

The Wedding Banquet

Ang Lee's 1993 film *The Wedding Banquet* focuses on the life of Wai-Tung Gao, a gay Taiwanese man living in New York City with his boyfriend Simon. His parents, who still live in Taiwan, ask him when he will marry and enroll him in Taipei's best singles club and send him a form to complete describing his ideal woman. Wai-Tung and his boyfriend attempt to foil the Gao's plan to find Wai-Tung a wife, however, his parents insistence cause Simon to suggest that Wai-Tung marry his struggling tenant, Wei-Wei, who faces the threat of being deported without a green card. The three rush to remove pictures of Wai-Tung and Simon from the apartment and replace them with Chinese scrolls before the arrival of Mr. and Mrs. Gao.

Wai-Tung introduces Simon to his parents by saying he is his landlord. He then announces that he and Wei-Wei are getting their marriage certificate at city hall. His mother's heartbreak results in the family throwing a banquet to atone for the no-fills union at the courthouse. After the banquet, Wei-Wei has sex with a drunken Wai-Tung and becomes pregnant. In a moment of anger after fighting with both Simon and Wei-Wei, Wai-Tung reveals the truth to his mother. She urges him not to tell his father who has just suffered another stroke.

However, Mr. Gao is far more perceptive than he lets on: he approaches Simon and tells him that he knows the true nature of his relationship with Wai-Tung. He realizes that Simon has made a great deal of sacrifices for him and takes him, as his own son, offering Simon a hongbao, a symbolic admission of their relationship. At Mr. Gao's behest, Simon promises not to tell his secret. He notes that without the false marriage, he would not have a grandchild. En route to an abortion clinic, Wei-Wei decides to keep the baby, asking Simon to stay with Wai-Tung and be the baby's second father. The final scene depicts Mrs. Gao, who has formed an emotional bond with Wei-Wei, and Mr. Gao, who shakes Simon's hand. The end of the film provides one of many possible alternative family structures that challenge heteronormative and hegemonic ideals.

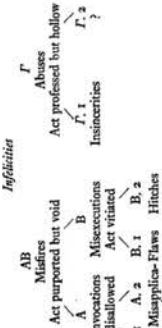
Front and Back Regions of Everyday Life

"A back region or backstage may be defined as a place ... where the impression fostered by the performance is knowingly contradicted. It is here that illusions and impressions are openly constructed. Here the performer can relax, he can drop his front, forgo speaking his lines, and step out of character."
—Erving Goffman, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*

The Oxford English Dictionary defines "front" as "outward appearance" as well as "façade." This definition encompasses both the front and back regions as described by Goffman. Applied to the context of Lee's film the front region concerns the false heterosexual relationship and the deception of the bride and groom's respective families; the back region concerns Wai-Tung, Simon, Wei-Wei, and the emotional labor which is made invisible by the construction of such an elaborate illusion. Goffman asserts that the front stage has a specific "setting" which includes "furniture, decor, physical layout, and other background items." In Lee's film, we see how important setting is in maintaining the illusion of Wai-Tung and Wei-Wei's relationship.

In this case, the backstage blurs with the front stage, when parents invade a space which is meant to be private, Wai-Tung, Simon, and Wei-Wei are not able to "step out of character" as Goffman suggests. One must wonder: do couples involved in contract marriages ever get to step out of character? Or does the maintenance of such an elaborate ruse compromise one's ability to effectively switch between the two regions?

Speech Act Theory: Felicity and Infelicity



In Maggie Nelson's memoir, *The Argonauts*, she recounts her spontaneous marriage to her partner the day before it seemed as if Prop 8 would pass:

"That evening, Reverend Starbuck—who listed her denomination as "Metaphysical" on our forms—rush-delivered our paperwork, along with that of hundreds of others, to whatever authorities had been authorized to deem our speech act felicitous. By the end of the day, 52 percent of California voters had voted to pass Prop 8, thus halting "same-sex" marriages across the state, reversing the conditions of our felicity."

Here, Nelson invokes J.L. Austin's speech act theory as a way of analyzing how words work. In *How to Do Things with Words*, Austin outlines the conditions for felicity as follows: the procedure must follow the appropriate conventions, the appropriate participants and circumstances must be present, and the speech act must be completed "fully" and "correctly." In Nelson's case, the second condition, which concerns proper circumstances, was negated by a modification of a constitutional amendment that made her vows infelicitous. In the case of Wai-Tung and Wei-Wei, their vows did meet Austin's felicity conditions; however, Austin also introduces an additional set of conditions which makes the performance "not void, although it is still unhappy." These conditions, which concern feelings, thoughts, and intentions, focus on instances in which what is being stated does not align with what one is feeling. While Wai-Tung and Wei-Wei's vows meet Austin's felicity conditions, they are still "unhappy" since the feelings and intentions described by them are not congruent with how the couple truly feel towards each other.

What are contract marriages?

In China and Korea, filial duties create inevitable pressure for gay and lesbian individuals to marry and start a family. John Cho writes: "In South Korea, both men and women, but men in particular, need to marry in order to fulfill their filial obligations, acquire social status, and get promoted at work." This poses a significant dilemma for these individuals, who must disavow their sexuality and consent to the hegemonic, heteronormative order and traditional ideals of kin and lineage. Contract marriages allow gay and lesbian individuals to maintain their true relationships by creating a front; within these arrangements gay and lesbian individuals seek each other out with the express purpose of giving the illusion of a false, heterosexual marriage. In order for contract marriages to function successfully couples must enact believable performances that can deceive hundreds of people and felicitously perform speech acts which they inherently oppose.

Thesis

John Cho's 2009 essay "*The Wedding Banquet* Revisited: Contract Marriages Between Korean Gays and Lesbians" focuses on a number of couples involved in contract marriages. Tae Hoon, one of Cho's subjects, becomes frustrated by the pressure to maintain the illusion of a heterosexual marriage. "What was supposed to be a 'fake' wedding is turning into the real thing." What is real or fake when all parties involved are making emotional, financial, and physical sacrifices? The strain of keeping up appearances coupled with maintaining a "fake" and "real" relationship raise another question: is there an inherent advantage to the contract marriage over staying cooped in a heterosexual relationship when both require such extreme levels of acting? Furthermore, can these marriages be read as a form of subverting hegemonic, heterosexual norms, or do they reinforce and perpetuate the heteronormative ideals that have historically oppressed queer peoples?



Pictured below: Wai-Tung, Wei-Wei, and Simon

Arranged Marriages vs. Love Marriages

"Marriage remained class marriage, but within the class the partners were conceded a certain degree of freedom of choice ... Nothing was more immutable than that every marriage is immoral which does not rest on mutual sexual love and really free agreement of husband and wife. In short, the love marriage was proclaimed as a human right."
—Frederick Engels, *Origins of the Family, Private Property, and the State*

Happiness and affection often did not accompany marriage as a result of centuries of arranged marriages which focused on class and procreation. The emergence of marriage as something solely rooted in mutual love is relatively recent; it is evident that while many people are able to marry for love, those involved in contract marriages find themselves forced into unions that echo much earlier forms of marriage.

Conclusion

Contract marriages are one way of negotiating a system rooted in heteronormative and patriarchal values. Until the system is abolished entirely, we must find a way to ease the tension against it. In his book *Ancient Society* Lewis H. Morgan suggests that when the monogamous family fails the "requirements of society ... it is impossible to predict the nature of its successor." Although Morgan's book was published in 1877, it still resonates with the present state of affairs. The monogamous, heterosexual model upon which our notions of love and marriage have been built is crumbling; while the institution is not currently open to negotiation, many have found ways to infiltrate and co-opt it for their own purposes. Marriage exists as a fixed entity in the legal sense; however, it is malleable in ways Engels and Morgan would not have imagined, and it is left for us to wonder all of the possible forms it may take in the future.

Challenging Heteronormativity and Hegemony

Heteronormativity, a term coined by Michael Warner in 1993, ensures and reassures heterosexual individuals that their romantic and sexual feelings and desires are normal and acceptable. Chrys Ingraham states: "Heterosexuality ensures its hegemony in that it is held to be 'normative' in marriage and marital status." In accordance with these ideas, one presumes marriage as both inevitable and ideal; it is precisely this mindset which both naturalizes and reinforces heterosexuality as the dominant ideology in most societies.

Maria do Mar Castro Varela and Nikita Dhawan argue that the "politics of same-sex marriage ... [offer] the possibility to challenge sanctity of heterosexual marriage" and "[contest] the normativity of customary kinship structures." While there are possibilities to "challenge the sanctity of heterosexual marriage," many feel discontent with the institution being presented as the only option. Varela and Dhawan also argue that "same-sex alliances carry the potential to intervene in heteronormative orders."

"Same-sex marriage is not going to harm heterosexual marriages, as opponents so often claim, but its gravitational pull is likely to warp all other kinds of queer relationships. Our community's purporting, mutable ways of loving one another are fast becoming something we need to defend all the more to the straight world. In this country, [marriage] is not just an option: it is the option. It is the relationship against which all others are defined, both an institution and expectation—and you cannot have one without the other."
—Hugh Ryan, "We Didn't Queer the Institution of Marriage. It Straightened Us"

While there are possibilities to "intervene in heteronormative orders," Ryan's assertion points out that outside of monogamous marriage, all other queer relationships are rendered invisible. Varela and Dhawan assert that "by consenting to a hegemonic institution and striving for special privileges same-sex marriage stabilizes the hierarchy between legitimate intimate associations and those who cannot enter the hegemonic order and are thereby condemned to remain illegible." As someone with multiple partners, Ryan acknowledges that while legalizing gay marriage has benefited the community at large, that it also poses a vast number of disadvantages for those that cannot or do not want to "[consent] to a hegemonic institution." Looking towards a future in which many have worked valiantly to "disman[te] an inherently flawed system that privileged some people based on their sexual relationships" Ryan urges one to question the governments' role in granting benefits based on such intimate relationships at all. Ryan, whose article was published in the wake of the Supreme Court decision which made gay marriage legal in the United States, feels that instead of "queering" the institution of marriage, "it has straightened us," and suggests that to move forward we cannot look at the ruling as a final step, but as a first one.

Conversely, an article in *Jacobin* argues in favor of gay marriage while critiquing it and those who critique it. "A common argument made by critics is that fighting for issues such as marriage equality or ending discrimination in the military assimilates LGBTQ people into oppressive systems that radicals should have no business in. Small adjustments to such a fundamentally rotten system are of course insufficient. We need a revolution. Marriage equality is of course a partial victory that provides limited improvements to people's lives while still leaving the system intact."
—Keegan O'Brian, "In Defense of Gay Marriage"

O'Brien picks up where Ryan left off by suggesting that such a victory is merely the first step in trying to overturn a historically oppressive institution. He argues that due to numerous obstacles "it's not surprising that our most good activists have lowered their expectations and embraced the idea that there is a limit to what our movements can achieve—that we can only pick between winning gay marriage or combating anti-trans violence." He notes the "tendency among radical activists to view movements and reform victories only in terms of what they haven't accomplished" which inhibits progress. Moving forward we must recognize the validity in both arguments—that there are inherent benefits and drawbacks that accompany gay marriage.

In *The Wedding Banquet* Simon argues that there is an advantage to Wai-Tung marrying Wei-Wei: he will get a tax break. Additionally, the marriage benefits Wei-Wei, who needs a green card in order to remain living in New York. Chambers and Carver write: "From insurance to taxes, from adoption to immigration, one can trace how heteronormativity secures privileges for those who consent to hegemonic norms, while non-normative behaviors, relationships and practices are stigmatized, illegitimated and rendered illegible." Ryan's arguments against marriage are valid; however, it is evident through fictional situations and real ones that marriage provides necessary benefits to those who would not have access to them otherwise. Nevertheless, one must not become comfortable with the status quo, Maggie Nelson points out that "if we want to do more than claw our way into repressive structures, we have our work cut out for us."

La perruque

"*La perruque* is the worker's own work disguised as work for his employer. It differs from pilfering in that nothing of material value is stolen. It differs from absenteeism in that the worker is officially on the job. *La perruque* may be, as simple a matter as a secretary's writing a love letter on "company time" ... With the complicity of other workers (who thus defeat the compulsion, the factory tries to instill among them), he succeeds in "putting one over" on the established order on its home ground."
—Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*

In relation to contract marriages, *la perruque* can be viewed as a form of contesting the ruling ideology. The "other workers" that de Certeau writes of are the individuals involved in the contract marriage, and the established order is the heteronormative, hegemonic ideology that pervades many societies. Contract marriage couples disguise their real relationships to "[put] one over" on their parents, relatives, co-workers, and whomever else they successfully deceive. While "on the job" these individuals pretend to be heterosexual; however, these couples ultimately evade the established order as they utilize contract marriages to escape the marital ideals upheld by their parents.