Gender Inequality as Family Drama in Ang Lee’s *Eat Drink Man Woman*

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December 8, 2015
Abstract

In this thesis, the primary source of my analysis lies with Ang Lee’s film, *Eat Drink Man Woman*, which was released in 1994. In this paper, I maintain that in *Eat Drink Man Woman*, Ang Lee’s depiction of the clashing between modernity and tradition allows for him to redefine the definition of success; thusly turning away from the traditional gender expectations of Taiwanese society and towards personal fulfilment. Through analysis of tradition and modernity as it appears in the film, I examine how Mr. Chu and each of his daughters find success despite the gender expectations within which they exist as a turning point in the understanding and interpretation of tradition, especially as it applies to sexism, in Taiwanese society. To gain a better understanding of the operation of sexist ideologies in Taiwanese society during the time at which *Eat Drink Man Woman* is set, I took a socio-historical approach in exploring the main socially embedded manifestations of patriarchal beliefs in Taiwan, looking at language, depictions of gender biases in the Taiwanese media and music industry along with the participation of women in the Taiwanese workforce. Thus, with this film, Ang Lee was ultimately able to flip normative understandings of traditional Taiwanese gender constrained definitions of success on its head. In the many years that have passed since the film’s release, it is found, however, that the struggles of the women in *Eat Drink Man Woman* are felt in Taiwanese society today, evidencing that Ang Lee’s message on the attainment of success has ultimately gone unheeded by modern Taiwan.
Ang Lee and *Eat Drink Man Woman*

Renowned Taiwanese director Ang Lee's career is one that makes a case for the belief that an abundance of experience and effort does eventually lead one to find fame. With a total of twenty-three awards to support his directorial skills, Lee has shown the world that artistic film expression and favorable box office numbers are capable of going hand in hand. From *The Wedding Banquet* and *Pushing Hands to Ice Storm*, it is clear that Lee's interest lies in getting into the depths of issues that everyday people must contend with. A number of his films explore issues such as gender norms, women's societal roles, social conflict and self-discovery. His films are important because they do not alienate audiences, as others do, but instead bring them together. Regardless of any language barriers that may exist between his films and his viewers, Lee's works have a way of connecting audience members on a deeper level because of their exploration and depiction of issues and ideas that speak to viewers on a universal level. Generational conflict, hiding one's true self, longing to break free from familial or societal constraints—these are all concepts that everyone can identify with. His third film, *Eat Drink Man Woman* is one that especially explores the ideas of generational differences and their relation to traditional roles.

The focus of this thesis will be on Lee's film *Eat Drink Man Woman* or 饮食男女. Released in 1994, this film follows the lives of a long-widowed Taiwanese master chef and his three adult daughters as they attempt to live their lives while circumventing familial and societal constraints.

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pressures. Set in bustling 1990's Taipei, *Eat Drink Man Woman* more specifically follows this master chef, Mr. Chu, and the conflicts he has with his three adult daughters and their life choices. In an attempt to repair his relationships with them that have all but broken in the years that have passed since his wife's death, Chu ultimately tries to communicate with them in the only way he knows how—food. An aspect that is incredibly crucial in this piece, Deborah Lupton perfectly encapsulates its thematic significance in *Eat Drink Man Woman*, “Food and eating practices are banal practices of everyday life; we all, as living beings, must eat to survive. Food and eating habits and preferences are not simply matters of ‘fuelling’ ourselves, alleviating hunger pangs, or taking enjoyment in gustatory sensations. Food and eating are central to our subjectivity, our sense of self, and our experience of embodiment.” Food is the central pillar that both supports and hinders Chu’s relationships with his daughters. Furthermore, in this film, Lee explores the notion of family as a burden and the effect it has on one’s ability to achieve success in any of its multiple forms. The film depicts these conflicts as a clash of modernity and tradition as Chu struggles to accept the ways in which his daughters go against Chinese tradition. Though littered with surprising and strife-filled moments, *Eat Drink Man Woman* ultimately ends with each of Mr. Chu’s daughters finding different levels of success and fulfillment. Even though some might see the individual successes of his daughters as complying with gender norms, Lee maintains that success, in its best form, should be measured personally rather than professionally. Thus, *Eat Drink Man Woman* is significant not only for its unique portrayal of the breaking down of gender stereotypes, but also for how it relates this depiction to the concept of the clashing of tradition and modernity—to change. In *Eat Drink Man Woman*, Ang Lee ultimately redefines the

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notion of success with his depiction of the contrast between modernity and tradition.

This essay will use *Eat Drink Man Woman* both to demonstrate what contemporary Taiwanese gender roles were like in the mid 1990’s and to present Ang Lee’s message of personal satisfaction being more significant than following the societally set success paths which are restricted by such gender roles. This paper will do this by first using the work of sociologists and historians such as Catherine Farris, I-Ching Lee, and Jocelyn DeHaas to show what the dominant gender situation was during this time period. I will then present a close reading of the film that will show how those existing gender ideologies are challenged by this particular domestic story that Ang Lee presents. First, I will conduct a close reading of several scenes that will show the basic plot concerns about the film and then I will provide socio-historical background about the larger anxieties going on in urban areas of Taiwan at this time. Then, I will return to scenes that demonstrate Ang Lee’s suggestion on how one should measure success through analyzing key scenes from the film.

**An Exploration of Modernity versus Tradition in Eat Drink Man Woman**

Continually, in *Eat Drink Man Woman*, it does not take long for one to see that one of the film’s main themes will concern the struggle against change and the past. The fight against tradition and modernity is one that has been going on since time began and 1990’s Taiwan is no different. From the opening scene alone, viewers are quickly able to see the contrast between tradition and modernity. Ang Lee opens *Eat Drink Man Woman* simplistically. In the film’s first few seconds, the initial shot fades in as offscreen urban ambient sounds are heard simultaneously. As the black screen gives way to visuals, audiences first see an aerial medium-long shot of the frantic chaos of the modern daily commute in Taipei. The speeding commuters
are shown in their entirety with a high angle that eventually appears to be looking down on them. The camera does not move, but merely tilts downward from a higher angle as the film title appears, thus providing an omniscient perspective at the chaos taking place below; allowing for a level of detachment from the activity taking place. The continuity editing used to create this scene suggests that this is almost a documentary-like recording of the Taiwanese daily traffic. Another interesting aspect to note is how the way in which the film’s title is displayed is in itself an indicator of this main theme as *Eat Drink Man Woman*'s Chinese name (飲食男女) appears written in two different forms of Chinese script. 飲食 in traditional Chinese characters, and 男女 in Seal Script (which predates traditional, Standard Chinese characters by a large amount) as seen below in figure 1.4

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*Fig. 1. Change Meets Tradition*
Another way in which this comparison between modernity and tradition is displayed in Ang Lee’s film is through the act of cooking, especially when concerning that of its patriarch, Mr. Chu. *Eat Drink Man Woman* largely portrays the master chef as a very traditional man, as exemplified through his culinary methods. Take for instance, the film’s second scene. The audience is introduced to the chef quite vividly as they watch him make preparations for his traditional family Sunday dinner banquet. Beginning with a high angle shot on the exterior of the Chu household, the scene immediately cuts to Mr. Chu’s hands with a close up shot as he catches descales and guts a fish for the upcoming feast with his bare hands. The scene alternates between close ups on his face and his hands as his culinary skills are displayed. As is done multiple times throughout the film, Lee utilizes narrative cueing to mark Chu’s entrance into the scene with the playing of traditional Chinese instrumental music. This not only reinforces the theme of tradition versus modernization but helps to establish Chu as representative of the ideal of tradition itself. From the portrayal of Chu boiling frogs and slaughtering chickens to individually cutting fish into fillets, it is obvious that buying these items pre-made from the store is not an option. In *Eat Drink Man Woman*, the director’s initial contrast between the bustle of the city to the stillness in the Chu household immediately after gives audience another example of the struggle of progress versus the past. Thematically, it portrays the urban traffic to represent the idea that time only goes forward and that the world exists in perpetual motion. Cutting to the quiet household of Chu immediately after merely serves to show that Chu’s insistence on tradition is what ultimately prevents him from moving forward and remain entrapped within the confines of tradition. Furthermore, the audience’s introduction to Chu and other cinematic cues in the film serve to show Chu’s character as an embodiment of the concept of tradition. This is made unmistakably
clear in the scene in which he drunkenly tells his closest friend and colleague, “Eat, drink, man, woman. Basic human desires. All my life, every day, that's all I've ever done. It pisses me off. Is that all there is to life?” (“飲食男女人之大慾，不想也難。哎，忙活一輩子就為這個？想了氣人，好滋味誰尝過?”) What is significant here is the simplistic way in which Chu compartmentalizes the aspects of living that he believes are the most crucial. Unlike his daughters who are growing up in a rapidly changing society, all his life he has lived according to these basic human desires, never daring to desire more and reach for complexity. Chu’s life view here stands in stark contrast to the modernization that is taking place all around him.

Continually, due to the fact that one of the main focuses of this film is on food in its various forms, it should come as no surprise then that food is used to convey the struggle of modernity and tradition. For instance, in the scene when Mr. Chu first brings Shan Shan a home cooked lunch at her school, audiences see the enviable appearance of the lunch box Chu prepared sitting next to the listless looking fast food Shan Shan previously bought, which more than pales in comparison, as shown in figure 2.6

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As Chu later tells a co-worker who attempts to coerce him out of retirement, “People today are so insensitive. They can't appreciate the art of exquisite dining.” (“人心粗，吃的再精也没什么意义.”). The visual contrast of the formal dining banquet halls against the fast food eateries and Chu’s statement here serve as further examples of the struggles that come with accepting modernization. Within these images, Ang Lee implies that convenience has brought on a decline in quality in Taiwanese society.

Furthermore, another significant aspect with which Lee explores the issue of modernity versus tradition and its relation to the definition of success is as it is displayed within the familial dynamic of the members of the Chu household. In “Negotiating harmony: Women, work and family in Taiwan”, Jocelyn DeHaas outlines the typical Taiwanese family dynamic in her study of 1990’s Taiwanese women and their definitions of success as well as their individual attempts

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to achieve it. Similar to way in which the Chu family unit functions in *Eat Drink Man Woman*, DeHaas finds that:

> It is important to remember, as well, that harmony does not arise naturally, *sui generis*, from the family in Taiwan; it is an ideal toward which people work, a constraint, and a tool for manipulation... The women I interviewed wanted their parents, husbands, or in-laws to support their ideas and their behaviors. They were not becoming autonomous selves with class consciousness or even necessarily gender consciousness; their identity remained embedded in their families. This was the context in which they operated.\(^8\)

Such is the case for the Chu family. In various instances throughout the film, As Mr. Chu and his three daughters go about their daily lives—personal and professional obligations blend together and it negatively affects their familial relationships. Each struggles to find a balance between person and professional success while living stifled and suppressed beneath the pressures that come with its societal gender-stereotypical definition.

Likewise, another demonstration Lee makes towards the theme of change takes place near the end of the film as Chu inspects his old house and what Jia-Chien has done with it in everyone's absence.\(^9\) These scenes are depicted below, in figures 3 and 4.

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Fig. 3. Chu inspects Jia Chien’s changes to their old house

Fig. 4. Chu remorsefully notices the changes Jia Chien has made to his old kitchen

Opening with a close up on Chu’s face as he remorsefully looks around his once familiar, now changed surroundings. The camera pans from the dining room to the kitchen where Jia Chien
cooks. The emptiness of the rooms and the house is almost alarming. Gone are the traditional outside cooking tools he used to prepare the banquets. Gone are the abundance of tools in the kitchen and the traditional Chinese house decorations. However, in spite of these minor superficial changes, we see that Jia-Chen still upholds the tradition of the Sunday Family Banquets despite other minor modern changes. The cooking equipment and house interior may have changed, but the essence of the family tradition has not. In this, *Eat Drink Man Woman* shows that it is possible to retain elements of tradition while adapting to change; thus exemplifying that, contrary to initial appearances, a blending of modernity and tradition is possible as evidenced by Jia Chien becoming the family matriarch and the cook of the Sunday dinners. Moreover, it can be said that the film’s final scene reinforces this theme as well. An image of this moment is provided below in figure 5. This theme is also seen within the Chu family through their familial evolution as they each move forward and learn to accept each others’ individual life choices, while still holding on to the traditional elements of their family unit, such as continuing to attend the weekly Sunday dinner.
The camera’s focus shifts away from the food on the table and views Jia Chien and Mr. Chu from a distance at an angle that is just above eye level. This physical shift in subject focus demonstrates a shift in Jia Chien and her father’s relationship as they look away from food and finally focus directly on one another. There is a medium shot after Chu tells her, “Your soup...I can taste it,” (“你的汤，Jia-Chien。。。我尝了.”)\(^{10}\), he addresses her as “daughter” for the first time in the film as they clasp hands. Ultimately in this scene Jia Chien’s mastery of cooking is finally justified and proven to be a personal success on multiple levels when it is discovered that her cooking is what gives her father his sense of taste back. Their connection to food and his long awaited acceptance of her culinary success restores their relationship. Of course while the traditional definition of success has been affected by the clashing of change versus

modernization as depicted in this film, it can be found that gender norms are also closely related to this concept.

**Manifestations of Sexism within Taiwanese Society and Ideological Explanations**

As I will suggest later, Taiwan, being a patriarchal society, has mainly depended upon the social and political subservience of its female population. Of course, while the patriarchal ideal has manifested itself in various ways in Taiwan, one of the main forms through which this has occurred is within the workforce. Despite the dominance of certain sexist ideals, by the time in which *Eat Drink Man Woman* is set, achieving true success was either measured through attaining marriage or professional promotions. This is clearly displayed in the film in various instances. From the male dominated banquet hall kitchen where Mr. Chu works to the mostly female-run Wendy's where his youngest daughter, Jia Ning works. From a kitchen that requires masterful culinary skills to fast work that requires no actual cooking skills, it is clear that Taiwanese gender norms, particularly in this situation where men are traditionally seen as more capable of cooking masterfully; certainly have an effect on societal measurements of success. For instance, in the scene where the Chief Executive at the company where Jia Chien works tells her that he has recommended her to the board to be the vice president at their company’s office in Amsterdam, he implies that she should not get her hopes up as she is “too young for it and too

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pretty for it”, (“老实讲，接这个位置，你是太年青也太漂亮了”). While he clearly believes that Jia Chien is capable of holding the position, this comment demonstrates the sexism behind the fact that her looks are even considered in her receiving the promotion in 1990’s Taipei workplace.

Moving on, in service of my argument how Ang Lee was able to reject Taiwanese traditional beliefs to turn the traditional gendered Taiwanese definition of success upside down in *Eat Drink Man Woman*, I plan on using scholarly literature regarding Taiwanese women’s ability to act participate in the workforce, live according to main traditional Taiwanese beliefs and still find personal success. Of course, before we can delve into how the modern, 1990’s woman was able to achieve personal satisfaction and success, we must first understand how success amongst women was traditionally defined in Taiwan. As I-Ching Lee finds, “Present research suggests that Confucianism defines successful persons as male, a definition that has different gender messages for men and women. In Taiwan, success is traditionally defined as male and a masculine accomplishment. Successful persons are typically assumed as male.”

Continuing on with this study of the Taiwanese woman’s pursuit of personal success, I-Ching Lee also examines both internal and external measurements of this concept and how these definitions ultimately vary in Taiwan according to gender. Lee finds that one’s personal beliefs regarding whether or not they have achieved success varies according to gender ultimately due to the traditional

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gendered notions that they have come to internalize over time.\textsuperscript{16} Within this study she also describes how these perceptions of success are firmly established within the traditional and cultural spheres of Taiwanese society:

In achieving normatively masculine goals, the Taiwanese cultural pressure of being successful (i.e., of men being successful) may be most detrimental to men with low self-efficacy in achieving the goals. In particular, young women may report low life satisfaction because of their anxiety at having to cross the gender line in pursuit of conventionally defined masculine success (i.e., types of success for men only) or because of their lack of feminine traits (e.g., trust traits).\textsuperscript{17}

This cultural pressure to succeed according to gendered definitions of the word in Taiwan is reflected clearly in \textit{Eat Drink Man Woman} through each of the Chu sisters struggle to ignore these standards and pursue careers. Thus while Lee explores the range of how sexism has permeated Taiwanese society within the professional sphere here, he also analyzes how patriarchal ideals affect the definition of success within the family unit as well, as evidenced in the Chu sisters’ pushing aside of the expectation of attaining marriage to find personal fulfillment elsewhere.\textsuperscript{18} The looming of marriage over their heads is a concept that is mentioned repeatedly throughout the film. One such instance of this takes place in one of \textit{Eat Drink Man Woman}’s later scenes, in which Mrs. Liang, the mother of Mr. Chu’s eventually revealed lover, visits Chu and


discusses the states of their children’s lives. The scene begins with a medium long shot of the house interior as Mrs. Liang enters the Chu house. She immediately asks Jia Jen if she is still unmarried. (“还没结婚？”) When Jia Jen confirms this assumption, Liang’s face drops dramatically, indicating her deep disappointment at hearing this news. The camera then pans to the living room, following Liang and the Chu clan as they make their way to the living room. As they walk, Mrs. Liang then asks Jia Ning how old she is. Upon finding out that she is twenty years old, Mrs. Liang excitedly advises, “It’s time to have a boyfriend. Don’t wait too long like your older sister. (‘那该找对象了。不要像你大姐拖那么晚！’) In this it is clear that Mrs. Liang’s traditional beliefs are held with strong conviction, and that she, as many Taiwanese do, believe that a woman’s highest possible achievement is getting married.

Furthermore, upon viewing this issue of gendered work division in Taiwan from an academic perspective, it is found there are several scholars who have discovered not only what it was like to be a Taiwanese woman participating in the workforce in the 1990’s, but also why this was such a difficult task to undertake. In “The Modern Women's Movement in Taiwan: The Changing Roles of Taiwanese Women in a Conscious and Collective Struggle Toward Equality”, Pei-jung Lee paints a vivid picture of 1990’s Taiwan in terms of the societal condition of gendered treatment in the nation’s society. Despite the numerous state laws that were put in

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place in order to ensure that women received equal pay as men and protection from gender discrimination, it is found that this was in fact, a deceptively progressive course of action. Regardless of the laws and policies that were put in place to ensure gender equality during this time period, discrimination still lingered and prevented women from achieving equality in a number of forms. In her dissertation, Lee found that Taiwanese women faced three main forms of gender discrimination within the workforce:

First, women's wages are always much lower than men's when both work at the same position. For example, Taiwanese men's average monthly salary was 55.5 percent and 56.5 percent higher than Taiwanese women's in 1978 and 1989, respectively. Thus, the gender gap is not only large but also persistent, despite the rapid economic growth and the big surge in labour demand in Taiwan over the period. Second, the professional and higher technology industries, which is the state's present economic plan's focus, have hired relatively few women until recently, whereas a large number of Taiwanese female workers were employed in the export industries of textiles and electronics with lower wages, terrible working conditions and no health insurance. Third, women are seldom promoted into higher positions in almost every profession, even in some areas that traditionally employed women.22 As Catherine Farris discovers in “The Sociocultural Construction of Femininity in Contemporary Urban Taiwan”, there may be more deeply embedded reasons for gender inequality within the Taiwanese labor market, “The traditional Chinese kinship system and the Confucian ideology

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which informed it may be seen to have produced and maintained the sexual division of labor in which women are subordinate to and dependent upon men.”

Farris also concludes that Taiwan’s women’s movement, which originally took place between 1972 to 1979 and was resurrected between the years 1982 to 1989, has not been enough to fully eradicate some of the more prevalent stereotypes and traditional gender beliefs from bleeding into the minds of current members of Taiwanese society. Women still faced a number of obstacles, that were still present, both legally and ideologically at the time *Eat Drink Man Woman* was released:

The woman born after 1949 has been described by the media as the “new generation woman”, and has so come to describe herself. She eagerly seeks the “new generation man” but is often disappointed to find that he has not experienced quite the same evolution of consciousness that she has. Many men are very unhappy about having to renegotiate power in the family, based on women’s self-increased confidence due to higher education and work outside the home. Men are also threatened by the challenge to their traditional prerogative to multiple sex partners. The continued diligence in control over women’s sexuality implicates both changing gender relations and changing relations of power between the older and the younger generations.

In Taiwanese society and history, the concepts of women in the workplace, the traditional Taiwanese family unit, and gendered societal measurements of success remain deeply

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intertwined. When pondering this societal combination and the dominance of patriarchal ideals in Taiwan, one may ask “why”? The anthropologist Melissa J. Brown is one such scholar who has discovered her own answer for this query:

Social and cultural dynamics are affected by the conscious and unconscious choices of individuals, and such choices are themselves affected by the perceptions of individuals about power and social relations which are often consciously thought of in terms of gender or ethnicity. Perceptions-based on idiosyncratic interpretations of the social power hierarchy and cultural meanings that often take the form of personal gender and ethnic experiences-may or may not accurately reflect actual social power relations. At a very broad level, analysis of the cultural impacts of a gendered social role in terms of social and cultural dynamics implies that choices--conscious or unconscious-are influenced differentially by cultural meaning, social power, perception (and thus the cognitive structure and operation of the brain), and demographic trends. People often notice and articulate these influences in terms of gender and ethnicity. Thus, while individuals "choose" their actions, the alternatives available to them are constrained by the existing cultural meanings, social power relations, and demographic conditions in which they live. Gender and ethnicity are so embedded because they both organize and claim ideological justification for hierarchical social relations.26

With the case of Taiwan then, it can be said that these gendered divisions beliefs and their societal forms stem from much more than the dominant gender refusing to change. As Brown

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demonstrates, sexism in Taiwan operates on a level much larger more complex and systematic than on an individual one. Delving further into Taiwan’s ideological manifestations of gender division with this possession of psychological reasoning for this gendered way of thinking in mind, it is clear that in order to truly understand the effects of gender division in Taiwan we must look at how this division existed on a [modern] societal level. However, before we can study the social gendered condition of 1990’s Taiwan in which Eat Drink Man Woman is set, we must first look at the general Taiwanese societal conditions that exist in relation to gender. Many scholars have analyzed the different roles women have held in Taiwan throughout its history as well as the different societal aspects through which Taiwan and China’s patriarchy exists. Of course, when thinking of main manifestations of this gender binary and its inferior depictions of women, workforce or domesticity participation might first come to mind. However, Taiwan, a predominantly Mandarin speaking country, it is found that its main language itself is embedded with these concepts of gendered superiority.\(^\text{27}\):

All the meanings of masculinity and femininity, of what it means to be boy or girl, man or woman in Chinese society, are contained in these two irreducible morphemes. The "natural" fact of maleness and femaleness, mediated by sociocultural meanings, is encoded in language, and appropriated by actors to talk to and about, "men and women" (nan nu)… [For instance] Caizi or ciren is glossed, "a man of ability," "a talented person," seemingly a generic or gender neutral term. However, the presence in the language of cainu, "a woman of ability," forces the interpretation that, once again, ren and

zi are par excellence $+$masculine$, and only a specific context will allow them to be read as $+$feminine$\ldots$ As long as people have sexist beliefs that get transformed into sexist social practices, those meanings will be encoded via the lexicon in language, and transmitted to and potentially transformed by, new generations. Chinese metaphysical assumptions about the nature of women and men inform their linguistic and cultural codes, and motivate their social behavior.$^{28}$

Looking at this issue of contemporary forms of gender inequality in Taiwan, Xiaohe Xu and Shu-Chuan conducted a study using the 1994-1995 Taiwan Social Change Survey in “Resources, Gender Ideologies, and Marital Power: The Case of Taiwan”. Here they examined the relationship between socioeconomic resources, gender ideologies, and marital power within the context of Taiwanese marriages that were taking place during this time period.$^{29}$ In this study, they found that while Taiwanese women in this time frame were allotted more marital freedom in making career and childcare decisions, that a number of marriages still existed in which they functioned more according to traditional gender roles, thus concluding that this institution in Taiwan was ultimately in a transitioning state.$^{30}$ Furthermore, in “Gender and Class Stereotypes: A Comparison of U.S. and Taiwanese Magazine Advertisements”, Chia-When Chi and Cecelia Baldwin provide analysis of women’s roles in Taiwan through the focal point of the Taiwanese media and its depictions of Taiwanese women from 1988 to 1998. In this it was concluded that


the Taiwanese media served as an accurate reflection of the persistence of gender inequality and stereotypes within its society:

By ignoring an increase in female work force universally, the U.S. and Taiwanese media misrepresents male images as non-working in a majority of portrayals in magazine advertisements. This study also concludes that women are depicted as inferior to men in the type of work they do. In general, men were frequently portrayed as high-level business and professional people, while women were most likely to be portrayed in entertainment/sports or mid-level/non-professional roles regardless of the country and the year. This confirms the female stereotype as a servant.\(^\text{31}\)

Another artistic aspect through which these gender norms are displayed in Taiwan is through its locally created pop music, commonly dubbed “Mandopop”. As its name suggests, Mandopop is pop music that is sung and performed in Mandarin Chinese.\(^\text{32}\) As Marc L. Moskowitz discusses in *Cries of Joy, Cries of Sorrow: Chinese Pop Music and Its Cultural Connotations*:

Conceptions of innate male and female characteristics so often found in Mandopop are remarkably traditional and conservative. Mandopop lyrics portray men as considerate (*titie*), generous (*guangda*), hard-hearted (*xinchangyaoying*), independent (*zili*), tender, gentle, and feminine (*wenrou*), tolerant and forgiving (*baorong*), and vigorous and energetic (*youli*). Women are depicted as following men’s lead, placing their own needs as secondary to men’s, and as needing to endure hardship (*rencai*). They are also


portrayed as being emotional and illogical and are consistently depicted as being dependent (*yilai/yifu*) on men…Women are portrayed as being both headstrong and passive, just as men are depicted as both hard-hearted and tender. This provides a window view to the remarkable flexibility of gender-constructed images in Chinese-speaking Asia.  

In short, it can be resolved that women in Taiwan of the time of *Eat Drink Man Woman*’s 1994 release date were still subjugated to both discreet and overt forms of discrimination. In spite of external praises of gender equality, manifestations of traditional roles and ideals regarding women’s actions and achievements were still very much dominant. Each of the struggles *Eat Drink Man Woman*’s main female characters faced are embodied in these scholarly works. From television marketing and popular music to linguistic composition and workforce division, it is clear that 1990’s Taiwan—as seen through the eyes of Jia Chien and her sisters in Ang Lee’s film—was still very much a society which saw the internalization of gender stereotypes in many aspects of daily life.

**Redefining Success in *Eat Drink Man Woman***

Continually, in his film *Eat Drink Man Woman*, Ang Lee ultimately takes these traditional gender stereotypical Taiwanese concepts of success and turns them on their head. While success in traditional Taiwanese society is typically determined either through marriage or rising within the workforce ranks, in his depiction of the struggles of the Chu family, Lee proves that success cannot be measured in such black and white terms. Life is composed of too many shades of grey for this to be possible. Each of the Chu family members finds success in their own ways. Mr.

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Chu finds it with his new wife and family; Jia Jen with her new husband; Jia Ning with her new living situation with her future child’s father and his parents, and Jia Chien with her cooking and transformation into the family matriarch. While some may view these triumphs as going against Taiwanese traditional values, Ang Lee pushes the message that success, in any form, is important only when it is meaningful on a person level. By personal success, here I define the phrase as a type of success in which it is deemed as such by an individual because of significant meaning, pride or positive emotions that are associated with the successful act. In *Eat Drink Man Woman*, Ang Lee maintains that success is felt in its best form when these individual positive associations come from it as a result. Whether or not a person’s successes fall under traditional societal standards for success is irrelevant; so long as he or she is satisfied with their accomplishments is all that ultimately matters. Take for instance, Jia-Chien’s “familial promotion” in becoming in charge of cooking the family’s Sunday banquets, as demonstrated below in figure 6.

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Her father’s acceptance of this shows that he acknowledges that her culinary skills are masterful in her being able in to take on such a huge familial role. Jia-Chien’s satisfaction from this shift in familial dynamic is clearly demonstrated above in figure 6. Against the notion that women needed to be able to have jobs and participate in the workforce as loudly advocated with the new wave of feminism that swept over Taiwan in 1987, in *Eat Drink Man Woman* Lee presents a regressive argument on success in presenting the notion that success is best measured personally rather than through workforce related achievements. As depicted below in figure 7, with the female waiters at Mr. Chu’s banquet hall kitchen and Jia Jen, amongst some of the film’s other female characters, audiences are given depictions of women who adhere to Taiwanese gender norms.\(^{36}\)

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Fig. 7. Never a second to rest working in the banquet kitchen

Furthermore, there are multiple connections that can be drawn between these previously described traditional societal beliefs towards success, gender roles and the relationships between Mr. Chu and his daughters in *Eat Drink Man Woman*. As Chu represents the traditional views towards women and success (in that a woman is only considered successful once she has married), his daughters become indicative of Ang Lee’s message that success cannot be measured so starkly. Going along this vein, it can also be said that the generational difference-spawned conflicts between Chu and his three daughters serve as a direct representation of the clashing of tradition versus modernity. Another aspect I wish to explore in this thesis is the way in which the women of *Eat Drink Man Woman* defy traditional Taiwanese gender stereotypes in the ways in which they achieve success. In this I will further argue that, specifically, in the film's characters: Jia-Chien, Jia-Ning, Jia-Jen, and Mr. Chu, one may find direct examples of Lee’s ideas regarding the measurement of success. For instance, in Jia-Chien we have the single,
financially successful businesswoman who leaves her job to care for her father. In Jia-Jen: a romantically reserved woman who works as a schoolteacher and later elopes with her husband. Jia-Ning, a fast food worker who has a child out of wedlock and leaves home to stay with her developing child’s family and father. In the end, Mr. Chu also finds personal success—as seen through his acceptance of his daughters’ life choices and his re-attainment of joie de vivre, both exemplified through his regained sense of taste. Of course, while it is clear that each of the Chu daughters’ abandonment of the professional world in favor of the domestic one may be seen as some as taking a step back progressively; in this film Ang Lee shows with these examples that success cannot be measured merely within either the professional or domestic context—it must be done so on the individual level. Whether or not an action or achievement is viewed as a success is only up to the person who committed it.

Therefore, in Eat Drink Man Woman, Ang Lee interestingly juxtaposes the idea that yes gender norms of success can be defied but even bearing this in mind on an individual level, this still does not change society as a whole. In spite of Jia Chien’s success, you still have a number of women in the film who are still oppressed by Taiwanese society’s sexist beliefs. Moreover, despite the fact that her own successes do not prove anything to society she ultimately proves she can succeed to herself and her father that despite being a woman, she is still more than capable of
serving as a high ranking executive and masterful chef. It was only when Jia Chien was about to personally become fulfilled, that her character truly achieves what she deems to be “success”.

Truthfully, it is less success in the form of promotion and more she succeeds in finally being able to express herself through cooking, doing what she loves at the end of the film. As an audience, we are shown that Jia Chien’s two main successes are not related to a tangible promotion at all, but are far more personal ones—first when she becomes the matriarch and is able to utilize her superior cooking skills and secondly when she mends the broken bond with her father through her cooking. Therefore, it can be said that success is re-defined as turning away from the workforce and towards the self.

Not only that, but this film also connects its definition of success to its redefining of the notion of independence as well. Even though some might see leaving home to live with your newly wedded husband or to live with the father of one’s unborn child and his family or giving up a high level executive position to stay at home and cook extravagant meals as un-feminist and demeaning, it can be argued that this is simply not the case in Eat Drink Man Woman. Though some may view these acts as falling very much under the category of “co-dependence”, in the case of Mr. Chu’s three adult daughters and the way that the Chu family dynamic is portrayed in this film, these three daughters are seen as stifled and oppressed living in their childhood home, with their father as the household head. As a result, their relationships with one another suffer and are reduced to ones of little communication. Throughout each of the film’s depictions of the Sunday dinners, it is seen that the quality of Chu’s prepared food declines. As his sense of taste gets worse, not only do his meals (both for physical food and life) begin to deteriorate, but his

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relationships with his daughters do as well. This is clearly exemplified in the third Sunday dinner scene. As the cinematic perspective changes from Chu to that of his daughters, it is clear that their individual subjects of focus could not be any more different. Alternating between medium shots, close ups on Chu and medium long reaction shots of his daughters’ concerned faces as he hammers a dish at the table in silence, it is clear that Jia Jen, Jia Ning and Jia Chien are each concerned with their father’s decreasing culinary talent, while Mr. Chu is focused solely on the food. In this scene, audiences are able to see the power of silence and its destructive effect on the family’s interpersonal relationships. Therefore, it can be argued that the daughters’ leaving their dysfunctional childhood home in favor of other, different pursuits can be viewed as acts of independence rather than as continuing a pattern of co-dependence or un-feminist. Their leaving the familiar biological domestic realm in order to pursue another one with their respective husbands, or in the case of Jia-Chien, reinvention of their childhood home, leads them to attain personal fulfillment. They do this not because society tells them women belong in the home, but because they need to for the sake of their well-being. While the measure of success is traditionally gendered, the conclusion of this film shows that gender should not affect how one’s achievements are perceived, but rather that their personal feelings regarding the matter should be all that is reflected upon. Against the popular belief that women need to be liberated (post 1945), it can be said the liberation of these three daughters is ultimately minor in comparison to the whole of women in Taiwanese society. However, in spite of the difficulties women face in patriarchal Taiwanese society, the fact that Mr. Chu’s daughters still attempt to succeed in the workforce before ultimately learning that there is no one way to define success speaks volumes.

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about how one is able to break tradition in favor of positive change. Thus stating that there is no set standard of achievement that everyone can happily live by—true success varies by individual. Consequently, with the example of Jia Jen, Jia Ning and Jia Chien, Ang Lee ultimately proves in his redefinition of the term success that a blending of tradition and modernity is possible and is truly for the better.

**Relevance to Contemporary Taiwan**

Finally, it can be found that Ang Lee's *Eat Drink Man Woman* 's connection to gender norms and women in the Taiwanese home, workforce and elsewhere is still relevant to contemporary Taiwan. Though released just over twenty years ago, this film is still significant today. Of course while this film is important for its thematic depictions, historically, *Eat Drink Man Woman* is significant for a number of reasons. Besides serving as a triumphant indicator of the New Wave of Taiwanese Cinema that marked 90's Taiwan, it was one of the handful of films at the time that explored such societal issues so directly. Moreover, when initially presented with the topic of the relationship between Taiwanese tradition and modernization as it affects gender roles and norms in Taiwanese society, one might believe it to be irrelevant and unimportant. However, I find that although over two decades have passed since the time of this film’s release, it is as relevant today as it was when it was first released. In studying the relationship between these concepts, it allows us to understand a variety of seemingly unrelated societal aspects and use them to understand the dominance of patriarchal ideals within Taiwanese society. *Eat Drink Man Woman* explores issues that have always existed—generational differences, familial struggles, emotional suppression, the conflict between moving forward and wanting to step back—these are aspects of life that have been experienced universally and are still prevalent
today. Moreover, the themes portrayed in this film, such as tradition versus modernity and the persistence of sexist ideology, are still a part of everyday life in twenty-first century Taiwan. Despite the fact that Taiwanese women hold higher statuses now than they did before, both in the workplace and the home, it can certainly be said that Taiwan still has a long way to go before truly achieving gender quality. As Catherine Farris finds:

The government-directed policies which resulted in the industrialization and urbanization of Taiwanese society drew upon the patriarchal social structure, which created and reproduced docile, minimally trained women wage laborers, for its success. But the last hold-out of authoritarian hierarchy has not been breached; women remain subordinate to men within the structures of kinship and marriage, and by extension, within the larger society as well. Women’s interests are clearly subordinated to the interests of patrilineal familism and patriarchal capitalism of state and society in Taiwan. Of course, Farris also writes of a course of action she believes Taiwanese women must take to achieve full equality, in every sense of the word:

The narrowly defined meaning of femininity and womanhood in Taiwanese society constrains women psychologically from realizing their full potential. Women in Taiwan today must take back the words which have both created and constrained the ideas of femininity in order to begin creating and producing new and more satisfying visions of

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their own femininity and that of their daughters. In short, women in Taiwanese society must find their voices and become, not “the spoken of”, but the speakers.44

Continuing along this train of thought, Annette Lu speaks from her own personal experience and expresses the general progresses she believes still need to be made in “An End to Patriarchy: Democratic Transformation and Women’s Liberation in Taiwan”:

Despite many accomplishments, our work to promote greater women's political participation [in Taiwan] is far from over. We have yet to fulfill the promises we have made to our daughters and granddaughters. We still live in a world where discrimination exists. We live in a world where girls and women are still abused. We live in a world where far too often, women are forced to settle for far less than they deserve.45

Concluding Thoughts

In conclusion, it can be argued that Eat Drink Man Woman is still as relevant today as it was in 1994 for a multitude of reasons, especially its complex depiction of the Chu family dynamic. Despite the initial difficulties each member underwent to understand and see each other as they truly were while attempting to reach some levels of self-expression, in the end they were all able to finally communicate and accept their family for what it was. Family difficulties, pressures and misunderstandings are issues I believe most can relate to. In this it can be said that this message of acceptance is one that still has the potential to resonate with Taiwanese audiences of the twenty-first century. Continually, another example of this film’s continued relevance is the


fact that in the time that has passed since being first released, the struggles of Taiwanese women in the home and in the workforce still ring true in Taiwan today. The nation’s modernization, while helping its female find success on some levels still has yet to fully eradicate the socially embedded and discriminatory obstacles women continue to face in contemporary Taiwan. This film’s message that success can only be gained from personal satisfaction is surely one that Taiwanese citizens can strive towards today, in a society that pressures its citizens to define success either through work related promotions or within the domestic realm. Furthermore, *Eat Drink Man Woman* is significant for today’s audiences in that it shows that change does not necessarily mean that a person must abandon tradition and look ahead, but rather that a blending of these two ideals more often than not leads to positive change over negative ones. In his depiction of Mr. Chu as ultimately accepting his daughters’ independence and individual successes in life, Ang Lee shows viewers that a blending of modernization and tradition can be achieved. In this, he ultimately depicts the belief that a transformation of the definition of success does not mean that traditional morals or beliefs must be sacrificed in order to truly achieve it. In a fast-paced environment where the manifestations of the battle between modernization and tradition are seen in all aspects of daily life, this message is one that is especially relevant for contemporary Taiwan.

However, as demonstrated by the referenced works of Catherine Farris and Annette Lu above, in the twenty-three years that have passed since the film’s release it appears that Ang Lee’s message on success and progress in *Eat Drink Man Woman* has mostly gone unheeded and unheard by Taiwan. Perhaps this is ultimately because of the fact that Ang Lee’s celebration of personal fulfillment, however delightful it is, does not change the larger gender related problems
that continue to plague members of Taiwanese society so many years after the film’s release.

Even though individuals can be personally satisfied, as the Chu family’s eventual accomplishments show, the larger whole of society fails to progress this way. *Eat Drink Woman,* in spite of its positivity fails to fully take realism into account. In order for Taiwan to truly change and reach full gender equality, it must recognize that Ang Lee’s vision of personal success is only realized in its truest form when it occurs in a society that does not possess gendered restrictions on one’s ability to succeed.
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