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A Thousand Universes: Zhang Ziyi in Feng Xiaogang's *The Banquet*

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Abstract

Beyond its lush cinematography, *wuxia* wire acrobatics, eye candy costumes, and million *yuan* sets, Feng Xiaogang's 2006 film, *The Banquet*, presents more than a Chinese reimagining of Shakespeare's *Hamlet*. The film recenters the play by switching the locus of the protagonist from Shakespeare's titular character to the generally subordinate character of Gertrude. Though the switch creates some clearly problematic gender issues, Zhang Ziyi's intricate performance as Empress Wan offers potential for multiple interpretations.

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Zhang Ziyi's Empress Wan/Gertrude is less a pawn in the film and much more a queen on a chessboard. But what happens when you give Empress Wan/Gertrude the full latitude of movement, agency, and power imbued in that chess piece? Does the character become richer, allowing more insight for the audience? Or does the film pander to contemporary gender norms and crumble under the weight of its own culture's sexism? Probably, the most honest answer is that it does both. While in her essay in this collection Rebecca Chapman focuses on Wan as the structural focal point in the film's adaptive strategy, I would like to examine the new interpretive possibilities enabled by considering Wan as a central character.

If a filmmaker hires a leading world actress such as Zhang, she is unlikely to play a subordinate or supporting role. Zhang often plays independent and strong-willed characters and is clearly one of China's leading actresses. One wonders, therefore, how much of the script was rewritten to entice Zhang to take on the project. Certainly, the Empress/Gertrude character had to be made younger for the twenty nine year old actor, making her Prince Wu Luan/Hamlet's stepmother because of the lack of an age difference between the two.

Often in *The Banquet*, the story that Feng Xiaogang and his crew are telling through the total text of the film (spoken text, film shots, edits, underscoring, and such) can run parallel to, and even at times be at odds with, the performances of the actors, and this is particularly true of Zhang. Actors are never mere puppets, though the director (and often the producers) has the final say in the shape and movement of the film itself. But evidence of the original performances still exist and bleed through the work of directors, editors, producers, and the entire post-production staff.

Enter the Dragon Lady — Empress Wan

In *The Banquet*, the text may highlight the Empress/Gertrude character, but the mere act of doing so does not create a gender-progressive film. Instead of a feminist version of the *Hamlet* story, we get a throw-back medieval view that represents women as either saints or whores. The film's medieval setting validates and therefore perpetuates the old, chivalrous (*xia*) views of gender. In this case, the Empress becomes the whore or, in colonialist terms, the Dragon Lady.

The Dragon Lady, a concept of American coinage, comes from a colonialist/Western perspective on strong women in the East. A Dragon Lady is characterized typically by her beauty, seductive power, and evil nature, and she is always punished for overreaching. In this racist view, an Asian woman must be a beautiful and submissive flower, or she is to be a *femme fatale*, domineering and manipulative, but also doomed. The type ranges from over-simplified cartoon strip baddies to Western news accounts of real political leaders (e.g., Soong May-ling of China and Madame Nhu Ngo Dinh of Vietnam). In *The Banquet*, our Dragon Lady is a politically astute climber who realizes too late that her desire for power and control leaves a wide swath of destruction, killing her loved ones as well as her foes. To find the character emerging from a Chinese-made and produced film is disturbing and yet, unfortunately, not anomalous.

Shakespeare has provided very little context for Gertrude. As Baldwin Maxwell summarizes the situation, Gertrude "appears in ten of the play's twenty scenes, but in those ten scenes she speaks fewer lines than does Ophelia, who appears in only five . . . She speaks but one brief aside and never the concluding line of a scene" (Maxwell 1964, 236). Gertrude has often been perceived as weak ("Frailty, thy name is woman") or conniving. The role has been loathed by actors and critics alike

since the 1800s, when "the wicked queen" interpretation began to flourish. For centuries now, this simple-minded interpretation of Gertrude has reinforced cultural sexism, despite the fact that the Ghost tells Hamlet to not "let thy soul contrive against thy mother" (Shakespeare 1939, 1.5.770-71). George Kittredge, by contrast, thought that Gertrude seems to be exonerated in the play, arguing that the Ghost never accuses Gertrude of complicity in the murder and that Hamlet later seems to damn his mother merely because she shows no suspicion of Claudius (Shakespeare 1939, 170). In *The Banquet*, however, we get a new enactment of Gertrude's character that nevertheless reinforces the traditional view of her as a conniving Dragon Lady.

From the opening shots of the film to the closing moments, Empress Wan figures prominently in her quest for control and power, which is codified carefully through the film's design. In the opening shots, we see Wan dressed in the gold of Chinese royalty. Later, we see her in deep crimsons and vermilions, the color of "the flame of desire" (*The Banquet*) and the embodiment of her passionate and unsatisfied blood. Finally, by the last scene she is draped in black, perhaps to signify that she has become an impure creature. These shifts in color scheme create a visual crumb trail that allows the audience to follow Wan to her self-destruction. After an opening prologue and a brief introduction to the Prince/Hamlet character, we meet our Empress, gliding down a long corridor of an expansive and expensive set towards her new Emperor. She trails a long, golden train in what feels like a Western bridal march down the aisle. Gold, in China, is traditionally the color of wealth and the color of the Emperor.

As we learn more about the Empress and her schemes slowly percolate, we see her donning the traditional Chinese wedding color, red. Adorned in this auspicious color, the Empress later details her own interpretation of and attraction to it — for her, red epitomizes a human desire akin to a rush of blood. As all of the characters meet their various fates, only the Empress survives to the last. Empress Wan's final moments are marked by a powerful monologue that she delivers alone in a courtyard and through which we learn finally her true intentions. Wan has gotten what she wants — the throne — but unfortunately, she has survived the coronation night calamity only to be assassinated by a weapon from an unseen assassin.

While Shakespeare's Gertrude is reduced to inaction and textual marginalization, Empress Wan's actions drive *The Banquet*'s plot; through her two-faced, poisonous plans, she functions as the dominant agent in the destruction of the entire court. First, Wan decides to marry the Emperor for political expediency and to protect Prince Wu Luan, as we find out when she meets the Prince upon his return. Wan tells him that she has made her face a mask to hide her real intentions from her new husband. She also sends protection for her stepson, Prince Wu Luan/Hamlet, when the Emperor sends him away with the Rosencrantz and Guildenstern analogues. She then decides to

poison the Emperor for his murder of her previous husband. In this way, Wan's actions become the central source of the tragedy.

Double faces are an essential component to the Dragon Lady character. She puts on the face of the dutiful wife to the new Emperor while obtaining poison to murder him. She gets Minister Yin/ Polonius and General Yin/Laertes to buy into her plan to assassinate the Emperor and then double-crosses them, skewering General Yin/Laertes through the neck with a sword and exiling Minister Yin/Polonius to a northern wasteland. Empress Wan's actions cause the death of the honorable and loyal General Pei merely to curry favor for the Emperor.

By focusing on the Empress Wan/Gertrude character without grounding it in feminist theory, *The Banquet*'s analogies with Shakespeare's *Hamlet* problematize Empress Wan/Gertrude's situation without solving the character's problems. We get a more complicated look at what drives her, but the choices of the filmmakers lead us down a gender regressive path. Prince Wu Luan/ Hamlet and Emperor Li/Claudius are thus let off the hook because they have no real agency; only Empress Wan/Gertrude does.

A Thousand Possible Universes — Zhang Ziyi

One attribute that makes a performer great, especially in acting for the camera, is the ability to hold together many options at the same time. As an audience, we see actor/characters faced with a clear crisis that requires action, and we delight in watching them (sometimes at lighting speed) sift through the endless possibilities, make a choice, and then act. Metaphorically speaking, we see them simultaneously inhabit a thousand possible universes, before having to choose to live in a particular one. In a tragedy, these actor/characters unfortunately make the most devastating and deadly choices. In the nearly twenty films completed in her still young career, Zhang Ziyi often portrays complicated and deeply conflicted characters. Even in *The Banquet*, where she must play the Dragon Lady text, a more complicated subtext wiggles through her performance when the camera settles for a moment and does not cut away. Zhang has thus created a more nuanced performance than the script suggests, and her performance can be read in multiple ways. Zhang populates the film with startling moments of decision, but for the sake of brevity, I will focus on three central structural moments in the plot: when she gives up dowager status, when she makes her final choice to kill Emperor Li/Claudius; and when she gives her last monologue. Each moment has sufficient complexity to elicit multiple readings.

Early on, the status of the new Emperor influences whether Empress Wan will accept him as her true husband (giving him the throne's lineage) or stand as an Empress Dowager (giving the throne's lineage to her stepson, the Prince/Hamlet). General Pei has referred to her as the Empress

Dowager, even though the court hails her as the Empress. Though she kneels to the new Emperor as his wife and subordinate, Zhang complicates the moment. With a stone face, eyes lowered in submission and her body held tight, she hesitates. She begins a deep breath before the film cuts away — a breath that could be read as steeling herself to make the tough, but smartest choice. As she kneels, she deepens her bow into greater reverence. Though the act traps General Pei (who has referred to her as the Empress Dowager) and sentences him to death, Zhang's nuanced physical actions open up the moment to various interpretations. Does she secretly regret having to put Pei in that position? As she sits in her lowest kneeling position, we see Zhang tilt her head towards the General with her chin; chin raising is generally considered a shift towards a higher status. Is she blaming the General for his stupid *faux pas* and hence his own death? Does she see a larger picture than we do? The breath Zhang takes before kneeling and the tilting of her head afterwards opens up the text.

One of the more complicated moments in Zhang's work occurs before the banquet, in the bedchamber scene. Seen from a point of view above their heads, Empress Wan lies with her head upon the Emperor's chest, caressing his arm tenderly. Her eyes are fixed and far away as she listens intently to how he responds to her question. After warming him up, she sits up and makes direct eye contact. Using metaphorical language, she warns him through tears that she plans to kill him; she is turning from ice to fire. He says that eventually her ice will melt in his mouth and that he will swallow her fire. In an intricately open-ended reaction, Wan bursts into tears, squeezes the Emperor with intensity, and begins to beat him furiously on his back with her fist. Is she punishing him for not understanding the metaphor or for putting her into a position where she will be able to pull off the assassination? Why does she change her status in the scene when she sits up to his level and bores into his eyes with her own? Throughout the scene, Wan is difficult to read. Only after the Emperor leaves at the end of this sequence do we realize that she has chosen to kill him. Curled up in a fetal position, half naked and with messy hair — presumably after having had sex with the Emperor — she calmly pulls out the poison and cuddles it to her chest for comfort. The complexity of her actions lie open to interpretation as we see Zhang wrestling with Empress Wan's moral choices.

In the final scene, however, the filmmakers sentimentalize the Empress once again as "Little Wan" — the name that the Prince/Hamlet called her when they were younger — by playing a sappy song as we see her slowly expire. However, Zhang once again creates a multitude of physical actions that open up the scene's interpretation. She wears all black, the opposite of the traditional Chinese color of mourning, which is white. She stands unmoving in the middle of the courtyard, eyes cast down and using a little girl voice, while the camera jumps from angle to angle as snow

falls around her. Wan then says that all will now refer to her as "Her Majesty, the Emperor": she has assumed male/patriarch status. As she smiles to take her victory and gathers a bolt of red cloth to her chest, the blade (which looks like the Maiden of Yue's sword that is used by Prince Wu Luan) spears her through the back. The sentimental song begins to play while Wan points directly into the camera lens at us, the audience. Zhang's tightened voice, creepy smile, and blank stare leave us to wonder whether she has gone mad with never-quenched desire or whether she is pleased with her accomplishments. Maybe, having removed the immediate threats around her, she has truly achieved a calm state, or perhaps the actress is no longer resisting the film's text but has simply begun to exceed the role of the Dragon Lady, with its moralistic conclusion. The possible readings of Zhang's own reading of Empress Wan seem to multiply endlessly.

Shifting Away from *Hamlet*

Though a relocation of the protagonist of the *Hamlet* story may offer the potential for a new reading of medieval-versus-contemporary gender issues, films are themselves cultural products and bring with them the problems of that culture. Whether a film is produced in Hong Kong or Hollywood, the question of whether it is regressive or progressive on questions of gender is always a fair one. One rarely draws in box office money by deeply questioning a culture's commitment to gender equality; however, the performance of an individual actor, such as Zhang's performance in *The Banquet*, can be nuanced enough to be seen in many different ways. Certainly, an audience can buy into the Dragon Lady mythology. Upon further examination, however, Zhang's performance shows us an image of an individual woman who is sorting through a thousand different possible universes. The film text tells her what her final choices are; her job, as a good actor, is to allow all of these possibilities to exist at once, if only for a brief moment.

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