Ang Lee’s Domestic Tragicomedy: Immigrant Nostalgia, Exotic/Ethnic Tour, Global Market

Sheng-mei Ma

The Taiwanese immigrant filmmaker Ang Lee’s award-winning trilogy, *Pushing Hands* (1992), *Wedding Banquet* (1993), and *Eat Drink Man Woman* (1994), represent the most recent phase in the evolution of *Luo-shueh-shen-wen-shueh* (Overseas Student Literature) since the 1960s. While narrative strategies of immigrant texts linger, while traditional filmic techniques prevail, Lee advances overseas student/immigrant discourse by conceiving his films globally, with an eye to commodifying both the nationalist and the non-nationalist ingredients in the immigrant, Asian American, and American characters. Instead of simply dwelling on nostalgia for a bygone era, these films elaborate the immigrant’s present dilemma in the U.S. and, in *Eat*, the immigrant culture in Taipei. Most significantly, Lee increasingly undermines fixed categories in racial, cultural, and sexual identities through interjecting into immigrant subjectivities, among other things, ludic sexuality and deracination, both elements being utterly missing in Lee’s literary predecessors on Chinese immigration. Though retaining some melancholic tone of Overseas Student Literature, all three of Lee’s films challenge sexual orientation, traditional romance, and marital suitability, whereby gender, race, and age seamlessly intersect.

The material conditions of Lee’s films betoken boundary-crossing in a globalized film culture. Despite being financed chiefly by Central Motion Picture in Taiwan and representing Taiwan in various international film festivals, Lee’s films are self-consciously produced and consumed in the world market, with multinational crew, storyline, and marketing strategies. Lee collaborates with a New York production company, Good Machine, headed by James Schamus and Ted Hope (Comer 63). The scripts for the trilogy grow out of the concerted effort of Hui-ling Wang, Lee, and Schamus. In addition to Good Machine, the credits to all three films indicate that Western technicians as well as performers play a crucial role in this joint venture.
While the production side is unequivocally multinational, Lee’s consumption strategies are no less global. Few aspiring filmmakers nowadays can afford not to think globally. Elizabeth B. Buck in “Asia and the Global Film Industry” offers a cogent analysis of the necessary promotion in the world film market:

While Hollywood is still dominant in terms of exports (U.S. films command roughly two-thirds of the box offices in the majority of countries around the world), the dynamics of the film industry are changing rapidly, moving toward a more international product that has creative and financial roots in several countries. Now the industry talks about a ‘global cinema’ where any single film may have stars, producers, director, scriptwriters, and financing from various countries, all aimed at a global cinema audience of two hundred million people. (122)

Lee’s aggressive promotion tour at international film festivals testifies to his appreciation of global cinema. Box office success around the world, Lee knows too well, corresponds to nominations and awards at film festivals, particularly those garnered from Western Europe and the U.S. In sum, both the production and consumption of Lee’s films are practiced in a capitalist framework, whereby “Third-World international or festival films,” as Fredric Jameson puts it in The Geopolitical Aesthetic: Cinema and Space in the World System (1992), are obliged to be packaged “in national, cultural and one is tempted to say, tourist-friendly ways, in which it is the fact of a brand-new locale and unprecedented national provenance that is stressed and marketed” (119; emphasis mine).

Ang Lee’s oeuvre goes beyond a close examination of the “Pacific Rim” because Lee’s leading roles customarily possess immigrant subjectivities so perpetually shuttling between the First and the Third World that the barriers raised between them are nearly collapsed to reveal one world. Nevertheless, Lee presents his films in a “tourist-friendly” way in terms of the appeal to bourgeois taste and the subsuming of class. Similar to a great number of overseas Taiwanese Chinese students/immigrants, Lee originally came to the U.S. to pursue an advanced degree, earning an MFA from New York University (Comer 63). Two salient factors prevent his art from falling into the formula of dejection and homesickness of Overseas Student Literature: compared to Pai Hsien-yung and other overseas Chinese writers, he belongs to a younger generation whose art comes of age in recent years in the U.S. The context from which Lee emerges, therefore, differs drastically from that of Overseas Student Literature decades ago in Taiwan and other
Chinese-speaking areas. Secondly, his medium of art is cinema which, increasingly, is conceived in and consumed by a larger audience than just the Chinese, who have remained the target group for literature in Chinese. Lee’s generation and profession suggest the possibility of transgression of established parameters concerning nationality, race, gender, and age differences.

With regard to genre, “domestic tragicomedy” is an appropriate description for Lee because of the existence of the Chinese term Chia-t’ing Pei-hsi-chu (family tragicomedy) with its suggestion of Chia-t’ing Lun-li (family ethics), which is exactly one of the axes on which the films are constructed. Family ethics revolving around a patriarchal figure is, after all, the foundation of Confucian cosmology. On the other hand, the word “domestic” is exceptionally enlightening, for its intrinsic ambiguity serves to shed light on Ang Lee’s cross-cultural, multinational texts. “Domestic” refers not just to family but to nation or culture. Furthermore, “domestic” can be taken to mean the cultures of both Taiwan and the U.S., a duality contributing to the films’ global success, for an international moviegoer, whatever his/her subjectivity in approaching the film, is able to find some appeal. The complex duality at times renders the same episode evoking nostalgia in some audience and exoticism in others. For instance, what a Chinese (immigrant) audience considers a nostalgic moment over an irretrievable Chineseness may turn out to be an exotic/ethnic tour for a Westerner venturing into alien culture. Conversely, what a Chinese audience finds exotic becomes, for a Westerner, comforting, contextualizing markers for what might otherwise be Brechtian “alienation effect” that threatens to disorient or even repulse the middle-class moviegoers. Above all, the designation of “domestic tragicomedy” brings out the distinctive movement of the trilogy. The initial, potential tragedy on immigrant predicament and nostalgia is transformed into a comedy as an exotic/ethnic tour is extended to the audience in a global market.

II.

All but Pushing of Lee’s trilogy are widely available at major video stores across the U.S., due most likely to the fact that Pushing is less polished technically and far more intense in featuring immigrant nostalgia. Some characters reappear in the three films, especially the father figure played by Lang Hsiung, who becomes a crucial link stringing together the trilogy. Pushing describes how a retired Tai Chi Master moves from China to New York to live with his son and American daughter-in-law, Martha. All three are trapped by their cultural and linguistic differences and the Master feels especially humiliated
when he and Mrs. Chu, also from Beijing, perceive that they are being brought together as a match by their children. The father “runs away from home” in a rather adolescent manner and degenerates into a dishwasher in Chinatown. This melodramatic episode later leads to the ethnocentric myth of *Chi Kung* (Chinese Kung Fu manipulating the inner “breath”). When fired by the ruthless restauranteur, the Master shows his true grit: he remains immobile on the premises and bounces off anyone trying to remove him—Chinatown gangsters and policemen alike—with his *Chi Kung*, which is as much a commentary on his power as it is on his ineffective stasis. His son finally locates him in prison and, following the Master’s request, rents a unit for him in an old people’s apartment in Chinatown, where the Master chances upon Mrs. Chu. She has also moved into a near-by apartment for similar problems with the next generation.

The comic plot of *Wedding* stems from a series of mistakes and miscalculations. A homosexual Taiwanese, Gao Wai-tung, lives with his Caucasian lover Simon in New York and collects rent from the various apartments he owns. His traditional parents in Taipei are so anxious to have grandchildren that they practically send a bride-to-be from Taiwan to meet Wai-tung. Desperate “to get them off my back,” Simon and Wai-tung orchestrate a sham marriage between Wai-tung and Wei-wei, a Shanghai painter of abstract art stranded in one of Wai-tung’s run-down apartments. Wei-wei could benefit from the arrangement in acquiring a “green card” or permanent residence. The plan derails as the parents unexpectedly travel to New York to attend the wedding. It goes even further awry when Wai-tung and Wei-wei, exhausted and intoxicated from the banquet and subsequent *Nao-tung-fang* (“friends disrupting the bridal chamber”), have intercourse and Wei-wei becomes pregnant. The tense, triangular relationship explodes as a jealous, enraged Simon storms away from the breakfast table. The parents, who supposedly do not speak English, are dumbfounded. The breakup is only saved when Wei-wei decides against an abortion, when Simon agrees to maintain a *ménage a trois*, and when the retired general-father, in a vintage Ang Lee comic twist, privately reveals to Simon, in *English*, that he understands their morning brawl and accepts him as another son.

The leading role of *Eat* is a widower-father and master chef at Taipei’s Grand Hotel. Chef Chu’s life is beset by the fact that he has mysteriously lost his taste buds and that he is losing his three daughters—Chia-jen the spinster Christian who allegedly turned religious because having been jilted by a Li Kai in college, Chia-chien the airline executive yuppie, and Chia-ning the adolescent, a McDonald’s employee. The cracks in the fabric of the family show
through the meaningless, ritualistic Sunday night banquet the father prepares for the daughters. In addition to his professed wish to present Chinese cuisine cinematographically, Ang Lee explains the banquet as follows: “Sometimes the things children need to hear most are the things parents find hardest to say, and vice versa. When that happens, we resort to rituals” (Comer 62). Food, as “a metaphor of love,” is poorly produced as the chef can no longer control the right amount of seasoning and is poorly received as the daughters contemplate a move away from the family prison. Four announcements of imminent move out of the family are made by each of the family members at four separate Sunday dinners, but Ang Lee’s trademark comic resolution occurs when the chef-father discloses his impending marriage with a family friend decades younger than himself and long regarded as “a fourth daughter” of the Chus.

Considered individually, each of the trilogy contains both immigrant nostalgia leading to melodrama or even tragedy and exotic/ethnic tour suggesting a comic denouement. But taken chronologically in the order of their release, the trilogy reveals an increasing propensity toward exotic travel in search of the Other rather than nostalgic lamentation over the loss of the Self. Specifically, Pushing opens with the claustrophobic impasse felt by the immigrant father, the film’s acute nostalgia only slightly mitigated by the sight and sound of the ethnic community in Manhattan. Wedding seeks to balance melancholy felt by the retired general-father over a lost lineage and comic components derived from gender-transgression, i.e., homosexuality, and from culture-transgression, i.e., parody of Chinese and American values. Finally, Eat concludes with an unreservedly exotic/ethnic tour of Taiwan for Western audience, with the chef-father’s predicament offering some indigenous flavor to the “tourist-friendly” film. As a result of the lessening of immigrant nostalgia, which only strikes the chord of a specific kind of audience anyway, and the highlighting of the exotic other, which is favored by moviegoers around the world, Lee’s later films receive much more global recognition and are more commercially successful than the first film.

The opening of Pushing illustrates how the immigrant father and his American daughter-in-law Martha, and, by extension, the Americanized son/husband and the Asian American grandson are straitjacketed in the same space. A repeated pattern of the mise en scene for the film’s credit contrasts, on the one hand, the father-in-law practicing Tai Chi or Chinese calligraphy in studied and silent movement with, on the other, Martha, in the opposite background or foreground, staring at the computer screen, neurotically twitching her fingers above
the keyboard. The writer's block Martha experiences echoes the Tai Chi Master's being entangled in a linguistic and cultural maze. The Master's measured steps and breathing will not enable him to speak English, drive a car, or operate a microwave—until the aluminum foil he accidentally puts in bursts into flame. While Tai Chi, the father's traditional Chinese dress and shoes, the scroll of Chinese calligraphy on the wall, and videos of Beijing opera and Kung Fu films evoke forlorn nostalgia for Chinese and Chinese immigrants, all these denote an alien Other to a Westerner. By contrast, Martha's presence, her computer, her typical American behavior patterns help situate the aforementioned exotic elements within a familiar context for Western audience, yet Martha and everything about her become sheer exoticism for Chinese. These opening scenes have merged both nostalgia over lost Self and exoticism for Other, often in the same shot, depending on the subject-position—Chinese or non-Chinese—of the audience projecting the gaze.

As a cross-cultural intermediary, the husband is woefully inadequate in negotiating differences of the people closest to him, for instance, the divergent notions of space:

Martha: "I don't have space to think [for my new book]."
Husband: "Not enough space! This room is big enough for four people back home [China]."

The husband's outburst over Martha's legitimate complaint is in part justified by his guilt for his parents' suffering during the Cultural Revolution, but it also betrays a weakness in characterization. They all tend to display sudden change of path: in addition to the son's mood swings, the father behaves rather melodramatically and Martha winds up writing a novel about early Chinese immigrants building the Transcontinental Railroad. This flaw of Lee's first major production, however, does not eclipse the ingenious juxtaposition, within the opening mise en scene of computer and Tai Chi, of two conflictual spaces where Martha's desire for future-oriented literary fame and the Master's past-oriented homesickness are interlocked. Throughout his trilogy, Lee deploys such cramped urban spaces to frame tense and volatile human relationships: the crowded streets, restaurants, classrooms, school quadrangle in New York and Taipei; the traffic jam during rush hours; the long queue at McDonald's; cats meowing in heat; neighbor's deafening Karaoke; entangled and misplaced underwear in the drawers.

Shackled by urban space, incapacitated by their age and impotence, the three father-retirees are caught in a world beyond their control. In
response, they long to return to an imaginary Chineseness, seen in terms of their Beijing dialect and their insistence on tradition, especially with regard to cuisine and/as ritual. Linguistically, the fathers’ nostalgia for an alleged Chinese orthodoxy is embodied in the actor Lang Hsiung’s near-perfect Beijing accent, which forms the basis for standard Mandarin. Similarly, Mrs. Chu, whom he courts in Pushing, is also from Beijing and enunciates every syllable with the same crispness. These characters representing an older generation in fact verbalize an idealized Chineseness totally unadulterated by other Chinese dialects and, above all, by English. By contrast, all the younger, white-collar Taiwanese immigrant-children speak Taiwanese Mandarin and English, symbolizing their distance from the imagined Chinese core. Lastly, the American-born grandchildren—such as Martha’s son, Li Kai’s son, and, conceivably, the child of the “triangular” marriage in Eat—speak English primarily or exclusively, illustrating their severance from Chineseness.

The culinary art, regarded as one of the great achievements of the Chinese civilization, likewise epitomizes the dissipation of the tradition. Meals have always been important social occasions whereby Chinese family members or acquaintances strengthen the bond. However, arguments abound in the trilogy as a result of hidden hostility. The strained relationship in Pushing explodes over the dinner table, where two languages, two kinds of dishes, and two mentalities clash. The deception no longer holds in Wedding over breakfast when the couple and Simon exchange obscenities, oblivious to the stupefied parents and eventually causing the father’s second stroke. In Eat, the family’s routine Sunday night banquet has become such a meaningless and torturous ritual that each member uses it to announce his or her intended exit from the family.

Increasingly in the trilogy, however, is a tendency for the tragic to be attenuated and ultimately overwhelmed by the comic light-heartedness of exotic/ethnic tour. Food in the trilogy, for example, has grown from, in Pushing, the Master’s uncouthly huge rice bowl of Chinese “home cooking,” which suggests his disjunction with the family members preferring Western food, to the lavish banquet in Wedding as well as to the chef’s “star tour” of Grand Hotel’s mammoth kitchen and his sumptuous family feast in Eat. Chinese cuisine becomes less a marker of immigrant dilemma than an exotic tour of the taste for non-Chinese audience. The wedding banquet in Wedding, in fact, is punctuated not only by elaborate courses but by carnivalesque “performances” designed for the express purpose of public humiliation of the newlyweds. The filmmaker, during his cameo appearance in that
scene, rationalizes this intricate ritual: these titillating and embarrassing practical jokes suffered by the newlyweds, claims Lee the guest to two baffled Americans, reflect “five thousand years of sexual repression” (Galbraith 33). Surely a tongue-in-cheek hyperbole based on the stereotype of a-sexual Chinese, it comes to justify an exotic filmic spectacle of what is supposedly the prevailing Chinese custom. To his credit, nonetheless, Lee meticulously shows that the mastermind of the games does seek approval from the general-father before wrecking havoc. The father’s slight nod and grin sanction all the subsequent excesses. These games consist of forcing the couple to drink immoderately and of having the blindfolded bride receive kisses from male guests, culminating in a multitude of indecent acts in public. Even if non-Chinese viewers do not find these bewildering, what follows in the bridal suite is, to be sure, exotic.

Such pranks intensify during the traditional Nao-tung-fang, where the crowd becomes more intoxicated and rowdy and the performances required of the newlyweds more lewd. Only a Bakhtinian interpretation of the wedding banquet as a carnivalesque transgression suffices to account for the extravaganzas. The license to shed daily Confucian code of conduct gives rise to a communal ritual of Bacchus-like drunkenness and cavorting. However, being a product consciously packaged for the world market, it would be disingenuous to deny that such exaggeration during the banquet sequence comes to satiate the urge for exoticism, as Western audience is treated to a puzzling but not terribly disorienting alien culture.

This exotic tour is found in the preparation of Sunday night banquet during the opening moments of Eat as well. The chef slaughters fish, chicken, frogs, displaying superb dexterity and a wall of knives of different sizes. At one point, the chef even uses a heavy axe to crack open some solid object wrapped in huge lotus leaves on the elegant dining table. Another striking juxtaposition occurs when the lovemaking of Chia-chien cuts to the chef blowing into a duck’s raw, headless throat to prepare perhaps the famed Peking Duck. Lee consciously choreographs these scenes as a strange blending of the aesthetic and the abhorrent; the chef’s metier comes to fuse beauty and brutality. The Asian American playwright Frank Chin has long called this kind of gastronomic tourism “food pornography,” aptly defined by Sau-ling Cynthia Wong as “making a living [in Lee’s case, a film] by exploiting the ‘exotic’ aspects of one’s ethnic foodways. In cultural terms it translates to reifying perceived cultural differences and exaggerating one’s otherness in order to gain a foothold in a white-dominated social system” (Reading Asian American Literature 55). Even though Lee has
asserted that part of his intention in *Eat* is to demonstrate the sophisticated Chinese civilization in cuisine ("Eat Drink" in title) blended with the primitive sex drive ("Man Woman" in title) (Chen 164), the filmmaker has yielded to the stereotype of an artistic yet unfathomably inhuman Orient. The end result is box office success since the film confirms global audience's preconceived notion of a mysterious and inviting East.

Tragicomedy must end, more or less, happily and the evolution of the trilogy's concluding moments demonstrate, yet again, the proclivity to move immigrant nostalgia to exotic tour for consumerist societies. *Pushing* closes with the Tai Chi Master and Mrs. Chu standing on a dingy Chinatown street, shadowed by skyscrapers on all sides. He rather awkwardly inquires: "Anything to do this afternoon?" She hesitates and replies while lowering her eyes: "Nothing." Both are frozen after this exchange and their paralysis is prolonged by the gradual fade-out, the bleakness of this scene only somewhat redeemed by the possible union of the two. Some melancholic tone does continue in the closure of *Wedding*. When the parents board the departing flight, the sadness of parting is crystallized in the father's helplessness of the final shot—the victim of two strokes raising his arms in slow motion to be frisked by the airport security. It is, however, a highly ambiguous gesture since his arms suggest as much a submission to life by a frail retiree as a possible victory for gaining an heir—a grandson (despite the mistranslation of "grandchild" throughout the film)—to the Gaos. After all, shortly before the departure, the father, a typical Chinese male who makes little physical contact, holds tightly Simon's hand rather than Wei-wei's to bid farewell, fully acknowledging Simon as a member of the family. The father seems to give his blessing to the formation of a happy yet non-conventional family. His acceptance of an alternative marriage may derive from a rather conservative reason, though, namely, the prospect of carrying on the family name through the homosexual son. Put another way, the exotic/ethnic tour into the gay interracial lifestyle is normalized and mainstreamed by a traditional premise. In addition, the vintage Ang Lee comic twist of an English-speaking father confiding in Simon dissolves some of the gloom gathered over his recent stroke and impending breakup of the sham marriage. By the same token, *Eat* concludes with yet another comic twist when the father announces at the banquet that he will marry a family friend considerably younger than himself. This totally unexpected turn of event provides comic relief to the anticipation that he will marry the family friend’s obnoxious mother, who has been actively wooing him. This happy ending is compounded by the chef’s miraculous recovery of the sensation of taste as he savors
his daughter's soup, a further sign that the traditional family has been restructured rather than demolished. Such wish-fulfillments in the endings of both *Wedding* and *Eat* attest to the bourgeois tendency to subsume immigrant nostalgia in exotic travelogue.

Notes

1*Wedding Banquet* (1993) won a Golden Bear for best picture at the Berlin International Film Festival in 1993 and, with Sally Potter's *Orlando*, shared the prestigious Palme d'Or at Cannes. *Eat Drink Man Woman* (1994) won the best picture award at the thirty-ninth Asia-Pacific Film Festival and was nominated for Best Foreign Film at the 1995 Oscar Award.

2Alex Albanese's "Behind the Scenes: It's 4 AM, Do You Know Where Your Chopsticks Are?" in the August 1994 issue of *Boxoffice* demonstrates that Ang Lee also relies on the assistance of American studios and technicians not included in the credits of the films.

3See Buell's *National Culture and the New Global System* (1994), especially Chapters 4 and 5.

4Martha, on the other hand, experiences gastrorrhagia (bleeding in the stomach) because of the pressure of work and of living with her father-in-law. More significantly, the bleeding occurs while the Tai Chi Master tries to cure her with his Chi Kung. Not only does her digestive organ rupture but the human relationship as well.

5*Wedding* has been criticized by various women's rights groups and gay/lesbian rights advocates in Taiwan. "On Being Gay in Taipei: An Acclaimed Film Fails to Please Everyone" in the December 1993 issue of *Asiaweek* reports that according to Lee Yuan-chen, director of the women's rights group, Awakening Foundation, in Taiwan, "The case with which the conflict between the parents and their son is resolved and the apparent understanding [they reach] at the end of the film differ from most true-life experiences here [in Taiwan]" (45). By the same token, Chi Chia-wei, Taiwan's gay-rights and AIDS-education advocate, complains that the resolution comes about because the baby would have "ensured that their line [lineage] would continue" (45).

Works Cited

Ang Lee’s Domestic Tragicomedy 201


Sheng-mei Ma, Department of American Thought and Language, Michigan State University, East Lansing, MI 48824.