

The Aesthetic Singer of East and West—Film Master Ang Lee

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Keywords: Cultural intermingling, Western reception of Chinese film, East-meets-West aesthetics, cross-cultural communication

Abstract: Chinese film director Ang Lee can be considered a benchmark figure in the film industry, his films are always deeply philosophical and intriguing. Growing up in Taiwan and studying in the United States, the interplay of two different cultures has created a distinctive aesthetic perspective in Ang Lee's work, which also combines the traditional Confucian culture of the East with the openness and liberality of the West. This unique experience has also enabled him to make Chinese films acceptable to the West, while blending the aesthetics of East and West to achieve a cross-cultural spread of film art.

1. Introduction

Director Ang Lee's films are dedicated to exploring the contradictions and conflicts between tradition and modernity, the cultural clash between East and West, etc. He has opened up a new field of expression for Chinese film. He has interpreted and expressed the human nature of different historical periods and the dilemmas of the times, achieving a breakthrough in the technical-aesthetic-commercial triad, perfectly combining the commercial genre with the Chinese aesthetic spirit. His success lies in his ability to resolve various conflicts and contradictions, as well as his understanding and reflection on traditional Chinese culture and his unique sense of Western value systems.

2. Creative style

2.1. Aesthetic features

Ang Lee's films achieve a perfect balance between Eastern and Western cultures. In Ang Lee, there is both the immersion of traditional Chinese culture in classical aesthetics and the inculcation of Western civilisation. His films have a philosophical and aesthetic connotation. In *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*, human and nature, emotion and scenery are highly integrated, and the fight between the main characters in the forest is not only the highest level of integration of Chinese martial arts into nature, but also presents a style of "Taoism and Nature". He not only understands the art of metaphor in cinematic expression, but also uses metaphor to tell a variety of creative themes, and his metaphors are often ambiguous, which greatly expands the scope of interpretation,

enriches the meaning of expression and enhances the artistic and aesthetic effect of the film ^[1].

2.2. Narrative features

The basic narrative features are realistic, subtle and philosophical. At the beginning of his career, Ang Lee's films were mostly realistic in theme, although he also dealt with science fiction and other subjects in his subsequent films, but in general, Ang Lee's films have always been realistic.

In *The Wedding Banquet* and *Eat Drink Man Woman*, which are family ethics films, Ang Lee's down-to-earth approach to detail gives the films an objective, dispassionate and realistic look in terms of plot advancement and emotional expression. In *Sense and Sensibility*, he does not succumb to the narrative style of mainstream Hollywood films, but remains realistic and subtle. This is a result of the traditional Chinese culture that Ang has embraced since he was a child. In *Brokeback Mountain*, both the joy of meeting Jack and Ennis and the sadness of parting are presented in a subtle way.

There is another typical narrative strategy called “cultural integration”. Ang Lee combines Western commercial genre films with the spirit of Chinese aesthetics, internalize traditional Chinese aesthetic concepts. So that the audience will not shy away from the huge cultural differences, but will be willing to accept and understand another culture. For example, *The Wedding Banquet* has a clear logical structure, blending sensual with traditional narrative forms. ^[2]It embeds this ‘renegade love’ in the development of a traditional Chinese family, highlighting the tragedy of the times.

In fact, his success is also due to his deep cultural heritage and unique artistic perspective. Instead of grand narrative patterns, his films focus on telling family stories that reflect real human nature and the real emotions of real people.

3. Artistic expression in the film

3.1. Characterisation and plot treatment

Ang Lee's film characters often face the confusion of identity in the face of cultural shock and the psychological vertigo of a heterogeneous culture.

3.1.1. Self-contradictory characterisation

Gao Weitong, the only son of the Gao family in *The Wedding Banquet*, is a gay man who has long lived in a relatively open society in the West. But he does not deny his Chinese roots, and the concept of “There are three things that are unfilial, and the lack of offspring is the biggest one” has always pervaded his psyche. So the beauty of *The Wedding Banquet* is that by portraying such a self-contradictory character as Gao Weitong, Ang Lee has brought to life the struggles of a society in transition, and the conflict between traditional values and emerging ideas, even putting the traditional Chinese culture of “family” in the midst of the tide of the times.

The father figure is also an important one, especially in traditional Chinese families. It is worth noting that in Ang Lee's “Father Trilogy”, Lang Xiong was chosen to play the father. This father is also a highly contradictory being, who is caught in the whirlwind of Chinese and Western fusion, whether it is “Lao Zhu”, who has a foreign daughter-in-law, or “Gao Father”, who has a homosexual son, who is self-contradictory, wishing his children to be good, but on the other hand, they are deeply affected by the constraints of tradition and the impact of foreign cultures. When there is an irreconcilable conflict between breeding offspring and an ‘anachronistic’ true love partner, the Gao family's approach is actually full of helplessness and compromise, and I think it is also a way to redeem themselves in the context of the times.

3.1.2. Female portrayal

Most of Ang Lee's films acknowledge the power and role of the female character, although some characters are also set up to follow their fathers at home and their husbands at marriage, but he also acknowledges that they are the backbone of social innovation.

Ang Lee's in-depth portrayal of “women's own emotional pursuits” makes the film's plot more dramatic and moves the plot forward. Most of them are spontaneous, eager to be free and have their own unique and unknown spiritual world; they are often averse to the world's public eye and live in their own ‘utopia’. The ideal characters, such as the rebellious and unruly Jen and the sensual and delicate Wang Jiazhi, can hardly escape a sense of fatalism in Ang Lee's films.

Wang Jiazhi in *The Lust Caution* can be considered a typical representative. She falls uncontrollably in love with Mr. Yee, to the point of abandoning her mission. The sensual woman ultimately chooses her ideal love. Wang Jiazhi indulges in a fantasy created for her by love, but the rational Mr. Yee firmly chooses career over emotion, so once the fantasy is shattered and Wang Jiazhi returns to the real world, love becomes unbearable.

In *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*, Jen is born into a traditional Chinese noble family with strict rituals, but she aspires to a life of chivalry and steals the ‘Green Destiny Sword’, showing the freedom and independence of a modern Western girl. But as fate would have it, she took a leap from Wudang Mountain, ending a remarkable but short and sad life.

And then there's Wei Wei in *The Wedding Banquet*, who loves Wei Tong so much but ends up as a production tool.

The tragic end of idealistic characters often lies in the fact that they are so immersed in their ideal world that when real life no longer matches their ideals, a great sense of loss easily shatters the characters.

3.1.3. Plot treatment

The plotting of most of Ang Lee's films is quite worth studying. The unique thing about his film's plot treatment is that it neither criticises tradition through the lens of evolution and modernity, nor does it take a conservative stance to reject the development of history, but rather, through the crisis a Chinese family encounters in fulfilling its mission, it presents a new perspective on the struggle and mutation of traditional values in the context of modern lifestyles and the blending of Chinese and Western cultures. It is the struggle and mutation of traditional values against the backdrop of modern lifestyles and the blending of Chinese and Western cultures.^[3]

3.2. The emotional core - the deconstruction and reconstruction of the ‘family’

Ang Lee's films show a keen interest in the changing and disintegration of the ‘family’, *Pushing Hands*, *The Wedding Banquet* and *Eat Drink Man Woman* all being family-themed films. This is a result of Ang Lee's deep influence on traditional Chinese culture and his own feelings, and is a direct result of his concern and reflection on cultural phenomenon within the family^[4].

3.2.1. Personal and family conflicts

In *The Wedding Banquet*, the audience is told straight away, right from the beginning of the film, what a tragedy this is: the Gao family, which has a certain social status, needs an heir to carry on the legacy, but the only son, Gao Weitong, is a homosexual. Although the film is set in the 1990s, when the old and the new are blending and exchanges between China and the West have become more normal, the country's thinking has not yet completely changed (nor has it until the present day). All this is undoubtedly a fatal crisis for this traditional Chinese family, the Gao family. It was a classic

case of irreconcilable conflict between the individual and the family.

3.2.2. The cultural significance of the 'family'

Ang Lee's *The Wedding Banquet* considers homosexuality as a pre-existing cause of conflict among family members, focusing on the reactions of parents and sons when the homosexuality of an only son threatens the heir of a traditional family, and the hidden Chinese culture and the characteristics of the people shaped by it. It also takes same-sex love to a higher level, referring to the ambivalence of the older generation in the face of a new culture and new ideas, and even to the social phenomenon of reluctant compromise. The reason why the film uses the role of the father as the main driver of the plot is, in my opinion, the following.

First of all, fathers are authoritative in traditional Chinese families, which is typical of the cultural sense that fatherly love is mostly stoic and unspoken. Despite the fact that Gao Weitong has lived in the United States for nearly ten years and has been deeply influenced by Western ideas and culture, he is still afraid to resist his father's demands, let alone to tell him the secret of his sexuality.^[5] And then there's the end of the film, where the father's love and fulfilment for his son is evident. The hands above his head as he passes through the security check means that he is letting go and compromising, as well as giving his silent blessing. At the end of the film, it is the trio of Gao Wei Tong, his true love partner Simon and his agreement partner Wei Wei who are framed together, making one think about how the traditional family model should be transformed into a modern family model.

3.3. Spatial perspective

3.3.1. Single-camera narrative

At the beginning of making the film, Ang Lee used the dispatch of scenes within a single shot to show the characters' relationship and develop the plot as much as possible. For example, in *Pushing Hands*, in order to show the sullen, confrontational mindset of 'Lao Zhu' and his foreign daughter-in-law, he deliberately used a single shot to treat the two of them as a deep dispatching relationship in a front and back scene, thus creating a strong contrast.

3.3.2. The scenery shot and still life as a transition

As a 'temporal' art, the passage of time in film is necessarily represented through figurative space. In *The Lust Caution*, the three years that Wang Jiazhi returns to Shanghai from Hong Kong are removed by the principle of "narrativity" and are represented in scenery shots.

In *Billy Lynn's Long Halftime Walk*, when the entire B-team is interviewed by the press, Ang Lee uses a transition from still life shots to downplay cause and effect. By shifting the narrative to the "past" of the Iraqi battlefield, the still-life tree occupies the centre of the scene, leaving the "blank" sky to occupy most of the frame. This transitional space thus takes on the classical Chinese aesthetic of 'white space' in the stretching of time and space^[6].

3.4. Effect presentation—there is an end to words but no end to meaning

Ang Lee's films are dramatically oriented, with a focus on narrative strategy, and he is happy to provide audiences with a good popular story, but when the story on the screen comes to an end, audiences are led to another evocative space outside the screen, where they can savor all kinds of life, and even cultural reflections. It is a story with endless meaning.

4. The unique charm of Chinese and Western fusion

Ang Lee is a Chinese director who has expressed the clash between East and West to the fullest extent and in doing so has won the approval of both Eastern and Western audiences, his directorial art has both the connotations of Confucian culture and the popular melodrama of Hollywood drama. For example, *The Wedding Banquet* expresses the conflict between the old and the new in family issues, and is typical of Eastern rites and Western love. The series he has created reflects his familiarity with the popular melodrama format and his adherence to the Confucian tradition of 'love and propriety'.

5. Cultural diversity and cultural identity

Ang Lee also strives to find a way out of the reality of cultural pluralism and divergent identities in a harmonious and different way.

Ang analysis of his interpretation of Chinese and Western cultures shows that Ang Lee believes that cultures are equal, but that there are inevitable differences, which is the essence of culture and its charm. Ang Lee uses compromise to resolve the cultural conflicts in his films, thus achieving cultural identity.

Perhaps this is also due to his own multiple cultural identities and cultural stances. Through an analysis of Taiwanese culture and Ang Lee's life experiences, it is concluded that the multiplicity of Ang Lee's cultural identities leads to a non-monolithic cultural stance. Therefore, he emphasises cultural diversity in his films and pursues intercultural exchange and identity through compromise.

In the end, the journey to cultural identity is a long and distant one, and Ang Lee's film shows us that the best way to do this is to let go and compromise.

6. Conclusions

Ang Lee is a very good Chinese director, and I think he is very dramatically tense, and that tension is between form and content. There is a strong dramatic colour, a strong conflicting narrative system, a quiet and introspective and compassionate style. It can be said that the surface is unperturbed, but the inner quality is innumerable. They say that good work is honed by wisdom and experience, that restraint is what keeps the director's ego from proliferating and the audience from feeling the essence of the film. I think that Ang Lee, the master filmmaker and singer of Eastern and Western aesthetics, has done just that.

Acknowledgements

Thankfully, the world has film. Thank you for the edifying effect this art form has on people. Thank you to the millions of filmmakers who work day and night to produce food for the human spirit.

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