

The Awakening of Female Consciousness under the Fusion of Chinese and Western Cultural Conflicts from the Perspective of *Eat Drink Man Woman*

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Abstract. Ang Lee's works fully reflect the conflict and fusion between Chinese and western cultures due to his own identity as a cross-cultural film communicator, which has also been the focus of academic attention. This theme is reflected in the film *Eat Drink Man Woman*, which focuses on an ordinary family in Taiwan. The father is more exposed to traditional Chinese cultural elements while the daughters are more influenced by western culture. The feminism embodied in the film forms a special characterization of the film, which is dominated by female characters, therefore making the element worth studying. This article uses textual analysis as the main research method, using the three sisters of the Zhu family and Jinrong as examples, and focuses on the analysis of character images and film content to study the various changes in the image of oriental women arising from the fusion of Chinese and western cultural conflicts, and to explore the embodiment of the awakening of female consciousness in the film from multiple perspectives in the direction of patriarchy, the concept of marriage, love, self-desire, and gender order. Ang Lee has always tried to find a balance between Chinese and western cultures that is acceptable to the world; because of his status as a male writer, the female characters can reflect a unique understanding of the female image and the awakening of female consciousness from a male's perspective, which is quite charming despite its limitations.

Keywords: Eat Drink Man Woman; the Chinese and western culture; female image; female consciousness awakening.

1. Introduction

Ang Lee, a Taiwanese director, was influenced by his father's traditional Chinese culture during his childhood, and his experience of studying and living in the United States brought him into contact with western culture. The huge differences between western and eastern ideologies perfectly blend into his background, resulting in a constant theme of the conflict and fusion of Chinese and western cultures in his works. For many years, studies on Ang Lee's films have seldom been conducted in the direction of feminism, and this article attempts to fill the gap in this direction. Unlike the previous two films *Pushing Hands* and *The Wedding Banquet*, *Eat Drink Man Woman* is the last film in the "father trilogy" series, in which Ang Lee takes female roles as the main characters for the first time and tells the story of the relationship between a father and three daughters in an ordinary Taiwanese family, depicting a story of conflict and reconciliation. The film portrays a new era of the female image that is different from traditional oriental women, fully reflecting the theme of female consciousness awakening.

Therefore, this article will take several female characters in *Eat Drink Man Woman* as examples, and analyze how eastern women have changed after being influenced by western culture from a feminist perspective, and explore how the film reflects the awakening of women's consciousness from multiple perspectives. The three sisters of the Zhu family and Jinrong in the film all are "rebellious" women who are brave enough to rebel against their parents' authority and dare to pursue themselves, which subverts the traditional image of oriental women as gentle and submissive. Ang Lee elevates the status of female characters in his film, giving women more voice and initiative, and showing the audience the ideal gender equality and gender order in his mind.

2. The changing image of oriental women under the fusion of Chinese and western culture clash

Due to its special geographical and historical factors, Taiwan has been influenced by multiple cultural forms due to its many years of colonial history, which has led to constant changes in the ideology, mindset, and lifestyle of Taiwanese people. The three sisters of the Zhu family in the film are both oriental women, and each show different western elements: the eldest sister Jiazhen is a Christian, the second sister Jiaqian is a white-collar worker in a foreign company, and the youngest sister Jianing is a college student majoring French who also works in a western fast-food restaurant. The female characters in *Eat Drink Man Woman* have the rhythm of traditional oriental women, but at the same time, they act against traditional Chinese cultural concepts in many ways.

2.1 Independent choice of marriage

In ancient China, marriage between a man and a woman was always determined by their parents' order and matchmaker's advice; people who reached marriageable age must listen to their parents' requests and let their parents decide whom they would marry. The deep-rooted concept of patriarchal supremacy completely deprived ancient Chinese women of their right to speak. However, influenced by the open and liberal culture of the West, the concept of marriage has been greatly changed and developed since modern times. Arranged marriages have gradually been replaced by free marriages, so that women have more rights in their own marriage choices and can choose the men they like, and their parents only play the role of advice. As in the movie, Jiazhen and Jianing both inform their father of the fact that they are getting married in hand, and the father does not give his negative opinion from the beginning to the end, but only sees his daughters leaving the family.

2.2 Sexual desire is liberated

Chinese people have always given the impression of introverted characteristics; this characteristic is not only in the character and treatment of people but also in expressing their sexual desires. Chinese people, who are deeply influenced by feudal thinking, often think that "sex" means "lust" and that it is something not to be talked about. "Sex" is "lewdness", something that cannot be hung on the lips [1]. In ancient China, beautiful women were often referred to as "helen of troy"; their expression of sexual desires was considered a seduction to men, and any failure of men would be stereotypically blamed on them. Therefore, people always suppressed their sexual desire, and women were forced to maintain chastity.

Western culture focuses on the liberation of human rights, and westerners are more tolerant and open about "sex", pursuing sexual liberation and sexual freedom. "Human beings awakened to themselves from the awakening of sexual experience" [2]. Westerners do not suppress their inner desires all the time, rather they are more open about their sexual needs. Therefore, influenced by western culture, Chinese women also began to gradually get rid of the long-standing confinement of repressing sexual desire, and people no longer have difficulty talking about "sex". A sexual relationship has gradually been a way to relieve desire and pressure, acting as a sign of people pursuing to become a new image of independent and free women. Jiaqian is the most open-minded of the three sisters, she broke up with her ex-boyfriend but still maintains a sexual relationship, and unapologetically responds to Li Kai's sexual advances. Jiaqian never seems to resist the flow of her own desire, the few scenes of male and female intimacy throughout the film have her figure.

2.3 Competence is recognized

The old Chinese moral concept has always believed that a woman does not need much talent. A woman only needs to learn to do a good job in the house, know how to serve their husband on it, and try to make women shape a considerate and caring "good wife" image; even the ladies only know little poetry and literature. Because of that, women can never be like men who can show their talents to the outside world. It was their destiny to spend their ordinary lives quietly and properly at home.

In ancient China, where rituals were strict, women were taught from an early age that they should not go out of the gate, meaning that their range of motion is restricted and they are not allowed to leave their homes. However, with the integration of Chinese and western cultures, this traditional feudal ideology was broken. The three sisters in the film are all highly educated, and the campus is no longer dominated by men, as parents are willing to let their children receive schooling.

At the same time, there are more and more excellent female figures in many professional fields, and women's talents have been recognized by society. Jiaqian is a typical image of a strong professional woman; although she is a woman at a young age, she is holding a senior management position as a deputy director. Moreover, the general manager intends to send her to Amsterdam to fully preside over the business. This highly affirms that women's talents are not inferior to men's, and it is also a weakening and elimination of the traditional concept of "a woman's virtue is having no talent" in China [3].

The clash and fusion of eastern and western cultures is the narrative theme of many contemporary Taiwanese films. Ang Lee himself is not only influenced by both Chinese and western cultures but also tries to reflect on traditional Chinese culture, seeking a balance point between Chinese and western cultures, so that the characters he portrays contain the shadow of traditional eastern culture while abandoning some traditional bad habits and creating a series of modern and open new female images.

3. The awakening of female consciousness embodied in the film

Some people have defined "feminist consciousness"; it's considered to be women's perception of their own value, mainly focusing on the current situation of women's existence [4]. Therefore, when studying feminism, people prefer to focus on the works created by female writers, but in fact, many male writers create female characters who also show a distinct awakening of feminine consciousness, which is profoundly highlighted by the female characters in *Eat Drink Man Woman*, who gradually break away from the authority of their father and free themselves to find themselves.

3.1 Weakening of the father's discourse

In traditional Chinese culture, the concept of patriarchal supremacy is deeply rooted, and the father has the highest status in the family. However, it is obvious that the role of the father in this movie is in a relatively weak position, as the father's weekly Sunday family dinner party only struggles to maintain the apparent existence of a "family", and the three sisters are more like coaxing their father to complete their weekly tasks mechanically. The situation of the family gathering every Sunday is also not optimistic; as the star chef of the restaurant, the father worked half a day to prepare the ingredients, but because of the loss of taste, the dishes often complained by the daughters strange taste of the food.

The discourse in the film is mostly dominated by the daughters, the father tries to announce a big event to his family several times, but his daughters speak before him every time. At the first gathering, Jiaqian tells everyone she is moving to a new house; at the third gathering Jianing tells everyone about her pregnancy, and at the fourth gathering, Jiazhen announces that she has been married in the presence of a priest. Finally, at the last family gathering, the father succeeds in announcing that he and Jinrong (the elder sister of Jiazhen's classmate) are in love, which completely overturns the traditional and serious image of the father in the children's minds and makes the father's authority disappear [5].

The whole film is dominated by female characters; because of the mother's early death, the father also has a mother-like tender side in this family. For the daughters' decisions, the father does not have an absolute voice, but only a role in being informed. The father and his second daughter, Jiaqian, were an intense conflict in the early stages, but they reconcile and Jiaqian becomes the heir to maintain the "family" in the end.

3.2 Pursuit of freedom of marriage

The traditional Chinese concept of marriage is parents' orders, and daughters cannot decide their own marriage matters, only to listen to the arrangements of their parents. However, the three sisters in the movie have a westernized view of marriage. They pursue a degree of freedom and openness towards love and marriage, believing that marriage and love are a matter for both men and women, and couples in love freely marry each other. The marriage of the eldest sister and the youngest sister is a form of preemptive action, in which the father is not involved in either the dating or the marriage of the couple. At the same time, the father is not overly concerned about the three daughters' marriages, and this can be shown in Jiazhen, the eldest sister's situation. Reaching well beyond the age to get married in a traditional sense, people are uncomfortable about the fact that Jiazhen is not even dating, and the father's good friend Uncle Wen repeatedly reminded him to worry about Jiazhen's marriage. Despite the concerns, the father simply brushes over the concern and is ready for the possibility that the eldest daughter will not be married in this life, respecting the daughter's decision.

In addition, relatively few people pay attention to the fact that Jinrong (the elder sister of Jiazhen's classmate) is also a woman who bravely pursues the freedom of marriage. To outsiders, the love relationship between the father Zhu (the three daughters' father) and Jinrong is not generally accepted by society because the age difference between the two of them is simply too much. It is more like a father and a daughter, not a couple, which is why it was difficult for the three daughters and Jinrong's mother to accept at first. It has been pointed out that Jinrong shows the Elektra complex [6], and the lack of fatherly love makes her long to be compensated by the father Zhu (the three daughters' father), while her mother's nagging harshness makes her long to leave her mother's control and start her own new family as soon as possible. At the end of the film, Jinrong bravely admits her relationship with the father Zhu (the three daughters' father) at the dinner table and is also pregnant with the father Zhu's child, all of which can show that Jinrong is free from worldly prejudice and bravely pursues the love that belongs to her.

3.3 Emancipation of self-desire

In the movie, father Zhu said this sentence "dining and intercourse are the most basic and important requirement for a person", and this sentence is from Confucius in *Classic of Rites*. "Food" is the normal material need of the human body, and "intercourse between male and female" is also the normal physiological need of people; both are objective and real human desires. But all along the Chinese people are mostly talking about sex, thinking "sex" is a shameful topic, which leads to most Chinese people suppressing their main desire for a long time.

The eldest sister, Jiazhen, is the one that follows traditional Chinese femininity the most among the three daughters, and the conservative precepts of traditional Chinese culture make her a sexually repressed woman in her behavior, even to the point of psychopathy [7]. As a Christian, she dresses plainly every day, shows her displeasure when she sees a cat in heat on the roof and drives it away, in the song which she sings "love is patience". She is an abstinent person, as evidenced by all her actions. But her religious beliefs are just an excuse for distraction [8], everything is just a way to suppress and hide her desires, but she still desires love in her heart. The appearance of Zhou Mingdao (a male gym teacher at the school where Jiazhen teaches) and the love letter prank of her students awaken her desire to experience the taste of love. Since then, she starts to make changes, wearing red lipstick and brightly colored clothes. She gradually breaks through the shackles of her own desire and finally liberates herself from them.

"Driven by the feminist trend, the emotional life of the three daughters represents the new female image of the emotional revolution" [9]. The second sister Jiaqian has always been the representative of the open new era of women, pursuing the concept of sexual separation of love, not only maintaining sexual relationships with her ex-boyfriend but also having an ambiguous relationship with her colleague. The youngest daughter looks to be the most well-behaved but is unmarried and pregnant. Jinrong finally puts aside an inner burden and bravely gets together with her husband Zhu (the three

daughters' father). The female characters in the film dare to face their own desire, and the women gradually get rid of the shackles of abstinence.

3.4 Focus on gender equality

China has long been a male-dominated society where men are mostly the competitors, creators, and inheritors, while women are passively subordinate to men, and people have the traditional concept of "the man goes out to work while the woman looks after the house", where all economic, political, and cultural activities belong to men, and women are expected to take on the role of serving the elders and raising children at home. Ang Lee subtly blends Chinese and western cultures, trying to build a new gender order of harmony and equality between the sexes in his films, and to achieve "a culture that guarantees equal rights and opportunities for both sexes to participate in political, economic, educational, social, cultural and family life and advocates that both sexes treat each other equally, live together harmoniously, interact positively and develop together in social and family life" [10].

Hofstede's cultural dimension theory mentions that in a masculine temperamental society, men generally represent masculinity and women are feminine [11]. Ang Lee breaks this phenomenon of solidified temperament and solidified gender roles for both genders. The kitchen is often considered a woman's position, but in this film, it is the father's battlefield. Cooking, washing, and collecting clothes, which are often considered women's responsibilities, are all done by the father in this family. In the workplace, Jiaqian, who is a woman, can also show off her skills and crush a lot of male competitors to get a promotion. Most of the women in this film are in active positions, while the men are in passive positions [12].

The female characters in *Eat Drink Man Woman* are free from the marginalized "the other" status and pursue the equal status of both genders; women are no longer considered weak, as they can also take the lead in the workplace. While men are not only considered purely masculine, they can also do housework and take care of children. At the same time, men and women are in a symbiotic and coexisting relationship. At the end of the film, a bowl of soup from Jiaqian allows the father to regain his long-lost sense of taste, which shows that women can also redeem men [13].

The film *Eat Drink Man Woman* reflects the awakening of women's consciousness in many ways. Ang Lee uses a uniquely male perspective to think about and examine the current situation of women's existence, which not only subverts the traditional concept of women as "the other" consciousness but also breaks the gender dichotomy between men and women. Describes the process of women's resistance and eventual victory under the collapsing patriarchal rule. The female figures in his works are therefore more like a symbol, impacting a society dominated by male discourse.

4. Conclusion

It is clear that most of the female characters in *Eat Drink Man Woman* show a distinctive awakening of female consciousness, listening to their innermost thoughts, with a strong sense of self-subjectivity, bravely challenging patriarchal authority and actively taking the initiative. As a Chinese director working in Hollywood, Ang Lee understands what western audiences expect to see in a film, so it contains a series of traditional Chinese cultural elements in the film, as well as western elements in the characters. As for the female characters in the film, they exude the charm of oriental women, while their minds and personalities are influenced by the open, inclusive, and liberal culture of the West, breaking the stereotype of traditional oriental women, and becoming new-era women who pursue freedom and selfhood.

At the same time, the awakening of women's consciousness shown in the film also has certain limitations, as Jiazhen, Jianing, and Jinrong eventually return to their identities as a wife in the family, ultimately living in dependence on their husband and not becoming fully independent woman. The new gender order that Ang Lee attempts to construct in his film does not completely break the traditional male domination, men and women live in harmony, and women are only in a relatively equal position.

It is also worth noting that although Ang Lee's film works have portrayed a series of excellent and courageous female characters, reflecting a strong feminist theme, he has publicly denied that he is a feminist director. This action shows that in this era when men still hold the most of the discourse, the label of "feminism" needs to be recognized by more people, and the road to the awakening of women's consciousness is still long. Facing the changing social environment in the future, how women can survive and realize their self-worth is their constant struggle.

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