Bigger Fish to Fry: The Global Appeal of Eat Drink Man Woman

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by Samantha Roach

Ang Lee speaks of Chinese film, stating that “[Chinese] film history is a subculture to Hollywood” and that “...when you want to bring [it] out to the world stage...you have to upgrade it” (Museum of the Moving Image, 6). The marketing and reception of *Eat Drink Man Woman* (Ang Lee, 1994) points to an acceptance of the film by Western audiences as a “food film” rather than as a Taiwanese film, as the materials directed at and originating from these audiences minimize the Taiwanese locality of the film in favour of universal values of food and sex. This suggests a concept of world cinema in which local identities become less important than cultural accessibility as the world becomes increasingly globalized. The food film emerges then as a “tourist friendly” method of bringing films made outside of mainstream cinemas onto the world stage (Ma 5).

The marketing materials for *Eat Drink Man Woman* reveal diverging approaches in promoting the film as the materials aimed toward Chinese and Taiwanese audiences and those aimed toward outside audiences differ in terms of which themes are made prominent. The Chinese film poster for *Eat Drink Man Woman* features a scene from the end of the film, in which Tao Chu and his middle daughter Jia-Chien clasp hands, mending their strained relationship that is a main conflict of the film. While food is present in the image, the focal point is the clasped hands of Chu and Jia-Chien, foregrounding the father-child relationship as the centre of the film. The golden tint of the poster as well suggests nostalgia and melodrama and overall conveys a more serious tone, one appropriate to the melancholy events in the film’s narrative. However, in the North American poster for *Eat Drink Man Woman*, Tao Chu is absent entirely. Instead, the three daughters are featured looking seductively into the camera with a plate of food next to the title. The image features in particular a post-makeover eldest daughter, Jia-Jen, whose appearance is actually very straight-laced for more than the first half of the film, her character being a devout Christian, and youngest daughter Jia Ning who dresses in a more tomboyish manner in the film, wearing makeup with her hair down. What is emphasized in a poster such as this is not only the food of the film but also the sexual attractiveness of the actresses. Indeed, the tagline on the poster promises, “A comedy to arouse your appetite,” a triple promise of food, comedy and sex with no mention of the family melodrama that encompasses the whole of the film. The theatrical trailer used to promote the film in North America also highlights these alternative values through short cuts of food preparation and consumption along with cuts of the single sex scene in the film coupled with bombastic, excessive mambo. The trailer is severely distanced from the actual tone of the film, eliminating the themes of nostalgia and loneliness that are abundant in the actual film in favour of farce. Aspects of the film’s locality are also wiped from the trailer, most obviously in terms of language. The trailer only features one line of dialogue, when Jia-Jen’s new husband Ming Dao introduces himself at the family dinner table with a “Hi.” The erasure of the Mandarin language and its replacement with shots of food and sex narrated by an American reveals the fear of alienating the potential audience through the use of subtitles, and therefore these foreign characters are kept as silent images under American control. The Samuel Goldwyn Company, the film's American distributor, released other foreign films in the 1990s such as the Japanese film *Rampo* (1994). A trailer for the film, titled as *The Mystery of Rampo* in the U.S., features similar
characteristics to the trailer for *Eat Drink Man Woman*, including an eradication of spoken language with subtitles and a focus on eroticism.

**Why is *Eat Drink Man Woman* marketed in this way, focusing on the food and sex rather than the main plot of the film?** Diane Negra suggests that as North American audiences “our investment in fetishizing ethnic food involves nostalgia for modes of food production that are no longer typical in either U.S. homes or restaurants” (63). Food films “overvalue and exaggerate ethnic food as a sensual, reproducible sign of a mode of ethnic kinship that is simultaneously mourned, romanticized and nostalgically re-enacted in popular culture” (Negra 69). Negra notes that this trend of fetishizing ethnic food is not only present in food films but also in the rapid growth of ethnic food restaurant chains such as Olive Garden (Negra 65). The marketing of *Eat Drink Man Woman* can be argued then to play not only the universal appeal of food but specifically nostalgia in Western audiences.

The American reception of *Eat Drink Man Woman* reflects the effectiveness of the emphasis on food and sex that was present in the marketing of the film. Reviews of the film feature titles such as "Heartburn" and “Food Glorious Food” and describe the film as "tasty," and “a piquant delight.” A trend in the reviews for *Eat Drink Man Woman* was that they often made comparisons with other “food films” released in the same period, such as the Mexican film *Like Water for Chocolate* (1992) or Denmark’s *Babette’s Feast* (1987). One review notes that “*Eat, Drink* isn’t an imitation of *Like Water for Chocolate*, but it shares that film’s basic understanding that food is one of the things that holds life and families together and makes it possible for things to continue,” (Moshovitz, 1994) with another review applauding that it takes a different approach to the “gimmicky, widely overpraised *Babette’s Feast*” (Baron, 1994). Still another compares that the film as having “neither the passion of *Like Water for Chocolate* or the richer depth of *Babette’s Feast*” (Cuneen, 1994). Another appearance in these reviews are the references made to the daughters' beauty, which as discussed beforehand was the focal point of the North American poster, with reviews noting Chu as a “Taipei widower with three good-looking daughters” (Cuneen), and designating Jia-Chien as “the most beautiful of the daughters” (Cuneen) and “the most svelte” (Village Voice, 1994). Finally, yet another trend in the reviews is a pan-Asian approach. One reviewer upon seeing the film at Cannes describes Tao Chu as “seeking the Zen balance between love and life” (Kennedy, 1994). Another compares Lee to Ozu, “the camera sits still and low to the floor, letting you feel the harmony of the old ways,” (Moshovitz) despite the film completely lacking Ozu’s understated approach and slower pace characteristic of his melodramas. References such as these seem to feel like a reach for Asian familiarity, but the specific location and context of Taiwan is often given a fleeting glance in these reviews, usually just as an identifier of the characters’ origins. One political reference to Taiwan is even turned into a joke as one reviewer describes the Chu family table as containing “enough fried noodles, glazed ducks, and chopped eels to feed the Kuomintang” (Kennedy). Overall, the Western reception of *Eat Drink Man Woman* was mostly concerned with the presentation of food, the attractiveness of the actresses, and the film’s connection to other food films. *Eat Drink Man Woman* was marketed to and received by audiences outside of Taiwan and China as a focus on the “connection between food and life [as] one of the most natural of all metaphors” (Barnes, 1994) with little focus on the film’s local roots. Sheng-Mei Ma offers the comment that “Chinese cuisine becomes less a marker
Ma notes that “the material conditions of Lee’s films betoken boundary crossing in a globalized film culture,” and that “despite being financed chiefly by Central Motion Picture in Taiwan and representing Taiwan in various international film festivals, Lee’s films are self-consciously produced and consumed in the world market, with multinational crew, storyline, and marketing strategies” (3). Some of these marketing strategies have already been covered, but of interest is the use of a multinational crew and storyline. Arguably most important member of the crew in this respect is Ang Lee’s long-time writing partner, James Schamus. Schamus co-wrote *Eat Drink Man Woman* along with Ang Lee and Hui-Ling Wang, another frequent Lee collaborator, in a process he refers to as “transatlantic writing ping-pong” (*Museum of Moving Image*, 12) as the American Schamus and the Chinese Wang send the script back and forth between each other. Schamus’ participation also introduces this idea of a multinational storyline, albeit one that is more involved with the history of the film than the film itself. In a retrospective interview, Lee says of Schamus in his recollection of his work on *Eat Drink Man Woman*, “at first he tried to write like Chinese. And to me, that’s rubbish. They don't sound like Chinese things. Someday, one day, he just gave up and write like Jewish. And I said, it's very Chinese” (*Museum of the Moving Image*, 6). An artifact of this translation was left in the film, as youngest daughter Jia Ning’s co-worker is still named Rachel, her name not having been switched back. Schamus notes that this wasn't a problem because "at that time in Taipei, in particular, it was kind of in for the kids to take on American names" (*Museum of the Moving Image*, 6). Facts such as these which flesh out the history of the film’s production also reveal the similarities between cultures that allow stories to be translated across national and cultural borders, as Schamus did translating from Jewish to Chinese. A look at the context of Lee’s directing career at the point *Eat Drink Man Woman* was being made and his intentions in making the film also reveal this embrace of multinationalism and his striving for success in foreign markets.

Lee admits that in the case of *Eat Drink Man Woman*, “when [he] made that movie, [he] was a little detached from Taiwan,” explaining that the film was “[his] old memory of how he grew up there, updated with the crew and what [he saw]” and that “there’s attachment and detachment” (*Museum of the Moving Image*, 6). To better understand the waning of Taiwanese presence and Lee’s detachment in *Eat Drink Man Woman*, the film should be considered alongside Lee’s previous two films, *Pushing Hands* (1992) and *The Wedding Banquet* (1993), which together with *Eat Drink Man Woman* form a "Father Knows Best Trilogy." Ma Sheng-Mei explains that “each of the trilogy contains both immigrant nostalgia leading to melodrama or even tragedy and exotic/ethnic tour suggesting a comic denouement,” however, “taken chronologically in the order of their release, the trilogy reveals an increasing propensity toward exotic travel in search of the Other rather than nostalgic lamentation over the loss of the Self” (5). Lee speaks of this as well when he relates that “[in] the first two movies, it's about survival…I was starting to expand my filmic language in *Eat Drink Man Woman*” (*Museum of the Moving Image*, 6). The embracing of Western values is then evident in not only the promotion and reception of the *Eat Drink Man Woman* outside of its land of origin, but also in the narrative itself. James Keller notes that “Chu’s resignation as a chef signals his willingness to abandon tradition and accept the progressive assimilation into the Western melting pot” and that “his second marriage is his first act of revolt
against cultural orthodoxy” (170) as he rejects the more traditionally garbed Mrs. Liang despite her compatible age for her young, recently divorced daughter, Jin Rong.

As a footnote that speaks to the ability of *Eat Drink Man Woman* to be translated across cultures, the American film *Tortilla Soup* (2001) was created as a remake of *Eat Drink Man Woman*, taking the film’s script and applying it to a Mexican American family. The poster for the film even features the same tagline: “A comedy to arouse your appetite,” revealing the same triple offer of food, sex and comedy, this time in a film that speaks the language of Western audiences while still containing the exotic pleasure of ethnic food. We are witness to a very recent genre, the food film, a genre that includes *Eat Drink Man Woman* among films such as *Like Water for Chocolate* and *Babette’s Feast* preceding it and followed by films such as remake *Tortilla Soup*. The appeal to universal values of food and sex comes through in the way *Eat Drink Man Woman* was marketed and received in terms of the Western audience at the expense of the film’s status as Taiwanese. These trends point to a world cinema in which local identities are marginalized in order to perform on the world stage. Perhaps we have not reached the stage yet where all films outside of Hollywood silence their political cultures to appeal to Western audiences, but the idea of such a bland cinema landscape definitely leaves a bad taste in the mouth.
Works Cited


Films Cited


