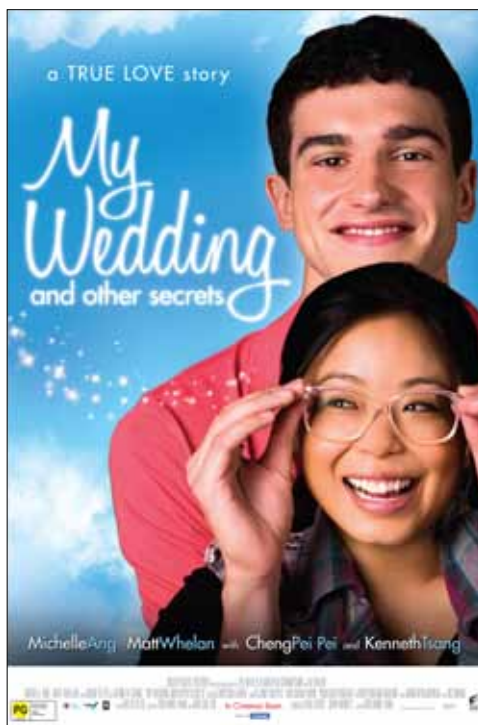


Film review

MY WEDDING AND OTHER SECRETS: A true story of women of Asian diaspora in New Zealand

Director: Roseanne Liang



In March 2011 the romantic comedy feature, *My wedding and other secrets*, directed by Roseanne Liang – a New Zealand-born Chinese – reached number three in the New Zealand box office (Onfilm, March 11, 2011). This film was also selected for the Melbourne International Film Festival (2011), and the 20th Golden Rooster and Hundred Flowers Film Festival (2011) in China. Liang's success illustrates the public emergence of a new category in local cinema in which filmmakers from the various Asian immigrant communities living in New Zealand relate their own version of diasporic life and reality.

Roseanne Liang started her career as a filmmaker with her documentary *Banana in a nutshell* (2005), in which she narrates the true story of her own life and a cross-cultural romance with her New Zealand boyfriend, Stephen. *My wedding and other secrets* is a 'rom com' extended version of this documentary. One of the themes that repeatedly emerges in the film is the ways that immigrant parents' views and beliefs clash with

their children's contemporary aspirations in a new homeland. This becomes more evident in the case of girls' and women's lives, as the influence of parents and cultural traditions within Asian families is more overt and onerous for daughters than it is for sons.

My wedding and other secrets centres on Emily Chu (Michelle Ang), a student of Film Studies at the University of Auckland, who believes she can do anything she puts her mind to. She falls in love with a Kiwi boy, James Harrison (Matt Whelan), and decides to secretly marry him, because getting married could qualify her for a student allowance and she needs that money to make her first documentary. The autobiographical mode of filmmaking reinforces Emily's character as a self-centred, ambitious, and somewhat clumsy nerd who struggles to find a balance between what makes her a Chinese girl, and what defines her as a New Zealand grown-up. Emily's immigrant parents, who came to New Zealand seeking a better future for their children, think that Emily is doing an IT degree, which they believe will most definitely guarantee their daughter's financial future. They also want her to marry a decent Chinese boy who meets their expectations in terms of affirming Chinese tradition, language, and culture. Though angling for comedy, *My wedding*

and other secrets in fact depicts the challenges and consequences of leading a diasporic life, where immigrant families strive to maintain and transfer their traditions and customs to their children. This process can create tension and conflict within immigrant families. In this case, Emily's Kiwi upbringing empowers her as a woman to solve her issues her own way, an approach that may not be approved of in her parents' Chinese culture and tradition.



My wedding and other secrets admirably draws attention to a very real dilemma that families in Asian diasporic communities in New Zealand potentially face: 'What if my daughter falls in love with a Kiwi boy'? Engaging with this question, the film presents an instantiation of cross-cultural sentiments and values, and how these may continue to reverberate through the lives of both first and second generations of diaspora. Embracing a charming romance summed up by the 'girl meets boy' narrative cliché, the film finds a solution for this dilemma through its happy ending, an outcome that was thwarted in the case of Emily's older sister, Susan. Susan's relationship was seriously undermined by their parents because the Kiwi boy she fell in love with did not, and could not, be 'Chinese' in any conceivable way.

When Emily's mother threatens to similarly undermine Emily's marriage by refusing to come to her wedding, Emily raises a fundamental question that any immigrant parent might be confronted with sooner or later: 'If you wanted me to be such a good little Chinese girl and marry some Chinese boy, then *why* did you leave Hong Kong'? Emily's rhetorical question embodies the multi-layered process of adaptation and change that is variously challenged, welcomed, or ignored by people in diaspora. Emily is attempting to create harmony between the Chinese identity that she has inherited from her Hong Kong parents, and the Kiwi identity that has been ascribed to her in the country she was born. Maintaining this harmony is difficult for Emily, because her internal assimilation as the second generation of Chinese (Asian) diaspora in New Zealand collides with her parents' ethnicisation as members of the first generation of diaspora in this country. *My wedding and other secrets* manages marvellously to subsume the probable disappointment and disillusionment generated by this clash beneath the veneer of romantic comedy. Thus, Emily's mother participates in her wedding with a smile and celebrates her daughter's happiness, even though this outcome is not what she has imagined for herself or for Emily.

Liang's film, *My wedding and other secrets*, celebrates the differences between the diasporic culture and the majority culture without reducing one to another. The film opens and ends with Emily declining to eat Weet-Bix – typical Kiwi fare – for breakfast. The metaphor of Weet-Bix epitomises that side of diasporic identity that derives from the host country. At the start of the film, we observe Emily as a child, as she tries to dispose of her Weet-Bix by pushing them down the sink. At the end of the film, she calmly watches her Kiwi husband enjoying his Weet-Bix while she is having her favourite Chinese breakfast at their home in Auckland. Hence, this delightful 'rom com' concludes with Emily and James living happily ever after, though Emily still hates Weet-Bix and James still hates Chinese seafood.

The newly-sensed multicultural New Zealand society will see more of this type of film in the future, and will also witness the ways such films can raise the local and international profile

of the country's small but ambitious film industry. The diasporic subjects of such films provide a specific locus for representing women whose stories, challenges and issues may be rather different to those of other New Zealand women, as they come from a range of different cultures, ethnicities, religions, and backgrounds. These women may find, as the Ministry of Women's Affairs (2008) in New Zealand states, 'settling into a new country, [and] maintaining their cultural identity...confusing and stressful'. Women filmmakers of Asian diaspora in New Zealand – such as Roseanne Liang – potentially offer a voice for this diverse group of women who face similar challenges. Their films can examine and depict the complicated interstices of identities and affiliations that shape the lives of Asian women in Aotearoa New Zealand today.

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Reference

Ministry of Women's Affairs (2008). *Migrant women*. Retrieved from <http://www.mwa.govt.nz/women-in-nz/migrantwomen>