

University of Alberta

The Narrative Function of “Meal Scenes” in Ang Lee’s Family Trilogy

by

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A thesis submitted to the Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts
in
Chinese Literature

Department of East Asian Studies

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Fall 2011
Edmonton, Alberta

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ABSTRACT

This thesis examines the narrative function of “meal scenes” in Ang Lee’s family trilogy films, exploring how food in them constructs meaning and indicates the complex nature of human relationships. Food preparation serves as a liberating element to express the cook’s repressed love to others and the cook’s efforts to establish his/her identity; however, the supposedly pleasant family meal is always full of tension due to the characters’ intergenerational/cultural frictions and their lack of communication. Thus those eating scenes ironically become an alienating force within the narratives of the films and result symbolically in the disintegration of a family. The characters’ recognition of the true situation and efforts to resolve the strained familial relationship is reflected in the scenes of “cleaning up”, which conveys the meaning of “to communicate, to accept and to forgive”, an ideal way to bridge the boundaries of generation and culture.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to express my deep and sincere gratitude to my supervisor, Professor Zeb Raft, for his invaluable guidance, steadfast encouragement and support during the two years. Professor Raft urged me in his effective way to find my focus during the preparation of this thesis. And throughout my thesis-writing period, he read drafts of my work and provided detailed comments, sound advice, and lots of good ideas with his wide knowledge and logical way of thinking.

I am also immensely grateful to Professor Jenn-Shann Lin, who introduced me to film theories and narratology and shared valuable insights in the relevance of the study. His excellent research skills yielded sources that I would not have found on my own.

My gratitude goes to Professor C(h)ris Reynolds-Chikuma, for his kind support as one of my thesis committee member and his guidance in food culture. I thank Central Motion Pictures Corporation for permission to include copyrighted images as part of my thesis.

In addition, I wish to extend my warmest thanks to all those who have helped me with my study in the Department of East Asian Studies, University of Alberta.

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Introduction

Focus of the Research:

Ang Lee, as the first Asian winner of the Best Director Academy Award in the history of the Oscars, is a transcendent filmmaker who has established himself internationally with films that feature family and romantic relationships and made his works accepted by audiences worldwide. He is regarded as “a post-national artist because he has crossed and blurred the boundaries of the cultures of East and West”.¹ Since 1991, Ang Lee has shot eleven films, including *Pushing Hands* (1992), *The Wedding Banquet* (1993), *Eat Drink Man Woman* (1994), *Sense and Sensibility* (1995), *The Ice Storm* (1997), *Ride with the Devil* (1999), *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* (2000), *Hulk* (2003), *Brokeback Mountain* (2005), *Lust, Caution* (2007) and *Taking Woodstock* (2009). The distinct artistic style of his movies has enabled him to win many international awards as well as high box-office earnings. Meanwhile, he has brought broader attention and wider reception to Chinese-language cinema in western countries through his Chinese-language films. Among them, *Pushing Hands*, *The Wedding Banquet*, (which garnered Golden Globe and Oscar nominations and won the Golden Bear at the Berlin Film Festival), and *Eat Drink Man Woman*, (which received a Best Foreign Film Oscar nomination), deal heavily with father/son and father/daughter relationships in families and thus have been grouped together as the family trilogy.

¹ Whitney Crothers Dilley, *The Cinema of Ang Lee: the Other Side of the Screen* (London and New York: Wallflower Press, 2007), 20.

Ang Lee's trilogy conducts a continued exploration of the very fine ethnic/cultural line between East and West and also indicates the continuing clash of tradition and modernity, leading numerous scholars to ponder their cultural significance. However, the filmmaker's both artistic and commercial successes in the world can not only be attributed to the transnational themes and intercultural/generational ideologies conveyed in the movies, but also to the ingenious narrative and cinematic forms of his works, which have only received a cursory glance and brief discussion: for example, Whitney Crothers Dilley just summarized the use of the long take as one of the characteristics of Ang Lee's cinema and gave illustrations of this kind of shots in one or two sentences², or some critics only chose to discuss the scenes which are useful for further proving their arguments focusing on the cultural meanings. Actually, in order to explore the films' real cultural essence, it is very necessary to take a close look at the narrative organization of each entire film and get a clear idea of how these cinematic elements such as the setting, the use of costume, props, and the behavior of the figures as well as techniques of framing, editing, sound and the spatial arrangements appropriately integrate with the thematic expression of the film. Although Ang Lee's trilogy films are frequently discussed, no scholar has performed a thorough and systematic analysis based on film theory and narratology.

Another intriguing issue attracting my attention is that meal scenes bulk large in Ang Lee's family trilogy films. These scenes can be divided into three

² Ibid., 25-26.

categories according to the chronological order ----food preparation, meal time and cleaning up. This food motif functions to unify the film and advance the “cause-effect chain” of the narrative.³ However, the meal scenes in Ang Lee’s trilogy film have never been treated as a united narrative system, being categorized into several groups and explored thoroughly for their respective functions in the entire narrative framework. Moreover, why does Ang Lee use the food scenes to carry such essential narrative functions? Does food in the films play a key role in constructing meaning and indicating the complex nature of human relationships? What kind of internal narrative mechanism do the scenes of “food preparation”, “meal time” and “cleaning up” constitute? All these questions still await in-depth investigations.

This thesis aspires to address the above issues through a detailed examination of all the key meal scenes in Ang Lee’s trilogy films for their narrative functions. Just as Jane Ferry states, “A close observation of food scenes within the narrative framework of film reveals its powerful, coded, cultural meanings that structure the arrangements of social life.”⁴ By the cinematic close readings of different categories of meal scenes, the thesis will figure out the symbolic representations of them and provide insight into how these scenes are united systematically in the narrative to demonstrate the dynamics of characters’ familial and social interactions.

³ Characters and their traits, particularly desire, are a strong source of causes and effects. In the classical Hollywood narrative the chain of actions that results from predominantly psychological causes tends to motivate most or all other narrative events. See David Bordwell and Kristin Thompson, *Film Art: An Introduction* (6thed.) (New York: McGraw-Hill, 2001), 76-77.

⁴ Jane F. Ferry, *Food in Film: A Culinary Performance of Communication* (New York: Routledge, 2003), 1.

Literature review and the significance of the research:

As a well-known Asian filmmaker in the world, Ang Lee can treat both Eastern and Western themes well and his works have been frequently discussed in many modern scholarly works based on comparisons of Chinese and Western cultural and gender values.

There are two books in English mainly focusing on Ang Lee: one is Whitney Crothers Dilley's *The Cinema of Ang Lee: the Other Side of the Screen* (2007), the other is Ellen Cheshire's *Ang Lee* (2001). Both of them provide useful biographical information about the moviemaker and give an introductory overview of his works. Whitney Crothers Dilley first discusses Ang Lee's position in Chinese and world cinema as a director and offers a brief presentation of the characteristics of his cinema, such as globalisation and cultural identity, patriarchy, family and the long take and framing. Then she explores the deep cultural meanings of Ang Lee's nine films from *Pushing Hands* (1992) to *Brokeback Mountain* (2005) one by one with various subtitles, including "Confucian Values and Cultural Displacement in *Pushing Hands*", "Transgressing Boundaries of Gender and Culture in *The Wedding Banquet*" and "Globalisations and Cultural Identity in *Eat Drink Man Woman*".⁵ Although the author did explain some key plots in detail such as the opening dialogue-free friction between the father and daughter-in-law in *Pushing Hands*, to serve for her argument that the film is "an intimate study of the cultural tensions of the diaspora that at its essence deals with the confrontation between Chinese and Western

⁵ Whitney Crothers Dilley, *The Cinema of Ang Lee: the Other Side of the Screen* (London and New York: Wallflower Press, 2007), 51-71.

culture”⁶, she only pays attention to the plot development, and has not plumbed what kind of role the specific cinematic elements play in each scene and how they integrate with the overall narrative structure of the film.

Ellen Cheshire’s *Ang Lee* covers the director’s career up to 2001. The book provides information on each film from the aspects of crew, cast, story, background, the father figure, rites of passage, the generation gap, food, framing, awards and etc. Although Cheshire has touched upon the topic of food, pointing out “the ritual of meal preparation and consumption is observed in Lee’s films time and time again”⁷, she only summarizes the plots related to meals in time sequence briefly and superficially and the cleaning-up category is not included. In other words, she takes a simplified approach to the meals scenes in the films; therefore her discussion of them does not go far enough. Also, Cheshire marginalizes Schamus’ contributions (who plays an important role in shaping Lee’s films as a producer and a frequent script collaborator) just because he says “he is honoured to take the back seat”.⁸ She unwisely accepts Schamus’ display of modesty and refers to him as a “Side Order”, while Ang Lee is “The Master Chef”, which seems unfair for Schamus. One must be careful when using *Ang Lee* as a source, for Cheshire commits some factual errors when she misunderstands the plots.

Besides books, there are also some articles and essays devoted to Ang Lee’s films. An early in-depth study of his Chinese trilogy was conducted in 1997 by Wei Ming Dariotis and Eileen Fung in their essay “Breaking the Soy Sauce Jar: Diaspora and Displacement in the Films of Ang Lee”, which is included in the

⁶ Ibid., 52.

⁷ Ellen Cheshire, *Ang Lee* (Harpenden: Pocket Essentials, 2001), 18.

⁸ Ibid., 8.

book *Transnational Chinese Cinemas: Identity, Nationhood, Gender* (1997), edited by Sheldon Hsiao-peng Lu. This essay discusses exilic/diasporic issues in these films, placing Ang Lee in opposition to a Chinese cultural critic called Po Yang. Po Yang emphasizes the Chinese cultural tradition's stagnant qualities by comparing it to a "soy sauce jar", while Dariotis and Fung argue that Lee's movies consistently "illustrates the repressive as well as revitalizing forces of Chinese traditions in the intersection of the residual past and emerging future."⁹ They read Lee's films as a series of attempts to negotiate a place for the Chinese tradition in Westernized modernity, suggesting that although the traditional patriarchy is initially threatened in all three films, it is ultimately recognised and re-established with a flexible twist. In this essay, the two writers offer some convincing ideas about the implied meanings of certain meal scenes, but only from the cultural perspective and they don't pay attention to the interrelation between these meal scenes.

Ang Lee's trilogy films are not always treated as a unit: sometimes they are discussed by scholars individually, such as Chris Berry's "*Wedding Banquet: A family (Melodrama) Affair*" (2003), which is a genre study of the movie's mix of American and Taiwan melodrama and Ti Wei's "Generational/Cultural Contradictions and Global Incorporation: Ang Lee's *Eat Drink Man Woman*" (2005). Similar to the books and essays mentioned above, both of them aim to explore the cultural and commercial values of the films and do not take the extra

⁹ Wei Ming Dariotis and Eileen Fung, "Breaking the Soy Sauce Jar: Diaspora and Displacement in the Films of Ang Lee," in Sheldon Hsiao-peng Lu, (ed) *Transnational Chinese Cinemas: Identity, Nationhood, Gender* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1997), 187.

step to inquire the narrative functions of these scenes by means of film theory and narratology.

While greatly indebted to different researchers' studies on Ang Lee, this thesis will distinguish itself from the above scholarly works. It is neither an ambitious endeavour to exhaust all of Ang Lee's movies on various subjects, nor a monographic account of this filmmaker's career advancement and artistic achievements; instead, I narrow my focus to the meal scenes in Ang Lee's family trilogy and give an initial exploration of the narrative functions of them. Relying upon Bordwell and Thompson's *Film Art: An Introduction* (2001), the thesis will figure out how the cinematic forms and techniques of these food scenes construct the narrative structure of the films and clarify the hidden connection between them. It will complement current scholarship on the cultural significance of Ang Lee's family trilogy films and provide new perspectives to understand how food in them constructs meaning and indicates the complex nature of human relationships.

Generally speaking, all the characters in the films are somehow repressed at the beginning, so "food preparation" scenes function as a liberating element to resist against the oppression. They try to establish their own identity both in the family and society and develop their relations with others through the preparation of a meal. However, the shared family meals and dining spaces are always brought into disorder because of the characters' intergenerational/cultural frictions and their lack of communication, thus those eating scenes ironically become an alienating force within the narratives of the films and result symbolically in the

disintegration of a family. Such crises awaken the protagonists with the truth of situation and the “cleaning up” scenes in all the three movies have the common narrative function of reflecting the moment of their recognition and the solution to their strained relationship: “to cooperate, to accept and to forgive”, an ideal way to bridge the boundaries of generation and culture.

Plot Summary:

Before we move to the content of each chapter in the thesis, a brief introduction of the plots in Ang Lee’s family trilogy films is necessary:

In *Pushing Hands*, Mr. Zhu, a widowed Tai-Chi master, moves from China to New York to spend his retirement with his son Alex, his American daughter-in-law Martha and his grandson Jeremy. However, when Alex and Jeremy are absent throughout most of the day due to their work and study, Mr. Zhu and Martha don’t spend a happy time together at home. Martha is novelist who works all day in front of the computer, and she finds Mr. Zhu’s presence a distraction for her and becomes more and more antagonistic towards her father-in-law. Although Mr. Zhu doesn’t know English, he tries to maintain a good relation with Martha, such as bringing her a cup of tea and practicing Tai-chi therapy on her to alleviate her pain, but he is always ignored or rejected. The tension between Mr. Zhu and Martha is elevated when all the family members are gathering at the dining table and they two compete to talk with Alex, disapproving of the other’s values and lifestyle. So Alex is trapped in the middle of strained relationship between them. On one side, his wife keeps complaining that the father’s coming has affected both her writing and Jeremy’s study. On the other side, the father is at odds with

American customs and technology, and resents the boring life in New York. To make Mr. Zhu's life more colourful, Alex suggests his father teach Tai-chi in a Chinese community center on weekends, where Mr. Zhu first meets the widowed cooking instructor Mrs. Chen from Taiwan. The two elderly people establish a smooth friendship because of their similar situations.

One day, when the father gets lost on a walk and Alex fails to find him, the son goes berserk and smashes up the kitchen. Then Mr. Zhu, who is later returned by the police, has to clean up the messy dining space together with Martha. Alex's outburst makes him realize the harm he is doing to his wife and child and decide to let his father leave. He secretly cooperates with Mrs. Chen's daughter to encourage the relationship between Mr. Zhu and Mrs. Chen, which makes the father feel insulted and quietly slip away from his son's home. He moves to Chinatown and works as a dishwasher in a Chinese restaurant, where his boss humiliates him. Mr. Zhu uses his Tai chi skills to resist and is finally brought into the police station. Alex learns the news on TV and runs to rescue his father. But Mr. Zhu refuses to return to his son's home. He chooses to live on his own in Chinatown and teach Tai-chi there.

In *The Wedding Banquet*, Gao Weitong is a successful Taiwanese migrant property developer who lives in New York with his American gay lover called Simon. But he has never told his parents (Mr. and Mrs. Gao) in Taiwan about his sexual orientation for fear of breaking their hearts. In an attempt to end the old couple's efforts to find Weitong a bride, Simon suggests a sham marriage between his lover and Weiwei, a tenant of Weitong's from mainland China in need of a

green card. Trouble begins when hearing that their son is going to marry in New York, the Gaos come for a visit immediately to attend the wedding, and the small civil ceremony makes them feel very disappointed. The three young peoples' plans go further awry when all the family members meet the father's former jeep driver in the army occasionally at his restaurant who then insists on holding a lavish wedding banquet for "the new couple". After Weiwei and Weitong spend a drunken wedding night together, Weiwei gets pregnant. This accident threatens the relationship between Simon and Weitong and at the same time the father is sent to the hospital because of his stroke. All the crises provoke Weitong's coming out to his mother, who asks him to keep the secret from his father. However, Mr. Gao reveals in a private conversation with Simon that he has figured out the situation and gives him a red envelope, which is a symbol that the care of his son has been handed to the "wife" and represents his acknowledgement of their homosexual relationship, but Mr. Gao swears Simon to secrecy. At the end of the movie, Weiwei decides to keep the baby, the old couple return to Taiwan, and the gay lovers and Weiwei agree to raise the child together.

In *Eat Drink Man Woman*, Mr. Zhu, whose wife died sixteen years ago, lives together with his three unmarried daughters in a big old house located in the center of Taipei. The daughters lead very separate lives: Jiazhen, the eldest daughter, is a strait-laced chemistry teacher who has converted to Christianity; the middle daughter, Jiaqian, who looks the same as her mother, is an ambitious executive for a Taiwanese airline; and Jianing, the youngest one, is still a student but works part-time in a fast food restaurant. Mr. Zhu is a master chef in a five-

star hotel, but one problem that bothers him is that he gradually loses the sense of taste and has to rely on Old Wen, his colleague and long-time friend, as the trustworthy taster when he cooks in the hotel kitchen. Mr. Zhu insists on preparing an elaborate feast for his family every Sunday. But they are not happy occasions because every time one of the daughters makes an unexpected announcement to leave home due to their work or romance. The daughters begin to worry about the father's personal life but actually he has fallen in love secretly with a divorced woman called Jinrong, who is the family's neighbour and is only a little older than his eldest daughter. He plans to sort out his own romance at the regular Sunday dinner, but keeps getting foiled by the three girls. Mr. Zhu finally announces his intention to sell the old house and to start a new life with Jinrong in another place at the largest family gathering, when Jinrong's mother, Auntie Liang, and her daughter, Shanshan, are also invited. The father's news makes all the members extremely surprised and disappointed, especially for Jiaqian, who has decided to quit the chance of working abroad and stay with her father. At the end of the movie, when Mr. Zhu and two of his daughters have already moved out, Jiaqian turns to be the cook to prepare the family meal. As she and her father sit alone at the dining table and Mr. Zhu accepts her soup, he discovers that his sense of taste comes back.

Chapter overview:

Chapter one of the thesis discusses the narrative function of the "food preparation" scenes in each of the family trilogy films, pointing out that this category of scenes serves as a liberating element to express the cook's repressed

love (no matter whether it is paternalistic love, romantic love or fraternal love) to others and the cook's efforts to establish his/her identity. And when there is more than one cook in the scene, it is a vivid "exposition"¹⁰ of their relationship. This chapter begins with the examinations of these "food preparation" scenes in *Pushing Hands*, where two chains of personal relationship are established: the relations between father (Mr. Zhu) and children (Alex and Martha) and the encounter between the two elderly characters, Mr. Zhu and Mrs. Chen. It is then followed by an analysis of the three cooks' relation (Weiwei, Simon and Mrs. Gao) revealed in the "food preparation" scenes in *The Wedding Banquet*, where Simon is established as a very good cook but Weiwei is inept at cooking indicate their true identities in the family. The "food preparation" scenes in *Eat Drink Man Woman* is the last part in this chapter, in which the liberating elements in the scenes containing Mr. Zhu and Jiaqian individually as the chef and the brotherhood revealed in the ones having both Mr. Zhu and Old Wen preparing meals are discussed separately.

Chapter 2 gives a thorough exploration of how the familial and social relationships between characters develop in the eating scenes. This chapter consists of three parts. The first part articulates these family meals' (which are full of tension) instrumental role in expressing the characters' "disparity of understanding"¹¹. Such disparity makes the supposed pleasant family gathering ironically function as an alienating force within the narratives of the films. And

¹⁰ David Bordwell and Kristin Thompson, *Film Art: An Introduction (6th ed.)* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 2001), 68.

¹¹ Robert Scholes and Robert Kellogg, *The Nature of Narrative* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1966), 240.

when the tension and repression reach a certain degree, they have to be released. So the second part discusses the figures' outburst during the dining time or in the eating space in each film, such as Alex's outburst in *Pushing Hands*, Simon's outburst in *The Wedding Banquet* and Mr. Zhu's emotional outburst in *Eat Drink Man Woman*, which can be perceived as the turning points of the narratives. While outside the home space, there is another category of eating scenes indicating a smooth friendship (Mr. Zhu and Mrs. Chen in *Pushing Hands*, and Mr. Zhu and Old Wen in *Eat Drink Man Woman*), which is involved in the third part of my discussion: dining with friends harmoniously symbolizes a ritual of intimacy and creates an image of social cohesion.

Chapter 3 advances to the next stage of the solution for the strained relationship between family members. It explores how the "cleaning up" scenes in the three movies fulfill their narrative function in revealing the recognition of the protagonists with the truth situation ("anagnorisis"¹²) and expressing their efforts to resolve conflicts, which is also divided into three parts: the silent cooperation between Mr. Zhu and Martha in *Pushing Hands*; characters' (Mr. Gao, Simon and Weiwei) acceptance and compromise in *The Wedding Banquet* and the forgiveness between the two sisters (Jiaqian and Jiazhen) in *Eat Drink Man Woman*. Characters re-establish their personal identities and rebuild the family

¹² Aristotle identifies three key elements in narrative: *hamartia*, *anagnorisis* and *peripeteia*. The *hamartia* means a 'sin' or 'fault'; the *anagnorisis* means 'recognition' or 'realization', this being a moment in the narrative when the truth of the situation is recognized by the protagonist—often it's a moment of self-recognition; The *peripeteia* means a 'turn-round' or a 'reversal' of fortune. See Peter Barry, *Beginning Theory: An Introduction to Literary and Cultural Theory* (Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 2009), 216.

structure in this process, which also leads to their “switch in fortune (*peripeteia*)”¹³ at the end of the movies.

¹³ Ibid., 216.

Chapter One The Narrative Function of “Food Preparation” Scenes

In Ang Lee’s family trilogy films, characters’ love toward others, as well as their perception of their own identity, are commonly restricted at the beginning of the movies. Because “food is central to an individual’s sense of identity”¹⁴, the filmmaker arranges them to release their oppression through the orgy of preparing meals. As Jane F. Ferry states, food that is presented in the film can be regarded as a liberating element, a tool of resistance against oppression.¹⁵ The category of “food preparation” scenes in the movies functions as just such a liberating force in the narrative to resist against its general repressed tone. They are a symbolic expression of the cooks’ repressed love, no matter whether it is paternalistic love, romantic love or fraternal love; moreover, they vividly represent characters’ efforts to establish their identity and develop their relations with others both in the family and society. And when there is more than one cook in the scene, it is a lively exposition of their familial or social relationship.

1.1 “Food Preparation” scenes in *Pushing Hands*

In *Pushing Hands*, there are a total of six series of scenes to establish the “food preparation” motif and these scenes mainly take place in two settings—the kitchen in a house belonging to Mr. Zhu’s son (Alex) in New York and the Chinese community center. From these two settings, two chains of personal

¹⁴ Fischler, Claude. “Food Habits, Social Change and the Nature/Culture Dilemma.” *Social Science Information* 19, no.5(1980):937.

¹⁵ Jane F. Ferry, *Food in Film: A Culinary Performance of Communication* (New York: Routledge, 2003), 43.

relationship are exposed: those narrative events in the kitchen reflect the relations between father (Mr. Zhu) and children (Alex and Martha), while the plots developed in the Chinese community center imply the relationship between the two elderly characters, Mr. Zhu and Mrs. Chen. Although the characters or settings are similar in the meal scenes, these scenes convey different meanings by varying the cinematic elements such as props, the spatial arrangements, framing, editing, sound and the behavior of the figures.

1.1.1 The exposition of the relationship between Mr. Zhu and his children (Alex and Martha)

The film begins with a prologue showing the distinct living habits of the retired Chinese (Mr. Zhu) and his American daughter-in-law (Martha): the way Mr. Zhu spends his spare time practicing Tai-chi, establishing a peaceful eastern lifestyle, whereas Martha's expression and every move show the anxiety of modern western ways. Significantly, no line is delivered in the first seven minutes of the film: they can't or don't want to bridge the linguistic and cultural barrier. The first "Food Preparation" scene in the movie appears right after this silent period and props become important here: Mr. Zhu covers his Chinese-style food with aluminum foil and put it in the kitchen microwave to heat up, which shows his mistaken use of western products. As Bordwell states, "Expectation spurs emotion"¹⁶; Mr. Zhu's action engages the spectators' attention deeply: "No, it's dangerous!" And as the spectators predicted, the oven begins to flame and spark. Then Martha has to run in the kitchen to solve the problem and shouts to her

¹⁶ David Bordwell and Kristin Thompson, *Film Art: An Introduction (6th ed.)* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 2001), 45.

father-in-law, “No metal in the microwave!” This is the first spoken line in the film and it is delivered in the long shot (Fig.1.1): the two human figures are put between the frames of two doors within a shot full of oblong shapes (cabinet, mirror, decorations on the wall and etc), which denote their restricted situation. Moreover, Mr. Zhu’s posture in this shot, ducking his head in front of Martha and listening to her scolding in silence, conveys the meaning that the eastern patriarchy has been challenged in western circumstances. This message is underlined by the mirror in the foreground of the frame which only reflects the oblique image of Mr. Zhu, showing the threat of his identity. In this way, the narrative positioning of the characters and the style of framing help fulfill distinct functions. The restricted space serves as a metaphor for the father’s identity crisis.



Figure 1-1

Mr. Zhu moves from mainland China to the States, where he is a foreigner. Although he stays together with his son’s family, it’s very difficult for him and his daughter-in-law to communicate because of the language and cultural barrier,

which must have made him feel alienated. He originally lived in China where patriarchy is regarded as the social and psychological structure of society: the father is always the most important figure in a family and everyone has to listen to his words and shows respect to him.¹⁷ However, now in the scene, the father is being criticized by his daughter-in-law, like a child who made a mistake. We can get from the sharp contrast that Mr. Zhu's traditional patriarchal identity is repressed in a western country. Meanwhile, Martha also feels restricted due to the change of her working environment: her original private space now turns to be public because of Mr. Zhu's presence, which is a distraction and unacceptable for her.

Both Mr. Zhu's and Martha's repression get released in the later "food preparation" scene when they begin to prepare dinner simultaneously in the kitchen for Alex and Jeremy; they can cook what they like at that time: Martha serves up sloppy macaroni cheese, while Mr. Zhu is preparing for a complex array of colorful Chinese dishes. "Cultures have created cuisine and endowed food with symbolic representations to mark a collective as well as an individual identity"¹⁸, and Mr. Zhu and Martha's different food choices mark their cultural boundaries. Again, the characters are silent, but the scene is full of the noise of cutting and washing. The sound of their cooking functions as a liberating force to balance the oppressive tone in the narrative and we can't ignore its competitive nature: the two figures are competing to strengthen their own identities or positions in the

¹⁷ The director Ang Lee mentions, "I was raised under that patriarchy shadow, which exerted a lot of influence. I didn't know what I wanted from life, but I knew I had to please my father." See Berry, Michael, "Ang Lee: Freedom in Film." [Interview]. In Berry, ed., *Speaking in Images: Interviews with Contemporary Chinese Filmmakers* (New York: Columbia UP, 2005), 329.

¹⁸ -----, "Food self and identity." *Social Science Information* 27, no.2 (1988): 275-292.

family. Although Mr. Zhu and Martha are in the same space---the small kitchen – there is no eye contact between them. It’s ironic that their close physical distance can’t help to shorten the distance between their hearts.

When Alex comes back, he attempts to help his father to prepare and talk with him, and the use of deep space in this scene (Fig.1.2) supports and advances the cause-effect chain of the narrative: Alex stands in the foreground of the frame, whereas Mr. Zhu is positioned in the background, thus Alex’s facial expression is clearly seen when he listens to his father’s complaint of the boring life in New York. He is a little worried about the inharmonious relationship between his father and wife. This is why he suggests his father teach Tai-chi in the Chinese Community Center.



Figure 1-2

As Bordwell and Thompson maintain, there are basically four principles of film form, including similarity and repetition, difference and variation,

development and unity/disunity.¹⁹ The last three “Food Preparation” scenes in this movie, together with the first two, which are all shot in the home kitchen, unify the film through their repetition, variation and development.

In next home-cooking scene, which has Martha preparing dinner for her husband and son, echoes the second one (repetition), but at this time, another cooker--the father--is absent (variation). So without the Chinese chef, only western dishes cooked by Martha are put on the dining table. Does this mean Mr. Zhu has become the loser in their “cooking competition”? This causes Alex asks “where is father?” when he comes back, then both of them realize the father may have gotten lost: actually, this plot implies that Mr. Zhu not only loses his direction, but he also feels confused and frustrated for his own position both in the family and in a western society.

After the father is sent back by the police, he catches a cold, but Alex’s attitude towards his father and wife reverse (the reason will be explained in Chapter two: Alex’s outburst), which is expressed in the following “Food Preparation” scene (Fig.1.3): although Alex is cooking ginger soup for his sick father to show his concern, he stands together with his wife (in contrast to helping his father to prepare food in the second one), and says to her that he got a great idea to let his father leave without hurting anyone’s feelings. The narrative generates suspense by arranging Alex not to speak out what “the great idea” is, so the spectators’ expectations are delayed until Mrs. Chen tells Mr. Zhu about their children’s trick disappointedly during their long uphill climb.

¹⁹ David Bordwell and Kristin Thompson, *Film Art: An Introduction (6th ed.)* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 2001), 51.



Figure 1-3



Figure 1-3

The last “Food Preparation” scene in *Pushing Hands*, which is arranged nearly in the closure of the movie, involves the cook’s personal development. It begins with the close-up of a Chinese spring roll fried in a pan, which is a prop to make the spectators hungry and also arouse their curiosity –“who is cooking this?” It is followed by a medium long shot to tell the audience that Martha, the problematic western woman, is using chopsticks to cook (Fig.1.4), another prop revealing eastern culture, and the color of her clothes changes to red, the brightest and the favorite color for Chinese people. “Eating the food of another culture produces a sympathetic union whereby one assumes the essence of that culture.”²⁰ “Eating, digesting, and assimilating foods of a foreign culture transfers the symbolic properties associated with foreign food into the eater.”²¹ All these narrative elements such as spring rolls, the chopsticks, her red sweater and even the tea set that her friend is using in the scene convey the meaning that Martha has learned to appreciate and integrate eastern culture into her own daily life. And in the process of identifying with Martha, the Western audience are also supposed to “digest” Chinese culture through watching the film. Martha is even planning to

²⁰ Frazier, Sir James George. *The Golden Bough: A Study in Magic and Religion*, (New York: Macmillan, 1958), 12-52.

²¹ Alan Beardsworth and Theresa Keil, *Sociology on the Menu: An Invitation to the Study of Food and Society* (London: Routledge, 1997), 53-56.

write a novel about the history of the Chinese railroad workers in America at this time. Her personal development is emphasized by the line that she delivers in the close-up, “I blame myself”. Another interesting point in the frame is, compared with the shot full of oblong shapes in the prologue (Fig.1.1), here there are more round-shape objects in the image, such as the plates, the cups and the bottles, which implies the relationship between family members with different cultural backgrounds turns to be more harmonious at the end.

1.1.2 The encounter between Mr. Zhu and Mrs. Chen

In *Pushing Hands*, besides the familial relationship, the filmmaker proposes to establish another kind of social interaction between two elderly characters, Mr. Zhu and Mrs. Chen. Their relationship is also developed in the process of preparing food, but the setting shifts to the Chinese Community Center, a space outside home, where both of the characters have their new social identities: Mr. Zhu teaches Tai-chi, while Mrs. Chen is a cooking instructor.

In this scene, Mrs. Chen comes to borrow a space from Mr. Zhu for their food preparation---making steamed buns. The shots afterward function to create comedy through the behavior of the figures: in the setting of their first-talk scene (Fig.1.5), there is a very fat Tai-chi student standing between them, with his hand raised, like a barrier, which implies it’s not appropriate for Mr. Zhu and Mrs. Chen to talk freely at that time. However, when they begin to share the same space to teach Tai-chi and cooking, in order to show Mrs. Chen his excellent Tai-chi skills and have a chance to become friends with her, Mr. Zhu pushes that “barrier” student to fly across the room and destroy the desserts that Mrs. Chen

has made, thus he has the excuse to help her with food preparation and they can sit down shoulder by shoulder to chat, as shown in Figure 1.6. Those humorous scenes reveal Mr. Zhu's crush on Mrs. Chen. Compared with the repressed father figure at home, Mr. Zhu in this scene is established as an intelligent one who can skilfully pursue his romantic love. The shot of the two elderly characters happily making the Chinese buns together (Fig.1.6) vividly presents food's importance as a cohesive force for maintaining their communal Chinese-heritage identity and their smooth relationship.



Figure 1-4



Figure 1-5

1.2 “Food Preparation” scenes in *The Wedding Banquet*

Ang Lee's second Chinese-language movie, *The Wedding Banquet*, also brings forth the cross-cultural and transnational issues between the Asian parents (Mr. Gao and Mrs. Gao), their gay Asian American son (Weitong), Weitong's white lover (Simon) and Weitong's sham wife (Weiwei). Compared with these in *Pushing Hands*, the “Food Preparation” scenes in *The Wedding Banquet* are fewer, but they conduct similar narrative functions and create more comic effects.

Most of the “Food Preparation” scenes are shot in the kitchen of Weitong's trendy brownstone in Manhattan and the characters who are preparing dishes in

these scenes are often Weiwei, Simon (the real “wife” for Weitong) and Mrs. Gao. This phenomenon reflects the traditional Chinese cultural value that in a family, it is always the woman or wife that prepares meals for her husband and even his parents to show her loyalty and filial piety. Cooking is a necessary skill that a qualified housewife should grasp in traditional China; this may be why Simon is established as a very good cook but Weiwei is inept at cooking in the “Food Preparation” scenes — to indicate their true identities in the family. In the way of gathering all the preparation scenes in the movie together, we will get a close look at how the two daughters-in-law (Weiwei and Simon)’s identity transfers from real to sham and vice versa for the mother (Mrs. Gao). These scenes constitute a clear chain in the narrative for the dynamic transformation of their relationship.

1.2.1 The transformation of relationship between Mrs. Gao and her two “daughters-in-law”

The first “Food Preparation” scene (Fig.1.7) in *The Wedding Banquet* looks very funny: Weiwei, who wears the apron and looks like a professional cook, is leaning on the table drinking Fanta casually, while Simon, with a more formal stripe shirt and western trousers, is cooking beside her. Spectators may feel



Figure 1-6



Figure 1-7

surprised when Weiwei and Simon suddenly switch their positions, but they will understand the two figures' action when seeing Mrs. Gao enters the frame with her gratitude: "Thanks for cooking for us, Weiwei!" (Fig.1.8); this line reveals Weiwei's position in Mrs. Gao's mind: her daughter-in-law. Comedy arises not only from the figures' behavior, but also from the film's use of deep space to present two narrative events simultaneously. While in the foreground of the image, Mrs. Gao prepares to set the table with some bowls and chopsticks in her hands, Simon helps Weiwei with the dish in the background (Fig.1.9). Mrs. Gao's ignorance of the situation is displayed through planes of depth. Thanks to such spatial arrangements, Ang Lee is able to pack two story events together, resulting in a tight narrative construction and in a relatively unrestricted narration.



Figure 1-8

It is very interesting that when the image has already shifted to the living room, where Weitong and his father walk towards the calligraphy scrolls hanging on the wall, the dialogue between Mrs. Gao and Weiwei who are in the kitchen

area continues: “It’s very lucky for Weitong to find a girl who is so good at cooking these days!”, “You flatter me!” Although the two figures are not in the image, this short dialogue further improves the relationship between Mrs. Gao and Weiwei: the mother-in-law is very satisfied with her new daughter-in-law. And a “sound bridge” of this sort smoothes the narrative transition between the scenes.²²

The second and third “Food Preparation” scenes shot in the kitchen both begin with the close-up of fried eggs, but the attitude of the cook – Weiwei – towards the action is totally different. The former one further indicates that Weiwei is actually a poor cook with another close-up of the messed up eggs in the pan. Although she is laughed at by Weitong, who later came in the kitchen because of her clumsy action, the relationship between figures in this scene including Weiwei, Weitong, Mr. Gao and Mrs. Gao are harmonious. Weiwei enjoys her role as Weitong’s wife and the old couple’s daughter-in-law.

In the latter scene, when Weiwei realizes she is pregnant but it’s impossible for Weitong, who is the potential father, to love her instead of Simon, she feels frustrated and doesn’t know how to deal with this situation. In another word, she is confused about her identity in the family. So this time, Weiwei is cooking eggs absent-mindedly. And when Simon, her rival in love, enters the kitchen to offer some help and reminds her to be more careful, she refuses his offer by making the eggs even worse, contrasting sharply with the first scene in which they two can cooperate in cooking smoothly. Therefore, the two “Food Preparation” scenes

²² The sound from one scene may linger briefly while the image is already presenting the next scene; this is called a “sound bridge”. See David Bordwell and Kristin Thompson, *Film Art: An Introduction (6th ed.)* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 2001), 313.

constitute “parallelism”, which is “the process whereby the film cues the spectator to compare two or more distinct elements by highlighting some similarity”²³. Ang Lee uses the repeated motif of fried eggs to unify the narration, and he also guides the spectator to pay attention to the change of the figures’ emotional state. The unharmonious relationship between Weiwei and Simon in the latter “Food Preparation” scene foreshadows Simon’s outburst in the following eating scene and the two wives’ confrontation besides the dining table (see chapter 2) because of Weiwei’s pregnancy.

The last “Food Preparation” scene shot at home is a medium close-up of Mrs. Gao in the foreground, with her son’s gay lover standing in the blurred background (Fig.1.10). Diegetic sound plays an important role in this scene: although the close-up only frames the figures’ bodies from chest up and we can’t see what they are actually doing with their hands in the restricted image, the



Figure 1-9

²³ Ibid., 53.

sound of cutting and washing reveals that they are preparing dishes. This kind of framing has the effect of intensifying the viewers' attention on the diegetic sound and Mrs. Gao's facial expression greatly since they becomes their main guide to what is happening in the scene.

The narrative background of Figure 1.10 is that after learning that Simon is her son's real lover, Mrs. Gao is asking him about his family members and Simon replies patiently in English. This scene implies that the figures have already begun to adjust their identities in the family, Mrs. Gao as Simon's "Mother-in-law", and Simon as her "Daughter-in-law". Spectators may just wonder if Mrs. Gao can understand Simon's English. Then they will hear Weiwei's translation in Chinese, "His mother is in Boston, and his father lives in Arizona". Although Weiwei doesn't show up in the image, her voice confirms that she has also adjusted herself to be a translator between Mrs. Gao and Simon accordingly. Compared with the previous preparation scene in which she is struggling in her sham role of Weitong's wife and the old couple's daughter-in-law, in this scene, she gets more released when her identity and Simon's have switched and she becomes an "outsider" to help Simon (the real "daughter-in-law") and Mrs. Gao to build up their relationship.

"Sound can offer potent clues about offscreen space"²⁴. Weiwei's lines tell the spectators that she is also in the kitchen and arouses their expectation that she will come into the frame later. Because of this anticipation, they will pay great attention to the moment that Weiwei comes and thus the narrative motivation of it

²⁴ David Bordwell and Kristin Thompson, *Film Art: An Introduction (6th ed.)* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 2001), 216.

can be fulfilled: when Weiwei enters into the frame and tells Mrs. Gao that Simon has two older sisters and they both live in San Francisco, Mrs. Gao whispers to her, “Are his two sisters also acting a little weird?” The word “weird” reflects traditional Chinese people’s attitudes towards homosexual, which is the point that the director proposes to make an emphasis on. “The elderly lady is portrayed as someone who has bought into the values of patriarchal culture, period”²⁵: Mrs. Gao treats homosexual as a kind of illness, so she is very sad when Weitong tells her his sexual orientation. She even hopes Weitong’s homosexuality is “just a phase” and one day he will recover from this “weird illness”.

Another typical feature of this scene is the filmmaker’s adept use of racking focus to yield comic and ironic effect. As has been mentioned, this “Food Preparation” shot begins with Mrs. Gao in the foreground sharply visible and the rear plane which contains Simon fuzzy, but after Mrs. Gao’s question, “Are his two sisters also acting a little weird?”, in order to let the spectators see clearly Simon’s vague look, the filmmaker adjusts perspective, so that Simon in the background comes into crisp focus and the foreground which contains Mrs. Gao becomes blurred (Fig.1.11). Racking focus in the scene helps indicate the language and cultural barrier between Simon and Mrs. Gao, although both of them try to communicate with the other and establish their new familial relationship.

²⁵ Rey Chow, “All Chinese Families Are Alike: Biopolitics in *Eat a Bowl of Tea* and *The Wedding Banquet*”, in *Sentimental Fabulations: Contemporary Chinese Films* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007), 138.



Figure 1-10

1.3 “Food Preparation” scenes in *Eat Drink Man Woman*

Because of its exhilarating display of Chinese culinary masterpieces, Ang Lee’s follow-up movie *Eat Drink Man Woman* has even been classified as a food film. According to one critic’s account, “over 100 different recipes are used in the film, each one authentically prepared and beautifully photographed.”²⁶ Since the protagonist, Master Chef Mr. Zhu, is established as Taiwan’s greatest living chef who works in the kitchen of a five-star hotel in Taipei and his middle daughter, Jiaqian, also has cooking talent. The “Food Preparation” scenes in *Eat Drink Man Woman* look very professional. These scenes reveal food’s importance as a symbolic expression of love and identity, and can be divided into three categories according to the cook: those having Master Zhu preparing his family dinners, those with Jiaqian as the chef and those containing both Master Zhu and Old Wen working together in the huge kitchen of the hotel.

²⁶ Steve Zimmerman, *Food in the Movies* (2^d ed.) (North Carolina: McFarland company, 2010), 377.

1.3.1 Master Zhu's restricted loves

As a family ritual, Mr. Zhu prepares the regular Sunday dinner to express, in a nonverbal way, his paternalistic love for his three daughters, all of whom still live at home in the beginning of the movie. The opening credits roll over a series of close-up food shots of many different dishes skillfully being prepared by Mr. Zhu for the family dinner, which lasts over four minutes without any dialogue.

Different from the former "Food Preparation" scenes that we have discussed in *Pushing Hands* and *The Wedding Banquet*, most of which are single shots (some are long takes), the first "Food Preparation" scene in *Eat Drink Man Woman* is distinguished by crosscutting. In Bordwell and Thompson's words, "Crosscutting gives us an unrestricted knowledge of causal, temporal, or spatial information by alternating shots from one line of action in one place with shots of other events in other places."²⁷ The whole "Food Preparation" scene lasts more than 10 minutes. The first four minutes are a dialogue-free sequence completely shot in the kitchen of Zhu family's old house; in the following six minutes, Ang Lee always cuts from a shot of the father who is busy with meal preparation in his kitchen to what Bordwell and Thompson would call expositions of Mr. Zhu's three daughters in different places.²⁸ These crosscuts give the viewer a sense of the daughters' specific character traits: Jiazhen is the oldest daughter and a religious, strait-laced chemistry teacher; the middle daughter, Jiaqian, is a sexually liberated airline executive; and Jianing is the boy-crazy, youngest daughter who ironically works in a fast food restaurant.

²⁷ David Bordwell and Kristin Thompson, *Film Art: An Introduction (6th ed.)* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 2001), 275.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 68.

It's funny that the shot in which Jiaqian is kissing and enjoying sex with her ex-boyfriend Raymond is followed by the image of Mr. Zhu blowing air into the mouth of the duck that he will use to make a dish, implying the daughter's and the father's different ways to release their repression: one by sex, the other by cooking; and the shot of Jianing's glancing back and smiling to her colleague's boyfriend, Zhong Guolun, is followed by a close-up of flames that Mr. Zhu is cooking with in his kitchen, which vividly indicates this boy will be involved in the flames of her love. In this "Food Preparation" scene, crosscutting ties together four lines of narrative actions around Mr. Zhu and his three daughters that are occurring in several locales simultaneously, and it gives us a range of knowledge greater than that of any one character in the plot.²⁹ For example, when Jianing says to her colleague, "Father will kill me if I'm late for Sunday dinner again"; and Jiaqian tells her ex-boyfriend, "I have to get home for the Sunday dinner torture ritual", we can observe their unwillingness for this family dinner, which is unknown to their father, who regards the dinner as an opportunity for family communication. The girls hide their true feelings from their father, so it's difficult for them to communicate. This kind of embarrassed relationship between father and daughters is just what Ang Lee proposes to express in his movie.

We can also observe the father's repression from this "Food Preparation" scene, beginning with the close-up of three live carps in a pot, and then Mr. Zhu deftly catches one of them for the meal. His culinary wizardry is shown by the technique of montage editing, which binds his various cooking actions of scaling, gutting, cutting and frying together. The orgy of cooking can be regarded as a

²⁹ Ibid., 275.

liberating way for Mr. Zhu to release the repression in his heart. He cooks as sublimation not only for the repressed parental love but for his own restricted romantic love as well.

During this series of “Food Preparation” scenes, there is a frame that isolates an important narrative detail: Mr. Zhu’s wife has already passed away. In this shot, Mr. Zhu is positioned in the back of the kitchen cooking dishes, while his deceased wife’s photo framed in black is hanging on the wall of living room in the foreground (Fig.1.12). The two planes even stand in bilateral symmetry for two seconds. Then the camera pans left and downward to make the photo nearly out of the frame and Mr. Zhu becomes more centralized (Fig.1.13). Great attention is drawn on the mother’s photo through its first onscreen and then offscreen movement. Besides telling us about Mr. Zhu’s deceased wife, the photo has another narrative function: Jiaqian looks the same as her mother, which will lead the spectators to infer, will the middle daughter occupy an important position both in the family and in the father’s heart because of the similar look? Actually, it’s true that “the focus of the film is the relationship between Mr. Zhu and the middle daughter”³⁰ and the father’s repressed parental love is most vividly expressed by



Figure 1-11



Figure 1-12

³⁰ Ibid., 211.

the scenes between the two of them.

After learning that his wife has already passed away, the viewers may recall Mr. Zhu's first words, which is also the first dialogue in the movie, when his cooking is interrupted by a telephone ring and he talks with a woman over the phone. This dialogue reveals Mr. Zhu's restricted romantic love. When the woman on the other side tells him that she hasn't eaten yet, he suggests, "Just throw together some noodles for lunch. The fish is excellent." Then he further instructs her how to cook the fish. Although there is no shot for the woman on the phone during their talk and the spectators can only see Mr. Zhu's expression and gestures, the narrative of his instruction asks us to imagine that there is another "Food Preparation" conducted by the woman in the offscreen space of the movie. More importantly, when Mr. Zhu asks the other side, "If not today, then when will we talk about it?", it builds up suspense and creates the spectators' expectation about what he actually wants to tell his daughters and who this secret lover is. Mr. Zhu doesn't speak out his secret until the fifth dinner at the end of movie, although Jinrong's identity as his lover has already been leaked out when she and her daughter Shanshan visit the Zhu family later that day, and Shanshan says, "Today, Mom burned the fish!" It's a good device for Ang Lee to use the restricted narration to further emphasize the repression of the romance between Mr. Zhu and his lover.

There are totally five family dinners prepared by the father in the movie, but only two of them have relatively complete "preparation" scenes preceding them, which highlight the importance of the two. Different from the one for the first

Sunday dinner that has been discussed above, the “Food Preparation” scene for the fifth dinner carries a more hasty tone. According to the plot, both Jiazhen and Jianing have married at that time and moved out of the family house, and Jinrong’s family (including her daughter and mother) is also invited to attend the dinner this time. So the shots of Mr. Zhu, preparing the dishes in his family kitchen, are intercut with those having the “guests” dressing or on their way to this important family union. In contrast to the first scene, in which Mr. Zhu does everything smoothly, showing his culinary wizardry, this time he is always getting into trouble in his cooking: at first the pan held in his hand falls down to the ground, then he makes mistakes in his watermelon sculpture (Fig.1.14). In each shot, his expression looks hasty and frustrated. And when his two sons-in-law, Mingdao and Guolun, having difficulties in grabbing a chicken for dinner, only make the chickens fly and cackle in the courtyard, the atmosphere of panic is strengthened. Here the filmmaker uses the tone of narrative development to reflect



Figure 1-13

the figure's upset feelings, because Mr. Zhu is going to announce, in the following dinner, his relationship with Jinrong, who is only a little older than his eldest daughter, and he isn't sure if his daughters and Jinrong's mother will accept their marriage. It also foreshadows that there may be an even bigger panic during the dinner when father's restricted romance is finally exposed.

1.3.2 The releasing of Jiaqian's repression

Mr. Zhu's middle daughter, to our surprise, is also an excellent cook like her father. There are two "Food Preparation" scenes in the movie centering Jiaqian as the chef, which indicate that food can be used symbolically as a way to bring someone back to his/her roots or basic nature. Jiaqian's culinary skills is first displayed through a close-up of her slicing paper-thin tofu for use as a wrapper for minced chicken, in a scene in the kitchen of Raymond's apartment. Spectators may wonder why she doesn't cook at home. Then they will get the answer from the conversation between Jiaqian and Raymond.

Jiaqian tells him in the process of her cooking that she enjoys cooking elaborate dishes but is afraid to do so at home because the kitchen is off-limits to her and her father will come to stop her if she cooked there. The figure's facial expression conveys an essential narrative message: from Jiaqian's smile in the image (Fig.1.15), we can learn that cooking is the true happiness and what comes naturally for her, but her father pushed her to move beyond her roots with the wish that she can have a better lifestyle than being a chef. Jiaqian shares with Raymond those happy days she spent with her father in the kitchen as a child and says the moving line, "I don't have any childhood memories unless I cook them

into existence”, which implies that only food can help Jiaqian feel connected to her past. And from Jiaqian’s memory, audience can also learn how deeply this daughter loves her father, although their relationship doesn’t look smooth on the surface.



Figure 1-14

Jiaqian finally can cook in the old house kitchen at the closure of the movie. This time, she replaces her father’s role to prepare the dinner for the family. The “Food Preparation” scene begin with the close-ups of two kinds of batter food without showing who actually is cooking them: the first one is deep-fried crisp rice balls (Fig.1.16) and the other one is the Mandarin pancake (Fig.1.17). The



Figure 1-15



Figure 1-16

similarity between the two images is that everything in them has been rounded. For example, in the first shot, the pan, the plate, the dough and even the cook's hand are all round in shape; so is the cooker and pancake in the second one. As has been mentioned above, Ang Lee does well in using the objects' shape to indicate implicit meanings. "Round" in Chinese carries the meaning of harmony and fullness, so the two close-up shots function as the hint of the movie's happy ending. From the scenes intercut with those having Jiaqian preparing dishes in the closure, we can learn that Jianing has given birth to a girl; Mingdao has been baptized a Catholic under the religious influence of his wife (Jiazhen); and to everybody's surprise, Mr. Zhu has moved out of the old house to live together with Jinrong, who is already carrying his baby.

When the scene cuts back to the kitchen, in contrast to shooting Mr. Zhu outside the kitchen's pane window in the prologue to indicate his restricted situation (Fig.1.13), the camera moves inside the kitchen and is placed just in front of the chef--Jiaqian this time-- so she is shot directly in a medium shot without any barrier (Fig.1.18), and the lighting becomes much brighter. All of these cinematic elements create the feeling that Jiaqian's personal repression has been released and she eventually finds her root or identity in the family kitchen. "Identity is a way of re-departing. Rather, the return to a denied heritage allows one to start again with different re-departures, different pauses, and different arrivals."³¹ For Jiaqian, cooking in the kitchen of the old house is her "denied heritage", but now she has returned to it, so she can have a fresh start on every

³¹ Minh-ha Trinh, *When the Moon Waxes Red: Representation, Gender, and Cultural Politics* (New York: Routledge, 1991), 14.

aspect of her life: she no longer needs to use sex to compensate for her ambition to cook³², thus she cuts off her relationship with Raymond and will go to Amsterdam to maximize her future career.



Figure 1-17

1.3.3 The exposition of the friendship between Mr. Zhu and Old Wen

Besides these shots in private kitchens, there is another series of “Food Preparation” scenes in *Eat Drink Man Woman* using Master Zhu’s working place—the huge kitchen in a five-star hotel—as the setting. When the scene is first shot at the hotel, we see how mise-en-scene and camera work present narrative material. It begins with a half-minute long take, the camera first pans right and back to present a broad view of dozens of chefs and cooks busy with preparing food, then it follows Mr. Zhu’s steps, who gets an emergency call from his hotel to “save the day”, through an enormous labyrinth of kitchen passage, with authentic props such as huge ovens and freezers on either side. He removes

³² Emilie Yueh-yu Yeh and Darrell William Davis, *Taiwan Film Directors: A Treasure Island* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005), 207.

his jacket and slips into his white cooking coat like a surgeon preparing himself for a difficult operation³³, and then Old Wen, his longtime friend and chef, tells him what the problem they are facing when preparing the shark fin dish for the governor's son's wedding banquet: the fins they bought are fake, when placed in boiling water they fall apart.

Here in this part, Ang Lee uses shot/reverse-shot cutting to emphasize the entrance of the new and important character in the movie--Old Wen--and the dialogue between Mr. Zhu and him. As we can see from Figure.1.19 and Figure.1.20, the camera first shoots Mr. Zhu and Old Wen behind them and then crosses the 180⁰ line (axis of action) to shoot their faces in a medium close-up. We may not even notice the cutting, since the style works to emphasize the narrative flow of the scenes---what Old Wen worries about and how Mr. Zhu reacts: after looking at the huge steaming vat containing the fake fins for seconds, Mr. Zhu determines to fix “Joy Luck Dragon Phoenix”, another specialty of the restaurant. Mr. Zhu's quick determination reflects his position in the huge kitchen as a culinary expert, that is, his social identity.



Figure 1-18



Figure 1-19

³³ Steve Zimmerman, *Food in the Movies* (2^d ed.) (North Carolina: McFarland company, 2010), 376.

From the above scene, we can learn the close relationship between Old Wen and Mr. Zhu. If we say that most of the “Food Preparation” scenes in Ang Lee’s family trilogy reflect the paternalistic love or romantic love, then in this series which all have Old Wen in them, Ang Lee glorifies the fraternal love between the two. The sense of taste is of great importance for a good chef, but when Mr. Zhu gradually loses his taste, he relies on Old Wen as his trustworthy taster. In the following “Food Preparation” scenes shot in the huge kitchen, we can observe the repetitions of shots having Mr. Zhu feeding a taste to Old Wen, as shown in Figure.1.21 and Figure.1.22. Although the two characters dress the same and have similar gestures, and there do exist some distinct elements in the two shots such as the scoop that Mr. Zhu is using and the position of the camera, the two shots create parallelism.



Figure 1-20



Figure 1-21

The motif of “feeding a taste” cues the viewers to pay attention to the narrative details after it (Fig.1.22) when they discover this repetition: when Mr. Zhu is waiting for Old Wen to tell him the taste, Old Wen suddenly can’t speak out a word and falls on Mr. Zhu’s chest (Fig.1.23). The camera pans right as Old Wen falls so the flame on cook stove is framed into the scene, which implies Old Wen’s dangerous situation.



Figure 1-22



Figure 1-23

The narrative background of the third scene shot in the huge kitchen just follows this plot, when Old Wen is already out of hospital. He is warmly welcomed by other chefs working in the kitchen when he enters and he even wears a red jacket (which represents his wish for good fortune) to celebrate his return. Ironically, this is also the moment he passes away (Fig.1.24). Old Wen's death motivates the denouement of the film: Mr. Zhu decides to retire from his work as a chef and to pursue the true life he wants, which is to pursue his long-time restricted romantic love. He asks the person who tries to persuade him not to retire, "Do I just stand in the kitchen until I rest in peace, like Old Wen?" and then he told him that he doesn't plan on wasting his whole life on cooking. Old Wen's death also causes Jiaqian to be more anxious about her own father's health, so she had planned to give up the chance to work abroad and stay at home with her father when she didn't know his father's secret love. In other words, the tension between father and daughter is greatly released because of the accident.

In conclusion, the "Food Preparation" scenes shot in the hotel kitchen offer a storyline around Old Wen, who is an essential figure in the movie to advance the narrative and makes the spectators get their in-depth understanding of the old, restricted father figure (Mr. Zhu).

Chapter Two The Narrative Function of “Eating Scenes”

In Ang Lee’s family trilogy films, “eating scenes” can be regarded as the most important category among those “meal scenes”. Eating together is a symbolic act of communication and cultural contact which expresses “the quality of social relationships”³⁴. It is interesting to learn that in the three movies, shared meals among family members at home are usually fraught with conflict and tension whereas the eating scenes between friends outside the home space seem to be more harmonious and release a sense of conformity and order. “Relations with others help to build the image of a character. These relations tend to be processed into similarities and contrasts.”³⁵ The tensions between family members during their meal time express the characters’ contrasts of viewpoints, which constitutes barrier for familial cohesion and even results in the gradual disintegration of family. While dining with friends who have similar cultural cognitive habits shows the social ritual of intimacy and promotes the figures who are frustrated at home to compromise and develop. Generally speaking, the “food preparation” scenes and eating scenes form a dynamic narrative continuity because the audience can learn from the latter category how the familial and social relationships between characters that established in the “food preparation” scenes develop.

³⁴ Jane F. Ferry, *Food in Film: A Culinary Performance of Communication* (New York: Routledge, 2003), 59.

³⁵ Mieke Bal, *Narratology: Introduction to the Theory of Narrative* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1997), 127.

2.1 Familial alienation: The tensions released from family meals

The three works show us different stories around three types of families, but all with a Chinese father-figure in them. However, the patriarch's traditional views are always challenged in the movies: Ang Lee examines the contemporary Chinese experience using clashes that place modernizing forces in opposition to the father-figures,³⁶ a contrast vividly delivered from the tensions between children and father in these "eating scenes" at home. Such contrast, from the aspect of narratology, can be called the characters' "disparity of understanding"³⁷, which means "one person knows or perceives more—or less—than another". As Robert Scholes and Robert Kellogg indicate, "there are broadly three points of view—those of the characters, the narrator and the audience—in any example of narrative art. Irony is always the result of disparity among these viewpoints"³⁸. In Ang Lee's trilogy films, the original purpose of those family gathering is to maintain the familial cohesion, but the disparities among the family members' viewpoints ironically make those eating scenes become an alienating force within the narratives of the films.

2.1.1 The disparity between Mr. Zhu and Martha/Jeremy in *Pushing Hands*

The first eating scene in the film begins with Martha enjoying her lunch at the kitchen counter by herself, but the off-screen sound of pots and pans colliding tells the spectator that there must be another person in the same space. Then Mr.

³⁶ Yunda "Eddie" Feng, "The Chinese Patriarch and Evolving National Identities: Ang Lee's 'Father Knows Best' Thematic Trilogy", (MA thesis: Chapman University, 2005), 1.

³⁷ Robert Scholes and Robert Kellogg, *The Nature of Narrative* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1966), 240.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 240.

Zhu, her Chinese father-in-law, enters the frame from the left side and his movement carries an important narrative message: as seen in Figure 2.1 and 2.2, he at first moves past Martha to eat at the brown dining table, but when he reaches the table, he pauses for two seconds and then turns back to eat with his daughter-in-law. This subtle physical movement shows Mr. Zhu's desire to communicate with Martha. However, during this process, Martha doesn't even look up at him,



Figure 2-1



Figure 2-2

which shows her disregard of the father. When Mr. Zhu sits down in front of her (Fig. 2.3), there is still no talk or eye contact between them. Ang Lee frames the figures all in medium long shots in the above process and then the camera changes its location, presenting the viewers with a close-up of Martha's western-style lunch (Fig.2.4). It then tilts up to shot Martha's face: annoyed by the eating noise from her father-in-law, she looks up directly at him for her first time (Fig.2.5).



Figure 2-3



Figure 2-4

The following point-of-view shot aligns the viewers with the perspective of Martha: Mr. Zhu is enjoying his tasteful Chinese lunch (Fig.2.6). One common feature for the eating scenes in Ang Lee's trilogy films is that he always insert such subjective moments into his overall framework of objectivity. And the shot of Martha's gaze on the camera (Mr. Zhu) functions as a narrative link to connect two images (Fig.2.4 and Fig.2.6) forming a distinct contrast between "West" and "East", modernity and tradition: Martha eats cold vegetable salad and dry wheat crackers, with a glass of lemon water, while Mr. Zhu has a hearty, month-watering stir-fry; she uses fork and plate, but he uses chopsticks and a bowl with some Chinese pattern on it; she leaves the plate on the desk, while he holds the bowl in his hand. Such formal contrast fully reflects the cross-cultural disparity between Martha and her father-in-law. Although Mr. Zhu comes to sit together with her, they are still not "eating together".



Figure 2-5



Figure 2-6

“In the course of the narrative the relevant characteristics are repeated so often that they emerge more and more clearly. Repetition is thus an important principle of the construction of the image of a character.”³⁹ In the latter part of the film, there is another eating scene between Mr. Zhu and Martha echoing the above

³⁹ Repetition, accumulation, relations to other characters, and transformation are four different principles which work together to construct the image of a character. See Mieke Bal, *Narratology: Introduction to the Theory of Narrative* (2nd ed.) (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1997), 126.

one; the two scenes constitute a narrative repetition, making the audience's attention focused on the cultural and linguistic barrier between the two characters repeatedly. In this scene, Martha is still eating her crackers and Mr. Zhu holds a bowl of Chinese food in front of her. The filmmaker uses a similar point-of-view shot to express Mr. Zhu's attention on Martha's gesture showing she is not comfortable, as seen in Figure.2.7 and 2.8. But the biggest variation between this scene and the previous one is that Mr. Zhu breaks the silence by asking Martha concernedly in Chinese: "Toothache?" and then he attempts to practice tai-chi therapy on her to alleviate her pain. However, Martha rejects his kind offer by flying backward with fear, which highlights her mistrust of the "other" culture. Comparing the two paralleled scenes, the spectators will learn that Mr. Zhu has made efforts to communicate with and help his daughter-in-law, but no matter whether he keeps silent or not, he is always denied. The silence of Martha can be interpreted as both a linguistic absence as well as visual nonrecognition.



Figure 2-7



Figure 2-8

The tension between Martha and Mr. Zhu is not only because of their linguistic and cultural barrier, but also because they are competing to communicate with someone who is absent throughout most of the day due to his work (Alex Zhu). Their competition is vividly revealed in the family dinner scene

where all the family members gather at the dining table. Similar to the previous eating scenes, the props in this scene show us the cultural divide between Asian and American lifestyles (Fig.2.9): Mr. Zhu eats Chinese dishes with chopsticks and bowls while Martha and her son Jeremy enjoy western-style macaroni cheese with forks and plates. They even use different-style cups for drinks: a traditional Chinese tea cup stands in front of Mr. Zhu whereas Martha and Jeremy use transparent glasses. The figures' behaviour yields comic effects in this scene: Martha and Mr. Zhu are competing to feed Alex with food prepared by themselves, so Alex, who tries to show his loyalty to both sides, is busy with changing his cutlery from chopsticks to forks and vice versa, which makes him hardly have a real taste of the food.



Figure 2-9

Film sound can be divided into diegetic sound and nondiegetic sound⁴⁰.

These two kinds of sound actively shape how the spectators perceive and interpret

⁴⁰ David Bordwell and Kristin Thompson, *Film Art: An Introduction (6th ed.)* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 2001), 305.

the image. In this eating scene, the diegetic sound---the dialogue between figures-- plays an essential narrative function. Actually, besides competing to feed Alex with food, Mr. Zhu and Martha also compete to talk with him in their different native languages. Thus conversations across the dinner table occur in two languages, switching back and forth between English and Chinese. As the negotiator or middleman, Alex is torn between separate conversations with his father and his wife and when one of them wants to know what the other is saying, he has to serve as a translator. However, his translation only lets the conflict between Mr. Zhu and Martha go further. The following is part of their conversation:

(When Mr. Zhu tries to feed Martha with the meat cooked by him.)

1. Martha: No, thanks! (English)

Mr. Zhu: Why does this American woman only eat vegetables? (Chinese)

Alex: She's afraid of getting fat. (Chinese)

Mr. Zhu: Why am I not fat? On this Earth, there are two kinds of food: Cereal and vegetables are 'yin' and meat is 'yang'. You must eat both to be balanced and to be healthy. (Chinese)

2. Jeremy: Mommy, can I watch cartoons? (English)

Martha: Jeremy, finish your milk and you can watch TV. (English)

Mr. Zhu: What did she say? (Chinese)

Alex: If he finishes his milk, he can watch TV. (Chinese)

Mr. Zhu: American people teach children everything's a deal, like doing business. (Chinese)

Alex: Yes, father. (Chinese)

Mr. Zhu: And, these American cartoons are only adding weirdness and violence to this messed up world. (Chinese)

Martha: Can I talk to you for five minutes? (English)

Mr. Zhu: For children? It's just a mess. Our sages said... (Chinese)

Alex: Dad, eat! (Pause) Don't get upset. I'm just afraid your dinner's getting cold. (Chinese)

Martha: What has he been babbling about? (English)

Alex: The violence in cartoons. (English)

Martha: How can he complain he's martial arts expert himself? Isn't that violence enough? (English)

Alex: Would you cut it out? Both of you! (pause) Just eat! (English)

Language is a significant aspect in this multilingual film, adding an important dimension of shaded meaning. We can feel the forces of two cultures—American and Chinese—clashing on the dining table, not only because of the acoustic clutter of their diverse languages, but also due to their contradictory ideas on how to have a balanced meal and on childrearing methods. While Chinese culture trains children to respect authority, the American mother---Martha—make agreements with her son: if he finishes the milk, he can watch TV. This style of parenting is weird for the Chinese grandfather, who regards it as a kind of “doing business”. This dialogue may partly explain why the traditional Chinese patriarchy can’t be fulfilled in this bicultural family, because the parents don’t represent “authority” in an American society.

Actually, Jeremy’s request to watch cartoons is a very clever design for the narrative development and even the image and sound of the cartoon helps intensify the atmosphere of tension around the dining table. As soon as Jeremy leaves the table and turns on the television, the spectators will hear the sound of a battle from the cartoon that he is watching. Although the television is in the rear plane of the shot (Fig.2.10), the image on its screen of a cartoon figure holding a broadsword and shouting to his enemy is quite visible while Alex in the foreground who nearly occupies the left half of the shot becomes blurred, revealing the filmmaker’s purpose to emphasize on this “battle” plot. On one side, it composes a smooth cause-effect chain in the narrative: after hearing the noise of the cartoon his grandson is watching, Mr. Zhu suggests that American cartoons are too violent, and Martha snaps back that Chinese martial arts are more violent

than the cartoons. On the other side, the battle in the cartoon mirrors the true atmosphere of tension at the family dinner. It is a kind of parody, juxtaposing a cartoon world with a human one.



Figure 2-10

When the camera switches its focus back to the dining table where Alex, Martha and Mr. Zhu are sitting together, the sound effects of the battle are blended coherently with their speech, adding both a comic and high-energy touch to the narrative, and the rhythm of the sound mix also changes: before the TV is turned on, Martha and Mr. Zhu chat with Alex one by one, although both of them want to say more to him; whereas after being accompanied by the sound of battle, the speed of their speaking becomes much faster and they even talk to Alex in English and Chinese simultaneously, as if the “battle” on the dining table were reaching its climax. This sonic mess is finally ended by Alex with his line: “Would you cut it out? Both of you! Just eat!” However, when the figures become quiet, the crackle of machine gun fire in the cartoons still goes on for 7 seconds.

At this moment, the prolonged sound effect serves as a metaphor for the three persons' mental states, which adds a degree of subjective depth to the film's narration.

In addition to using the meal scenes to express the disparity of understanding between the Chinese father and his American daughter-in-law, the grandson's (Jeremy) rejections towards Mr. Zhu and his culture is also aptly revealed during the following two eating scenes where Martha is absent. The first one is arranged just after Martha is sent to the hospital because of her bleeding ulcer, and Jeremy wrongly believes his mother's pain is caused by the grandfather, because he sees Mr. Zhu practice tai-chi on her, but actually it's her nervousness that brings the therapy into failure. The meal scene is simply a 26-second medium long shot (Fig.2.11): eating with the Chinese grandfather, Jeremy has to use eastern-style bowl instead of western plate. But when Mr. Zhu tries to feed his beloved grandson with the food he prepared, Jeremy keeps shaking his head in refusal and speaks out the only line in this scene: "You broke Mama!" Jeremy's reproach makes Mr. Zhu very disappointed; he can do nothing except giving a long sigh. The father figure's sigh is a kind of thematic motif in the films, reflecting his loneliness and isolation. Every time when Mr. Zhu feels confused about his identity in the family or in western society, it will appear.

Later, when Alex comes back from the hospital, the three "men" in the family eat a Chinese meal together (Fig.2.12). The filmmaker purposefully frames the empty chair belonging to Martha in the center of the foreground, a subtle device to reinforce her absence. Jeremy is designed as the key figure again in this scene

as the previous one; both his behavior and line convey important implicit meanings: he begins to use chopsticks, but his awkward gesture shows that he is not a good user. After trying to pick up the food with chopsticks several times but never once succeeding, he gives up and asks his father in English: “Can I have some macaroni and cheese, please?”, this line reveals his loyalty to his mother, even though she is not at the dining table. Moreover, his gesture of leaving the chopsticks aside symbolically reflects his rejection towards the Chinese culture: he doesn’t like the eastern food, or its tools. If we can’t judge who the winner is in the previous eating scene when Mr. Zhu and Martha compete to talk with Alex, in their competition to feed Jeremy, Martha is the obvious victor even she doesn’t attend the match. Jeremy’s support for his mother pushes Mr. Zhu to a more alienated status in the family.



Figure 2-11



Figure 2-12

2.1.2. The disparity between Weitong and his parents in *The Wedding Banquet*

At least one reviewer sees this film as “a testing of traditional Chinese values in an alien environment rather than a statement on gay life.”⁴¹ I agree with this idea. Mr. Gao and Mrs. Gao’s arrival at New York constitutes the key to Ang

⁴¹ Chi Cheng Wang, “Review of *The Wedding Banquet*, dir. Ang Lee.” *Min Sheng Daily* (Taiwan: March 4, 1993), 31.

Lee's narrative design: they come to attend their son's (Weitong) wedding ceremony, but their Confucian values keep getting challenged by their westernized son. On the surface, the old couple's coming and eating together with their son is a reflection of familial cohesion, however, the discrepant viewpoints of family members make this supposed pleasant meal unfinished, which lead to dramatic change of the meal scene's function from a cohesive force to an alienating force in the narrative.

This eating scene begins with the establishing shot which frames in all the five "family members" (Weitong's parents, Weitong, Simon and Weiwei) when they are having the breakfast as a family unit, delineating their relative position around the table. Then the five-member family is divided into three groups by the shots that follow: Weitong is always framed together with his parents talking, while Weiwei and Simon are shot individually out of their group. Such methods of framing release the implicit narrative meaning: at that moment, both Weiwei and Simon are a kind of "outsider" for the Gao family. Weiwei is just acting her role as Weitong's wife in front of the parents, while Simon, the true "wife" of Weitong, is only a foreign landlord in the old couples' eyes, he can't even get what they are talking about in Chinese, so he keeps silent during the whole process.

The conversation between Weitong and his parents is the main diegetic sound for this scene, which fulfills the narrative function of showing their disparate attitudes towards the wedding ceremony. Mr. Gao initiates the talk by asking casually what they are going to do on that day (Fig.2.13). Then Weitong's

answer---“to get married in the afternoon”--- shocks his father and mother, which can be seen in Figure.2.14, expressions. From then on, both of the parents have no interest in consuming the food, Mr. Gao lapses into silence but Mrs. Gao, as a traditional Chinese mother, can't help expressing her incomprehension:



Figure 2-13



Figure 2-14

- Mrs. Gao: This afternoon?
 Weitong: Why wait? We've prepared our marriage certificate...and we have a marriage appointment at 2:00. We planned to do it one day after your arrival.
 Mrs. Gao: We came all this way. How can you be so casual?
 Weitong: Ma, we're both very busy and not much for ceremonies. Besides, her parents can't make it, so why not keep it simple?
 Mrs. Gao: This happens only once in a lifetime. Think of the bride, if not yourself. Our friends and relatives gave \$30,000...to have a grand wedding. What will we tell them?
 Weitong: We're not marrying for them.
 Mrs. Gao: If not for them, then for whom?
 Weiwei: Ma, it's okay. A wedding banquet will not affect how we love each other. We're not into these traditions.

(Then Mr. Gao ends their quarrel by delivering the following line and leaves the table angrily.)

Mr. Gao: Very well. They're adults. We'll do what they want!

Mrs. Gao: Why should it be like this?

Ang Lee designs this “unfinished” meal scene to tell the spectators that although the old couple are firm believers in honoring traditional rituals and ceremonies, their westernized son only wants a swift marriage ceremony, which is “a rude awakening for his parents because it demonstrates how far their son has

moved away from them both in terms of distance and tradition.”⁴² The last two lines uttered by the parents vividly reflect their disappointment and a sense of loss. Weitong may refuse the grand marriage ceremony partly because of its sham nature, but his wishes to “keep it simple” and “not for anyone” are striking evidence of a modern and independent people’s attitude towards life, which is incompatible with the demands of the traditional Confucian values.

2.1.3 The disparity between Mr. Zhu and his daughters in *Eat Drink Man Woman*

Different from the previous two films which discuss the father-son relationship, Ang Lee refreshes the pattern of *Eat Drink Man Woman* into a father-daughter relationship and the setting of this movie shifts from New York to Taipei, but the consistent theme of intergenerational conflict and alienation remains (due to the forces of globalization and Westernization in the modernizing capital city⁴³). Mr. Zhu, the father figure, uses the traditional way of holding Sunday dinners to gather the family members at the dining table, however, such ritual presented with love “becomes steadily less attractive to his daughters—the younger generation—who are more familiar with modern/western culture”⁴⁴, particularly to the middle daughter, Jiaqian, “whose work as an airline executive both literally and symbolically transnationalizes her identity.”⁴⁵

⁴² Ellen Cheshire, *Ang Lee* (Harpden: Pocket Essentials, 2001), 38.

⁴³ Whitney Crothers Dilley, *The Cinema of Ang Lee: the Other Side of the Screen* (London and New York: Wallflower Press, 2007), 75.

⁴⁴ Wei, Ti, "Generational/Cultural Contradictions and Global Incorporation: Ang Lee's *Eat Drink Man Woman*." In Chris Berry and Feii Lu, (eds), *Island on the Edge: Taiwan New Cinema and After* (HK: Hong Kong University Press, 2005), 105.

⁴⁵ Wei Ming Dariotis and Eileen Fung, “Breaking the Soy Sauce Jar: Diaspora and Displacement in the Films of Ang Lee,” in Sheldon Hsiao-peng Lu, (ed) *Transnational Chinese Cinemas: Identity, Nationhood, Gender*

The repeated family meal scenes are the most significant narrative elements in the movie. Every time during the dinner there is a family member announcing to leave, which implies their alienation from the traditional family unit. Ang Lee said in an interview, “one thing that really inspired me was the Chinese saying, ‘All banquets must eventually come to an end’ (*Tianxia meiyou busan de yanxi*) --that is a saying that I really attribute to the film.”⁴⁶ In order to express such emotion, the director even arranges a shot having the family’s neighbour singing karaoke with the song lyrics—“gone with the wind”---at the beginning of the first family dinner scene, which sets the basic tone of dispersion and alienation for all the following family meals scenes.

The first eating scene delivers several key plot elements for the whole narrative through the figures’ conversation and behaviour; meanwhile, it shows the disparity of understanding between the repressed father and his middle daughter, Jiaqian. When Mr. Zhu first enters the dining room with a dish in his hand and sits down beside the table, he tries to speak out what is in his mind to his beloved daughters: “These past two days, I...” (Fig.2.15), unfortunately, none of the three girls pay attention to the father’s word and it is interrupted by the noise of sipping soup from Jiaqian with a facial expression of disapproval (Fig.2.16). Ang Lee frames the father in a medium close-up to present his notice, in which he asks if there is something wrong for the soup. When Jiaqian points out that the ham was overcooked and wonders if Mr. Zhu’s taste is getting worse. He angrily replies: “My taste is fine!”, then stands up and leaves the table. Actually Jiaqian

(Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1997), 209.

⁴⁶ Berry, Michael, "Ang Lee: Freedom in Film." [Interview]. In Berry, (ed), *Speaking in Images: Interviews with Contemporary Chinese Filmmakers*. (New York: Columbia UP, 2005), 336.

has exactly touched the sore point for her father, who truly begins to lose his sense of taste at that time. The father's loss of sense of taste is a critical device in the narrative; it is a metaphor for Mr. Zhu's disability: he has difficulties to express his paternal love to his daughters, and is also repressed in the pursuit of his own romantic love. However, when the father eventually moves out the old house to start a new life and rebuild a smooth relationship with Jiaqian in the closure of the movie, he regains his taste.⁴⁷



Figure 2-15



Figure 2-16

During the narrative time when Mr. Zhu is absent, the three daughters begin to gossip at the table. Jiazhen, the oldest daughter, says that her college friend (Jinfeng)'s mother, Auntie Liang, will come back from the US and stay with her elder daughter, Jinrong. The content of their superficially random talk foreshadows the exposition of another family in the following scenes, who will later develop close relationship with the father.

As soon as Mr. Zhu steps into the frame again with a plate of food, Jiaqian pokes fun at him that Auntie Liang's return will be good for dad, because he will have someone to chat with. Then Mr. Zhu expresses his rejection by saying: "Like I have time to gossip after taking care of you three?", which exposes their

⁴⁷ It was James Schamus's idea (who is the screenplay and producer of the movie) to use the loss and return of the father's sense of taste to imply the suppression and liberation of his desire and emotion. See Zhang Jingbei, *Shinian Yijiao Dianying Meng* (A Ten-Year Dream of Cinema), (Taipei: Shibao, 2002), 128.

disparity again. The following part creates both a narrative and formal repetition with a close-up of Mr. Zhu who utters the same line as in Figure.2.17: “These past two days, I...”, unsurprisingly, he fails to continue again, which is disturbed by Jiaqian’s announcement that she has bought a new condo and plans to move out when it’s ready (Fig.2.18). Ang Lee designs the narrative repetition whereby Mr. Zhu keeps getting ignored and foiled in one meal scene, strongly emphasizing the father’s repression and the inharmonious relationship between his daughters and him. The original purpose of this family ritual is to communicate, as one of Jiaqian’s spoken lines says: “we communicate by eating”, but the father is even unable to deliver a full sentence to show his heart. Besides, Mr. Zhu’s failures to speak out also build up suspense and arouse the spectators’ curiosity about what he is going to say till the end of the movie.



Figure 2-17



Figure 2-18

Although Jiaqian is the first one announcing to leave, her sisters actually go away from the family earlier than she does, which contributes to the gradual dissolution of the family. In the third Sunday dinner scene, the youngest daughter, Jianing, makes an unexpected announcement that she is pregnant and then moves out to live with the boy she loves. Similarly, during the fourth dinner scene, after announcing her having got married, the oldest daughter, Jiazhen, introduces her

husband, who has been waiting outside for a long time, to the father and Jiaqian, and then another family member leaves. As Jonathan Romney notes, “there’s this discrepancy between the ritual of food presented with love and the difficulty of actually tasting the love in it.”⁴⁸ Although every time the family banquet looks elaborate, the figures in the scenes actually hardly enjoy the food because of these disappointing announcements, especially for the demoralized father. All his daughters make decisions without consulting with him in advance, which implies his incapacity to direct their lives. The mise-en-scene of the shot that centers Jiaqian and the father in the frame seeing Jiazhen off (Fig.2.19) carries an elegiac quality: the old wall and wood door, the plain color of figures’ costumes, the dim light and even the faded couplet all release a sense of the traditional family’s decline, which constitute a narrative irony with the words on the horizontal strip: Da di chun hui (the return of spring). All these alienating elements imply the



Figure 2-19

⁴⁸ Jonathan Romney, “Food Glorious Food.” *New Statesman and Society* 8, no. 336 (January 20, 1995), 33.

dissolution of this conventional family is inevitable.

2.2 A familial crisis: The outburst scenes in the dining space

From the above discussion, we can learn that in all the three film narratives, the family meal scenes play a powerful role in highlighting the strained relationship between the younger generation and the older generation, tradition and modernity, Confucian and Western values. When the tension and repression reach a certain degree, they have to be released. Just as Ang Lee maintains, “The greater the repression, the greater the outburst of appetite and energy.”⁴⁹ A common feature for the outburst scenes in the trilogy films is that they are all arranged within the kitchen and dining rooms, which are the most important space of any house for Ang Lee⁵⁰: the kitchen serves as a metaphor for the heart of the home and the dining table offers a space for family members to reunite. But people in those scenes consistently make a mess of the common spaces, which results symbolically in the disintegration of a family. Those outburst scenes can be regarded as the turning points of the narratives and after that point, characters manage to adjust to their role both in the family and society to achieve a new balance, to reconstruct the family and personal identity.

2.2.1 Alex’s outburst in *Pushing Hands*

Alex, the son in the movie, is trapped in the middle of strained relationship between the two most important people for him. On one side, his wife’s constant

⁴⁹ A maxim stated outright in *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*: “To repress one’s feelings only makes them stronger.”

⁵⁰ Emilie Yueh-yu Yeh and Darrell William Davis, *Taiwan Film Directors: A Treasure Island* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005), 208.

nagging makes him feel frustrated for unable to provide a life-style she wants; on the other side, it's hard for him to find his father a way to enjoy his retirement at home. So when the father goes missing and Alex fails to find him, he can't hold his temper any more.

There is a quarrel scene between Alex and Martha in the dining room before Alex's outburst. As seen in Fig.2.20, the wife stands in the foreground, while the husband sits in the background. Martha leaves her back to Alex when talking, showing their tension. The dialogue between them further foreshadows the coming of an outburst: although Martha apologizes for her carelessness, she keeps complaining that "your father is more and more like a child cooped up here with me" and "I had a feeling that he was gonna get himself lost just like a kid trying to get some attention". Annoyed by such words, Alex delivers the touching line, reflecting his Confucian influence: "I grew up believing you should care for your parents the way they care for you. My father is a part of me. Why can't you accept that?" Then Martha walks towards her husband and passes him a plate of food, which signifies her concession and love, but it is knocked over by Alex (Fig.2.21), showing his rejection.



Figure 2-20



Figure 2-21

When Martha walks out of the frame, Alex physically demonstrates his despair by smashing up the kitchen (Fig.2.22) and storming out, which makes the apparently forceful wife begin to weep (Fig 2.23). The wedding-ring on her fourth finger is an obvious prop in the shot to imply that the father's incident has even threatened the stability of his son's marriage. In other words, the father becomes a de-stabilizing element for the family.⁵¹ Besides, the camera angle of the two shots does affect the spectators' view of the main figures in it: in most cases, "framing from a low angle automatically 'says' that character is powerful and framing from a high angle presents him or her as dwarfed and defeated"⁵², thus the low-angle shot of Alex (Fig.2.22) helps strengthen the violence of his outburst, while the high-angle shot of Martha (Fig 2.23) promotes audience empathy with her. As shown in Figure.2.20, 2.21 and 2.23, Martha is portrayed weaker and weaker, which offers a smooth transition for her change in attitudes towards the father and the whole family. From then on, she manages to communicate with the father although their linguistic barrier still exists. For example, when Mr. Zhu is brought back by the police, Martha uses the body language to show her concern (Fig.2.24):



Figure 2-22



Figure 2-23

⁵¹ Yunda "Eddie" Feng, *The Chinese Patriarch and Evolving National Identities: Ang Lee's "Father Knows Best" Thematic Trilogy*, (the Chapman University, 2005), 46.

⁵² David Bordwell and Kristin Thompson, *Film Art: An Introduction (6th ed.)* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 2001), 220.

“Are you hungry? Thirsty? You really should eat something.” This is her first time in the film to talk with her father-in-law in a nice and soft tone, indicating Martha begins to realize and fulfill her obligation as a daughter-in-law. The messy kitchen and overturned dining table presented in Figure 2.25 is not only a vivid reflection of Alex’s psychological state, but also serves as an “alarm bell” for all the members about the family’s potential crisis, forcing them to adjust and compromise, with the common wish of a peaceful and happy family.



Figure 2-24



Figure 2-25

Alex’s repression is finally released by banging his head against the wall when he returns home after heavy drinking and the noise he makes awakens his son, Jeremy. The little child is the key figure in the narrative that calms his father down by saying: “Do you need a band aid?” and then carefully place a bandage on Alex’s head. Jeremy’s concerned behaviour also “awakens” Alex to his responsibilities as the father of his own family⁵³. He says: “Jeremy... is the good one who knows better than Mommy and Grandpa on how to care for Daddy”. This line functions as the ending for the outburst scene and also a turning point for Alex’s change of attitudes, and after this narrative point, Alex’s traditional values of being loyal and filial to his father are outweighed by the idea of providing his

⁵³ Wei Ming Dariotis and Eileen Fung, “*Breaking the Soy Sauce Jar: Diaspora and Displacement in the Films of Ang Lee*,” in Sheldon Hsiao-peng Lu, (ed) *Transnational Chinese Cinemas: Identity, Nationhood, Gender* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1997), 194.

wife and son a lifestyle they are accustomed to, so he decides to send his father to an assisted living apartment.

Alex's betrayal of the traditional patriarchy is the cause of the following narrative development in which the father quietly slips away from his son's home. When we hear offscreen sound of a farewell letter that Mr. Zhu writes to his son, such as "'It's easier to struggle together than to pass happy days together'. In China we managed to stay happily together through so many bitter times but here in America, with so many fine material things, it seems there's no place in your home for me", we can't help wondering: How can the eastern ethical culture find a way to coexist with the local culture in a western circumstance? And how to deal with the conflicts between tradition and modernity? Those questions must be what Ang Lee proposes his spectators to consider.

2.2.2 Simon's outburst in *The Wedding Banquet*

Similar to the one in *Pushing Hands*, the outburst scene in *Wedding Banquet* also chooses the kitchen and dining room as the settings. In terms of narrative form, this 75-second scene is composed by two long takes and the camera only changes its location once. However, such simple form division consistently serves for the narrative development. At the beginning of the first long take, using the planes of depth, the filmmaker economically frames all the five central figures in (Fig.2.26): Weiwei and the old couple are sitting beside the table and enjoying their breakfast, while Weitong and Simon are talking outside but still visible through the window.



Figure 2-26

Then Simon’s sudden rage—“pregnant!”---breaks the originally peaceful meal. Assuming the parents do not understand English, he even enters the kitchen and walks into the other three’s dining space to quarrel with Weitong, contrasting sharply with his usual effeminate look. As Bordwell notes, “the long take is frequently allied to the mobile frame”⁵⁴, and the camera pans right and left to follow Simon’s steps showing his out of temper (Fig.2.27 and 2.28), and his long-lasting repression is released by shouting out the telling line, “I can say whatever I



Figure 2-27

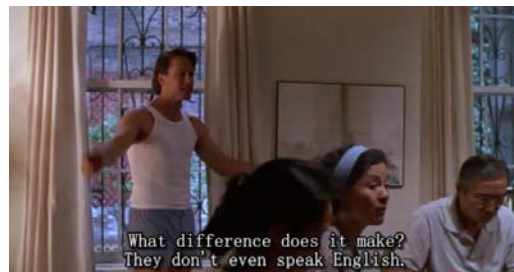


Figure 2-28

want in my own house and in my own language!” As has been mentioned before,

⁵⁴ David Bordwell and Kristin Thompson, *Film Art: An Introduction (6th ed.)* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 2001), 242.

Simon has become a kind of outsider⁵⁵ since the arrival of Weitong's parents: he is banished to a basement room; and the conversations around him are conducted in Chinese. He can bear all these physical harsh conditions because of his love for Weitong, but what makes him crazy is Weitong's infidelity (not only to him, but in terms of sexual identity). In this 45-second long take, Simon is the "outburst" figure, while Weitong is established much weaker as he tries to explain that Weiwei's pregnancy is only an accident.

However, when Weitong is eventually enraged by Simon's unforgiving gesture, Ang Lee uses the repeated frame mobility to create a clear narrative parallel: the two go out of the kitchen and then enter again, but this time Weitong is portrayed as much stronger and begins to fight back. Meanwhile, Ang Lee relocates the camera to start a new long take further indicating such changes: in the second half-minute long take, Simon doesn't deliver a line, whereas Weitong and Weiwei fly into a rage in succession. Weitong points out that it was Simon's idea to build up the sham marriage, implying he is also one of the victims. Weitong is truly the most tortured one because of the intense internal conflicts in him: he has to deal with the issues on three dimensions, to fulfill the filial piety to his parents, to maintain his own romantic love with Simon and to perform his obligation to Weiwei who has carried his baby. He stands as "a symbol of a postmodern merger and erasure of identity".⁵⁶ Is he homosexual? He is but impregnates Weiwei, who is a female. Is he a traditional Chinese or a modern

⁵⁵ Ellen Cheshire, *Ang Lee* (Harpenden: Pocket Essentials, 2001), 37.

⁵⁶ Gina Marchetti, "The Wedding Banquet: Global Chinese Cinema and the Asian American Experience," in Darrell Hamamoto and Sandra Liu, (eds) *Countervisions: Asian American Film criticism* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2000), 286.

American? It's hard to choose one because he upholds a Chinese tradition of filial piety and duty and still manages to maintain a relationship with his gay lover.

In addition, the change of the camera's location gives the audience access to the reaction of Weiwei, who is annoyed by Weitong's words and stands up to express her dissatisfaction with both of them. There is an interesting shot in which Weiwei and Simon, each standing on one side of the dining table, glare hatred at each other (Fig.2.29). Their similar costumes (white tank tops and blue pants) help strengthen the feeling of confrontation between the two "wives": Simon nearly fulfills the entire requirement for a qualified wife, except that he is a male and can't bear children like the one stands on the opposite; while Weiwei, although she gains public recognition as Weitong's wife and has the ability to assure the Gao family of the continuance of their family line, can never be as attractive to Weitong as the one in front of her.



Figure 2-29

It's important to note that during the whole process of the fight, the father keeps silent, except for hushing the inquisitive mother up twice. The questions

from Mrs. Gao, such as, “Are we overstaying our welcome?” and “Did Weitong forget to pay his rent?” yield some comic effect in the midst of such intense atmosphere, which also implies the linguistic barrier between the two generations. Actually this barrier is only for the mother, not for the father. Ang Lee designs the restricted narration in this part so that even spectators are kept away from the knowledge that Mr. Gao can understand and speak English till the release of his later conversation scene with Simon in English. Thus, some critics note that the father has maintained a “strategic” silence⁵⁷, in order to make Weiwei present him with his desired grandson. Moreover, this silence can be regarded as the father’s quiet acknowledgement of Weitong’s homosexuality. After the outburst scene, Mr. Gao begins to adapt himself into the modern way and accept Simon as his “child-in-law”.

2.2.3 Mr. Zhu’s emotional outburst in *Eat Drink Man Woman*

At the fifth family dinner in the film, in which Jinrong, her mother and daughter are all included, Mr. Zhu sorts out the “secret” that has been hiding in his heart for a long time: his romantic love with Jinrong. It is a great shock to his daughters and Jinrong’s widowed mother, Mrs. Liang, who had assumed that she was the object of Mr. Zhu’s affections. Mr. Zhu and Jinrong’s emotional outburst—speaking out about their relationship--results in the outrage of Mrs. Liang, thus, as the tone of the preparation scene preceding this one has foreshadowed, the largest family gathering in the movie falls into a panic.

⁵⁷Wei Ming Dariotis and Eileen Fung, “Breaking the Soy Sause Jar: Diaspora and Displacement in the Films of Ang Lee,” in Sheldon Hsiao-peng Lu, (ed) *Transnational Chinese Cinemas: Identity, Nationhood, Gender* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1997), 201.

The outburst scene begins with a high-angle shot of all the main characters sitting at the dining table and toasting (Fig.2.30), showing the interplay of reactions among the characters. And then the father suggests separate toasts with his three daughters and sons-in-law, arousing the spectators' expectation that Mr. Zhu must have some important decision to announce. Actually, the filmmaker has revealed the father's secret before he says it out by framing Mr. Zhu and the



Figure 2-30



Figure 2-31

anxious Jinrong in a close-up together (Fig.2.31). The director tells stories through the characters' talks, but he also narrates them through their physical posture and facial expression. The following close-ups of Mr. Zhu's tortured face (Fig.2.32 and 2.33) further indicate that it's not easy work for him to expose his



Figure 2-32



Figure 2-33

own romance. After a short silence, the father ventures to stand up and begins his well-prepared speech, which is the longest speech in Ang Lee's trilogy films,

echoing his idea that “the greater the repression, the greater the outburst of appetite and energy”:

“Fate has brought us to this table tonight. And since we're one big family.....there's really nothing we can't say to each other. I've kept this inside me for a long time. It wasn't as if I was trying to hide any secrets from you. I just feel that I shouldn't allow my personal affairs.....to be the family's worry and, thus, become a burden. As a family, living under the same roof.....we can still live separate lives. This worry that we have for each other is what makes us a family. I've done nothing wrong by not telling. By telling, I can end this lingering. I cannot live my life like my methods of cooking. I can't wait until all the ingredients are prepared and then cook. Of course, after the first bite, whether it's sour, sweet or spicy.....it's totally up to the individual. That's it for now. I'll continue after dinner.”

This verbose line reflects how much the father figure is stripped of his patriarchal reserve and how hard for him to break out of the Confucian cycle: even having delivered so many words, he is still worried about others' response and wants to postpone his announcement after dinner. The father's behavior fulfills another function of effectively keeping the audience in suspense. In terms of framing technique, Ang Lee chooses a 30-second long take to cooperate with the rhythm of the father's long speech and uses the mobile frame to strengthen and support the narrative. As seen in Figure.2.34-2.37, the sequence begins on a medium shot of the father who is giving his talk, and then the camera moves out of and around the dining room to frame him in larger spatial and narrative context. This mobile frame closely links the characters with the details of their environment, shapes the viewers' perception of the narrative space, like an elegy to the old house. It also reveals the hidden meaning of the relationship between people (the father) and thing (the old house), both of which are the foundations for the family.



Figure 2-34



Figure 2-35



Figure 2-36



Figure 2-37

When all three of his daughters push their father to speak out what exactly his “secret” is (in contrast to the first family dinners in which the father’s intention keeps getting foiled), Mr. Zhu says that he plans to sell the old house and move to a new one, which is foreshadowed by the above framing of the house. Then to everyone’s surprise, he calls Mrs. Liang “Auntie Liang” like his daughters, announcing that he is to marry her daughter, Jinrong, and asking for her approval. From this point, the suspense no longer exists and the father figure becomes a hybrid who is endowed with both the warmth in traditional culture and the passion of modern romantic culture. He has broken out of the spatial and emotional restrictions to pursue a fresh life, which conveys the symbolic meaning of a complete dissolution of the traditional family.

This outburst scene ends with a close-up of Jiaqian looking around the old house with tears at the door (Fig.2.38). Actually the father’s announcement

disappoints the middle daughter most, who has already decided to give up the chance of working abroad and stay with her father. It's ironic that Jiaqian is the first one to announce to leave the old house, but also the last one to stay. During the process of struggling to find a balance between old and new, the father and daughter move toward one another: he becomes a more modernized figure while she turns to be more traditional.



Figure 2-38



Figure 2-39

In the finale, Ang Lee's shot of Jiaqian functions as a narrative transition for the following scenes in which the daughter and father's positions reverse: Jiaqian, as the host of the old house, cooks the meal in the kitchen and serves the dinner for her father, which implies that she becomes the provider of food and stability⁵⁸; while the father, like a guest of the house, bringing some gifts and even knocking at the door for entering, begins to face the challenges of a new life. As has been mentioned before, it is on this dining table and after accepting the soup cooked by his favorite daughter that the father regains his sense of taste. In other words, the daughter's cuisine is the most effective "medicine" to make the repressed father recover, to have a taste of his daughter's love (understanding and support) to him and to rebuild their familial relationship. The movie ends with a touching frame in

⁵⁸ Wei Ming Dariotis and Eileen Fung, "Breaking the Soy Sauce Jar: Diaspora and Displacement in the Films of Ang Lee," in Sheldon Hsiao-peng Lu, (ed) *Transnational Chinese Cinemas: Identity, Nationhood, Gender* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1997), 212.

which the father and daughter hold each other's hands (Fig.2.39), and as soon as they delivers their last words---“daughter!” and “father!”----the abdicated father is rehabilitated, which symbolizes his reestablished patriarchal position and the reconstruction of the family.

2.3 Social cohesion: The meal scenes between friends

Different from those meal scenes at the family dining table which are usually fraught of ideological clashes and tensions, the eating scene out of the home space in Ang Lee's trilogy films seems to be more harmonious. Every human being plays two kinds of roles: one in family, the other in the society. When one feels confused about his or her position at home and the ritual of family dinner has gradually lost its function for communication, he or she will try to use the social ritual—eating and talking with friends---to feed both his or her body and soul. “Dining with friends functions as a ritual of intimacy and creates an image of social cohesion”⁵⁹, and this kind of intimacy is based on their similar cultural cognition.

2.3.1 The intimacy between Mr. Zhu and Mrs. Chen in *Pushing Hands*

The characteristics of two old people in the movie---Mr. Zhu and Mrs. Chen--composes a kind of narrative parallelism: both of them live with their children in New York, Mr. Zhu with his son, and Mrs. Chen with her daughter; Mr. Zhu has difficulty to get along with his American daughter-in-law smoothly at home, and Mrs. Chen is confronted with the same problem with her western son-in-law;

⁵⁹ Jane F. Ferry, *Food in Film: A Culinary Performance of Communication* (New York: Routledge, 2003), 74.

although living in a foreign country, both of them manage to connect themselves with their cultural roots---one teaches the traditional arts of Tai-chi, the other works as an instructor of cooking Chinese dishes; As the Chinese diaspora, only within the eastern cultural surroundings, such as in the Chinese Community center, will they have the chances to be respected in a way they are not at home and gain the sense of self-fulfillments. The two elderly characters absolutely mirror each other.

The setting of this picnic scene is just arranged to be such a Chinese surrounding: with the absence of Alex's American wife and the presence of Mrs. Chen's Chinese daughter and granddaughter, a homogeneous and linguistic coherence is constituted (Fig. 2.40). Among all the meal scenes in *Pushing Hands*, this picnic scene is the most pleasant one in which people can chats and enjoy the food freely without any conflicts. The only accident during this meal scene is the recurrence of Mrs. Chen's sore shoulder, which is actually a key plot element to



Figure 2-40

advance the cause-effect chain of the narrative. Seeing Mrs. Chen suffer from such ailment, Mr. Zhu volunteers to practice Tai-Chi therapy on her and the following treating scene creates both narrative and formal juxtaposition with the previous one in which Mr. Zhu offers Martha a similar treatment: from the aspect of framing and editing techniques, both of the scenes use the close-up of Mr. Zhu's hand touching the patients' (Figure.2.41 is Mrs. Chen's hand and Figure.2.42 is Martha's), shaping the spectators' perception of the mysterious Tai-chi art; also, they both include the close-ups of Alex and Jeremy, in which their facial expressions release signs of nervousness and apprehensiveness, and greatly intensify the viewers' attention on the treating process to see whether it will be effective or not. The results of the two treatments form a sharp contrast: Mr. Zhu successfully alleviates Mrs. Chen's pain because of her complete acceptance of his traditional philosophy while Martha's problem becomes more serious due to her nervousness, which shows her mistrust and rejection of her father-in-law and the eastern culture. Clearly, it is trust and faith that facilitates Mr. Zhu and Mrs. Chen to establish a successful treatment, symbolically, a smooth relationship indicating the social ritual of intimacy.



Figure 2-41



Figure 2-42

In order to set their parents up, Alex and Mrs. Chen's daughter go to play with their children on the lawn, so the two elderly characters are left alone at the table and offered a space to talk freely when Mr. Zhu continues his therapy on Mrs. Chen. The following sequence begins on a similar close-up of their hands (Fig.2.43), then the camera moves back gradually to anchor the two people in its larger spatial context (Fig.2.44), in which they begin to reminisce about the past. During their talk, the two old people mention some political events they have experienced in China, for example, Mr. Zhu says since the communist liberation he has been persecuted in every movement because of his family background



Figure 2-43



Figure 2-44

(echoing the previous narrative when Mr. Zhu tells Alex about his mother's death) and Mrs. Chen sighs for the change of Beijing she discovered when she went back to see the relatives after Taiwan loosened up, saying "Beijing seemed to have lost its flavor, the old warmth was gone....everything seemed unreal. I couldn't put my old and new impression together....", the two seniors are clearly situated as members of Chinese diaspora through such talk and Ang Lee creates a complete interplay between the talk and the sad Er-Hu music that accompanies it. Mr. Zhu affirms Mrs. Chen's confused feeling by saying: "Your impressions are not mistaken. Beijing has changed a lot. When I talk with you, I feel closer to you

than with my neighbors in Beijing”, such words shows his dependence on this confidential friend, who can help him drive away his loneliness and alienation that he gets in both his son’s hybrid family and the western society. Meanwhile, for Mrs. Chen, Mr. Zhu is the exact companion that can not only cure her physical pain, but also calm down her emotional anxiousness.

The final shot of this sequence in which the two elderly characters are framed together, with their eyes closed (Fig. 2.45), together with the previous touching moment of their hands holding together (Fig.2.41), release the sense of their support and solace to each other. The friendly relationship they maintain equips the two seniors with more power to negotiate their new positions in children’s families, as well as their new identities in a western world.



Figure 2-45

2.3.2 The intimacy between Mr. Zhu and Old Wen in *Eat Drink Man Woman*

Besides the father-and-daughter relationship, there is another kind of human relationship---“brotherhood”--- between Mr. Zhu and Old Wen in the movie.

Their fraternal love is released not only from those “Food Preparation” scenes, as has been mentioned in Chapter 1, but also from a meal scene in the big kitchen after they finish preparing the governor’s son’s wedding banquet. Usually the long takes are allied to the mobile frame for the effect of shifts of view supplied by editing⁶⁰, but this meal scene is an exception: the two old men are framed in a medium shot drinking and chatting for more than two minutes without any camera movement (Fig.2.46). This unusual long take makes their gestures and expression quite visible when they open their hearts to each other, like the audiences are just positioned on the opposite side of the table to listen to their talk; also, because of its immobility, the information released from the image is very limited, so the diegetic sound—their conversation---becomes the main focus for the spectators to pay attention to, which isolates important narrative details.



Figure 2-46

⁶⁰ David Bordwell and Kristin Thompson, *Film Art: An Introduction (6th ed.)* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 2001), 248.

The meal scene is arranged after the first family dinner scene, in which Jiaqian announces that she has bought a new apartment and will move out. So Old Wen calms Mr. Zhu down with the lines: “Old Chu, don't get upset. Girls eventually leave home. It was bound to happen”, showing that he knows Mr. Zhu very well and understands what he is worried about. However, Mr. Zhu's reply indicates his self-pride: “I'm not upset. I hope they all move out, so I can have a quiet life.” Then Old Wen points out his companion's true feelings: “Quiet life? I know you. What you want, you can't get. What you don't want, you can't get rid of. You're as repressed as a turtle.” This line fulfills very important narrative functions: firstly, it tells the spectators that Jiaqian is actually the father's favorite daughter, although their relationship looks full of tension at the prologue of the movie; secondly, it intensifies the audience's perception of Mr. Zhu's repressed characteristic by using the metaphor that he is “as repressed as a turtle”.

Besides the family problems, Mr. Zhu tells Old Wen that another trouble bothers him during work is his sense of taste is getting worse and worse. Mr. Zhu's frankness to Old Wen makes a sharp contrast with his pretended reply to Jiaqian---“My taste is fine!”---when she points out his taste problem in the previous dinner scene. Mr. Zhu's dramatic change of attitudes implies that Old Wen is the only person that he can rely on and share his pain with; in front of this intimate friend, he is no longer a restricted figure and can put off the mask of a strong father. In order to comfort Mr. Zhu, Old Wen makes an interesting analogy between the deaf composer Beethoven and the chef without taste buds (Mr. Zhu),

saying that “Good sound is not in the ear, good taste is not in the mouth, and good sex...God knows where”.

Old Wen’s words functions as a narrative transition for Mr. Zhu to utter the key line when they walk out of the kitchen, echoing both the name and theme of the movie: “Eat, drink, man, woman. Basic human desires. Can’t avoid them.” (Fig.2.47). This line can be regarded as the explicit meaning⁶¹ of the film. Food and sex are the fundamental components of all human life. However, as one of the screenplay writers, Wang Huiling, mentions: “Eating is about what you put on the table. Desire and gender is about what lies beneath it, which is never available for discussion.”⁶²This may explain why the characters are so repressed in the movie. The shot in which Mr. Zhu places his hand on Old Wen’s shoulder and they walk further and further into the dim corridor (Fig.2.48) releases a sense of their mutual understanding and support in harsh conditions. Living in a westernized modern society, the two old men have to encourage each other to break through the new challenges and keep going on, although they don’t know what would be waiting for them ahead.



Figure 2-47



Figure 2-48

⁶¹ A statement of the meaning of the entire film, it’s an openly asserted meaning in the movie, which is usually a line uttered by the main character. See David Bordwell and Kristin Thompson, *Film Art: An Introduction* (6th ed.) (New York: McGraw-Hill, 2001), 46.

⁶² Emilie Yueh-yu Yeh and Darrell William Davis, *Taiwan Film Directors: A Treasure Island* (New York : Columbia University Press, 2005), 202.

Chapter Three The Narrative Function of “Cleaning up” Scenes

In Ang Lee’s family dramas, as has been discussed in chapter two, the shared family meals and dining spaces are always brought into disorder because of the characters’ disparity of understanding and their lack of communication, resulting in the symbolically tottering internal family structure. So how can the characters resolve the intergenerational/cultural conflicts between them and save their family from the crisis? The audience may find the answer in those “cleaning up” scenes of the three movies. Aristotle identifies three key elements in a plot: *hamartia*, *anagnorisis* and *peripeteia*. “The *hamartia* means a ‘sin’ or ‘fault’; the *anagnorisis* means ‘recognition’ or ‘realization’, this being a moment in the narrative when the truth of the situation is recognized by the protagonist—often it’s a moment of self-recognition; the *peripeteia* means a ‘turn-round’ or a ‘reversal’ of fortune.”⁶³ Although Aristotle’s formulation was made with reference to tragedy, we can also see traces of these Aristotelian elements in Ang Lee’s melodrama, since both tragedy and melodrama are narratives made of plots: the family crises awaken the protagonists with the truth of a situation and the “cleaning up” scenes in all of them have the common narrative function of reflecting the moment of their recognition (*anagnorisis*). Apparently, characters in those scenes are cleaning up the physical space and making the dishware neat, but metaphorically, they are managing to restore the family into order and rebuild

⁶³ Peter Barry, *Beginning Theory: An Introduction to Literary and Cultural Theory* (Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 2009), 216.

their personal identities. The “cleaning up” scenes convey the implicit meaning of “to cooperate, to accept and to forgive”, an ideal way to bridge the boundaries of generation and culture, and they also lead to the characters’ switch in fortune (*peripeteia*) at the end of the movies.

3.1 The silent cooperation between Mr. Zhu and Martha in *Pushing Hands*

The significant “cleaning up” scene in *Pushing Hands* is arranged right after the one in which Mr. Zhu is returned by the police. Martha’s concern for him--- “Are you hungry? Thirsty?”--- involves a ‘peripeteia’ of Mr. Zhu according to Aristotle’s theory, not a fall from high to low, but a build-up of their father-and-daughter-in-law relationship from low to high. According to Peter Verstraten, “The filmic narrator is the agent responsible for the interaction of two types of narrators. One is the visual narrator; the other is the narrator that controls the auditive track, which contains external and internal voice-overs, dialogue, voices, music, and all other kinds of sound. I will call this the auditive narrator”⁶⁴. It is interesting to learn that the visual narrator and the auditive narrator of the scene operate synchronically until the moment when Mr. Zhu sees the messy kitchen made by his son, as shown in figure 3.1 and 3.2. The visual narrator observes Mr. Zhu first in a medium close-up (fig.3.1) and then from a distance (fig.3.2), but the auditive narrator in both of the shots registers what he hears: sound made by Martha to open the cabinets and find some food for him. Visually Mr. Zhu---the father figure---is the object of focalization, but auditive he is an internal

⁶⁴ Peter Verstraten, *Film Narratology* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2009), 130.

focalizer.⁶⁵ It is at this specific moment in the narrative that Mr. Zhu feels guilty for bringing his son's family such a "disaster" and realizes his responsibility to rebuild the heart of the home---the kitchen----into order, that is, his *anagnorisis*, which can be proved by his following behavior.



Figure 3-1



Figure 3-2

When Martha puts the food for him on the table, instead of walking towards it to relieve his sense of hunger, Mr. Zhu turns back and walks towards the door facing him. Martha wrongly regards his action as a refusal to her, like her husband knocked over the food she passed to him, so she bows her head and says: "I'm sorry, too." This line emphasizes the moment of Martha's self-realization (*anagnorisis*) of her past mistakes. Besides the protagonist in the narrative, the spectators outside the narrative also read Mr. Zhu's behavior as a kind of refusal. However, when Mr. Zhu turns back to the camera again with a broom in his hand (fig.3.3), all of us understand what he is going to do, as does Martha, who immediately joins him to begin their cleaning-up (fig.3.4). As Bordwell and Thompson state, "cheated expectations produce keener interest"⁶⁶, the broom in

⁶⁵ If narrating is connected to speaking, focalization has to do with seeing, which is the perspective from which events are narrated. It can be either external or internal. An external focalizer, which is often described as 'omniscient', has complete comprehension of the story, while internal focalizers appear, usually as characters, within the story itself. These narrators display partial knowledge of the story. See Paul Wake, *The Routledge Companion to Critical Theory* (New York: Routledge, 2006), 19-20.

⁶⁶ David Bordwell and Kristin Thompson, *Film Art: An Introduction (6thed.)* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 2001), 45.

Mr. Zhu's hand is the key prop in the shot to let the spectators realize their wrong comprehension and thus their attention will be greatly drawn to the following cleaning up process between the two figures. It has become a typical feature that in *Pushing Hands*, when only Mr. Zhu and Martha are included in the same scene, no matter if it is "food preparation", "eating" or "cleaning up", the characters always keep silent. But different from the previous scenes in which the issue of silence can be interpreted as a linguistic absence and visual nonrecognition⁶⁷, in this cleaning up scene, the strategic silence functions as a kind of communication. The two protagonists are now working together with the same purpose of putting the disordered kitchen into order. Their relationship has transformed from competition to cooperation.



Figure 3-3



Figure 3-4

The first task for the father and his daughter-in-law is to put the overturned dining table into its original position (fig.3.4), which implies its importance for a family: as long as it is recentralized in the dining room, the family members will have a space to eat together. However, we can see there is an obvious split space in the middle of the table (fig.3.4), which may foreshadow that the family is finally fragmented and torn apart. Although it disappears in the following shot

⁶⁷ Wei Ming Dariotis and Eileen Fung, "Breaking the Soy Sauce Jar: Diaspora and Displacement in the Films of Ang Lee," in Sheldon Hsiao-peng Lu (ed), *Transnational Chinese Cinemas: Identity, Nationhood, Gender* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1997), 193.

where Mr. Zhu and Martha continue their cleaning up (fig.3.5), like a metaphor that the gap between Mr. Zhu and Martha has been bridged through their cooperation, the spectators never see the whole family reunite around this dining table again in the following part of the film. “The absence of family dining represents alienation”⁶⁸. It’s easy to rebuild the physical space into order, but can the potential problem in this family be solved as easily as the split on the table? Actually, the tension between Mr. Zhu and Martha is greatly alleviated after their self-recognition and cooperation, but Alex’s betrayal to his father becomes the major cause in the narrative for the final separation between Alex’s own nuclear family and Mr. Zhu.

Ang Lee uses the close-ups of the protagonists’ hands performing the same tasks to highlight their cooperation (fig.3.5 and 3.6). One is to classify the food; the other is to pick up the broken pieces of dishes on the floor and to put the unbroken ones into order. In the words of Mary Douglas, “Ordering and classifying upholds distinction and is a powerful factor in unifying and conserving the social order of things. The entire cosmos is subject to classification and all creatures must conform to the class to which they belong”⁶⁹. In figure 3.5, Mr.



Figure 3-5



Figure 3-6

⁶⁸ Jane F. Ferry, *Food in Film: A Culinary Performance of Communication* (New York: Routledge, 2003), 69.

⁶⁹ Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of the Concepts of Pollution and Taboo* (London, New York: Routledge, 1984), 54.

Zhu and Martha are doing the exact task of classifying: Martha is picking up all the noodles on the table into one basket, while Mr. Zhu is collecting those vegetables into another. And the small bamboo basket in the foreground of the shot is used to contain the flavorings such as garlic. Food is the basic need for every member in the family and it also functions as the expressive means of communication, therefore, the figures in the scene choose to classify the mixed food instead of throwing all of them out.

Although food and dishware are not living creatures, they have to be classified into different categories and put into appropriate positions to ensure an orderly kitchen. By the same token, all the human beings have their own identity both in a family and society and must conform to the position or class to which they belong, in order to keep a stable family and to conserve a good social order. Many critics and even the director Ang Lee himself attribute the tensions between the father and daughter-in-law to their cultural boundaries, and although we can't deny this cause in a broad view, to be more specific, the friction and clash between them can be traced back to their unconscious intrusion into each other's private lives making their original positions threatened, when Mr. Zhu moves into his son's house and shares the same space with Martha in the daytime. The act of the figures' classifying food and ordering dishware may promote their gradual realization of the importance for a person to find his/her right position. So in the denouement of the film, Mr. Zhu becomes a Tai-Chi instructor in the Chinese Community Center in New York and lives on his own, which implies that he has found a position belonging to him in a western society. No one can deny the

father's leaving partly contributes to the stability of the family, although Alex, Martha and Jeremy all accept Mr. Zhu as one of the family members at the end of movie and express their wish for his coming back. The father's living alone can be interpreted as the disintegration of a traditional family on the surface, but we can also treat it as a reconstruction of a new family pattern: the father-children relationship is reestablished but they don't live together. As Mr. Zhu says to Mrs. Chen: "Alex and his family come to see me every two or three weeks when they go shopping around here." This family pattern is a product of modern industrial society, which means, the same physical space is no longer a necessary requisite for a family, as long as the blood-ties and family ethics bind them together as a union.

3.2 The protagonists' acceptance and compromise in *The Wedding Banquet*

There is a prominent eating scene in *The Wedding Banquet* in which the father puts on a formal shirt (in contrast to his usually casual T-shirts during the meal time) and proudly insists on washing the dishes after the meal, saying: "Simon cooked, so Dad (I) will wash the dishes." (fig.3.7) This scene is arranged after the father figure—Mr. Gao—recovered from his stroke and returned home from the hospital, when he has already learned his son's gay identity but kept it as a secret from the others. In a traditional Chinese family, washing dishes, a task belonging to housewives, is what the father will never touch, like a taboo that a man will never marry another man. But at that time, learning that his son has chose a western man (Simon) as his lover and Simon also has taken his role as a

wife to cook and to look after Weitong and the whole family, Mr. Gao realizes that he has stepped into a new world where traditional male/female roles can be reversed. His decision to wash the dishes conveys the implicit meaning that he is trying to adjust himself to a new way of life, in other words, he is attempting to accept his son's lifestyle choice. Therefore, I would suggest that the father's serious announcement signifies the moment of his self-recognition (*anagnorisis*) that he need to find a way to accommodate contemporary conceptions of sexuality into his Confucian system.



Figure 3-7

However, the father's "cleaning up" scene that follows shows how difficult it is for him to fulfill the inversion of roles, or to accept a new way of life: instead of observing the dish-washer---Mr. Gao---directly, the visual narrator first puts focus on the response of the other three protagonists (Mrs. Gao, Weitong and Simon) who are watching his action (fig.3.8), while the auditive narrator of this shot registers the sound of washing they hear, thus the three people are visually

focalized but also become the internal auditive focalizers. The camera then pans left, and after that, the visual narrator and the auditive narrator of the scene begin to work synchronically. We can see the father in the center of the frame, with his back to the camera, fulfilling his promise to wash the dishes and put them on the shelf cautiously (fig.3.9). But suddenly, a big noise alarms us when one of the



Figure 3-8



Figure 3-9

dishes falls down and shatters on the floor. The camera moves its location immediately to shoot the father's effort to hold the dishes (fig. 3.10), however, he



Figure 3-10

doesn't succeed in stopping the accident, which implies his adaptation to accept the homosexual relationship between his son and Simon is not easy. After this, Mrs. Gao suggests he leave and take a bath, but when she wants to offer some

help, Mr. Gao refuses her with the rebuttal: “No, I’ll do it myself”, which reveals his unwavering decision to forcing himself into a role for which he has no aptitude – the equivalent of the abandoned idea of forcing the son to marry a woman.

As soon as the father drops the dish, the three young people (Weitong, Simon and Weiwei) come to clean up the broken pieces; actually, they are undertaking their responsibility to sort out the mess made by themselves. The following long take deserves our attention. Simon and Weitong are in the kitchen clearing away: Simon continues the father’s job to wash the dishes and passes them to Weitong, who will wipe them dry and put them on the shelf (fig.3.11). When the father’s single task is distributed to two people, their behavior constitutes a well-practiced harmony. Does this imply that cooperation can make things go through more smoothly and successfully than an individual in isolation from others to fulfill all the tasks by himself (like the father who drops the dish)? However, the harmony between Simon and Weitong is challenged when Simon turns back to face the camera and tells Weitong that he is going to leave him (fig.3.12). At that moment, they are facing opposite directions, indicating their deteriorating relationship: Weitong keeps his back against the camera and slumps forward in a gesture of



Figure 3-11



Figure 3-12

resignation, whereas Simon leans up against the worktop and plays with his watch. The time on a watch can be easily changed but the actual time can never go backward or faster as they like. After Simon's announcement to leave, except Weitong's disappointed reply: "I know", no other words are spoken between the two. "Their quiet acceptance of their fate is far more heart-rending than any big emotional outburst"⁷⁰, and it reflects the moment of their self-realization (*anagnorisis*): it is their own fault to make the marriage of convenience, so they have to sacrifice their personal happiness to keep the wholeness of the family.

The final narrative "surprise" of the film occurs between Simon and Mr. Gao, when they are out for the father's physical therapy. Ang Lee chooses a similar set-up to frame the two persons in a long take with their backs to the camera, in which Mr. Gao says "Happy Birthday" in English to Simon and hands him a bright red envelope filled with crisp bills (fig.3.13). In the earlier part of the film, there is a shot in which Weiwei is given the same style of red envelope as a First Meeting gift from the mother (fig.3.14). For the parents, the red envelope is a symbol that the care of their son has been handed to the "wife". So in figure 3.13, the envelope functions as a signal of Mr. Gao's private acknowledgement of Simon as his "child-in-law". The father's eventual acceptance of their relationship is further revealed by his line in English: "I watch, I hear, I learn. Weitong is my son, so you're my son also." Mr. Gao's "modern" face with the "western" voice shocks Simon, which also involves his switch in fortune (*peripeteia*): Simon's identity changes from an outsider (landlord) for the parents to a member of the Gao family, and his pain and heartbreak is over. But the *peripeteia* here is not a

⁷⁰ Ellen Cheshire, *Ang Lee* (Harpenden: Pocket Essentials, 2001), 39.

one-way street, which is also relevant to Mr. Gao: as long as he gains Simon's support to keep the fact that he knows everything as a secret, he has more chance to get his desired grandson ("he worries that discovering he is less traditional than thought may dampen their enthusiasm for presenting him with the baby"⁷¹), thus he will gain a new role as the baby's grandfather and succeed in fulfilling his duty for making the family line continue.



Figure 3-13



Figure 3-14

Because it is Simon who suggests the sham marriage at the beginning, one critical essay has argued that "Weitong himself and by extension the grandson become the 'tribute' that Simon offers up to Mr. Gao in exchange for a place within the Gao family."⁷² Although this idea seems to confuse the agent of the action with the receiver of it (actually it is Mr. Gao who offers the gift and asks Simon to cooperate), we cannot deny that both of them will gain what they want because of their cooperation. Therefore, I prefer to say the red envelope is like a secret "offer" provided by the father to enroll Simon as their family member in exchange for the arrival of his grandson and his son's future happiness.

The most striking feature for the shots discussed above is that the figures are always framed with their backs to the camera. Such style of framing fulfills the

⁷¹ Chris Berry and Mary Farquhar, "Where Do You Draw the Line? Ethnicity in Chinese Cinemas" in *China on Screen: Cinema and Nation* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006), 176.

⁷² *Ibid.*, 179.

narrative function of releasing a sense of “secret”: in figure 3.9, when the father is washing dishes by himself, he blocks others from the truth that he understands English and has understood the true relationship among Weitong, Simon and Weiwei; in figure 3.11 and 3.12, Simon and Weitong’s backs indicates their hidden homosexual relationship and their suffering when they choose to make this hidden relationship stay as a secret; and in contrast to framing figures with their faces exposed to the camera where Weiwei is given the gift (fig.3.14), which indicates a kind of aboveboard relationship, Mr. Gao and Simon turn their backs to the spectators in figure 3.13, when they are build up another hidden cooperative relationship. Therefore, framing the figures’ backs is a style to convey the narrative meaning that they are facing a situation that is unsuitable to be publicized. Moreover, comparing figure 3.9 and 3.13, Mr. Gao has made a personal development: learning to cooperate or compromise with Simon instead of isolating himself from others.

Another narrative design to make the father’s final acceptance more reasonable is Mr. Gao and Weitong’s “parallel experiences as rebels”⁷³: on the first day when Mr. Gao arrives New York, he exposes his long-kept secret of why he came to Taiwan in his early age to Weitong: “I wanted to run away from home. So I joined the army. Your grandpa had arranged a marriage for me. I got mad and just took off.” So when Mr. Gao learns that his son is using a sham marriage to resist what he has imposed on him, which mirrors his own experience, it is morally difficult for him to reject Weitong’s rebellion. Actually, the director Ang

⁷³ Song Hwee Lim, "The Burden of Representation: Ang Lee's *The Wedding Banquet*." In *Celluloid Comrades: Representations of Male Homosexuality in Contemporary Chinese Cinemas* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i, 2006), 64.

Lee himself is also a “rebel” to his father, not for the marriage, but for his career choice to be a movie director instead of a school teacher as his father has expected. Referring to the making of *The Wedding Banquet*, Ang Lee said, “It’s a tremendous guilt I felt towards my father...I ended up an entertainer...”⁷⁴ Presumably, the plot device of the father’s final acceptance of Weitong’s lifestyle choice expresses Ang Lee’s wish that his father can understand and accept him as a director. And eventually, this highly traditional father does accept his son.

As soon as Simon is accepted by the Gao family in the dénouement of the movie, whether the baby can arrive becomes the spectators’ most imminent concern, because according to the narrative development, Weiwei is planning to abort the baby at that time. However, there appears a narrative twist when Weiwei and Weitong are driving to the hospital: the potential mother asks to stop in front of a fast-food restaurant and insists on eating a hamburger, and to everyone’s surprise, in the process of consuming this quintessential American-style food, she announces that she will bear the baby. As Paul Rozin points out, “The mouth functions as the natural guardian of the body and the main channel between two worlds: the outside world and the inside world of the body. It is the aperture that allows incorporation to take place. Once food enters the mouth, the digestive process begins incorporating food, physiologically and psychologically, into the self.”⁷⁵ On a primitive psychological level, Weiwei’s acceptance of the American food would signify her ingestion of the American spirit---modern individualism

⁷⁴ Ang Lee, speaking on ‘A Forbidden Passion’, 1993.

⁷⁵ Paul Rozin, “The Acquisition of Likes and Dislikes for Foods”, in J. Solms and R. L. Hall (ed), *Criteria for Acceptance: How Man Chooses What He Eats* (Zurich: Forster Verlag, AG/ Forester Publishing Ltd., 1981), 35.

and personal autonomy---into her own, which prompts her to make the decision to raise the child by herself. And in the process of consuming the food, she also incorporates the American identity to the baby and herself.

In one critic's opinion, the baby will help her "procure not only legal immigrant status but also a significant emotion connection and shelter and long-term financial assistance"⁷⁶ and that she accepts the baby when consuming the hamburger shows her dependence on global capital⁷⁷. This is one way to explain Weiwei's change of decision, but perhaps we can interpret her final choice from another perspective. In Chinese, the pronunciation of "hamburger" is "hàn bǎo", whose sound is the same as another term—Chinese baby, so when Weiwei says to Weitong uncompromisingly in the movie: "I'm craving a hamburger", she puns on the likeness of "hamburger" and "Chinese baby", actually, she has expressed her will before she eats the hamburger: "I want the baby!" Therefore, her action of consuming the hamburger is to further affirm her decision and to stabilize the baby's position in her body and also in her mind. From this point of view, the hamburger functions as a source to make her maternal consciousness alive and it also contributes to the unborn baby's peripeteia, whose fortune switches from being abandoned to the regain of favor.

⁷⁶ Rey Chow, "All Chinese Families Are Alike: Biopolitics in *Eat a Bowl of Tea* and *The Wedding Banquet*", in *Sentimental Fabulations: Contemporary Chinese Films* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007), 143.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 141.

3.3 The forgiveness between Jiaqian and Jiazhen in *Eat Drink Man Woman*

Man Woman

In *Eat Drink Man Woman*, Ang Lee proposes to use the “cleaning up” scenes to reflect the relationship among the three daughters, especially that between Jiaqian and her older sister, Jiazhen. As shown in figure 3.15, each of the three



Figure 3-15

sisters fulfill a different task in their first “cleaning up” scene and the narrative positioning of them implies their relationship: Jiaqian is putting all the leftovers into the crispers in the background of the frame; Jiazhen is washing the dishes in the foreground; and the youngest daughter---Jia’ning---positions herself between her two sisters to pass the empty dishes to the washer. Actually, Jiazhen’s posture in the shot---leaving her back to Jiaqian---has implied the tension between them, and Jia’ning’s constant moving denotes her role as a mediator between her two sisters. For example, learning Jiaqian is going to move out, Jiazhen says to Jia’ning, “I don’t know why I’m upset. I should be happy for her.” And when

Jiaqian apologizes for leaving father in their hands, Jia'ning tries to comfort both of them with her line: "Why should we be upset? It's just a matter of time before you or Jiazhen gets married and moves out." However, when they talk about their parents' love, the disagreement between Jiaqian and Jiazhen is escalated:

Jia'ning: I think the only true love in his life was our mother.
Jiaqian: You call bickering and fighting love?
Jiazhen: What do you know? Maybe it's not romance to you.....but it was founded on real old-fashioned respect and values.
Jiaqian: It was an old-fashioned war that ended only when Mom died!
Jiazhen: How would you know? You were a kid when she died.
Jiaqian: I was old enough to know her better.
Jia'ning: Stop it please, you two.

Ang Lee uses the typical shot/reverse shot (fig.3.16 and 3.17) pattern to present the quarrel between Jiazhen and Jiaqian. Such cutting and the shots adhering to the 180⁰ system work to emphasize the cause-and-effect flow of their battle---what Jiazhen argues and how Jiaqian retorts. The dispute between them reflects their contradictory values: as we know, Jiazhen is a sexually conservative Christian in the first place, while Jiaqian is portrayed as a sexually liberated



Figure 3-16



Figure 3-17

airline executive; therefore each of them suspects the other of disapproving of her morals. However, in a deeper sense, their strained relation can be attributed to Jiazhen's wrongly positioning herself as the other sisters' mother instead of their sister because of their mother's early death. She even makes up a story that she

was jilted by her ex-boyfriend in college to “create a barrier against intimacy”⁷⁸, she refuses to create a familial intimacy with her sisters and is also unwilling to pursue her own romance. Jiazhen’s misplacement of her identity only makes her to become an “outsider” of the family, but she didn’t realize her fault until Jiaqian points it out in their next washing dishes scene.

It’s ironic that although Jia’ning treats her two sisters’ moving out as “just a matter of time” in the first “cleaning up” scene, actually she is the first one to leave to establish her own nuclear family. The mediator’s absence makes the tension between Jiazhen and Jiaqian reach its climax in their second “cleaning up” scene, but in the meantime their communication goes deeper. When Jiaqian tries to persuade her sister that home isn’t everything when they are washing the dishes, Jiazhen is enraged, smashing the plate in the sink and saying:

Jiazhen: Why is it that you feel that you have to meddle in my life? What gives you the right to tell me what to feel? You probably think that I’m pathetic. But at least I had a heart to break.

Jiaqian: And what do you know of my heart?

Jiazhen: Nothing whatsoever.....because you never felt that I was worth sharing your feelings with.

Jiaqian: You’re wrong. Ever since Mom died, you acted more like a parent than a sister. You shut me out.

Jiazhen: I thought you hated me.

Jiaqian: Never.

Jiazhen: I broke the plate.

Jiaqian: It’s okay.

The filmmaker frames the two figures in medium close-ups on either side of the 180⁰ line (fig.3.18 and 3.19) when they open their hearts to each other, in order to emphasize the moment of Jiazhen’s realization (*anagnorisis*) that she was on the wrong direction with her sister’s assistance. “It is when Jiaqian reveals

⁷⁸ Wei Ming Dariotis and Eileen Fung, “Breaking the Soy Sauce Jar: Diaspora and Displacement in the Films of Ang Lee,” in Sheldon Hsiao-peng Lu, (ed) *Transnational Chinese Cinemas: Identity, Nationhood, Gender* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1997), 211.



Figure 3-18



Figure 3-19

her desire for a sister rather than a mother in Jiazhen 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.”⁷⁹ In other words, Jiaqian contributes to her sister’s switch in fortune (*peripeteia*), who moves from a conservative spinster teacher to a vibrant woman pursuing her own romantic love in the closure of the movie. And the last two lines between Jiazhen and Jiaqian in this scene---“I broke the plate”, “It’s okay”---implied the forgiveness and the restoration of their sisterhood.

⁷⁹ Ibid., 211.

Conclusion

After examining each category of the meal scenes in Ang Lee's family trilogy, we can understand how the material element of food constructs meanings about complex human relationships on a psychological level. Moreover, the tones of those meal scenes coherently integrate with the overall narrative structure of the films to create a sense of balance. "Food preparation" scenes can be treated as a liberating element in the narratives to release the characters' repression of love (paternalistic love, romantic love or fraternal love), and also to express their efforts to struggle with the restricted senses of identity, both personal and cultural, which are exposed in the familial and social interactions between different characters. The complexity of their relationships is illustrated in the eating scenes, where the two kinds of relations further proceed in two directions: on a vertical line, the disparity of understanding between different generations when they are eating at home results in the familial alienation, and when their tension reaches a certain degree, the protagonists' outbursts lead to the disintegration of the family; while horizontally, similar cultural cognitive habits between friends and generational peers contribute to their smooth eating outside the home space, which shows the ritual of intimacy and creates an image of social cohesion.

Those scenes having the father figure dining with his children give the audience a clear image of the embarrassing relationship between the older and younger generations: for Alex, Weitong and the three daughters in the trilogy films, although they still uphold a Chinese tradition of filial piety and duty, it's

hard for them to fully appreciate Eastern values because of their growing alienation from Chinese culture and the way they have become the hybrids of East and West; facing their beloved children's rebellions against his authority and their cultural heritage, the father figures are very disappointed and even frustrated in the process of compromising and accepting the progressive assimilation into the modern Western world. Reflected from the "cleaning up" scenes, both of the generations have recognized that they have to adjust to their roles to achieve a new balance: the children have learned to sacrifice, and the final desire of the father is no longer a conventional family, but the happiness of all the family members. Their cooperation, acceptance and forgiveness help to reconstruct the family structure and bridge the boundaries of generation and culture. By extension, in a modern industrial society, it is not the physical space but the emotional understanding and support that tie the family members together as a cohesive unit.

Ang Lee frames most of these meal scenes in the long takes or close-ups to slow down the narrative rhythm and emphasize the important narrative details. His three earliest films, involving the filmmaker's great passion and incorporating elements of his personal life, have heavily influenced his later film creations. Therefore, in his follow-up works (not only Chinese-language films, but also those in English) such as *Sense and Sensibility* (1995), *The Ice Storm* (1997), *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* (2000) and *Brokeback Mountain* (2005), meal scenes are still an indispensable part of the whole narrative framework. Future research would apply the ideas in this thesis to them.

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