

## **Eat Drink Man Woman / Yin shi nan nu (1994) Ang Lee**

P Michell, 2021

### **Synopsis**

The movie focuses on the Chus, a Taiwanese family living in modern time. Mr Chu, father of three daughters, finds himself struggling to keep up with his children. His youngest daughter, Jia-Ning, finds herself in trouble when she falls in love with her best friend's on/off boyfriend. The middle daughter, Jia-Chien, is strong-willed and stuck between two passions, culinary and airline work. The oldest daughter, Jia-Jen, is a school teacher who finds love at the most unexpected place. The movie consists of multiple Sunday dinners, at which each daughter fills the family in on their 'accomplishments' throughout the week. Laughs, serious discussions and arguing all occur at the table, as each member of the Chu family tries to find a balance between tradition and new morals. Many relationships flourish throughout the movie, and by the end of the film, Jia-Ning is pregnant, Jia-Chien becomes a chef and Jia-Jen learns an important lesson about love.

There is an excellent balance between humour and meaningful discussion in this film. Supporting characters, such as the volleyball coach, add a funny side to the movie. On the other hand, romantic relationships within the film involve deep conversations that question tradition and modern morals. Each daughter's story showed a different kind of love: love for family, love for a significant other and love for a passion. The plot has many twists and turns, and this film challenges Asian Culture in many different ways.

NOTE: See below 'Film Sufi' for detailed description of the main characters.

### **Ang Lee - Director** (24 credits)

This film came after the [Wedding Banquet](#) (1993). Taiwanese film director. Post graduate studies in USA.

Was 37 years old when he directed his first feature film.

Made *Austen's Sense and Sensibility* (1995) was next film after *Eat Drink Man Woman*.

Wide variety of films: *Life of Pi* (2012), *Lust, Caution* (2007), *Brokeback Mountain* (2005), *Hulk* (2003), *The Ice Storm* (1997).

Some of his films - [Sense and Sensibility](#) (1995), [Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon](#) (2000) (aka *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*) - involved repressed women trying to deal with the confines of their society.

His movies [The Wedding Banquet](#) (1993), [Eat Drink Man Woman](#) (1994) and [Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon](#) (2000) were Oscar-nominated for "Best Foreign Language Film". [Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon](#) (2000) won.

### **Quotes:**

It could be the hidden side of you; I think making movies is a great way to release that. I think it is important to be honest with that, and have fun with it.

On the receiving side, I think the whole world is more ready, with the Internet, with film festivals and DVDs. It used to be a one-way street from West to East: we were receiving and the West was producing. I think we're getting closer and closer. The gap between cultures is getting erased every day.

My father's family were liquidated during the Cultural Revolution in China because they were landowners. He was the only one to escape. I was born and brought up in Taiwan. But you absorb the trauma. My parents had no sense of security. It was as if the world could turn against them at any moment.

### **Trivia**

The opening sequence - in which a Sunday lunch is lovingly prepared - took over a week to film.

Quoted from Confucian's *Book of Rites*, the film's title refers to the nature and acceptance of basic human desires. The quote reads as follows: "The things which men greatly desire are comprehended in meat and drink and sexual pleasure;"

Upon the film's release on August 3, 1994, Lee's film was a critical and box office success.<sup>[6]</sup> In 1994, the film received the **Asia Pacific Film Festival Award** for Best Film and later nominated for Best Foreign film at the **Academy Awards** in 1995.<sup>[7][8]</sup> Lee's *Eat Drink Man Woman* would later inspire films such as the 2001 American film *Tortilla Soup* and *Joyful Reunion* in 2012 <sup>[9]</sup> and adapted into a musical rendition of the same title by the **National Kaohsiung Center for the Arts**.

The film grossed US\$24.1 million worldwide generating the third biggest percentage return on cost of films released in the year, behind *Four Weddings and a Funeral* and *The Lion King*.<sup>[1]</sup> It was the highest-grossing foreign-language film in the United States and Canada for the year with a gross of \$7.3 million

### Analaysis

from 'an Australian class':

<http://foreignfilmforum.weebly.com/review-of-eat-drink-man-woman.html>

Kristin Weaver's Academic thesis on Asian stereotypes: "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."

<https://scholarship.tricolib.brynmawr.edu/bitstream/handle/10066/18815/2016WeaverK.pdf?sequence=1>

### "Eat Drink Man Woman" - Ang Lee (1994)

The Film Sufi reviewed 2021.

Taiwan-born **Ang Lee** (pinyin: Li An) has been a highly successful film director whose versatility over the years has been demonstrated with productions undertaken across several different continents and with themes spanning multiple different genres and social contexts – for example: *The Wedding Banquet* (1993), *Sense and Sensibility* (1997), *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* (2000), *Brokeback Mountain* (2005), *Lust, Caution* (2007), and *Life of Pi* (2012). But I think Lee's greatest film was one of his earliest, *Eat Drink Man Woman* (1994). This is a compelling work that, despite its Taiwanese/Chinese cultural context, is concerned generally with how romantic concerns can interact with family values, and so it can be appreciated by just about everyone [1,2,3,4,5,6].

The film's story about a master chef in Taipei and his three grownup daughters was scripted by Ang Lee, James Schamus, and Hui-Ling Wang. And the film's overall production values,

including the acting, were excellent, but extra special praise should be singled out for the cinematography by Jong Lin and the film editing by Ang Lee and Tim Squyres. In some respects it is the cinematography and film editing that help elevate this film to a truly high status.

The film opens with a detailed presentation of Lao (“Old”, an honorific in Chinese) Chu preparing an elaborate dinner for his three grownup daughters. The daughters are unmarried and so live at Chu’s home, but they are often out attending to their own personal affairs. However, Lao Chu expects, indeed demands, that they all unfailingly attend the Sunday dinner that he prepares for them every week, as a ritual and as a precious instrument for family bonding. Chu has been a widower for the past sixteen years and has largely raised his three daughters during that time on his own. And like many parents, he is concerned that his daughters, who are all exposed to modernist influences of contemporary Taiwanese society, will start drifting away. So for Chu, the weekly Sunday dinner is crucial; but for the three daughters, the dinner is boring and almost a form of torture.

For the rest of the film, the viewer is treated to four parallel and interlaced narratives that trace the mostly separate and interpersonal concerns of Chu and his three daughters. We soon discover the following basic information about them.

- **Lao Chu** (played by Sihung Lung) is an aging but famous chef in Taipei and is the master chef at a huge and important hotel in Taipei. In fact it is widely said that Chu is Taipei’s finest chef, and he is generally used to being in command of those around him. However Chu is now losing what is critical for a chef, his sense of taste. So he has to rely on his old friend and fellow master chef Lao Wen (Jui Wang) to sample all his food concoctions to make sure they have been seasoned properly.
- **Jia-Jen** (Kuei-Mei Yang), Lao Chu’s oldest daughter, is about 29-years old and works as a high school chemistry teacher. She is sensitive and reserved and, compared to the other sisters, an upholder of traditional values. In addition, she has recently become a devout conservative Christian. Jia-Jen has a close woman friend, Liang Jin-Rong (Sylvia Chang), who was a former school classmate and with whom she often gets together to share concerns, such as Jin-Rong’s drawn-out divorce process. Jia-Jen’s other friends, worried that she is getting old to find a marriage partner, try to help her in this area, but Jia-Jen shows no interest in dating anybody. She still hasn’t gotten over a failed love interest when she was in college

nine years ago.

- **Jia-Chien** (Chien-Lien Wu) is the second-oldest daughter and quite different from Jia-Jen. Unlike her attractive but quiet and modestly dressing older sister, Jia-Chen is glamorous and outgoing. She is an energetic, rising executive for an airline company, and she is accustomed to expressing her opinions when she feels like it. She is also the least tolerant of their father's Sunday dinners and intends to move out of the home as soon as the new apartment she has purchased is ready. On the romantic front, she is confident and bold, e.g. she has a purely sexual relationship with a male friend, Raymond (Chit-Man Chan), that involves no commitments from either party. She treasures her independence.
- **Jia-Ning** (Yu-Wen Wang), the youngest sister, is 20-years-old and works at a Wendy's fast-food restaurant while attending college classes. She is generally upbeat and usually deferent to her more opinionated older sisters.

So all four members of the Chu family, though different, are relatively well-balanced; and in accordance with family traditions, they are expected to share with each other what is happening in their respective lines when they get together on Sunday for dinner. But over the course of this film, we see that all four develop romantic relationships concerning which they feel guarded about sharing with each other on Sundays. And the presented subtlety of those guarded feelings is part of what makes this a great film.

In this connection there is an early scene in which a Chu family Sunday dinner is interrupted by an emergency at Lao Chu's posh hotel. We learn that a big feast for an important gathering at the hotel is in preparation but due to some cooking hitches is evidently headed for disaster. Lao Chu is summoned to rescue this desperate situation, and in a highly professional way he does indeed save the day – and, in the process, demonstrate his impressive culinary prowess. Afterwards, Lao Chu and Lao Wen become somewhat inebriated and reflect on what they have learned over the courses of their long lives. In a reflective moment of gloom, Lao Chu asks his friend, “Eat drink man woman. Food sex . . . Is that all there is?”

The rest of the film offers an answer to that question.

As the interlaced narratives of the four Chu family members unfold, the viewer learns about the evolving romantic relationships that develop for them.

- Jia-Jen is not looking to date anyone, but she has an accidental encounter with her school's new volleyball coach, Ming-Dao (Chin-Cheng Lu), and further encounters stir an interest on Ming-Dao's part, Ming-Dao is naturally outgoing, and his interest shown is gradually reciprocated by the shy Jia-Jen.
- Jia-Chien finds herself attracted to Li Kai (Winston Chao) a handsome and suave new manager at her airline company. It looks like they are certain to become lovers, but at the last minute she learns that Li Kai was the man who broke Jia-Jen's heart nine years ago. So Jia-Chien has to call things off with Li Kai. About this time Jia-Chien also learns that Raymond has chosen to break off his relationship with Jia-Chien and get married to another woman. So now for the time being at least, Jia-Chien is bereft of lovers and "alone".
- Jia-Ning's close friend and coworker at Wendy's, Rachel (Yu Chen), appears to be in the process of dumping her heartbroken boyfriend Guo Lun (Chao-jung Chen), and knowing that Guo Lun will always be waiting for her outside of Wendy's after work, she asks Jia-Ning to shoo the lovesick boy away. But Jia-Ning's sympathetic encounters with Guo Lun soon lead to a mutual attraction between the two. It turns out later that Rachel was only toying with her boyfriend and didn't want to lose him, but her turnaround is too late.
- **Lao Chu** does not appear to be looking for any romantic liaisons, but his three daughters worry that he must do so or he will wind up lonely once the daughters eventually all leave home and attend to their private lives. Lao Chu's isolation is only worsened when his long-time friend and confidante, Lao Wen, suddenly dies of a heart attack. But when the daughters learn that their friend Liang Jin-Rong's widowed mother, Madame Liang (Ah-Lei Gua), has just returned to Taipei from overseas and is now sometimes socializing with Lao Chu, they optimistically assume that, even though the woman appears to be pushy and overbearing, she would be a suitable marriage partner for their father. However, Lao Chu devotes most of his attention to affectionately spoiling Liang Jin-Rong's young six-year-old daughter, Shan-Shan (Yu-Chien Tang), by secretly making the girl tasty lunches to take to school every day. For Shan-Shan, Lao Chu is like a substitute daddy.

Finally, mostly at Sunday dinner confessions, the viewer learns how these relationships have turned out. Jia-Ning announces that she is leaving home to marry her secret lover, Guo Lun, by whom she is already pregnant. Jia-Jen marries Ming-Dao and even gets him to convert to Christianity.

But most shocking of all is what happens with Lao Chu. At a family dinner to which the Liang family (Madame Liang, Liang Jin-Rong, and Shan-Shan) have been invited, Lao Chu makes a marriage proposal not to the one everyone expects – Madame Liang, but to Jin-Rong, with whom Lao Chu has been having a secret affair. This explains why Lao Chu has been showering Shan-Shan with paternal affection for awhile. And it also means that the daughters will not be abandoning their father to loneliness.

So romantic love appears to have conquered all, and, in particular, to have overshadowed traditional family mores. Is that the film's final message? Not entirely [6]. Jia-Chen, the most glamorous and attractive of the three sisters, was always the one who was least affected by traditional values. She always found her father and his Sunday dinners insufferable, and she was the first daughter to announce her plans to move out of the family home. But by the end of the film, she has changed. She abandons her affair with Li Kai out of concerns for her older sister's feelings. And she declines a promotion from her airline company to be an overseas vice president, because she wants to stay closer to her family. In the final scene she is shown cooking a meal for her father at the old home and showing hitherto unseen warmth for him. So traditional family values now apparently have meaning for her.

Consequently we can say that what we have here is not just a battle between Modernism and Tradition or between East and West. Overall, what makes this a great film is the display of subtle and complex interacting feelings presented by the main character actors. My favourite performance was that of Kuei-Mei Yang as Jia-Jen, but they are all compelling, and you may have another favourite.

Also outstanding is the cinematography. There are many emotive closeups that help convey the feelings in this story. I would also like to call your attention to three extended tracking shots that I thought were very effective. One is a two-minute shot showing an early conversation between Jia-Ning and Guo Lun. A second is a 90-second shot of a conversation between Jia-Jen and Liang Jin Rong. And a third sequence that lingers in my memory is a two-minute shot of Jia-Jen and Li Kai conversing while walking through a store.

So getting back to Lao Chu's question that he asked early on in the film, "Eat drink man woman. Food sex . . . Is that all there is?"

We can say that the film's response is,

*"No, there is much more. And it all comes from **love** in all its various guises and modes."*

Love can be manifest in **both** traditional **and** modern circumstances. The key thing is that, no matter what the situation, love represents the most sincere and authentic aspects of who we are. And this is what Ang Lee's *Eat Drink Man Woman* puts on display for us.

★★★★

#### Notes:

1. Hal Hinson, "**Eat Drink Man Woman**", *Washington Post* (19 August 1994).
2. Desson Howe, "**Eat Drink Man Woman**", *Washington Post*, (19 October 1994).
3. Marjorie Baumgarten, "**Eat Drink Man Woman**", *Austin Chronicle*, (19 August 1994).
4. Janet Maslin, "**FILM REVIEW; Avoiding Basic Human Desires, or Trying To**", "The New York Times", (3 August 1994).
5. Norman N. Holland, "**Ang Lee, 'Eat Drink Man Woman' (1994)**", *A Sharper Focus*, (n.d.).
6. David Sorfa, "**Eat Drink Man Woman: Summary & Analysis**", *Jotted Lines*, (23 February 2020).

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