

The Irresistible Rise of Asian Cinema 2

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THE GREAT LEAP FORWARD

THE subject of homosexuality is taboo in Chinese films. Ever since Chinese cinema gained world prominence in the 1930s with Mainland Chinese social protest works like *Street Angel* and *Crossroads* (both made in 1937 by the socialist Mingxing Film Company) and through the highly popular *wen-yi* (heterosexual romance) Taiwanese films of the 1960s and 1970s, and the action and comedy mainstays of Hong Kong in the 1970s, no major Chinese film has dared to venture into this taboo theme.

It was only in the realm of martial arts film genre (the *wu hsia pien*) that a renegade major director like Chu Yuan could tackle this "unspeakable" subject in his 1972 successful *Ai Nu, the Chinese Courtesan* and its more daring 1984 remake *Lust for Love of a Chinese Courtesan*. The former hints at a lesbian relationship between a brothel madame Chung and Ai-nu, her innocent protégé who is manipulated by the older woman for her selfish ends. The latter was more explicit with some graphic and titillating scenes of the two women (Hu Kuan-chen, known for her prim and proper roles, and Yu An An, as the procuress). In fact the *Ai-nu* remake was inspired by director Eddie Fong who in the same year made the hybrid Japanese-Chinese erotica, *An Amorous Woman of the Tang Dynasty*, which features the willowy and sensuous Pat Ha as a "liberated" Tang woman poet/prostitute involved in a deadly dalliance with her maid.

More recently, veteran action-actor and director Sammo Hung failed critically with his satire of a gay killer in his thriller, *Pantyhose Hero* (1992), a lack-lustre story about two cops (Hung and Alan Tam) trying very hard to solve a murder in a gay community.

To date, only two major Chinese films -- Taiwanese-American Lee Ang's *The Wedding Banquet* and Mainlander-American Chen Kaige's *Farewell to my Concubine* (both made in 1992) have touched on this previously taboo subject in a humane and relatively subtle way. Both directors won international acclaim for their works: At the 1993 Cannes Film Festival, Chen's *Farewell...* shared the Golden Palm with Jane Campion's *The Piano* while Lee's *Wedding Banquet* won the 1993 Golden Bear for Best Film in Berlin *ex aequo* with Mainlander Xie Fei's *Women from the Lake of Scented Souls*.

The more subtle of the two is *Farewell...* which was temporarily banned in China. The ban was eventually lifted, to the delight of thousands of Chen's fans who are pleased that he has secured the honour of being the first Chinese to win the top prize at Cannes. Unfortunately, *Farewell...* remains banned in Taiwan for political reasons.

The film's title is culled from an opera classic which tells of Ru-yi, the king's concubine, who kills herself out of loyalty to her king who has been defeated utterly by his nemesis rival. The story of the "love" between the two Peking opera stage brothers Duan Xiaolou (Zhang Fengyi) and Cheng Dieyi (Hongkong's heart-throb singer Leslie Cheung) and of the courtesan Ju Xian who comes in between them is based on the novel by the popular Hong Kong woman writer Li Pik Wah who also wrote the screenplay. The Cultural Revolution scenes where Cheng and Duan denounce each other to save their own skins were rewritten by Chen Kaige himself. The director incorporated into them his bitter personal experiences from the period in which he himself was made to denounce his filmmaker father.

The epic tale opens in 1977 with the two main characters as old men and flashbacks to the 1920s, when they were children at a cruel Beijing opera academy -- almost a torture chamber -- presided by a harsh disciplinarian who punished his pupils at the slightest mistake. Under these intensely harsh conditions, the two boys formed a strong bond; Cheng, blessed by his prostitute mother's good looks, took on girlish roles, while Duan played the macho warrior role.

As Cheng grew up, he became increasingly attracted to Duan who, to Cheng's horror, was smitten by a prostitute Ju (Gong Li) and whom he later married.

Through the brutal Japanese occupation of the 1940s to the harrowing decade of the Cultural Revolution (1967-77), the duo's lives remain inextricably linked by their stage roles they had assumed in the *Farewell...* opera classic. Their apolitical attitude did not save them from the assaults of History; they ended up betraying each other at the ugly purges and mock trials staged by the zealous Red Guards.

The theme of betrayal and loyalty -- the other preoccupation of this complex film -- subsumes that of the "gay connection." But the latter is undeniably strong, albeit undercurrent and a strong one at that. A critic who previewed it in Hong Kong with me suggested it was Leslie Cheung's fiery looks at Zhang Fengyi and those jealous rages he displays like a spurned woman that established the taboo theme.

Chen's *Farewell...* is sumptuously photographed and the period evocation is uncanny, verging from the moody black and white to the sulphurous yellow and amber, the latter suggesting the dark sides of the two men who later fail to stand up to the test of their courage and bonding.

Both Zhang and Cheung put in power-packed performances while Gong Li is faultless as the woman who thwarts and erodes the love of the two stage brothers. The film might as well be titled *Two Stage Brothers* after Shanghai director Xie Jin's 1964 classic, *Two Stage Sisters*.

The *Wedding Banquet* is a more open "gay" film compared to *Farewell...* Here, the thematic treatment is that of a marriage of convenience schemed by Simon (Michel Lichtenstein), the Caucasian lover of Taiwanese yuppie Wai-Tung (Winston Chao) -- to appease the latter's conservative parents who want him to marry and to provide them with a grandchild. This social comedy takes a swipe at the "5,000 years of (Chinese) sexual repression" and the Chinese prejudice of (male) homosexuality.

With Lee Ang's adroit handling, the Taiwanese film industry seems to have finally come to terms with the depiction of this sexual taboo in a humorous and incisive way. Lee neither portrays the gay relationship as weird or twisted nor does he glorify or glamorize the gay subculture in Manhattan. As a story-teller and a moralist, he shows people as they are, without passing judgement on them.

It is a better approach this way -- the director respects the audience. The film depicts the loving gay relationship of the two men, which is shaken by the insistent desire of the Wai-Tung's parents to see their son settle down. To get his Confucianist parents off his lover's back, Simon convinces Wai-Tung to marry Wei-Wei (May Chin), Wai-Tung's tenant. Wei-Wei, a sultry and pretty painter from Shanghai, is also an illegal immigrant. Out of this loveless marriage, she will get her coveted "green card." However, Wei-Wei is not satisfied merely to be his "unconsummated wife;" she seduces him on their wedding night and, like Gong Li in *Farewell...*, sets a wedge between the love of the two men.

Director Lee Ang is a master of situational comedy -- not the television sit-coms variety but those comedies of panic and human errors that come with fear. When Wai-Tung's parents suddenly drop in, the gay duo have to re-arrange their usual intimate set-up; their cartoonish action is very amusing indeed. When the pregnant Wei-Wei frets and blames Wai-Tung for his irresponsibility, the heated verbal exchanges between Wai-Tung and his white lover in front of his parents over the lunch table amply show they once enjoyed their onerous relationship until the fake marriage and May's pregnancy started to reveal cracks in their attachment to each other.

It cannot be a coincidental trend that these two major films have as their major theme homosexual love. Both have confirmed the resurgence of Chinese films which are more liberal and less inhibited in dealing with previously taboo subjects. At the same time, the films bring insight and better understanding of those outside the mainstream culture.

Chen himself does not want to tag his masterwork "a homosexual movie." That would be unjust and ill-judged, nay, even intolerant. Instead, he speaks about "a special kind of love." Lee Ang is also not about to pigeonhole his complex social comedy "a gay film." In his promotional film literature, he just inscribes "5,000 Years of Sexual Repression."

We, the audience, are left to draw our own conclusions, without being manipulated. That is what, in the view of this writer, makes filmviewing a challenging and wonderful experience.

Author Information

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