boyfriend face-to-face and receives answers, resolving the emotional knot between them. It becomes a compromise where Maomao develops his crucial character arc by recognizing

his independence within the relationship and moving forward. With Wu Minghan's assistance, Maomao also learns that his father has long since accepted his sexuality but failed to express it, which allows him to reconcile with both his father and himself, enabling him to leave without any lingering regrets. While this outcome is profoundly positive, it subtly touches the emotional support the minority yearn for in this rather hostile society, where only a few people can empathize with their feelings. The film tries to confirm the possibility of mutual understanding via the relationship between Maomao and Wu Minghan through their accidental marriage. In spite of Maomao's invisible status as a ghost, Wu Minghan succeeds in comprehending the visible difficulties Maomao faces as a human being, providing a new meaning to their bond. Through this process, the two characters get rid of the highly simplified behavioral logic of stereotypical characters in the film that passively follow the trope related to their identity, as they display the ability and will to reflect on themselves and implement changes.

Their relationship has also influenced the progressive agenda the film attempts to take by offering it an opportunity to illustrate an idealistic image shared by both the LGBTQ+ minority and the heterosexual majority. As Hu [9] suggests, by relating the equal rights movement with positive impacts on society, *Marry My Dead Body* tries to balance the tension between the traditional Confucianist way of living and progressive marriage-equality agendas. In the film, this tension is, to some extent, relieved by the mutual understanding of the two characters. The film emphasizes the commonality of the two groups and rejects being defined by the mere differences in sexuality. Therefore, the bond of Wu Minghan and Maomao firstly breaks the boundary between queer community and the heterosexual majority, which follows a recognition that rather than defining themselves through the labels and mindset their identity imposes on them, they can think alternatively from another angle and live another life. By the end of the film, Wu Minghan chooses to join the pride parade with Maomao's photo, clearly implying to the audience that the identity barrier hindering communication has been destroyed. He is no longer a mere straight male in the conventional sense, but an independent being capable of making his own decisions based on genuine life experience and a concern for others, which is usually seen as a precious value in Confucianism. The film offers the audience a satisfying answer to the potential concern about how the majority should react to the LGBTQ+ movement that challenges their original way of living.

3.2. Maomao as a token gay character for the token narrative

By the end of *Marry My Dead Body*, the two main characters both received their redemption. Wu Minghan overcame his homophobia and became a good police officer, whereas Maomao fulfilled his wish of solving his accident, saved his friend, solved his misunderstanding with his father, and ascended to heaven. However, an essential premise that supports the storyline of *Marry My Dead Body* and makes it convincing is that, from the very beginning of the film, Maomao only appears as a ghost who is unable to influence the material world on his own. However, he is not inherently a ghost. Still, a ghost written by the script, constructed to validate Maomao's passive status, which provides him with a strong reason to stay with Wu Minghan, who is portrayed with an internalized homophobia. Adopting a Foucauldian method of narrative analysis, the recognition of this design on the narrative level raises the need to revisit the narrative construction around Maomao's character development in the film, whose autonomy as an independent individual is intentionally denied at the very beginning, allowing the story to continue.



Figure 1. The ghost marriage scene

The setting of Maomao as a ghost has two main impacts on how the story is narrated in the film. Firstly, Maomao's identity as a ghost, on the other hand, visualizes his queerness as an abnormality in relation to Wu Minghan, who serves as a symbol of normality. This tendency is most evident during the scene of "Ghost Marriage," where Maomao's grandma and other elder relatives hold a traditional Chinese wedding for Maomao and Wu Minghan to "keep Maomao accompanied in heaven." Wu Minghan agrees with this plan out of despair, as he believes he is cursed by Maomao's ghost for breaking the traditional rule. The entire scenario is set in a dark room decorated in a Chinese wedding style, with only a dim red light shining from the lantern and neon tubes. The tubes form the traditional Chinese letter "囍," which is not only a common word used to bless the couple with happiness, but also an element of horror and strangeness often employed in Sino-culture cinema. Wu, dressed in a Chinese groom's suit, stands by a paper puppet, which is seen as a representation of Maomao. The background music mimics the music normally played at Chinese weddings, only more exaggerated. Together, they create one of the funniest scenes of the film, where an unwilling heterosexual man with a broken arm is surrounded by a number of elderly people and announced to marry a dead gay man, who is supposed to "be satisfied" with this arrangement. As Hu [9] notices, the film intentionally adopts Confucianist sociocultural elements in Taiwan to better deliver its main claim of LGBTQ+ rights. However, the first appearance of Maomao in such a horrific but hilarious circumstance additionally stresses an inherent difference between him and Wu Minghan, that is, a difference between a ghost and a living human. The stranger the status Maomao is in, the harder it is for the audience to treat him as a normal character. His representation of queer people then becomes less powerful as his actions that challenge the heteronormative rules are overlapped by his more distinctive characteristic as a ghost. That is to say, his identity and opinions as a queer person are likely to be mistaken for a cinematic exaggeration to emphasize his supernatural status in the film, just as the queer characters in early cinema were. It also forbids Maomao from having his own voice directly, since his identity as a ghost determines that the audience can only see and hear him through Wu Minghan's heterosexual viewpoint, which mostly focuses on their relationship. Maomao is therefore deprived of his own voice.

A second point that should be made here is that the nature of Maomao's interdependence relationship with Wu Minghan makes him a sub-character to the latter, in which case any of his character development is also tightly tied and yields to the character development of Wu Minghan. When Wu tries to get rid of Maomao, he asks Maomao about Maomao's unfulfilled wishes. To Wu's surprise, Maomao's wishes are about environmental and animal protection. Notably, this passion for environmental and animal protection, and his tolerant nature, are presented more like a contradiction

to Wu Minghan's selfishness and toxic masculinity, with no specific influence on Maomao's own character development, as these characteristics almost fade away after the film enters the main storyline of finding Maomao's murderer and destroying an international drug connection. A similar situation occurs in Maomao's conflict with his ex-boyfriend as well. In the film, their relationship is depicted as problematic and chaotic since Maomao's ex cheats on him and immediately starts a new relationship after Maomao's death. Maomao seems to be barely able to handle this situation, which generates an opportunity for Wu Minghan to stand out for him and deepens their friendship. Maomao's story becomes a background to reflect Wu Minghan's personality. It is an understandable strategy to invite audiences to rethink their attitude toward theminority, along with Wu Minghan, who is intentionally depicted as an ordinary person for audiences to empathize with in several scenes featuring details of his daily life. However, considering Judith Butler's take on the meaning of otherization [16], the cost of such a strategy is that once Wu Minghan becomes a member of the mass majority, his counterpart Maomao is consequently excluded from the heteronormative society as an Other to maintain the heteronormativity and justify the latter's existence.



Figure 2. The fitness studio scene

This need to make audiences identify with Wu Minghan also leads to a downplay of Wu Minghan's internalized homophobia. In the film, Wu's actions out of his disdain toward gays are often depicted comically. For example, in the operation of tracking down the drug connection, Wu Minghan catches a gay drug user in a fitness studio. The long shot around the fitness studio, focusing on male bodies in a pink and red color pattern, creates a sexy but also comedic atmosphere with the erotic background music featuring humorous, light-hearted beats. By sexualizing male bodies, it emphasizes the contrast between masculine males and the sexualized subjects, which deconstructs the equation of masculinity and heterosexuality and makes fun of this stereotype. However, as a foreshadowing for the conflict between Wu Minghan and the gay man, it hints to the audience at a rather relaxing and hilarious nature of the incident, portraying it more like a shameful and overreacted mistake on Wu's side, instead of an annoying discrimination happening to LGBTQ+ people. The revelation of the gay man possessing drugs illegally as Wu expects further strengthens this sense and downsizes the power difference between him and Wu. Therefore, in the latter scenario, when the gayman complains to the police station about Wu's abuse of power and discrimination, Wu's demotion is reversed in the narrative from a punishment for his mistake to a personal revenge where the two sides of the conflict are equally problematic. By making the scene

a typical comedy of one reaping his own sow, Wu's homophobia is no longer significant, which brings out a side effect of erasing the severe harm done by discrimination in real life.

The stress queer people receive from family members is also erased in the film. Maomao's father's opposition to his marriage is eventually proven to be a white lie in order to protect him from his unloyal boyfriend. By doing so, the film beautifies and idealizes the mainstream society to better please and convince its target audiences that they are not guilty of the injustice against queer population.

All of these settings aim to polish the structural discrimination faced by queer people, trying to create an illusion that Maomao, though otherized, is an equal being to Wu Minghan. By the end of the movie, Maomao even sacrifices himself to save Wu Minghan from death. The scene is undoubtedly touching, praising the deep bonds that can form among different kinds of people. Nevertheless, it cannot be seen as a symbol of Maomao eventually regaining and realizing his subjectivity with all of his actions being ultimately narrated to demonstrate how he can benefit the straight people as a queer: His softness supplements Wu's toxic masculinity, his caring personality reminds people the importance of toleration toward each other, even his death is an advantage for the straight people to take advantage of and a lesson to learn from. Maomao, therefore, can be seen as having no goal for himself, since all his wishes and actions are in fact designed to influence Wu Minghan. It then weakens the film's goodwill to promote the LGBTQ+ concepts to the mainstream audiences, as it essentially fails to present queer people as equal beings to the heterosexual majority. Instead, from a more critical perspective, Maomao's story could be interpreted with a rather opposite theme that the only way for gays to be accepted by the mainstream is to sacrifice themselves in the name of the greater good. In this film, it is particularly represented as both heterosexual and homosexual communities should stick together to fight for a better society and care for each other, which is not wrong, but simply too vague and oversimplifying, as the injustice against the homosexual society is exactly initiated by the heteronormative mainstream culture.

Since he has neither his own voice nor desire, Maomao is deprived of the possibility of being an independent character like Wu Minghan, but an Other who is, though implicitly, inferior for his inability to integrate with heterosexual society, which is only solved with his death as a result of his character development. So far, it is reasonable to conclude that Maomao is still portrayed as a classical otherized gay man to serve the film's purpose of delivering an idealized image of queer people and heterosexual people sharing the same goodwill at the price of the denial of queerness, which makes him a sympathetic and impressive character, but not a good representation of queer people. The film's neglect of the structuralized discrimination toward queer people also stops it from further challenging the heteronormative order that is often expected to be seen in queer cinema. Rather, it consolidates heteronormativity by suggesting that every social group can be equally treated within this structure as long as they are willing to know each other. In the end, Maomao inevitably becomes a token gay character whose existence is solely used to continue the plot and justify the heteronormative narrative.

It shall be pointed out that this heteronormative narrative is somehow necessitated by the social reality in East Asia, where queerness is still seen as a threat to mainstream society. This research does not aim to deny its contribution to the equal rights movement for LGBTQ+ people as a popular commercial film, but tries to warn people who care about the queer issue that such a compromise could be dangerous to the queer community. A token queer character can lead to an essentialization and reduction of the experience of queer people in real life, which will support the formation of a token narrative on queerness that reduces queerness as a whole to a general norm where heteronormativity becomes the purpose it should serve. That is to say, queerness itself as a resistance

against heteronormative norms is rejected in such a narrative, making the film's consideration of queer people eventually a preaching of heteronormativity as the ultimate answer to social problems. From a Foucauldian view [15], by constructing Maomao's identity within a heteronormative narrative, the heteronormative majority gains the power to redefine queerness as a problematic characteristic trait that should ultimately be fixed in the name of the greater good, a process that can invalidate, even erase, the needs and existence of queer people who do not match its standard that benefits the heterosexual majority. Queerness, then, becomes no more than the binary gender division it aims to abolish. To represent queerness means telling stories that are not solely constructed around heteronormative social relations.

4. Conclusion

The paper has analyzed the depiction of queerness in *Marry My Dead Body* as a part of the film's heteronormative narrative. Due to the sociocultural elements in East Asia and commercial concerns, the film chooses to depict the queer character as a remedy to the failure of heteronormativity and masculinity, reinforcing queers' position as a relatively passive subject for the heterosexual society to react upon, despite the humorous and heartfelt portrayal of character development. A restrained subjectivity of queer characters thus fails to save them from being a "token queer," as this subjectivity is constructed in a narrative intentionally avoiding touching the real-life experience of queer community. Rather, queerness finds itself under the threat of essentialization by the heteronormative narrative it claims to resist, as queer people narrated by the latter cannot escape the destiny of eventually returning to the existing social order. The film's plot of Maomao accomplishing his self-realization through saving Wu Minghan implies that the queer community has to compromise with the heteronormative majority, or their character will always be incomplete and powerless, in which process queerness is otherized for justification and consolidation of heteronormativity.

Ultimately, the paper advocates for a reconsideration of queer representation in cinema. The problem met by *Marry My Dead Body* and its peers cannot be mistaken for a technical issue of how to depict queer people correctly. It comes from a greater difficulty in telling stories without heteronormativity being the default setting.

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