

On the Limitations of Female Character Creation in Ang Lee's "Wedding Banquet"

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Abstract. The movie *The Wedding Banquet* directed by Ang Lee has received a lot of attention and love since its first debut in Germany in 1993. The film has won many blockbuster awards such as the Golden Bear Award at the 43rd Berlin International Film Festival and the 30th Taiwan Film Golden Horse Awards. These top awards have established the status of this film and its director Ang Lee in the international film industry, so it has also received different evaluations of the film from all walks of life. This article adopts the method of close reading of the text, through audio-visual language and plot interpretation, analyzes the female characters Gu Weiwei, Gao WeiTong's mother and the female-like character Simon in *The Wedding Banquet*, exploring the limitations of director Ang Lee's female character creation in this film, and analyzes the three aspects of the dwarfing of the narrative of the female image, the compromise of the female will, and the structural compression of the female space, and finally concludes that due to the influence of traditional oriental values and the director's own gender limitations, in *The Wedding Banquet*, director Ang Lee have great limitations in the female characters creation.

Keywords: Ang Lee, *The Wedding Banquet*, female figure, Limitations

1. Introduction

In the cross-cultural context of the 1990s, Ang Lee explored gender studies and family power conflicts through "*The Wedding Banquet*", and most of the research related to the film also revolved around cultural conflicts, same-gender studies, and patriarchal narratives, and the research on female characters in the film was relatively thin. In previous studies, some scholars have studied the positive aspects of female character creation in *The Wedding Banquet*, and many scholars have focused on the director's shortcomings in female character creation for critical research, and some believe that the creation of female characters may be subject to the director's male perspective, the narrative inertia of oriental family ethics, and the simplification of complex female experiences in commercial films.

This study aims to fill the gap in the critical research gap of female images in Ang Lee's early works and break the public's understanding that director Ang Lee is "gentle and tolerant" in portraying women in his works. At the same time, in the modern and contemporary era of the rise of women's consciousness films, it provides a reflective reference for the creation of female images in

Chinese films today. Critical research on this can not only reveal the gender power structure in the text, but also respond to the deep contradictions in the process of gender equality in our society.

2. Literature review

In the past 30 years of academic discussions, scholars from all walks of life have made in-depth analysis of the film from multiple perspectives: family ethics, father-son relationship, cultural conflict and integration, homosexuality..... This allows many viewers to understand the message behind the film from different perspectives. However, among these interpretations, there is a perspective that is rarely mentioned in comparison - that is, the shaping of female characters [1].

The presentation of female consciousness in this film has not been fully discussed independently before. Even if there has been relevant research and discussion, there are still certain limitations: on the one hand, some articles do not provide a thorough analysis of the female characters created by director Ang Lee. For example, Huang Ying studied many female characters in Ang Lee's films in this article "Research on the Image of New Women in Ang Lee's Films", and the patriarchal narrative in "the Wedding Banquet" movie mentioned in the article contributed to this research, but the content research in the study of female characters is not comprehensive, for example, the article points out that "Weiwei's insistence on abortion directly shows the attitude of modern women towards their own bodies - no longer a projection and carrier of male desire, and is unwilling to serve as a tool for passing on the lineage. Instead, they choose to dominate their own desires [2]. But in fact, the text ignores the fact that the character Gu Weiwei finally chose to give birth to the child, and in the end she failed to "dominate her own desires"; Di Qian studied women's forbearance and resistance under male values in "Female Consciousness in Ang Lee's Father Trilogy", and contributed to this study in exploring the reasons why director Ang Lee has limitations in portraying female characters. For example, the article points out that "the women in Ang Lee's 'Father Trilogy' are a good interpretation of the women who struggle under the strong authority of 'patriarchy', and with the awakening of women's consciousness, they no longer obey their fathers or husbands, but pursue their dreams more from their own hearts..... Weiwei is brave, persistent, confident and resolute, and although he has compromised in the process of pursuing his goals, he has not given up [3]. But the fact is that Gu Weiwei gave up her dream at the end of the film and chose to leave her children to join this "deformed" triangular family.

On the other hand, in the literature similar to the topic selection of this article, there are many criticisms of the female character creation of "The Wedding Banquet", but there are still some things that can be improved from the interpretation perspective of the film text. Li Shiyu studied the three characters of Gu Weiwei, Gao's mother, and Simon in "Research on the Female Image in Ang Lee's Films", and made great contributions to this article in Simon's role positioning, but when criticizing the creation of female characters, the interpretation perspective of some plots is different from this article. For example, Li Shiyu's article pointed out that "Gu Weiwei chose to keep the child not for the Gao family to be able to pass on the lineage, she said that 'her own children are raised by themselves', showing women's independent emotional demands and sense of responsibility to become mothers [4]. This article believes that Gu Weiwei's child was not out of a "mother's sense of responsibility", but the director himself made the role of Gu Weiwei to sacrifice for a happy ending when creating the character.

Through the analysis of relevant literature, it can be seen that for the study of women in the movie "The Wedding Banquet", on the one hand, most of the articles have not entered the stage of "criticism"; On the other hand, some articles do not thoroughly criticize the plot involving women in the text. This provides enlightenment for this paper: through a more thorough analysis of the film

text, a more thorough critical analysis of the portrayal of female characters in "The Wedding Banquet" can be made from some perspectives that other scholars have not covered before. This article argues that when Ang Lee creates the female characters in the film, he concentrates his understanding of female consciousness as an asymbiotic state of "empowerment and dilemma". From the analysis of the female character of Gu Weiwei in "The Wedding Banquet", it can be seen that the director has a positive attitude when establishing the subjectivity of the female character, but in the end he is also trapped by the influence of the patriarchal narrative, and finally reflects great limitations in the treatment of the ending of the female character. This article aims to systematically analyze and reveal how director Ang Lee reflected his limitations when portraying the main female characters Gu Weiwei, Gao's mother, and the "female-like" character Simon through meticulous text analysis.

3. Analysis

3.1. Narrative dwarfing of female images

The director endowed Gao Weitong's male lover Simon in the film with almost all the perfect female virtues: docility, tolerance, generosity, and proficiency in housework... This is a role that seems to be perfect: at the beginning, Simon proposed to let Gao Weitong and Gu Weiwei fake marriage, which is actually an act of "self-sacrifice"; After Gao's father and mother came to the United States, Simon took care of all the housework, gave meeting gifts to parents who met for the first time, let Gao's father and mother live in his own house, took on the role of photographer at the church wedding of his lovers Gao Weitong and Gu Weiwei, and exercised with Gao's father who recovered from a stroke... The director created the idealized image of Simon and endowed Simon with all the female virtues in the traditional sense.

In contrast, Gu Weiwei, a real female individual, is portrayed as a character who chooses to get a green card in the United States by taking the shortcut of gender relations, and even agrees to a fake marriage; Knowing that Gao Weitong had a lover, she still flirted with him before marriage, shouted "I want to liberate you" and had sex with Gao on the wedding night, and even became pregnant with Gao Weitong's child; In getting along with Gao's father and mother, she has always been a "recipient" state, accepting the bracelets and cheongsams bought by Gao's parents for her. This is in stark contrast to Simon's "giver" behavior.

The director's prejudice is that he strips away the virtues of real women and gives them to a male other. This replacement of functions shows the audience to some extent that real women's lives are chaotic and boring. In contrast, Simon, the male character, is almost perfect, while Gu Weiwei, the female character, has many shortcomings. Compared with the male protagonist Gao Weitong, the two are actually in the same position, both in Gao's "spouse" role position, but the director's emphasis on shaping the two roles is obviously different, reflecting greater limitations.

3.2. Compromising treatment of the female will

When Gu Weiwei discovers that she is pregnant, she returns the cheongsam and bracelet given to her by Gao's mother and has a private conversation with her. When confronted with Mother Gao's plea to keep her baby, Gu's response is, "I can't do it, I have my future." Gao's mother says, "A woman is still a woman, her husband and children are the most important things." Gu Weiwei's response is "Not necessarily". This episode exemplifies Gu Weiwei's control over her reproductive power and the director's aggressiveness in portraying female characters. However, the narrative eventually

forces Gu Weiwei to keep her child and enter into this monstrous marriage through the emotional blackmail of her mother and the pressure of her father's terminal illness.

This shift is not a result of Gu Weiwei's active choice, but rather the director's ultimate triumph of "family continuity" over "personal choice". In the beginning of the movie, Gu Weiwei gives the audience the impression that she is still independent and rebellious, but when she makes the decision to "keep the child", it means that the director still gives the character an ending of returning to the tradition and the family [5]. From the previous plot and character design, Gu Weiwei's choice to have an abortion is the most reasonable behavior, but the director still chose to anchor a woman who should be independent and pursue freedom in the role of "daughter-in-law of the Gao family", ignoring the subjectivity of women themselves. At the expense of the audience's experience, the director sacrifices the character of Gu Weiwei for a middle-of-the-road ending. In order to maintain the apparent peace, the pain of female childbearing and the search for freedom are buried once again [4].

3.3. Structural compression of female space

In *The Wedding Banquet*, there is a character who never appears but is always "present" and appears in the mouth of the protagonist many times, that is, Lao Yang. The relationship between Lao Yang and Gao's father is beyond master-servant, almost "spiritual symbiosis", which essentially constitutes an invisible compression of Gao's mother's living space. Even though the director does not mention whether Lao Yang and Gao's father are homosexuals, and does not directly point out whether the deformed relationship between the three people of Gu Weiwei's generation is a continuation of the relationship between Gao's mother, Gao's father, and Lao Yang, Lao Yang's importance to the Gao family and his squeeze on Gao's mother's family space is a fact. In her letter monologue at the beginning of the film, Gao's mother points out that Gao's mother and Lao Yang usually serve Gao's father together; Gao's father and Gao's mother bring a gift from Lao Yang when they give Gu Weiwei a gift for her daughter-in-law. Gao's father mentions that "Lao Yang has been in our family for decades and has watched Weitong grow up"; after the first church wedding, the Gao family meets Gao's former henchmen in a Chinese restaurant in the U.S., and the conversation between Gao's father and his henchmen reveals the depth of the link between Lao Yang and the Gao family. This hidden triangle of the previous generation previews the modern pattern of Wei Tong, Simon and Gu Wei Wei. The director accomplishes the warm protection of the male alliance in the patriarchal order through the structural abdication of women, a sacrifice of female subjectivity in the family's core locus. At the same time, the director sets up a plot in which the three people maintain this deformed triangular relationship and continue to live, but this peace is only temporary. This ending setting that compresses the space for women's survival and sacrifices women's reproductive autonomy ignores all the contradictions and difficulties that these three characters may encounter in the future.

This compression of space has a generational projection on Gu Weiwei, and is in fact a generational transmission. The director makes the character of Gu Weiwei, through self-retreat, become a "tool" to heal the rift between father and son in the Gao family and to maintain the balance of the male order [6]. The limitation of the director's realization is that he takes the structural sacrifice of women for granted as reconciliation. Whether in the old-fashioned "master-servant trio" or the new-fashioned "partner family", women are never treated as independent emotional subjects; they always appear as auxiliary tools for men to achieve balance [7].

4. Discussion

In response to the limitations of the portrayal of female characters in the film *The Wedding Banquet*, this paper believes that there are two main reasons: the influence of traditional oriental values and the director's own gender factors.

It is undeniable that Ang Lee presents his unique characteristics in his observation of human nature in his film works, but he is still bound by traditional oriental values in the substance of gender roles, and the oppression and domestication of women in traditional oriental societies can still be seen in the female characters in the film [8]. This is also related to the director's own upbringing. Director Ang Lee is originally from Jiujiang City, Jiangxi Province, and was born in Dongping City, Taiwan. His father was the principal of a school, and he received a traditional oriental education since childhood. From "Pusher" and "Eat, Drink, Man, Woman", we can also understand the family environment in which he grew up: a traditional patriarchal family, where the father is the head of the family, and under the father's pressure, the survival space of female characters in the family is more or less squeezed.

At the same time, the director's own gender also has a great influence on the portrayal of female characters in the movie. As pointed out by Laura Irvie, "Women are a kind of meaning bearers in patriarchal culture, men and women are the components of the gender order, but the power of the two genders is not equal in this order, men usually act as the subject to impose their own viewpoints and commands on women, and women are only the bearers of the bondage [9]." Although there are many positive comments on director Ang Lee's portrayal of women in many of the studies that have been previously conducted, it is undeniable that Ang Lee created the film *The Wedding Banquet* from a male perspective, and the director ultimately did not get rid of the patriarchal perspective, and the film's female protagonist, Gu Weiwei, did not achieve an awakening of her subjective consciousness, and the stoicism and passivity of the traditional woman can still be seen in her body, which greatly reflects to a large extent the limitations of Ang Lee in portraying female characters in his works [10].

5. Conclusion

To summarize, Ang Lee's portrayal of female characters in *The Wedding Banquet* presents the ambivalence of "giving first, then taking away". Although there are positive aspects of women's consciousness in the film, the director still has not got rid of the patriarchal perspective when dealing with gender issues, and the "middle-of-the-road" happy ending is still constructed on the sacrifice of women. The director's limitation lies in the fact that he clearly sees the plight and difficulties of women, yet he still allows women to give in to fulfill the reconciliation of men. This seemingly complete reconciliation actually conceals the director's neglect of individual women, which is the most obvious regret in the portrayal of women in this film. This study provides a lot of valuable references for future research on the portrayal of women's roles in director Ang Lee's films, and future research should focus more on the limitations of the director's portrayal of women's roles in the direction of in-depth investigation.

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