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Xiyan (The Wedding Banquet)

Taiwan/USA 1993

Director: Ang Lee

Certificate
15
Distributor
Mainline
Production Companies
Central Motion Picture Corporation
(Taipei)/Good Machine Inc (New York)
Executive Producer
Jiang Feng-Chyi
Executive in Charge of Production
Cheng Shuei-Chih
Producers
Ang Lee
Ted Hope
James Schamus
Line Producer
Dolly Hall
Associate Producer
Hsu Li-Kong
Production Co-ordinator
Victoria McGarry
Production Manager
Sarah Vogel
Location Manager
John Rath
Post-production Supervisor
Bill Rouady
Casting
American:
Wendy Ettinger
Chinese:
David Lee
Assistant Directors
Dolly Hall
Rob Hallenbake
Annie Tan
Patrick Sisam
Jilly Crook
Screenplay
Ang Lee
Neil Peng
James Schamus
Director of Photography
Jong Lin
Colour
DuArt
Additional Photography
Frank DeMarco
Opticals
Eastern Optical EFX
Editor
Tim Squyres
Production Designer
Steve Rosenzweig
Art Director
Rachel Weinzimer
Set Decorator
Amy Silver
Set Dresser
Amy Tapper
Paintings
R. Baker
L. Bell
Music
Mader
Music Extract
"Piano Sonata in A major: Third Movement Turkish March" (KV 331) by Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart, performed by Kwan-Yu Chen
Music Supervisor
Paul Cullum
Songs
"Outside Looking In" by Bob O'Hagen, performed by Fondlesocket; "Quisera Ser" by Jorge Pineiro, performed by Louis Shati; "The Maiden's Prayer" by Badarzewsea, performed by Kwan-Yu Chen; "Diamond and Stone" by Ang-Go

Tong, Yu-Zwei Liu, performed by May Chin, Ang-Go Tong; "Wordless Ending" by Kar Su, Ming-Zwei Liu, performed by Su-Zung Lin, Su-Fang Lo
Costume Design
Michael Clancy
Wardrobe Supervisor
Ida Schonfeld
Make-up
Karen Knesevitch
Title Design
Steve Chang
Sound Editor
Pamela Martin
Sound Recordists
Tom Paul
Music
Eric Liljestrand
Sound Re-recordist
Reilly Steele
Sound Effects Editor
Dan Sable

Cast
Sihung Lung
Mr Gao
Ah-Leh Gue
Mrs Gao
Winston Chao
Gao Wai-Tung
Mitchell Lichtenstein
Simon
May Chin
Wei-Wei
Dion Birney
Andrew
Jeanne Kuo Chang
Wai Tung's Secretary
Paul Chen
Yun Chung
Ho-Mean Fu
Jean Hu
Albert Huang
Thomas Koo
Jennifer Lin
Francis Pan
Neal Peng
Elizabeth Yang
Wei-Huang Yang
Ang Lee
Guests
Chung-Wei Chou
Chef
Michael Gaston
Justice of the Peace
Jeffrey Howard
Street Musician
Theresa Hou
Cashier
Ying-Teh Hsu
Bob Law
Neal Huff
Steve
Anthony "Iggy" Ingoglia
Restaurant Manager
Eddie Johns
Haskell
Chih Kuan
Granny Tien
Robert Larenquent
Hispanic Man
Neal Lee
Waiter
Mason C. Lee
Baby

Dean Li
Director Wang
John Nathan
Joe
Tien Pien
Old Chen
Marny Pocato
Miriam
Tonia Rowe
Simon's Nurse
Chung-Hsien Su
Studio Photographer

Patricia Sullivan
Mariane
Vanessa Yang
Mao
Peide Yao
Egg Head
9,690 feet
108 minutes
Partly Subtitled

Budding real-estate magnate Gao Wai-Tung (who has US citizenship) shares a Manhattan brownstone with his Caucasian lover Simon, a physiotherapist, but faces endless pressure from his elderly parents in Taiwan to get married. At Simon's suggestion, Wai-Tung proposes a marriage of convenience to Wei-Wei, a Shanghaiese art student in need of a green card who lives (illegally) in one of his Brooklyn lofts. To Wai-Tung's horror, his parents decide to visit for the wedding. Simon agrees to pose as Wai-Tung's landlord and to move into the basement spare room where they had planned to accommodate Wei-Wei. Mr and Mrs Gao are horrified in turn by the perfunctory City Hall marriage that Wai-Tung has arranged. But a chance meeting with restaurateur Old Chen (who was Gao's chauffeur in his days as a general in the Chinese Nationalist Army) changes everything: a formal wedding banquet is arranged.

Held in a luxury hotel, the banquet is a roaring, drunken success. Afterwards, raucous friends refuse to leave the nuptial bedroom until bride and groom have got into bed together and stripped. Wei-Wei, who has long fancied Wai-Tung, takes advantage of the opportunity to seduce him. Before long, with Mr and Mrs Gao still in residence as house guests and Simon's patience close to breaking point, Wei-Wei tells Wai-Tung that she is pregnant. Simon has a furious row with Wai-Tung in front of the others when he hears the news. Later that day, Mr Gao has a mild stroke. Wai-Tung rushes to the hospital, where he finally comes out to his mother - who is incredulous and baffled, but makes him promise never to tell his father that he is gay.

Wei-Wei determines to abort her child, but changes her mind at the last moment. Meanwhile Mr Gao tells Simon that he knows he is Wai-Tung's lover and tacitly approves - but says that his wife and Wai-Tung must never know. Simon agrees to be "one of the fathers" of Wei-Wei's child and is reconciled with Wai-Tung. Seeing Mr and Mrs Gao off at the airport, Wai-Tung presents them with an album of wedding photos - which includes one picture of himself with Simon. Flanked by Simon and Wei-Wei, he watches his parents leave.

Touchingly dedicated to the real-life couple whose lives inspired the story, *The Wedding Banquet* marks a huge advance on Taiwanese-American director Ang Lee's first feature, *Pushing Hands*. That film was sprung on the tensions between a Caucasian wife and her Chinese father-in-law, but conspic-



Made in heaven: Mitchell Lichtenstein, Winston Chao, May Chin

uously failed to address the mystery of what had attracted the woman to a Chinese husband in the first place. This film, by contrast, has all its gender questions, racial questions and sexual politics down pat. At the same time, even though it never exactly achieves a Renoiresque breadth of spirit, it is agreeably even-handed in its sensitivity to differing points of view - thanks to which it manages several degrees of emotional complexity and is sometimes genuinely affecting: the hospital corridor scene in which the son belatedly comes out to his uncomprehending mother, for instance, is the best written and played in the whole film. And, as that scene suggests, *The Wedding Banquet* is notable for being the first Chinese movie to problematise reactions to a gay relationship rather than the relationship itself.

But the film has larger targets in its sights than Chinese homophobia. The director himself puts in a brief (and, it must be said, rather awkward) cameo appearance in the central wedding banquet scene to comment that the ribald and increasingly hysterical goings-on reflect "5,000 years of sexual repression". His point, of course, is that everyone involved in the fake marriage and its repercussions is a victim of an endemic Chinese inability to deal with sexual realities. This is not a new perception. It was theorised with great sophistication with the Shanghaiese-Hong Kong writer Sun Lung-Kee in his influential 1983 book *The Deep Structure of Chinese Society*, and it has already underpinned plenty of other Chinese movies - even some made in Mainland China, like Huang Jianzhong's *A Girl of Good Family* (Liangjia Funu, 1985) and *Questions for the Living* (Yi ge Sizhe dui Shengzhe de Fangwen, 1987). And issues like sexual fidelity, paternity and the peer-group pressure to procreate in Chinese communities were given a fairly thorough airing in Wayne Wang's *Eat a Bowl of Tea*.

Still, Ang Lee articulates the point

credibly enough, partly because he presents the central gay 'marriage' so straightforwardly and partly because he is careful to relate the sexual questions to larger questions in the lives of characters with loaded personal histories. Mr Gao, we learn, is not just another Chinese patriarch set on siring a dynastic clan but a former KMT general who saw his family massacred in the Civil War of the late 40s; hence his urgent desire to have a grandchild before his impending death. Similarly, Wei-Wei is under great pressure to stay and succeed in the States because her family, stuck in Shanghai, needs a breadwinner overseas. Thanks to this kind of back-story, the fake marriage could be taken as a ruinous parody of the reunification of China and Taiwan.

Political satire, though, is the least of the film's concerns. Framed as fast-paced situation comedy, the film is so determined not to rupture its own feel-good effect that it cheerfully erases the plot's largest unresolved problem with the climactic revelation that Mr Gao understands and doesn't disapprove of his son's relationship with Simon. This is actually the script's only flagrant implausibility, but it's enough to make the film a wish-fulfilment fantasy on a par with the equally crowd-pleasing *Strictly Ballroom*. As such, *The Wedding Banquet* clearly merits its international success. Lee directs with great brio, making smart use of locations and settings, and his understated closing images suggest a grasp of emotional reticence that will stand him in good stead in future. The performances are variable (newcomer Winston Chao, in particular, is far stronger acting in Chinese than in English), but no lapse is serious enough to damage the overall charm. The print under review - clearly made from an inter-negative - has very poor colour-grading that does no justice to Jong Lin's original cinematography; and there is a problem with the legibility of some subtitles.

Tony Rayns