Transnational Chinese Cinemas

Identity, Nationhood, Gender

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University of Hawai'i Press
Honolulu

Chapter 7

Breaking the Soy Sauce Jar
Diaspora and Displacement in the Films of Ang Lee

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Ang Lee's films are powerful evocations of cultural preservation as well as intercultural (mis)communication. Lee's work illustrates the inevitable conflicts and negotiations between individuals bound by familial and societal obligations. These familial and social dramas are often set in scenes where the infiltration of Westernization is in direct conflict with orthodox Chinese ideologies. The overall philosophy of Ang Lee's films demonstrates the struggles of individuals within and between cultures. Lee's struggles to place Chinese culture within today's progressive societies—both in the "East" and in the "West"[1]—echo a long tradition of Chinese negotiation with the influences of Western culture. In contrast to the supposedly liberating possibilities of Western culture, the (also supposedly) oppressive nature of traditional Chinese culture has been criticized by many Chinese scholars. One of the most controversial critiques has been that of Taiwanese novelist and cultural critic Po Yang (Bo Yang),[2] beginning in the 1960s. Our use of Po Yang to begin our analysis of Ang Lee's films is a deliberate attempt to acknowledge the continual efforts of participants from multiple disciplines in the current discussion of transcultural and transnational interactions. Lee's films consistently negotiate among cultures, nations, generations, and genders—illustrating the repressive as well as revitalizing forces of Chinese traditions in the intersection of the residual past and emerging future. Po Yang and Ang Lee have in common a belief in the positive power of change. The difference between them is Ang Lee's recognition of the possibility of change within Chinese societies, as well as from without. In contrast, Po Yang argues for a view of Chinese culture that emphasizes its stagnant qualities:

> The soy sauce jar *(jianggang)* represents a confused society in which the forces of erosion and the forces of stagnation are at their most powerful. It also represents a kind of politics of enslavement. It is a mal-

> formed morality, a distinctive philosophy of life, and a snobbishness that has been destructive over a long period of time. It has created a confused society in which the intelligence peculiar to man [*sic*] is put out of action or made to vanish without a trace.[3]

Po Yang envisions Chinese cultural traditions as a massive "soy sauce jar." In Po Yang's characterization, soy sauce is a body of stinky, stagnant, dead water *(zhuoshui);* it also has a strong preservative aspect such that, after the fermentation process is complete, it stagnates. Soy sauce has a powerful odor and taste which strongly flavors any food with which it comes into contact. With this image, Po Yang criticizes the homogenizing forces of traditional Chinese culture which have assimilated even its conquerors into the cultural hegemony of the Han people. More recently, the rigidity of Chinese tradition, in Po Yang's analysis, has prevented the acceptance of exciting and progressive thoughts and practices emanating from the West. Po Yang's suspicion of Chinese traditional culture mirrors that of his literary predecessors in the early part of the twentieth century. For example, one of Lu Xun's highly respected texts, "The Diary of the Madman," characterizes Chinese traditions as being cannibalistic. The story insinuates that the self-destructiveness of the oppressive traditional past can only harm the awakening present.

Po Yang's works, particularly the controversial *Ugly Chinese* (Choulou de Zhongguo ren), as well as his earlier works, created enormous controversy in both China and Taiwan in the 1980s. His comparison of Chinese tradition to a dead and repressive "soy sauce" culture closely follows Lu Xun's criticism of Chinese culture at the turn of the century. Such attacks on traditional Han Confucian beliefs and practices became the central driving force behind communist ideology by attracting the socially underprivileged who had always been at the bottom of the metaphorical "soy sauce vat." Traditional Chinese culture, Po Yang suggests, tends to foster a love of power, which may command respect but also breeds fear. Thus, fear tends to govern the relationship between individuals in the family and in society. In his article "Life or Death at the Mercy of a Cough" (in *Si bu rencuo ji*), he discusses such concomitants of fear as suspicion, jealousy, and sycophancy—features demonstrably in evidence in both imperial and republican China.

The counter criticisms to Po Yang, especially by scholars from Taiwan, were immense and immediate. While the scope of this paper does not allow for a full analysis of this criticism, a brief elaboration of the arguments of two respected scholars, Sun Guodong and Li Ao, is useful here. They argue that the problems of Chinese society, resulting from specific political and historical situations, are nevertheless transitory and circumstantial. Furthermore, if China is truly as fatally diseased as Po claims, then its demise would be indisputable and soon in arriving. Instead, its five-thousand-year survival and its continual adaptation deconstruct the validity of Po's prediction, analysis, and—some would argue—curse.

As we approach the end of the twentieth century, these binary oppositional characterizations of the relationship between Chinese tradition and "Western" modernity appear more than naive. Cultural critic Rey Chow theorizes about this reaction of twentieth-century Chinese intellectuals to Chinese traditions. She writes:

> China, perhaps because it is an exception to the rule of imperialist domination by race, land, and language involving a foreign power, in fact highlights the effects of the imperialistic *transformation of value and value production* more sharply than in other "third world" cultures. . . . The obsession of Chinese intellectuals remains "China" rather than the opposition to the West. The cultural production that results is therefore narcissistic, rather than simply oppositional, in structure. Whatever oppositional sentiment there exists is an oppositional sentiment directed toward itself—"China," "the Chinese heritage," "the Chinese tradition," "the Chinese government," and variants of these.[4]

This "obsession" with "Chinese tradition" as a static symbol of hegemony has been eroded by the increasing ability of people to cross national borders with relative frequency. As contemporary Chinese and Taiwanese negotiate an increasingly transnational sense of self and nation, the "soy sauce jar" has begun to crack. Filmmakers like Ang Lee may use "soy sauce" to flavor their dishes, but they juxtapose it with unexpected ingredients. There may be a danger, as bell hooks argues, that "[w]ithin commodity culture, ethnicity becomes spice, seasoning that can liven up the dull dish that is mainstream white culture,"[5] but Lee's understanding of the "soy sauce jar" of Chinese culture largely avoids such reductive commodification. In many ways, Lee, like Po, recognizes the undeniable significance of cultural traditions in everyday political organization, societal expectations, and family interactions; yet Lee's films indicate a much more ambivalent and nuanced interpretation of the significance of Chinese traditions for contemporary populations.

Unlike Po Yang's total disillusionment, Lee's films reenvision "tradition" in a much more sympathetic light as something that is highly versatile and adaptive. The "soy sauce jar," which both represents and contains Chinese and Taiwanese national and transnational identities, is figuratively "broken" to reveal a new sensibility, but the fluid "soy sauce" within the "jar" is not discarded. Recognizing the unfinished nature of intercultural processes en-

dows individuals with a sense of agency and consequence: the past we reconstruct will shape the future in which we must live. Ang Lee's films depict the intersection between individuals and cultures as a Derridean "always already" interpolated space that constantly challenges and changes the course of those who seek to find their places within the micro- and macro-cosmic social (dis)orders.

Lee's characters, whether they are members of a Taiwanese or Chinese diaspora, or they are merely undergoing smaller forms of displacement, are each affected by the difficulty of negotiating identity not only as individuals moving from place to place but as members of families that become dislocated—literally and figuratively. When the family boundaries are expanding—through both marriage and migration—a crisis is created within the intergenerational relationships. This crisis is resolved in Lee's films by dramatic end moments, or final shots, which both reinscribe normative heterosexual bonds—thus insuring the continuation of the family into the next generation—and simultaneously destabilize these familial relations.

Ang Lee was born and educated in Taiwan. Although he went to New York in 1977 to study theater at New York University, he switched to film, and his career has developed quickly since the debut of his first film, *Pushing Hands* (Tui shou), in 1992. Does Ang Lee's shifting transnational identity destabilize the identification of his films? Is identity ultimately about sameness (identifying with something) or difference (identifying against something)? The question of how to label him as a director and his films—Taiwanese, American, or some kind of Asian American—is in some ways best answered by the content of the films themselves. His first two films, *Pushing Hands* and *The Wedding Banquet* (Xiyan), both deal with older Chinese/Taiwanese parents coming to an understanding with the European American mates of their sons. There is a need to renegotiate personal identity through the changes caused by immigration and relocation. Lee's third movie, *Eat Drink Man Woman* (Yin shi nan nü), appears to be the least problematic in terms of identifying labels. The entire film is set in Taiwan, and Taipei is clearly the spatial locus of the film. The interactions that occur within the Chu family have been read by several film critics as metaphors for the interactions within the larger Taiwanese society between traditional Chinese culture and the emerging modernization of the "West,"[6] but this interpretation simplistically positions Chinese tradition as a monolithic guardian of the past and the artificial construct called "the West" as the sole repository of progressive thought. We would argue that Lee's treatment of these issues is much more nuanced, as should be the categorization of his films.

In terms of subject matter, *Sense and Sensibility* does not fit into any of the

Fig. 16. Director Ang Lee. British Film Institute.

categories mentioned above. On the surface, it is simply an adaptation of a Jane Austen novel and therefore is a very British period costume drama. How does Ang Lee's presence as director complicate this simple identification? Is he simply a part of the mechanism that produced the film, his sensibilities and concerns—as displayed in his previous work—completely overridden by a purely technical participation in the project? Or is he an auteur whose personality was not completely subsumed by that of Emma Thompson? These questions of identity have serious consequences. Despite the transnational nature of contemporary cinema, the way a film is identified and labeled still has real meaning (distribution, awards, viewership, location on the video store shelf). This "real world" concern with multiple and shifting identities mirrors the complexities of Lee's cinematic world. These tensions are generally manifested in various characters who must come to terms with how the identities of family members and friends shift their own identities. However, this does not mean an easy melding into an unproblematic universalism. Film critic Donald Lyons says of Lee's work that "[h]e's no sentimentalist: generations and cultures do not compromise, coalesce, fuzzily melt, but rather achieve a tense, polite, somehow bracing remove."[7] *Pushing Hands* shows early signs of Lee's preoccupation with the

conflict between traditions and contemporary life and the ways individuals learn to redefine their relationships to them.

• *The Wedding Banquet*

> *A complex signifying chain is introduced in place of the lack which can never be made good, suturing over the wound of castration with narrative. However, it is only by inflicting the wound to begin with that the viewing subject can be made to want the restorative meaning and narrative.* KAJA SILVERMAN, *SEMIOTICS AND SUTURE*

The movie *The Wedding Banquet* (screenplay by Ang Lee, Neil Peng, and James Schamus) brings forth several critical issues. It most obviously deals with Asian parents grappling with the reality of their gay Asian American son. It thus forces an examination of the crossroads between traditional Taiwanese and American gender ideologies and transgressive sexual behaviors. Furthermore, it compels an investigation of the issue of immigration and the body of the immigrant woman who is caught between the transgenerational and transsexual identity crisis of men in *The Wedding Banquet.* Several secondary issues complicate these primary concerns. First, what types of cross-cultural and cross national issues does this film raise between the heterosexual parents and their gay Asian American son and his gay white lover? Second, the representation of homosexuality appears to be connected with the "West"—Wai-tung is thought by his mother to have "turned" gay after his immigration to America, and this "symptom" of homosexuality is situated far away from the "homeplace" of Asia. Third, the semiotic constructions of homosexuality and heterosexuality become confused and contained, especially when paternal authority and masculine ideology continue to exert themselves in the heterosexual paradigm of the gay couple and the ultimate preservation of Wei-wei's baby. Finally, the international politics of Taiwan, China, and the United States are subtly inscribed in the characterization of Wei-wei and her immigrant status.

"In Hannah Arendt's view," Homi K. Bhabha writes, "the society of the nation in the modern world is 'that curiously hybrid realm where private interests assume public significance' and the two realms flow unceasingly and uncertainly into each other 'like waves in the never-ending stream of the life-process itself.' "[12] The language Arendt uses evokes particular images, the "waves in the never-ending stream of the life-process itself" suggests "waves" of immigration as well as the "life process" of pregnancy and birth. The liminality of the sense of national identity described by Arendt is particularly in flux for the gay male immigrant, because so much of national

Fig. 17. *The Wedding Banquet* (Xiyan), directed by Ang Lee, Taiwan, 1993. British Film Institute.

identity is based on mythic (male) heterosexuality. The male homosexual immigrant threatens this in several ways. As a homosexual, he signifies castration and lack of potency, the ability to generate more "national identity" in the form of children. Paradoxically, as an immigrant, he invades the now feminized body of the nation. He throws into flux, therefore, the gendered identity of the nation. In order to resolve this tension in *The Wedding Banquet,* the "castrating wound" of male homosexuality must be "sutured over" by a reinscription of heterosexuality and ultimately the presence of a male baby who must have a "white father" to naturalize him into the identity of the ("white-identified") nation.

In this case, the "wound of castration" is literally a homosexuality that castrates the potential for national regeneration; this wound is then "sutured" over with the structure of the narrative, which reinscribes a heterosexuality and national identity, particularly in the bodies of the Chinese baby boys

with white fathers. As Eve Sedgewick makes clear in the introduction to *The Epistemology of the Closet,* her work has shown that "men's same-sex bonds" have been immanent in English literature since the nineteenth century.[13] We would argue that the homosocial (and the threat it carries of the homosexual) has long been a narrative commonplace precisely because it provides the castrating wound that requires suturing, which in fact sets up heterosexuality as its answer. Lee, however, by making explicit that which has previously been only implicit (and closeted) has added new dimensions of complexity to the "wound." The suture is not entirely successful perhaps because the "wound" was too obvious. The "threat" of the homosexual is the threat of disrupting the necessarily heterosexual national identity. Though, as Homi Bhabha says, "[t]he 'locality' of national culture is neither unified nor unitary in relation to itself, nor must it be seen simply as 'other' in relation to what is outside or beyond it."[14] A good deal of national identity is constructed according to false binary oppositions. Bhabha clarifies this by explaining that "the subject is graspable only in the passage between telling/told, between 'here' and 'somewhere else', and in this double scene the very condition of cultural knowledge is the alienation of the subject."[15]

Semiotic film theory is less openly concerned with this "passing" back and forth, though ultimately it is the negotiation between terms which reveals the meaning of binary opposites. In her chapter on "suture," Kaja Silverman discusses the lack of intrinsic value of any term: "They are fully contained within the closed system of signification: 'I' always derives its value from 'you,' and 'here' from 'there,' just as 'black' refers to 'white,' or 'male' to 'female.' "[16]

Within the context of *The Wedding Banquet* this binary is transmuted into "East" versus "West," old and young, and female versus male. Interestingly, just as the terms Black/white evacuate terms which cannot be accommodated within this binary (yellow, for instance), so the terms East and West. likewise eliminate a good deal in their division of the world; Africa and South America, for example, simply disappear. The only constant that remains is the image of the "white man," the center of all equations, because it is this culture which is the primary generator of concepts of binary opposition.

Ang Lee plays with, and sometimes reproduces, the stereotypes based on these binary oppositions. In *The Wedding Banquet,* an Asian man is constructed as silent. General Gao's voice is seldom heard, while in contrast Mrs. Gao's voice is heard even in her absence on the tapes she sends her son, full of her and her husband's expectations, to play while he exercises. General Gao's silence is strategic. The night of the wedding banquet swiftly leads to a morning breakfast exploding with tensions unleashed as Simon

Wei-wei's pregnancy and Wai-tung's infidelity (not only personally, but in terms of sexual identity, the ultimate threat of the bisexual in biphobic discourse is that their identities are unstable). Though we do not know the sex of Wei-wei's baby, it functions as a male in that it has assured General Gao of the continuance of his family line in a mirroring of his own experience of needing to return to the family fold in order to continue the line with his own son, Wai-tung. Interestingly, the very survival of the baby is predicated on General Gao's deliberately hiding his ability to speak English and thus to move freely within the national boundaries (this is symbolically alluded to in the final moment of the film as he and his wife walk down the long hallway in the airport for their departure from America and return to Taiwan, only to be stopped by an apparently "white" security guard who requires General Gao to raise his hands for a security check). The resulting gesture is captured in slow motion and rendered as a gesture of surrender, of one generation's sacrifice for another. Yet, ultimately, it is a selfish sacrifice; it is the Gao family, and thus in a sense himself, which the general wishes to perpetuate. Paradoxically, because of his son's homosexuality, which could not be expressed in Taiwan in a naturalized nuclear family without a descent in class status,[17] General Gao's family line could only be continued by a shift in location. The act of immigration (not necessarily from a "more repressed" to a "less repressed" locale) is what permits Wai-tung to be gay, but it is also what requires him to have a child because this child who will be born in the United States fixes his identity as an Asian American. By the conclusion of the movie, Simon has been ritually asked by Wei-wei to be the baby's second father. Although this seems to be done in order to validate the homosexual relationship between Wai-tung and Simon, the effect is also to secure a white father for the baby while maintaining a nonthreatening racial purity. Within the schema of immigration, having a white father for one's child can be seen as the closest non-European immigrant parents can get to assimilation and thus validation for their children as well as themselves.

The version of *The Wedding Banquet* released in France is called *Garcon D'Honneur* (The Best Man). The photograph accompanying a review of the film in the October 1993 issue of *Studio Magazine* features Mitchell Lichtenstein and May Chin sitting next to one another and slightly back to back, with Winston Chao (Zhao Wenxuan) rising slightly above, behind, and between them. He is holding Lichtenstein's hand, and all are attired as for a formal wedding portrait. The caption places Lichtenstein first. The significance of this retitling is that, like the title of David Henry Hwang's play, *M. Butterfly,* it ultimately refers to the white man in the story and his struggle with sexuality and manhood. The U.S. release title, on the contrary,

refers to a specifically Chinese cultural signifier and also to the crux of the movie, for it is after the tensions of the wedding banquet that Simon is left to drive General and Mrs. Gao home, while Wei-wei rapes/seduces Wai-tung and thus becomes pregnant with his child, the child that will root the immigrants in America and into a normative nationalist heterosexuality, thus "suturing" the original castrating wound.

When we examine the body of the immigrant woman in this film, we find that she is eventually caught between the transgenerational and transsexual identity crisis of men in "The Wedding Banquet." The film's Cinderella formulation and the deceptively happy ending bring in the issue of the semiotic function of a somewhat aggressive, yet apparently victimized, "China doll" whose illegal-immigrant status drives the subsequent actions of the film. While her immigration status directs the cinematic avenues of the narrative action, the urgency and the problem of her "illegitimacy" in America are gradually replaced by the sexual and cultural crisis between the gay man and the Chinese father.

The identities of the two main female characters are built upon their roles as transmitters, as catalysts, and as translators for their male counterparts. The film literally begins with the mother's voice on tape translating—and literally speaking for—the father and giving voice to his wish that Wai-tung would marry and procreate. Even when they arrive in the United States, the mother continues to act as the (gift) bearer of the Chinese customs, while the father remains mostly silent (aside from the speech about his own escape from marriage). Most importantly, the mother becomes caught between the lie of the son to the father; she is the bearer of guilt and a secret that, on the one hand, has made her role more significant; yet on the other hand, her agency/identity is completely disintegrated by the overwhelming importance of the connection between father and son. Even her identity as translator is obliterated as everyone realizes that the father himself speaks English and that he was never in need of a translator or transmitter (in fact, he says that he "sees and hears" everything). He reveals to Simon that he knows of his son's homosexuality; this scene represents an acknowledgment of his son's homosexual relationship as well as a reinforcement of a different type of male friendship.

Like the mother, Wei-wei also occupies an "in-between" space within the male milieu. While at one moment she becomes literally the translator between Simon and Mrs. Gao, her pregnancy also makes her a transmitter of a male legacy to the extent that a male identity is implied in her unborn child. Wei-wei's role, however, is much more complicated than that of her mother-in-law. Although her Cinderella transformation from starving illegal immigrant artist to financially stable married legal resident appears to be

a product of male generosity and beneficence—a result of Mr. Gao's investment in America, Simon's suggestion, and Wai-tung's cooperation—her initial appearance as a poor, beautiful but driven illegal immigrant/artist nevertheless represents a different type of "womanhood" from that of her later mother-in-law. Her origin in Mainland China, furthermore, creates a certain kind of stereotypical discourse around her identity—both artistic and impoverished. Of utmost importance is her illegal immigrant status; she is now homeless, without a national identity, living under constant threat of being deported to China. She occupies both an economically and socially inferior status, which causes even her female "sexuality" to become somewhat compromised. On the one hand, she seems to be quite liberal and free-spirited; on the other hand, to some viewers, her hypersexualized behavior with Wai-tung might seem quite transgressive (particularly in the scene where she might be said to have raped him). The first view of Wei-wei is her sweating back and her aggressive drinking—a sensationalized and sexualized moment that becomes further emphasized with her casual behavior toward her young and handsome landlord, Wai-tung. However, through her "Cinderella" experience—from poor to rich, from illegal to legal, from desperately single to her marriage to a handsome and educated, though gay, husband—one can argue that Wei-wei is becoming domesticated throughout the movie. She moves from a place she herself describes as not fit for human habitation to sipping cool drinks in Simon's middle-class house, and then she moves from acting the part of a desirable fiancée and wife to her decision to become a mother. Donald Lyons notes that in this film, as in his others, "Lee's spaces are clear sites of moral struggle."[18] She is domesticated, tamed, and desexualized. The scene at the airport when she first meets Wai-tung's parents clearly illustrates her physical domestication: her conservative dress, the closing of her legs and the correcting of her aggressive arm posture, the lowering of her hair, and finally her eagerness to comply with "female" duties as a submissive daughter-in-law by struggling with the luggage are all part of her domestic transformation.

Of course, one should not overlook the deliberate construction of Wei-wei as a liberated woman as well as an educated and ambitious artist. Her learned knowledge of Chinese writing and her passion for impressionist art on the one hand represent certain stereotypes about China as a land of oppressed scholars versus Wai-tung's stereotypical role as a cheap apartment owner from Taiwan;[19] on the other hand, they also connote female independence and intelligence. Interestingly, even her name, Wei-wei, in Chinese transmits a certain masculinity. However, her aggressivity becomes the very element which, ironically, completes the process of her domestication. Her seduction of Wai-tung borders on sexual violence: Wai-tung's saying "no" and the positionality of Wei-wei could qualify this as a "rape" scene. Her sexual aggressiveness toward Wai-tung leads to the pregnancy which ultimately (re)locates her permanently into Simon and Wai-tung's domestic milieu.

The complexity of this scene deserves closer examination. The relationship between Wei-wei's female (hetero)sexuality and Wai-tung's male homosexuality and their respective roles as members in Chinese families are at odds. As the good Chinese daughter, she is expected to do what she does, marry a wealthy, preferably Chinese, man in America. She is not expected to be the sexually liberated starving artist she is at the beginning of the movie. Wai-tung's role as a good Chinese son is to do what his father eventually did: marry and have sons. His homosexuality does not function well in this regard, and considering the pivotal moment in the plot of the wedding-night scene, one has to wonder if his homosexuality is here being shown as an impediment to his fulfillment of his cultural and familial responsibilities. Given our earlier discussion of the strong association of homosexuality with the "West" in this film, is a dichotomy being created between "modern" Western values and "traditional" Chinese values, or is a more subtle negotiation being enacted which recognizes that although Wai-tung could not be openly homosexual in Taiwan, his familial duties need not be opposed to his personal preferences? Likewise, Wei-wei's participation in a "marriage" with Wai-tung and Simon seems to preclude her sexual happiness, while it fulfills her filial obligations.

These interactions are made even more intricate when the role of Simon, Wai-tung's European American lover, is questioned. In light of the heterosexual duties that Wei-wei performs, Simon seems to be the other semiotic construction of a female counterpart. The first dinner scene between Wai-tung and Simon connotes a typical family scene of an overworked masculine figure who strives to appease the agitated feminine counterpart who desires to go on vacation. Simon's "wifely" mastery over Wai-tung's everyday habits and his cooking ability further "feminize" him as the "woman" to Wai-tung's man. This seems to be a reinscription of a heterosexual paradigm where one appears to be more "masculine" and the other more "feminine." Indeed, the kitchen scenes where Wei-wei and Simon cook (or in Wei-wei's case, attempts to cook) show two potential "daughters-in-law," where one fulfills the expectations of the traditional Chinese parents and the other satisfies the sexual desires of the gay husband. However, the issue of race cannot be ignored within these constructions of gender. The fact that Wai-tung is more stereotypically masculine than Simon reverses the stereotype of the feminized Asian man (atypically for American films in general, neither the Taiwanese American man nor the Chinese woman is

able to cook), but at the same time it reinscribes the notion that homosexuality, understood erroneously as the feminization of the male, is a particularly "Western" construct.

The question of whether homosexuality is a social construct or a biological determinant is brought up in conjunction with the question of Western influence in the scene between Wai-tung and his mother in the hospital corridor. Wai-tung, faced with the possibility of his father's impending demise, confesses he must tell his mother a secret. Thinking he means Wei-wei's pregnancy, Mrs. Gao sets her herself up for an extreme shock. When he tells her that he is gay, his mother does not understand him to mean that he has always been gay but rather that he has been "turned" homosexual by the influence of being "dislocated" in America.

While this scene is sensitively handled and the mother's point of view is seen as both culturally and generationally determined, another moment in the film raises further questions. In the translation of a line during the English-language fight between Wei-wei, Simon, and Wai-tung at the breakfast table about Wei-wei's pregnancy, the Chinese subtitles show Wei-wei calling the two men "vampires," though she does not say this in English. Is this a deliberate choice, a scribal error, or a translational mistake? It reflects a moment of anxiety and bias about homosexuality that is difficult to reconcile with the otherwise positive light in which the relationship between Simon and Wai-tung is depicted. If the issue of homosexuality is dealt with more positively elsewhere in the film, then what about the uneasy knowledge both the mother and the father bring back with them when they return to Taiwan? What of the sign of "surrender" when the father raises his hands in the final moment of the film? Is it one of acceptance or one of emasculation? And can we call this a "gay" movie when the subject is treated in this ambiguous fashion? At least one reviewer saw *The Wedding Banquet* as "notable for being the first Chinese movie to problematise reactions to a gay relationship rather than the relationship itself,"[20] but the complexity of these reactions is belied by the simplicity of this statement. The very consciousness of the film's construction of the relationship between "gayness" and the reaction to it is revealing of a certain tension surrounding this issue.

In the actual scene of the wedding banquet, followed by the intrusion to the newlyweds' room, both heterosexual union and orthodox tradition are renegotiated. The dramatic irony at play here is quite interesting. As viewers, we recognize an extremely mixed crowd of whites, Asians, heterosexuals, and gays. (Significantly, all the Chinese people appear to be heterosexual while the white male couples upon which the camera quite often focuses appear to be gay.) The white gay onlookers who always look

amused, the Chinese heterosexual "jokers" who continually emphasize the past brotherhood shared by the groom and themselves, the exasperated gay groom and his lover, and the heterosexual bride all make this wedding-banquet scene one of the most ironic moments in the film. In a way, the banquet signifies an ongoing containment of homosexuality; even at the end of the film, it is the photo album of the heterosexual tradition of marriage which brings all of the characters closer together, literally and figuratively. The wedding banquet functions as a repeating trope not unlike the always-sleeping, deathlike image of the father throughout the film which continually reinforces the parental pressure on the gay son to procreate. For example, Wai-tung's liaison with Simon can only be transmitted through technology—the cordless phone and one of the pictures in the album. Even at the moment when they are about to perform the sexual act, the camera discovers the father struggling to try on the blood-pressure measuring system. If the wedding banquet and the shadow of the father's mortality act as means to contain the "transgressions" of homosexuality, then can the father's revelation to Simon of his ongoing knowledge, and acceptance, of Simon and Wai-tung's true relationship disrupt this almost homophobic formulation within the film?

• *Eat Drink Man Woman*

> *Identity: the singular meaning of a person, a nation, a race, has undergone a reversal of values. Effacing it used to be the only means of survival for the colonized and exiled; naming it today often means declaring solidarity among the hyphenated people of the Diaspora.*
>
> *It is hardly surprising then that when identity is doubled, tripled, multiplied across time (generations) and space (cultures), when differences keep on blooming within despite the rejections from without, she [the Diasporic traveler] dares—by necessity. She dares to mix; she dares to cross the borders to introduce into language (verbal, visual, musical) everything monologism has repressed.* TRINH MINH-HA, *WHEN THE MOON WAXES RED*

Eat Drink Man Woman (screenplay by Ang Lee, Hui-ling Wang, and James Schamus) can be read as a kind of sequel to *The Wedding Banquet* given the implied return to Taiwan at the end of that film. As a sequel, it is a comment on the specificities of transnational interactions as well as on the particular vagaries of contemporary Taiwanese society. The scene that opens the film—an empty intersection soon filled with the chaos of motorbikes and cars unleashed by a changing traffic light—becomes a metaphor for a Taiwan growing in many different directions at once. This image of the technological mobility of this society is immediately contrasted with the

Fig. 18. *Eat Drink Man Woman* (Yin shi nan nü), directed by Ang Lee, Taiwan, 1994. British Film Institute.

deceptively harmonious domestic space occupied by Mr. Chu (Sihung Lung) and his three daughters. The violence with which Mr. Chu captures the fish in the small container to prepare it for dinner signals that these dinners, "the Sunday torture ritual," are not the nurturing feasts they appear to be but that the violence of unresolved relations underlies the struggle to maintain domestic harmony. The orgy of cooking belies the repression of appetites ("All the Chu family, one way or another, have their appetites suppressed"[21]) which is slowly resolved in a slightly formulaic fashion. This resolution comes as first the youngest daughter gets pregnant and marries, then the eldest daughter breaks through her "old maid" demeanor and gets married, and finally the father both finds love (with a younger woman) and regains his taste buds through the cooking of the middle daughter, whose culinary talents he had years earlier refused to encourage. The middle daughter's sexual liberty, her subsequent disillusionment with love, her decision to remain within Taiwan instead of taking a job abroad, and finally her "replacement" of the father in the kitchen all speak to issues about the interactions between female independence and familial as well as patriotic loyalties. The end results of these relationships ultimately sum up Lee's message about the inevitable codependency of domestic and national allegiances.

The identity of Taiwan is far from singular in meaning. To name it, we must declare the specifics of its multiplicity. In *The Geopolitical Aesthetic: Cinema and Space in the World System,* Frederic Jameson explores the transcultural spaces of Taipei as they are being reconfigured through cinema: "Taiwan is somehow within the world system as its citizens are in their city boxes: prosperity and constriction all at once; the loss of nature . . . ."[22] Jameson asserts that "if . . . it no longer makes much sense to talk about such cities [as Taipei] in terms of an opposition between the Western and the traditional, then it would seem to follow that . . . notions of national or ethnic identity (of the modernist type) are equally threatened by postmodernity."[23] Thus it would be simplistic and inaccurate to argue that the tension in the film is between a traditional Taiwanese man, Mr. Chu, and his "Westernized" daughters, particularly the middle daughter, Jia-chien, whose work as an airline executive both literally and symbolically transnationalizes her identity. Yet some critics, like John Powers, argue that this is exactly how we are to see the film: "[e]ach daughter embodies one facet of a culture that's surging wildly forward, just like the swarms of motorbikes whose restless, apparently chaotic motion becomes one of Lee's defining images of Taiwanese modernization."[24] In Powers' estimation, the father does not figure as a "facet of a culture that's surging wildly forward"; this energy is reserved for the next generation. Jonathan Romney agrees with this assessment, arguing that "[c]onventional though it is, the most effective strand is the one about Jia-chien, who embodies the new cosmopolitan Taiwan. . . . The twist on Western sexual conditioning is that the one thing she's never been allowed to do is cook."[25] Lizzie Francke argues similarly that the return of Jia-chien to the kitchen "makes manifest the various needs that bind a family by setting a mother back at the heart of it,"[26] suggesting that it is Jia-chien's womanly skills as a cook that are needed to recenter the family, which has only been (mal) nourished by a male for too long. As Romney notes, "[t]here's this discrepancy between the ritual of food presented with love and the difficulty of actually tasting the love in it."[27] Of course, what Romney and the others do not recognize about Jia-chien is not only that she is not allowed to cook but that she has not been allowed to become a chef, which is a male preserve not only in China and Taiwan but in Europe and America as well. Thus the clear divide between "West" and "East" is really less than the transparency to which they attest.

This issue of Jia-chien's cooking is a significant site of contestation in the film—not only in terms of Powers' and Romney's suggestion that Jia-chien

and her cooking represent the new wave of "cosmopolitan" Taiwanese culture as opposed to the old stinky "soy sauce jar" of stagnant Chinese traditions represented by her father, Mr. Chu. Jia-chien's identity is indeed caught up with the identity of Taiwan, whether that is traditional or modern, Chinese, native, or "Western." But the answer is more complex than her modern sensibilities (as demonstrated by her sexual freedom) overtaking those of her father. Her decision not to flee but to remain rooted at the heart of the home and her decision to cook are matched by her father's decision not only to marry and start a new family but to share the cooking space with her. When she helps him rediscover his sense of taste through her cooking, she is demonstrating the fluidity of the "soy sauce" of Chinese culture. But it is her father's decision to marry the young divorcée, rather than the woman's older mother, that breaks the confining "jar" of traditions. And it is her father's marriage that leaves Jia-chien able to make a choice that is not based on binary oppositional structures. Had she left the family home rather than take care of her elderly father, she would have been acting in opposition to traditional expectations. Likewise, had she remained, she would have opposed the "modern" sensibilities of the "West," which place individual satisfaction over the welfare of the family. Instead, at the end of the film she has neither abandoned the past as represented by her father nor embraced it, because even her father's traditionalism is not confined to the past. He has finally been able to move beyond his wife's death to embrace a young wife and her young daughter. Jia-chien's position as the new family chef is an "in-between" terrain from which she can move in many directions. Though she seems in some ways to have been left behind, in actuality she has been let free. But this is not the easy "freedom" of modern sexuality that she practiced at the film's opening; this freedom requires slow and deliberate movements to work through it. In recentering herself in her identity as chef, Jia-chien charts the path of the new Taiwan. Trinh Minh-ha says that "[i]dentity is a way of re-departing. Rather, the return to a denied heritage allows one to start again with different re-departures, different pauses, different arrivals."[28] Now that Jia-chien has returned to her "denied heritage," she can begin again. In this sense, although she and the film never leave Taiwan, she is clearly situated as a member of the diaspora.

The relationship between Jia-chien and her older sister, Jia-jen, is fraught with miscommunication and displacement and is significantly revealed in the scene where they are washing dishes—or, metaphorically putting their home in order. The early death of their mother had left Jia-jen feeling responsible for filling that role for Jia-chien, but in doing so she abdicated her position as sister. Jia-chien laments being abandoned by her sister in that way. Furthermore, as they grew older, Jia-jen became a sexually conservative Christian (perhaps to match her role as mother-figure), while Jia-chien became a sexually liberated executive. Each suspects the other of disapproving of her morals. What makes their relationship even more complex, however, is that Jia-chien begins to fall in love with one of her colleagues, a man named Li Kai (Winston Chao), whom she suspects to be the chemistry student who jilted her older sister in college. This wound appears to be what caused Jia-jen to retreat from the world, but we eventually discover that Jia-jen made up the whole story in order to create a barrier against intimacy—even with her family. "Since identity can very well speak its plurality without suppressing its singularity, heterologies of knowledge give all practices of the self a festively vertiginous dimension."[29] Although the plurality of Jia-jen's identity is largely a plot device, the revelation of her desire to be a mother to her sister ironically relocates her outside of the repressed atmosphere of her father's home. Critic Lizzie Francke's observation that "[t]he vision of food being prepared provides the mise en scene of desire deferred"[30] can also be read backwards such that the vision of Jia-chien and Jia-jen doing the dishes "provides the mise en scene" of desire satisfied. It is when Jia-chien reveals her desire for a sister rather than a mother in Jia-jen that the latter is able to become who she really is with all the complexity that entails (a modern, conservative, Christian, sexually aggressive Taiwanese woman), rather than being who she thought her family needed her to be.

Unlike the formulation of the "spinster turned sensual woman" story of Jia-jen, the story of the younger sister—Jia-ning—is one of naïveté and immature love. The construction of the "melancholic" boy-in-love and the overdramatization of the love triangle among three "teenagers" is in many ways a parody of comic book romance.[31] Their innocence, or perhaps even ignorance, belies the danger and tragedy of Jia-ning's unexpected pregnancy. Furthermore, her boyfriend comes from a clearly "dysfunctional" family—his parents are abroad most of the year, leaving him in a nearly empty house with few signs of habitation. His "fatherhood" seems to be built upon invisible financial resources that no one in the film questions. This lack of inquiry is endemic of this story line. In fact, it is with little ceremony or question that the Chu family sees Jia-ning off after her announcement that she is pregnant. The superficial treatment of Jia-ning's story is quite disturbing. While it is clear that the focus of the film is the relationship between Mr. Chu and the middle daughter, Jia-chien, the depictions of "innocent" love and the spinster finding a husband remain not only flat but also dangerously uncomplicated.

The last moment in this film is the image of Jia-chien and Mr. Chu sitting in the kitchen, which has become hers. She stands up slightly and feeds him with her chopsticks. The last words of the film are *nüer* and *ba:*

"daughter" and "father." This moment is highly enigmatic. It appears at one level to be a simple reaffirmation of their familial relationship to one another. But as they verbally reaffirm their relationship as father and daughter, they also visually reverse their roles. Jia-chien now is the provider of food and stability; her father is the one who faces the challenges and uncertainties of a new life and a new family. The two have resolved the tension that began the film: Jia-chien being trapped by her feelings of responsibility toward a man she thought was in his declining years, and Mr. Chu negotiating his own identity as a member of a changing society. He is no longer living in the past but has moved out of the house, which is filled with memories of his dead wife and the life they never lived together. He is no longer merely a representative of the traditional past.

What makes this scene even more resonant is the fact that earlier, when we see a photograph of Mr. Chu's dead wife, she is depicted by the same actress who plays Jia-chien. Thus Lizzie Francke's observation that the return of Jia-chien to the kitchen "makes manifest the various needs that bind a family by setting a mother back at the heart of it" has multiple meanings.[32] The oedipal significance of the relationship between Mr. Chu and Jia-chien is complicated not only by Jia-jen's confessed attempts to fulfill the role of mother but also by Jia-chien's "tomboy" wish to be a chef like her father. In this sense Jia-jen is trying to be the son her father never had. One troubling aspect of Ang Lee's revision of traditional culture is his continual glorification of fraternal love. When Mr. Chu's old cooking companion, the man Jia-jen affectionately refers to as "Uncle," dies, this motivates the dénouement of the film. His death causes so much anxiety for Jia-chien about her own father's health that she decides to stay close to home and assume the role of "mother" in the kitchen. Ironically, it is in fulfilling her wish to be "like her father," that is, to be a chef, that Jia-chien is reinscribed into the domestic role she had tried so hard to escape. The "Uncle" in this film is matched by the army driver turned restaurant owner in *The Wedding Banquet.* His unswerving loyalty to General Gao motivates the central action of the film—it is he who offers to give a wedding banquet for the marriage of the son of his former commander. All of this is based in uncomplicated heterosexual male bonding. All three of Lee's films starring Sihung Lung have been loosely categorized as his "father knows best" trilogy.[33] Lee's failure to problematize "brotherhood," not unlike his unwillingness to deconstruct heterosexual tendencies in all his films (though he cannot be held as accountable for the inevitable ending of *Sense and Sensibility*), remains a disappointing element in his otherwise complex vision of social interactions. In other words, his Hollywood-like endings—one must not forget that he is heavily influenced by his education in U.S. cinema—invite criticism about his concern for marketability in the "West." Ironically, Lee's adaptation of Jane Austen's novel, *Sense and Sensibility,* is both very marketable and very "Western."

• *Sense and Sensibility*

Sense and Sensibility at first appears to be diametrically atypical of Ang Lee's films. Of course, there is the obvious difference that Lee did not coauthor the screenplay with writer and actress Emma Thompson, and therefore we should have little expectation that the concerns manifested in his earlier films should make themselves known here. And indeed, on a superficial level, little of this film of nineteenth-century English manners and romance seems related to Lee's concern with contemporary transnational Chinese and Taiwanese generational interactions. There is, to begin with, no strong father figure—unlike the ubiquitous and profoundly present father portrayed by Taiwanese actor Sihung Lung in Lee's earlier films. Furthermore, the film is set in rural, aristocratic nineteenth-century England, as opposed to the United States or Taiwan. However, the intimacy and complexity of relationships between parents and children, between siblings, and between those who will come together to form new family configurations remain consistent throughout Lee's oeuvre even as the old social dynamics are changing. As in Lee's earlier works, the displacement of the individual and the family is a central concern of *Sense and Sensibility,* both in the original novel and in Lee and Thompson's adaptation. The heroine must move away from home in order to discover the truth of her situation. Being at home somehow blinds her, as well as the rest of Lee's protagonists, to what they can discover about themselves when they are forced to cope with the displacement of their identity.

Because Lee did not participate in writing the screenplay for *Sense and Sensibility,* as he did with his earlier films, a close reading of the details of the plot and themes of this film would serve less purpose than such an examination of the previous films. We therefore focus instead primarily on the conflict over Lee's identity and his identification with the film. References to the plot will largely act to clarify this argument.

Richard Corliss, in his review of *Sense and Sensibility,* speculated that Ang Lee "will probably be the first Asian to receive an Oscar nomination for best director."[34] Corliss' prediction would seem to have been a safe one given that Lee received such a nomination from the Golden Globe Awards. Given the critical and popular acclaim of his last two films, it seems only reasonable that the even more popular *Sense and Sensibility* would win him an Academy Award nomination. But despite the overall success of the film