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Fragmentary Narratives: Globalization and Cultural Identity in the Films of Ang Lee

Two thousand and one has been an exciting year for Taiwan's most famous director and native son Ang Lee, whose film *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* swept awards ceremonies in the U.S., most recently the Oscars. Best Music (Score) winner Tan Dun described *Crouching Tiger* as crossing boundaries—of film genres, musical traditions, and national cultures. This description of the film succinctly suggests the exciting trend toward globalization reflected by mainstream acceptance of a subtitled motion picture in Mandarin. This conception of globalization is not only realized as the synthesis and transcendence of opposites, but also as the representation of geographic localities and notions of territory—including nationalism, identity, narrative, and ethnicity. Ang Lee's films complement the current theoretical orientation of English and comparative literary study and its focus on cultural identity and globalization. Two of Ang Lee's earlier works, *Eat Drink Man Woman* (1994), and *The Ice Storm* (1997), are particularly clear examples of this phenomenon.

The implications of globalization must be considered in light of the relationship between commodity and economic exchange and symbolic and cultural exchange—globalization studies are a continued rethinking of the relation among nations, economies, cultures, social practices, etc. Globalization theorists are divided on whether to view globalization historically or from a strictly postmodern perspective. Writers such as Edward Said and Roland Robertson argue that the globalization process has a long history and must be worked through key historical periods—beginning with the development of maps, maritime travel, and global exploration. This paradigm stands at odds with that of postmodern theorists Anthony Giddens and David Harvey, who argue that globalization is linked much more directly to modernity and postmodernity. According to Giddens, the "'lifting out' of

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social relations from local contexts of interaction and their restructuring across time and space" is made possible by the cohesion and strength of twentieth century nation-states (21). Meanwhile, Harvey takes his position on globalization from the point of view of recent developments in mechanization and technology—such as the Internet—causing the shrinking and contracting of time and space world-wide; thus globalization is a thoroughly modern or even postmodern phenomenon.

Globalization—according to Giddens—leads to the "intensification of worldwide social relations which link distant localities in such a way that local happenings are shaped by events occurring many miles away and vice versa" (64). The implications of this theoretical paradigm are striking, and provide fertile ground for comparative literary study, itself a field caught up with influences and relationships. Though scholars of globalization focus largely on the fundamental impetus of capitalism and the spread of economic and commodity exchange, Malcolm Waters does not agree that "the driving force for global integration is restless capitalist expansionism" (10). Instead he feels that globalization has been fueled by symbolic exchanges, i.e., television, advertising, films, novels, music, fast food—cultural entities that are circulated and recycled simultaneously in many locations throughout the globe. This is based on the understanding that "symbols can be produced anywhere and at any time and there are relatively few resource constraints on their production and reproduction" (9).

The most striking example of the transference of symbols between East and West is in the Ang Lee film *Eat Drink Man Woman*, whose title alone impresses "otherness" for the native English speaker. A direct translation of a common Chinese idiom, the title in English conjures up pidgin grammar, thus suggesting a whole history of Asian "otherness" in a western setting.[1] The suggestion of binary opposition in the title also calls to mind the East/West dialectic. The title implies larger themes that the narrative of the movie will explore, e.g. the difference between male and female, yet it suggests an interdependence, such as that between eating and drinking. In the two pairs of the four-word idiom, *Eat Drink Man Woman*, the larger motifs of food and sex, the fundamental components of all human life, are implied in a neat

1 Interestingly, however, this title was somewhat accidental rather than intentional—it served as a working title for the script, penciled in for the crew and actors to work with—the problem of setting up a formal title was left until after the filming, when it was suggested that the working title be left as is.

short-hand of translated Chinese, and are universally recognized to be transcendent of any cultural boundary or border. Thus, the title of the film itself is a sign of the globalized, territorially non-specific themes within. A final twist on the meaning of the title is given when the proverb—"Eat drink man woman" (or in Chinese "yinshi nannü")—usually employed to describe the bare necessities of sustaining life, is given an ironic reading when pronounced by the main character in the film to illustrate that even life's simplest elements have a way of becoming complicated.

As the film opens, the viewer is treated to the sights and sounds of all manner of traditional Chinese gourmet cooking, which presumably involves the use of certain tools, cooking techniques, and animal organs not found in the western kitchen. This may provide a shock or at least a pleasurable voyeurism for the western viewer. However, this is set against later semiotic signals that suggest the power and the reach of globalization—specifically, the appearance of the western fast food chain in which the two teenage friends work in Taipei—with all of its western accoutrements such as the uniforms, burgers, shakes, fries, etc. This may also prove to be a shock for some western viewers unused to seeing Asian faces in the uniforms of American franchises. Food in the film is totemic, infused with significance, and an intergenerational means of communication. "We communicate through food," is a line spoken by the middle daughter of the family, and in the film *Eat Drink Man Woman*, food truly serves as a linguistic signifier. This is further emphasized by the father's disability in the film—although a gourmand and master chef, he loses his sense of taste, and this becomes a major theme in the narrative. When this sense of taste is restored at the end of the film—while he shares a meal cooked by his second daughter—it serves as a fitting denouement to demonstrate that communication and understanding has been restored. "Daughter," he says; "Father," she replies to him.

As a semiotic discourse, in this film there are signs of cultures and influences colliding and synthesizing that demonstrate the true nature of globalization. For example, with the roles of three sisters in the family, each has a juxtaposition of contradictions—the eldest, who brings Christianity into her closed, loveless existence—the presence of the Christian church in Asia, often a signal of western colonialism, but here simply presented on its own terms, in the form of the unsteady faith of the Christian sister; the middle daughter, an executive for a Taiwanese airline, which is expanding into new countries by acquiring new airline routes in the international market. The youngest sister works at a Wendy's, although as a contrast to that, when she

gets off work she enjoys a bowl of noodles at a traditional roadside food stall. International influences abound—globalization is demonstrated by franchise infringement in modern Taipei, a boyfriend's petulant perusal of Dostoevsky, etc. The film's structure itself suggests a Western stage play. The tried-and-true formula of family drama—three sisters all very different, under the tutelage of a hapless father whose generational separation from his daughters renders him incapable of true understanding is instantly recognizable to a western audience raised on *Lear* and Chekhov. As Ang Lee undoubtedly supposed, this placement of unfamiliar food/city/language within a well-traveled plot would help the film reach audiences versed in western literature. The drama is a keenly-observed character vehicle—especially the quiet ending which serves as delightful theatre—a tableau of father-and-daughter bonding.

It is interesting to consider that the criticism leveled against this film in the United States centered on how the film was not easily classified as a comedy or a drama. Andrew Tudor notes "The crucial factors which distinguish a genre are not only characteristics inherent in the films themselves; they also depend on the particular culture within which we are operating" (139). However, criticism of the film from its home country, Taiwan, centered on how the drama itself was too "westernized" and that such "exaggerated" events could never take place in conservative Chinese culture. This criticism reflects the argument of James Clifford in confronting global identity. Clifford puts emphasis on the dis-location of culture, that culture has become deterritorialized and diasporic. Arjun Appadurai builds on Clifford's view by demonstrating that "deterritorialization "creates new markets for film companies, art impresarios, and travel agencies, which thrive on the need of the deterritorialized population for contact with its homeland" (38). The members of diasporas thus may imagine or fashion new, postnational identities, making and remaking themselves in response to new localities, social and political pressures, and transnational cultural discourses (Appadurai 31).

No director of modern film seems to contribute more to the debate on globalization, in the sense of blurring the distinctions between cultural identities and plumbing their interrelationships, then does Ang Lee. His own path to worldwide recognition has been a crossing of boundaries. Lee left Taiwan in 1978 and relocated to the United States, where he completed a Masters of Fine Arts in Directing at New York University in Manhattan. His directorial focus shifted back and forth between his homeland and his adopted home in his earliest films, as he directed a series of critically-acclaimed

independent dramas—these include 1992's *Pushing Hands*, and two spectacularly received Asian films, *The Wedding Banquet* (1993) and *Eat Drink Man Woman* (1994). Having finally achieved deserving recognition, he was invited to direct Emma Thompson's $15 million Jane Austen adaptation, *Sense and Sensibility* (1996). His 1997 work *The Ice Storm*, based on the novel by Rick Moody, followed on the heels of this great success. In the imagination of the artist, however, the cultural entities of the West and the East have been metamorphosed, blurred, and traditional attitudes called into question. As such images of a young male student pondering Dostoevsky and female college students working at fast food restaurants in cosmopolitan Taipei indicate, globalization is a trend that cannot be resisted. And yet, through this dialectic of shifting inter-relationships of cultural identities, an opportunity arises for Ang Lee to uniquely promote Chinese culture (or a hybridization of Chinese culture) in a way which in many respects serves as an enlightenment. While his work appeals to consumer culture, it also suspects the more traditional grand narrative, demonstrating that people living in the new millenium have developed a unique sensibility to deal with the contradictions of their age. Ang Lee's filmic voice indicates the paradigm of globalization in the contemporary era—that ours is no longer a world of totality—that the world has become more and more fragmentary.

One of the most harrowing examples of this fragmentation in the work of Ang Lee is his 1997 film, *The Ice Storm*. In this film, set in 1970's suburbia, Ang Lee creates a stark, alienating, gray microcosm for his players—difficult to watch, but oddly compelling. The Connecticut winter is at its most harsh and unforgiving, and the scenes leading up to the famous storm are filled with bare trees, dead leaves, and bitter cold air. This paints an apt picture for the tone of the film, which is about sexual detachment and alienation within the family. The film is a masterpiece of irony and bitterness. One can go so far as to say there is practically no communication in the film—that is the transference of understanding and coherent exchange of ideas between the characters. Each scene is fairly short, and if conversation takes place, it is usually brief or interrupted. Characters speak with their backs to each other, from under bedclothes, from behind closed doors, from within a Nixon mask, without meeting each other's eyes. Characters do not listen to each other. Silence is an actual medium in the movie—the film is all about what is unsaid—and the unexpressed thoughts fill the movie like a picture highlighted in relief. Kevin Kline and Joan Allen play a married couple for whom an upcoming weekend of Thanksgiving vacation could provide a chance to

reconnect with each other and with their two teenage children, played by Christina Ricci and Tobey Maguire. Instead, however, the character played by Kevin Kline is distracted by his own affair with a neighbor (Sigourney Weaver) while his children are engaged in their own precocious sexual pursuits. Children mimic parents in their meaningless and labyrinthine chase.

Some of the most unforgettable scenes in the film include Kevin Kline and Christina Ricci's silent walk through a wet and muddy woods, as he carries the chastened teenage child home in his arms (her feet are cold). The final scene is also a masterpiece, as Kevin Kline weeps, penitent, bent over the steering wheel of the family car, while in the back seat, his son remains uncomprehending, watching the rear view of his tortured father's head. Other haunting scenes include the kiss, in a winterized, drained swimming pool filled with dead leaves, between Christina Ricci and her adolescent boyfriend—Ricci first takes her chewing gum out of her mouth in a gesture that seems both vampish and all too innocent. Lines from the film which linger in memory include Sigourney Weaver's scathing line to Kline, post-coital: "You're boring me. I already have a husband." Her husband returns from a business trip to Houston and says to their two boys, "Hey, guys, I'm back." The older son replies, "You were gone?" There is also the angelic cherub-like son who tells Christina Ricci "I love you." In response, she asks, "Are you drunk?" In addition, there is an early scene where Tobey Maguire recommends to a girl on which he has a crush to read *The Idiot* by Dostoevsky, as he stands on a staircase feeling like one. "I think you'd really like it"—he says—"*The Idiot*."

Ang Lee's familiarity with 1970's Connecticut life is formidable. The movie was filmed in New Canaan, Connecticut, the center of white Anglo-Saxon Protestant culture, and the accoutrements of the movie, stereo phonographs playing "Montego Bay," rainbow-colored toe socks, polyester fashions of the ugliest nature including long lapels and gaudy leisure suits, hairspray-hardened hairstyles, waterbeds, the hardcover volume of *Watership Down*, etc., are all products well-remembered by those who came of age in those years. The modernist houses used in the set—shag carpets, wall-sized windows, flat interior design, gray paneling, unattractive box TV sets, etc., are all exact replicas of the 1970s community. Even the television commercials (i.e., the weeping Indian chief in an advertisement for environmental protection) and programs in the background are authentic television footage that nail home the era.

The use of both drugs and sex as escape routes in the movie accurately mirror the American social scene as it unfolded in 1973. The human dramas

in the film are made all the more convoluted, murky, dream-like and detached by the emotionally-numbing involvement of drugs, sex, and alcohol. Alcohol is served at every party and gathering among the adults in the film—there is never an adult without a drink or a cigarette, usually both. The sexual relationships include those between Ricci and the two sons of a friend's family, Maguire and his love interest, plus the adulterous relationships of both parents. This culminates in the notorious "key party" in which everyone exchanges car keys and goes off with everyone else—including the town's preacher ("Sometimes the shepherd needs the comfort of the sheep"—"I'm going to try hard not to understand the implications of that.").

The date of 1973 is pinpointed by the footage of Richard Nixon on the television set, Thanksgiving week in 1973, in which Nixon is about to be relieved from office over the Watergate scandal, the war in Vietnam is not going well, and disillusionment pervades the atmosphere. This was the accurate historical date of the famous ice storm which hit Connecticut and a large swath of New England in 1973, in which the air over the eastern seaboard suddenly turned to a freezing temperature, and in a single night a rain storm coated every exposed surface with a glaze of ice. The storm was dangerous, and entire communities and neighborhoods were immobilized and isolated for days. Trees cracked under the weight of the ice, and the falling of these huge trunks crushed houses, buildings, and automobiles. The storm in both the movie, and in reality, highlighted the distance and alienation felt at that time. This is captured in Ang Lee's film by the sights and sounds so clearly etched in one's memory—the clinking and cracking of the ice as the wind blew through ice-encrusted trees, the squeaking cracks of falling branches, the impassible roads, the loss of electricity. The "ice" metaphor is given further weight by the close-ups of a metal ice tray appearing in the film. Metaphors are further suggested by the short, cold days accentuated by the gray skies and the bleakness of the approaching winter. Those from the New England area recognize Thanksgiving as the beginning of a long winter season, incessant and relentless until April. The ice is even given a role in the film, as husbands and wives gingerly make their way across slippery, unfamiliar terrain.

The Ice Storm is a remarkable achievement on the part of Ang Lee because it demonstrates that he is not confined to a single culture or genre. Indeed, the film demonstrates such a complete grasp of the 1970's American suburban experience it depicts that it is phenomenal. In addition, the book itself, which became a best-seller in the United States, was written by Rick Moody, who grew up in the environment he describes, and for whom the experiences

related are semi-autobiographical. While Moody's fiction shows a confidence with his material, the film in some ways surpasses the fictional experience—how often can it be said that the book wasn't as good as the movie? And yet in this case, the book can be judged due to its appeal as a type of "pulp fiction"—it contains far more explicit sex than the film—almost needing to entice the reader through its softly pornographic writing on nearly every page. The movie transcends this sexual obsession, presenting the sexual material more obliquely, or even omitting it, in favor of more sophisticated portraits of its characters. The book, for example, opens with a scene in which Ben Hood is wandering around in his neighbor's house, and he takes a pair of her underwear and masturbates into it, and then throws it into her son's room. The film omits this graphic scene. Another specific example is the teenage son's crush on his Manhattan classmate—in the book, a detailed scene of masturbation is described as the boy takes advantage of the girl's drugged stupor. The movie treats this situation more tenderly and comically—more skillfully in general—the girl passes out in the boy's lap; the expression on the boy's face is priceless. However, he does not take advantage of the situation in such a depraved and prurient way. Instead, trapped under her body, he uncertainly and clumsily moves her, clunking her head against the ground in one of the most bittersweet and believable scenes in the movie. Then he has to leave, running for his train that will carry him into the freeze of the ice storm. Surely one can appreciate the subtlety of this presentation over the graphic sexuality of Moody's fiction.

Not all critics agree that Ang Lee was successful in his adaptation of Moody's work. Charles Taylor represents one dissenting opinion:

> Everything about "The Ice Storm," from the cool green titles that seem to smoke and shift (as if seen through ice) to Mychael Danna's score of lonely, Asian-sounding wind instruments, is tasteful and distant…Moody was writing from the inside; Lee doesn't get beyond displaying artifacts from a lost civilization…the movie does call up the early '70s. But being an anthropologist isn't the same thing as being a dramatist, and I'm not convinced Lee understands the period. How could he? Lee's being Taiwanese didn't matter in his last picture, "Sense and Sensibility," because the early 1800s are distant to everyone, but the calamity of American life in 1973 is still fresh in the minds of anyone who lived through it. The exhausting, one-damn-thing-after-another tenor of American life, with the outrage of Watergate striking before the hangover from Vietnam wore off, was far removed from the cool, ascetic portentousness on display here.

In addition, the film has to make a coherent narrative out of a book that presents a fragmentary one. The story is not linear, but rather patchy series of events described without chronological order in a chapter-by-chapter exposition each told from a different character's point of view. Thus, Ang Lee must create a narrative from what is essentially a cubist and fragmentary piece of work. The nature of the film is part satire, part psychological drama, and part tragedy. It is also a period piece, requiring the director also to address accurately a time period in which he was not physically located in the United States, and also an era that is very recent in people's minds.

> I basically made the movie from the crew's suggestions. For one scene, I wanted some kids' toys against the wall in Mikey's room, to give the scene texture, and we tried a field hockey stick. It looked really good to me, until someone had to say that in America, field hockey is more of a girl's game. Gradually I got tuned into the world — that happens on every movie. I did a women's movie, and I'm not a woman. I did a gay movie, and I'm not gay. I learned as I went along. What hit me the most was when Wendy says, "Mom, are you all right?" And I couldn't understand when Ben tells the kids to go to bed by 10, and they don't do it — I couldn't relate to that. I had to learn from the crew, who explained to me that this was a time when the kids were really raising their parents. The parents were so self-absorbed that the kids had to take responsibility for their own upbringing.... I tried to keep the emotional core of the tragedy — that's what prompted me to make the movie.... I think [the tone of the movie] is a lot softer. Less angry. I didn't grow up there. I wasn't pissed off. That distance helped me to make it art — it wasn't so personal. But I think if the movie moves people, *it's because it has a subtext that's universal, that anyone, from any culture, can relate to* (italics mine). (Lee, Interview with Jennie Yabroff)

In the last sentence of this statement, Ang Lee himself points to the global nature of the story of the dissolution of marriage and family that is a common theme in his work. The universality of Lee's filmic voice transcends cultural boundaries. Lee himself has stated "Quite honestly, I don't know what's what anymore. I wanted to make a Chinese Film [*Crouching Tiger*] so that I could be different from Hollywood, but actually my Hollywood films are more Chinese in vision than the Chinese films I made before. My first three films were just made for the mainstream Taiwanese audience. I wasn't thinking about being Chinese or not Chinese" (Lee, Interview with Winnie Chung) . In considering the work of Ang Lee, questions must be raised about

the relation between parts and whole, between local and general, between individual and global. For Lee, the filmic voice he has created reflects a multifaceted approach which symbolizes globalization and informs it with the process of enlightenment and liberation.

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