

## Master (Cinema) Chef Ang Lee Cooks with Faith, Family, Art and Love

(By Toshio U.-P.)

In auteur Ang Lee's The Wedding Banquet, Eat Drink Man Woman and Life of Pi, viewers are served a bite of tasty cinema with food and the dinner table playing an integral role in the narrative, artistic fabric and character relationships.

In Life of Pi (1), writer (Rafe Spall) and adult Pi (Irrfan Khan), sit down for a traditional South Asian lunch of basmati rice, daal, dosa and spiced potato cakes with a pitcher of beer. Pi then begins to tell the writer "a story that would make you believe in God". The story begins in Pondichery, where younger Pi's family runs a zoo on the grounds of a botanical garden. At dinner, we find out that young Pi differs significantly from his father by his beliefs. Pi's father is a stern man of science, who believes that faith is about "accept[ing] everything blindly" while Pi is more spiritual and shows an avid interest in theology, trying to "follow three religions at the same time". The changes in food and diet in Life of Pi are an indicator of stability, adversity and crisis in Pi's life. As a viewer we notice that Pi's life in Pondichery has plentiful dosas, lentils and vegetarian dishes, while the ship (that the family takes to America when they sell the zoo) serves an un-appetizing combination of rice and gravy slop that would make many vegetarians want to fast during the long voyage. After a major nautical disaster, our vegetarian protagonist is restricted to a ration of biscuits, canned water (and even fish) on board "Pi's Ark". Following this difficult period on a raft where Pi constantly lives with the worry that food and water will be insufficient for him to survive, we return to Pi's current life being interviewed by the writer in a Montreal home, where he has found new stability with an "incredible cook" for a wife and kids of his own.

In Eat Drink Man Woman (2), we are introduced to Master Chef Chu (Sihung Lung), who routinely spends an entire Sunday cooking a family dinner for his three daughters Jia-Jen (Kuei-Mei Yang), Jia-Chien (Chien-Lien Wu) and Jia-Ning (Yu-Wen Wang). The film opens with the culinary master grabbing a live carp, scaling and gutting it into fillets, breading it and finally frying it in a sizzling wok. Before we meet all of the daughters as they gather at the same dinner table, director Ang Lee introduces us to each life separately as their father cooks the Sunday night meal. Finally, when Master Chu's meal preparation is finished, they all sit down for what daughter Jia-Chien refers to as the "Sunday dinner torture ritual". Soon after Jia-Jen, a more polite daughter says grace, the phone rings, and Master Chu leaves the dinner table to assist a hotel restaurant manager in a wedding feast for the General's son. After Master Chu and Master Chef Wen (Jui Wang) prepare a last minute "Joy Luck Dragon Phoenix" in the restaurant, they get drunk together and talk about Chu's daughters and marriage. Master Chu compares his situation as a father of three, to working in the kitchen. He says: "It's like cooking. Your appetite is done when the dish is done." From the gatherings at the family dinner table, we then explore the separate daughter narratives as relationships evolve from courtship to possible marriage. Master Chu takes more pleasure in cooking for Mrs. Liang's (Ya-Lei Kuei) grand-daughter Shan-Shan (and her classmates), than for his own daughters. His dinner table soon becomes the location of marital commitment announcements, as two of his daughters leave their father's dinner nest behind. Close to the end of the film, Master Chu is philosophical about cooking

and his retirement. He says: “Chinese cuisine has travelled to Taiwan for 40 years. And just like the rivers that eventually flow into the sea, it’s all the same in the end.”

In The Wedding Banquet (3), Ang Lee showcases his Taiwanese-American take on French play “La Cage Aux Folles”, which pre-dates his more famous gay road-trip film “Brokeback Mountain”. The film opens with Wai-Tung (Winston Chao), a real estate entrepreneur, working out while listening to an audio-tape his mother has sent him from Taiwan, putting pressure on her son to find and marry an “ideal woman” through a Chinese singles club. We are then introduced to Wai’s true partner Simon (Mitchell Lichtenstein), who is a Caucasian male nurse and HIV/AIDS activist. Simon helps Wai fill out a phony dating form, because Wai is unable to admit to his parents that he has already found the right male partner. However, the situation complicates itself when Wai’s parents are persistent and eventually plan a visit when their plan for marriage through the singles club doesn’t fall through. Simon later hatches a plan to fool Wai’s parents, involving a female tenant of Wai’s, who is an immigrant from Shanghai seeking marriage from an American citizen in exchange for a green card. Simon and Wai proceed to give their flat a makeover and coach Wei-Wei (May Chin) on how to be Wai’s perfect bride-to-be. With Simon posing as a landlord and Wei-Wei at the fore-front, food preparation in the film reveals the gap between traditional conformity and true relationship compatibility. While Simon secretly makes meals, like the shredded tofu served to Wai’s discerning father, Wei-Wei (who has trouble frying eggs) takes credit for the pleasant texture of the dish. After Wai plans a low-key wedding ceremony at City Hall, he is pressured into planning a last minute dinner at Manhattan’s China Palace Restaurant. After their meal, the restaurant manager Old Chen (Tien Pien), who recognizes Wai’s father from the military, proposes to plan a wedding banquet to properly mark the important life event. Wai, Simon and Wei-Wei then prepare for what they call the “final act”. After an intensive facial and makeup session, Wei-Wei is spoon-fed Lotus soup by Wai’s parents and eventually arrives at the well-attended and raucous banquet dinner. When it begins to get late, we notice that Simon steps in to help Wai’s parents go back home, while the fake newlyweds continue to drink and party heavily with guests. Simon shows throughout the film that he is Wai’s perfect partner by the way he is able to converse in mandarin, by the gifts he shares during Wai’s parents’ visit and by how well he tends to Wai’s father after his stroke. When the parents are ready to leave Manhattan, Simon helps make arrangements on the airline for a healthy meal for Wai’s father’s cardiovascular condition. As the parents board their flight, we are left with a shot of Wai standing between male partner Simon and wedding banquet bride Wei-Wei, symbolizing a modern and unified family.

Sources:

1. Life of Pi (2012), Dir. Ang Lee. 20<sup>th</sup> Century Fox. Taiwan, UK and USA. 127 min.
2. Eat Drink Man Woman (1994). Dir. Ang Lee. The Samuel Goldwyn Company. Taiwan and USA. 123 min.
3. The Wedding Banquet (1993). Dir. Ang Lee. The Samuel Goldwyn Company. Taiwan and USA. 106 min. USA. 127 min.