Unhappy Together: Chinese Diaspora In Film

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UNHAPPY TOGETHER: CHINESE DIASPORA IN FILM

by

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The lives of people who move from one culture to another are similar in the range of experiences they encounter and different in how they interact with their particular circumstances. Cinematic representations of diaspora, accurately enough, also show general similarities and specific differences. In light of the concept of "accented cinema," we can compare and contrast film descriptions of Chinese immigrants in New York City. We view day to day events as they are interpreted by the host culture and we also understand that immigrants define their own experiences in terms of their home culture.

Two directors who are veterans of the immigrant experience, Clara Law and Ang Lee, are
compared through their films about diaspora. In general, their movies depict the types of suffering that immigrants undergo; living in a foreign country is a process of continual rejection as the outsider accommodates her inner self to her surroundings. How the director chooses to understand the characters' dilemma is the key to how the audience will come to view both the characters and the world around them.

If the director's view is harsh, she will give her characters no end of trouble, push them into impossible corners and trip them up at any sign of success. The world will judge them without mercy and the audience will end up feeling desperate. This is not a condemnation of inaccuracy; there are plenty of real diasporic lives that end in tragedy.

If, on the other hand, the director softens her approach, her characters show a flash of insight or a speck of gentleness. They learn from the circumstances in their hostland and adapt their own ideas and morays to survive. People fleeing an old life may ultimately realize a good part of themselves in a new life.

Diaspora is a common experience. Cultures collide both within and between individuals. Realistic portrayals of the immigrant experience suggest that we can empathize with these stories and learn to appreciate the complexity of human interactions.
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Introduction

“Diaspora” denotes the dispersion or spreading of a population from its country of origin. Historical references to diaspora are associated with the experience of exodus and exile of the Jews from Palestine, the flight of the Greeks after the destruction of Aegina, and the expulsion of Armenians after the Persian and Turkish invasions in the mid-sixteenth century. But today, the definition of diaspora has been expanded to describe the condition of displaced peoples without nation-states, or the scattering of population groups who have left their homelands for hostlands (Kokot, Tölölyan, and Alfonso 3-17; Naficy 13-14). As a subject classification, diaspora has resulted in a theoretical and critical category in film studies and is introduced as a critical concept in discussions of topics such as migration, identity, nationalism, globalization, cosmopolitanism, hybridity, transnationality, and exile.

With the magnitude of international migration in the late 20th century among the “pan-Chinese” population, including people from mainland China, Hong Kong and Taiwan, the Chinese diaspora has become an important subject in a growing number of films. Films representative of this category include: Ann Sui’s The Story of Woo Viet (1981) and Song of the Exile (1990); Mabel Cheung’s Illegal Immigrant (1985), An Autumn’s Tale (1987) and Eight Taels of Gold (1989); Ang Lee’s Fine Line (1985), Pushing Hands (1991) and The Wedding Banquet (1993); Clara Law’s The Other Half and The Other Half (1988), Farewell, China (1990),
Autumn Moon (1992), and Floating Life (1996); Wayne Wang’s Eat a Bowl of Tea (1989), The Joy Luck Club (1993) and A Thousand Years of Good Prayers (2008); John Woo’s Bullet in the Head (1990); Stanley Kwan’s Full Moon in New York (1990); Wong Kar-wai’s Days of Being Wild (1990) and Happy Together (1997); Evans Chan’s To Liv(e) (1992) and Crossings (1994); Sylvia Chang’s Siao Yu (1995); Peter Chan’s Comrades: Almost A Love Story (1996); and Alice Wu’s Saving Face (2004). Although the contents of these films are diverse, they share a similar context and subtext: the crisis or dilemma of identity, dislocation, displacement, alienation, difference, disappearance, and disjunctive subjectivity within the diasporic condition.

The majority of the aforementioned films portray the diasporic experience of a Chinese population overseas, especially in New York City. This is because New York City has long carried the image of a melting pot of immigrants, and it symbolizes “America” in many immigrants’ minds. Although many Chinese communities have mushroomed around the U.S. in the last few decades, more than half of the entire Chinese American population is still located in New York and California. Therefore, New York City is one of the most representative destinations of Chinese immigration (Kwong 3-4).

This thesis will explore the conceptual representation of the Chinese diaspora in three film narratives: Clara Law’s Farewell, China (1990), and Ang Lee’s Fine Line (1985), Pushing Hands (1991) and The Wedding Banquet (1993). These films are all based in New York City.
Having lived in New York City as an overseas Taiwanese student for two years, my experience as the author of the thesis will also provide a vantage point through which to examine these films.

Directors Law and Lee are both renowned for their ability to capture the complexity of human relationships within families and ethnic groups, as well as the hybridity propagated by the dissolution of political, geographic, ethnic, cultural, and aesthetic boundaries. Law’s “migration trilogy” (*Farewell, China, Autumn Moon* and *Floating Life*) fashions her main concerns with immigrant issues. *Farewell, China* is one of her breakthrough works and epitomizes the psychology of ostracism of Chinese in America. Lee, a world-famous Academy Award winner, is less known for his earlier works that center on immigrant themes. However, all these films have an autobiographical flavor and both directors have had diasporic experiences of their own.

Law and Lee’s films depict not only the diasporic experience but also the different social strata of New York’s Chinese residents. According to Peter Kwong, Chinese residents in New York City today can be roughly divided into two distinct groups. More than 30 percent are professionals. These are the “Uptown Chinese,” who have a higher education and salary base than the national average, and who do not reside in the concentrated Chinese enclaves. The “Downtown Chinese” are manual laborers and service workers, who earn low wages, speak little English and are likely to settle in Chinatown (Kwong 5). While Law’s film pays close attention to the lives of Downtown Chinese, Lee’s works focus more on the Uptown immigrants.
The films discussed in this thesis epitomize visual representations of the Chinese diasporic experience in a culturally Western metropolis. However, my goal is not to universalize the image portrayed in all of these Chinese immigrant films. Rather, it is to examine the particular details of the individuals who live within similar cultural, social and political contexts in each film. Close examination of these works of accented cinema will reveal the “accents” within these films to shed light on the complexities of outsider identity and when native and new cultures collide. The concept of “accented cinema” was coined by Hamid Naficy. The term refers to films that reflect the intricate negotiations between filmmakers’ interconnected but divergent lives in exile and homeland. Naficy contends that even though the experiences of diaspora and exile differ from one person to another, films produced by diasporic filmmakers exhibit specific similarities in various levels of technique, style, aesthetics and ideology (4). In so doing, this thesis will offer a voice to ethnic and marginalized groups from the outskirts of society.
Clara Law's *Farewell, China*

*Farewell, China*, directed by Clara Law, is a representative Hong Kong Second Wave film. The film depicts Chinese immigrants who live as “riffraff” in the lowest stratum of society.

Applying the Asian-hell-to-Western-heaven motif, *Farewell, China* graphically portrays the suffering of immigrant life in this country: lack of money, lack of dignity, and a lack of true communication with a community. In addition, the period during which the movie was shot overlapped with the Tian’anmen Square protests of 1989. This event pushed the director to add a layer of complexity to the film. Her characters are also unintended refugees from a politically abusive homeland, yet another possible form of suffering.

In the Hong Kong film history, two movements are referred to as the “New Wave.” The first New Wave in Hong Kong did not indicate a particular kind of cinematic style or narrative, but rather referred to a number of works from some talented and groundbreaking young filmmakers of the late 1970s and 1980s. Unlike the previous period between World War II and the 1970s when the film industry had been dominated by transplanted mainland Chinese filmmakers, this period saw New Wave filmmakers refresh and revise popular genres in Hong Kong. As Stephen Teo describes, “They relaunched the thriller-as-social-conscience drama, with
a hard-nosed core of realism and an emphasis on crime and corruption, the two scourges of Hong Kong society in the 1970s” (105). With the new identity formation of people of Hong Kong and the popularity of Cantonese in mass media, these filmmakers extended their reach into a variety of local issues using more technically audacious methods than mainstream Hong Kong cinema of the time. The use of location shooting and sync sound recording gave New Wave films a grittier, rougher look and realistic atmosphere.

In 1984, the Sino-British Joint Declaration was signed and the United Kingdom Government declared that Hong Kong would be handed over to the People’s Republic of China effective July 1, 1997. The change in political status aroused concern among Hong Kongers and profoundly affected filmmakers and cinematic productions. As Ackbar Abbas asserts, “Almost every film made since the mid-eighties, regardless of quality or seriousness of intention, seems constrained to make mandatory reference to 1997” (24). The works created under this political and social atmosphere are dubbed “The Second Wave.” While the preceding New Wave directed focus on the lives of locals without a single or unified goal, Second Wave filmmakers consciously expressed deeper reflections on and care for the status quo and future of the locals (Lo 264). With the approaching Chinese takeover, many Hong Kong filmmakers began to consider and discuss the social and political differences between China and Hong Kong. They thus tended to make genre styles into allegories and subpolitical tracts (Teo 104). The
Tian’anmen massacre of 1989 deepened the dread of Hong Kong residents and intellectuals about Chinese governance, and accelerated waves of emigration at the same time. The diaspora served as a rich site to explore motifs of migration, mobility, hybridity and displacement (Yue 9). People were getting out of Hong Kong and filmmakers followed them, shooting in a range of foreign countries where Hong Kong emigrants had gone. Films like *Farewell, China* were shot in wherever people of Hong Kong landed and dealt with the problem they encountered in those places. As Lo contends, “The local is scrutinized in terms of it being replaced in different spaces and different times” (264).

Clara Law has immigrant experience in her own life. She was born in Macau in 1957, moved to Hong Kong with her family at the age of ten, and received her cinematic education in the U.K. from 1982 to 1985. She then returned to Hong Kong as a filmmaker before relocating to Australia in 1995, two years before the Hong Kong takeover. Most of her works bear the mark of exile and diaspora motifs. Furthermore, most of her films feature protagonists that are immigrants from Hong Kong; *Farewell, China* being the only exception. In this film, Law employed two famous stars from Hong Kong to play the story of a Chinese immigrant couple.

*Farewell, China* is Law’s fourth feature film. It is a eulogy on the diaspora experience and broken American dreams of a Chinese couple who try to immigrate to the United States, although the film’s themes are debated by scholars. The story begins at dawn in Pungu,
Guandong, the countryside of southern China. The year is 1988, twelve years after the end of the Cultural Revolution (1966-76), and in the last stage of the reconstruction stage of the Chinese Economic Reform. In the aftermath of the devastating Cultural Revolution, Xiaoping Deng, the Chairman of the Communist Party of China, adopted a nationwide “open-door” policy to restore the severely damaged society and economy. This policy facilitated the emigration of millions of Chinese, who left for large metropolitan cities in the West (Sun 47).

In the film, the female protagonist, Hung Li, has applied for a student visa but has been rejected four times by the Consulate General of the United States in Guangzhou. Hung and her husband believe that the consul in Guangzhou is prejudiced against Hung and would like to appeal to another consul’s judgment. Hoping for another chance, they travel all the way to the U.S. Consulate in Shanghai. According to Wanning Sun, “going to the city” and “going abroad” are two constant tropes of mobility in contemporary Chinese folklore. While millions take the first step and far fewer achieve the second, these two tropes are sequential and linked in many cases (43).

The long line outside of the U.S. consulate indicates high demand for visas. A woman who stands in the line prays to everyone from the Holy Mother Mary and Buddha to Premier Deng. Her prayer suggests that Deng has divine status and power in China. However, it is ironic that a national prays to the national ruler to fulfill her dream of leaving the country. Hung puts on
silk stockings and lipstick, both representative of luxuries from the West, trying to give the consul a good impression. Hung’s disclosure that she is considered “too pretty” for the consul of Guangzhou reveals the sexism and racism in U.S. immigration policy. It also suggests the fear and distrust officials have based on the stereotype that Chinese women tend to become prostitutes in the U.S. or are trying to find an American husband. To quell the consul’s fears, Hung delivers a baby as proof that she will return and is “not pretty anymore,” but she is dumbstruck when the consul asks sharply, “A baby…is that your way of getting a visa?”

During her visa application interview, Hung stammers but strives vehemently to persuade the consul with her limited English proficiency. She raises her personal situation to the level of a national issue, claiming, “I won’t allow my personal concerns…to hinder China’s Four Modernizations.” She pleads, “Our generation…so much time already wasted! Why won’t you help us?” Sheldon Lu claims that this appeal refers to the catastrophic consequences of the Cultural Revolution (98). If this is true, then the second part of her appeal is significant. Hung, as a Third World citizen/woman, rudely and awkwardly lays the responsibility to boost Chinese economic reform on the United States’ shoulders. She thereby acknowledges the leading role of the U.S. as the global leader, and assumes a “brotherhood” between the U.S. and China, with China as the weaker sibling. Her portrayal manifests the struggle and entanglement between globalization/modernization and localism/“Chineseness.” It also shows Hung’s full dependence
on the mercy of others due to her weakened racial and gender status.

Hung finally obtains a visa and goes to New York. From then on, as Yingjin Zhang suggests, this film becomes “a study of mainland Chinese diasporas in New York City” (267). Hung’s figure disappears on the screen. Only her voice remains as her husband Nansan Zhao unfolds her letters. Hung reveals in one letter that she wants to return and cannot stand any more of the hardship. However, Nansan selfishly tells her to hang on for the future of their son. Later, Hung sends a letter demanding a divorce, with an extraordinarily joyful voice-over recounting that she is going to get a green card. This letter alerts Nansan to the gravity of Hung’s situation, which leads to his illegal entry into the U.S. to retrieve his wife. The last thing Nansan sees in China is his family behind a grilled window, as his parents watch him speechlessly through the bars. The shot connotes their lives without freedom, and foreshadows Nansan’s experience in New York afterwards.

Nansan arrives in New York through a tour to Mexico, a tour with no return. The tour charges to smuggle people into the U.S. but also trades them to robbers, causing nine of the tour members to be killed and four arrested. Nansan escapes and trudges across the border, but immediately feels overwhelmed and overpowered by the bustling city.

He visits an old acquaintance, Ah Mu, an artist who resides in New York and is waiting for approval of his American citizenship. Mu’s American experience is an instance of
exploitation under the influence of Orientalism. He signs a contract with a gallery, which wants Mongolian landscapes in exchange for his permanent residence. Thus Mu trades his freedom of expression for a green card. Here, Western xenophilia actually reinforces stereotypes, narrows the West’s understanding of Eastern cultures, and exacerbates immigrants’ sense of otherness and polarity. Mu helps Nansan find Hung’s place and realizes that Hung has gone missing.

Although Mu promises to give Nansan shelter, he suddenly changes his mind during the night. Scared that his chances of residency will be compromised if he houses an illegal immigrant, Mu throws Nansan into the streets.

Mu’s attitude change not only reflects the fickleness of human relationships, but also coincides with changes in Hung’s life. The inconsistency implies the distorted humanity of immigrants under harsh living conditions and extraordinary pressure. Mu tells Nansan that he met Hung once in his exhibition. Hung had transformed from an unsophisticated country woman into a garish lady. This is the first time that the audience sees Hung, in a flashback that reveals her life in New York. During their brief encounter, Hung replies entirely in English to Mu’s Cantonese. Her refusal to speak her native language hints at her rejection of her original identity and dissociated personality.

Nansan’s situation worsens when he wanders onto the streets. He has no shelter, no food, no clue on how to find his wife, and he gets robbed by another homeless man. The city’s hostility
toward outsiders is presented through several scenes. When Nansan asks for some water in a donut store using his broken English, the owner chides him, “There is no water for free. You must be a communist.” Discrimination is also evident when Hung’s landlady shouts at him and calls him a “chink.” Such instances remind us that even though Nansan is a meek and mild man (from the Chinese audience’s perspective), local Westerners may see him as an unknown stranger and threatening outsider.

Nansan meets a wayward girl named Jane when he accidently gets involved in a fight with the Chinatown gangsters. Jane is a 15-year-old Chinese American girl who has run away from her home in Detroit, and Nansan finds her to bear a resemblance to Hung. Jane hates her racial origin, but shares commonalities with Nansan and therefore helps him continue his journey to find his wife.

As their search continues, Hung’s life in New York is gradually revealed to the audience through flashbacks that occur while Nansan and Jane trace Hung’s acquaintances one by one. Hung lived in a shabby basement, illegally worked at a Chinese takeout place, got assaulted and raped on the streets, and fell ill but had no money for medicine. She reached an agreement with a Chinese laundromat owner to enter a bogus marriage for a green card. However, she stole all the money from her new husband and disappeared.

Hung’s acquaintances reveal facts of Chinese immigrant life. They claim that they have a
freer life while living in fear every day. For instance, the Chinese takeout owner arms himself with a handgun and has the restaurant windows iron-barred and bullet-proofed as if lives behind the bars. His workplace echoes with Nansan’s room in China as they are all constrained in containments. The acquaintances seclude themselves in Chinese enclaves in New York, just like the laundromat owner who has imprisoned himself in Chinatown for thirty years. The English teacher from Hong Kong is waiting for amnesty, and does not dare not to ask the police for help because of her illegal status, much like Hung did not seek help when she was raped. These immigrants are living in a state without the safety net a state provides. In other words, they are living out of bounds.

Cultural differences also create misunderstandings and prejudice toward others. Hung stabs a Spanish male classmate when the guy asks her out because she thinks she will be raped. The Chinese takeout owner also expresses serious discrimination toward Black people, as if the way to survive in the city is to internalize and duplicate unequal treatment toward other minorities and collude with the oppressive system. The Chinese takeout owner states sarcastically, “Blacks are really not that frightening. Every weekend the whole family would go to church. They can be real sweet and warm.” He also mentions that “Deep inside, Blacks are maybe better than Whites. At least they don’t look down on us.” However, the English subtitle here is inaccurate. What he actually says in Chinese is “Blacks could be better than Whites if
they are bleached/ decolorized. At least they are not snobbish.” Thus, as a victim of racism, he truly believes that white skin equals superiority. While regarding racial others as threats, he judges them with a narrow mind and hurls insults on the basis of skin color, connecting Blacks with urban savagery.

These cruel facts about Hung affect Nansan. Hung left nothing but a suitcase in the care of the Chinese takeout owner when she left. She told the owner that she kept all her valuables in the suitcase, but when Nansan opens it, he finds only a slice of maggot-ridden pizza, some clothes, and Mickey Mouse and Donald Duck dolls she had set aside for her family in China. Yue contends that the suitcase intimates a familiar urban dystopia (47). The suitcase, as a symbol of migration, memory, nostalgia and dream, more obviously represents disillusionment with a rotten American dream. Pizza and Disney characters represent the fantasy of wealth and happiness of American life, and denote the impact of American cultural imperialism. However, this suitcase also hints at Hung’s mental state and foreshadows the film’s denouement.

Adding to their woes, Nansan and Jane run out of money. Jane decides to resume prostituting herself while Nansan acts as her pimp. Through this arrangement, Nansan repeats a pattern of sustaining his living by relying on a woman, first Hung and now Jane. However, Nansan cannot bear the frustration and heartbreak of witnessing Jane sleep with men. He runs up to the rooftop, collapsing under the looming figure of the Empire State Building. His male pride
is severely diminished by the dominating power of the West and capitalism. In fact, all the Chinese male characters in this film undergo a process of enervation to some extent.

Jane is the embodiment of the Madonna–whore complex. The motif is highlighted when Jane follows a despondent Nansan and holds him, speaking softly: “Don’t cry, Mammy is here.” Jane, whose capricious nature is set strongly against the traditional values held by Nansan, simultaneously acts in a maternal role for him. Her image is simplified in order to bring out Nansan’s tragic and chaotic state. The portrayal flattens Jane’s character but also justifies the argument that women represent the boundaries or limits of society. This is the sentiment that Toril Moi expresses when she presents her position:

From a phallocentric point of view, women will then come to represent the necessary frontier between man and chaos; but because of their very marginality they will also always seem to recede into and merge with the chaos of the outside. It is the position that has enabled male culture sometimes to vilify women as representing darkness and chaos, to view them as Lilith or the Whore of Babylon, and sometimes to elevate them as the representatives of a higher and purer nature, to venerate them as Virgins and Mothers of God (166-7).

Acting in a functional role to underscore Nansan’s maladjustment and sense of otherness, Jane is pushed farther toward a marginal position within patriarchal society. Jane’s dual sexual/maternal
roles make her the “other’s other.”

The weddings or erotic relationships, both of which appear in this film, are a favorite trope of many Hong Kong films from the “handover” period (Lu 282). Many Hong Kong filmmakers probed the nature and feasibility of the partnership between Hong Kong and China through allegories. In *Farewell, China*, erotic relationships can be seen as a metaphor for the relationship between the U.S. and China: the former acts as the pimp and the latter as the prostitute. Meanwhile, the individuals show how sexuality functions as a trope to move between two empires.

Eventually, Nansan runs away from Jane out of shame. He is overwhelmed by his own inability to protect the women he cares for (Hung/Jane), and his guilt from betraying the one he should be loyal to (wife/motherland). He intrudes upon an outdoor revelry, where the participants rave to loud music and sado-masochistic performances. This shot is the film’s apex of the spectacularization or demonization of New York City. To emphasize Nansan’s otherness and misfit status in the city, this sequence gives prominence to the grotesque and portrays New York as the decadent city of Sodom. It is not clear whether this is part of Nansan’s dream or reality, since even the Caucasian children on the swings have contorted and monstrous faces in his eyes. Law herself described the film as “part naturalistic and part fantasy.” Nevertheless, the New York experience is undoubtedly a genuine nightmare to both Nansan and Hung.
The director represents New York as a profit-obsessed city where the weaker parties get bullied. Nansan gets no help from any native. He wanders around dilapidated neighborhoods, places where the Chinese work and live. Wanning Sun discusses the phobic characteristics of space in the film, claiming the spaces and corners of New York that these characters traverse “are seen to be overpowering and disorientating…. The phobic space—fearing both going in and getting out—is also powerfully realized through the use of a number of signifiers in Nansan’s search for his vanished wife in Brooklyn, Harlem, and Long Island” (Sun 49-50). Many shots create an ambience of claustrophobia in Nansan and Jane’s nightmarish odyssey. Stephen Teo describes their journey as a descent into an American inferno: New York City (186). These immigrants are motivated only by material life, even though it is unclear whether their problems should be imputed to the environment or themselves. Ironically, the immigrants manifest the spirit of pioneering and American expansionism but are cast out in their new land.

Throughout the film, Nansan frequently grows dejected and despondent under the sight of urban landmarks in New York, such as the Empire State Building, Statue of Liberty and Brooklyn Bridge. This contrast is composed and demonstrates how Nansan is dwarfed and defeated by this imposing and menacing metropolitan city. Those noted spots, symbolically depicted like erect male genitals, represent the America’s political and economic dominance. In contrast, Nansan is an emasculated man who fails to protect his mother(land)/wife. He loses his
confidence as a man when he realizes his wife’s miserable experience and is forced to face the cruel reality of his impotence compared to Americans, even as a pimp.

While these Chinese immigrants are “the other” to the city and its locals, the city itself also signifies a strange and unintelligible “Other” to them. Yingjin Zhang points out that “…with its fractured identities and hybridized ethnicities, its multilingualism and multiculturalism, its synchronicity of past, present, and future, its contrast between wealth and poverty, its magnificent skyscrapers and back-ally filth, present-day New York has been frequently projected in recent Hong Kong cinema as an uncanny Other” (Zhang 275). The immigrants maintain their old-fashioned lifestyles and rarely mix with the locals unless necessary. While children in Nansan’s hometown sing the American folk song “Red River Valley,” the immigrants stop listening to American music in favor of ballads from their native countries. The Taiwanese song playing in the Chinese takeout kitchen vies with hip hop music on the streets of Harlem to emphasize the confrontation and diasporic isolation in the immigrant experience.

Out of desperation, Nansan rings his parents in China, telling them that he cannot stand being in America anymore and would like to return. Ironically, he receives the same heartbreaking answer that he once told Hung. His parents dissuade him from going back for the sake of his own son. This may be one of the most common oriental motifs of reincarnation cycles. Nansan finally experiences the same pain he inflicted on Hung out of his ignorance of the
hardships of being an outsider in New York. Louie argues that the film not only sheds light on the horrors of immigrant life in the West, but also the afflictions facing a splintered family (99). For those who stay in China, the immigrant in the U.S. represents hope; at the same time, the immigrants stuck in the U.S. are pushed to a hopeless ledge by the expectations of the people back home. Such naïve expectations from family deprive the immigrants of belongingness and aggravate their loneliness due to the collapse of familial and familiar support networks. The immigrants are bereft of both a homeland and a private home.

On the other hand, Jane, as an Asian American, still has a home to go back to. Jane’s change comes from nowhere after Nansan almost penetrates her. Her role parallels that of Iris in *Taxi Driver* (1976): they are both teenage prostitutes and identify their New York lives as free and independent. Nansan, as a flawed hero like Travis, gives Jane a hefty shove to send her home. Jane seems to be the only one who gets “rescued” in the film, but her home in Detroit (or Pittsburgh in *Taxi Driver*) just provides the audience with a vague imagination of elsewhere. Her return represents submission to a patriarchal system and tradition, although Nansan and Hung can no longer find shelter within the dysfunctional patriarchal system.

Nansan finally ends his search for Hung. He gives up hope and returns from the underworld without retrieving his Euridice. He stays in New York as an illegal immigrant, doing a delivery job. One day, he encounters Hung by chance. They spend the night together while
Hung tearfully tells Nansan her sorrows and grievances. But the next morning, Nansan discovers that Hung is schizophrenic and no longer has any memory of him. Hung curses at him with racist slurs and refuses to speak Chinese, presenting her desertion of her original identity. Her room is decorated with the American flag and she mistakes Nansan for a one-night stand stranger.

Stupefied, Nansan follows Hung to Chinatown, where he finds out that Hung is a swindler who steals money from elderly Chinese immigrants. He also finds Hung engaging in sexual transactions with a black man. In deep sorrow and disillusion, Nansan grasps Hung’s arm and asks her to leave with him. However, Hung does not recognize Nansan and thinks he is going to rape her. Thus, Hung takes a drill out of her purse, the same one she used before with her Spanish schoolmate, and stabs Nansan in his chest.

Hung kills her husband, who is full of Chineseness, implying how Chinese characteristics brought her suffering in New York. In a desperate attempt to assimilate to American culture, she even pretends that she is not good at speaking Chinese in front of her pimp, and despises her “chink” husband as other Americans do. Yet for all her chameleonic transformations and rejections, Hung unwaveringly remains the outsider and Third World woman. She never successfully becomes “transnational” or “transcultural.” Tony William contends that “Trapped within a materialistic urban hell which perverts her values, she never achieves her transnational dreams of an uncomplicated geographical transition and new identity” (184). Madness and
degeneration are her only “line of flight.” They remove the restraints of patriarchal and imperial oppression temporarily, but keep her marginalized and exploited.

The question she asks the consul in the beginning of the movie (“Why won’t you help us?”) is raised repeatedly throughout the movie. Hung cannot be saved while she is raped, and gets no help when Nansan chases her. All the pedestrians pass by indifferently as if nothing happens when she suffers. Therefore, as the oppressed, she knows the mechanics of oppression best and reproduces the pattern to elderly Chinese immigrants who have no external assistance. Ironically, her actions perfectly coincide with the initial worries of the American consul. She turns into a whore. Hung once hoped to work in foreign trade and ultimately becomes the “middleperson” pretending to help with monetary transfers.

Hung and Jane are actually doubles or alter egos to one another. Their mindsets and behaviors are strikingly parallel or similar. Jane abandoned her daughter, saying her pregnancy was an accident and not her fault. Hung also conveniently used her son and then deserted him. She even planned to give birth to another child as a means to obtain a bogus marriage. When Nansan denounces Jane for not bearing the responsibility of parentage, he and Hung are actually made from the same mold. Jane was brought up by her grandfather, like Nansan and Hung’s son is being raised. Their destinies rotate as copies of each other’s. While Hung changes from a mother into a prostitute, Jane turns from a prostitute into a mother. Jane’s self-denial is alleviated
toward the end of the film, yet Hung’s disavowal of her identity worsens and causes her to hallucinate.

Some scholars suggest that the film’s final sequence refers to the Tian’anmen Square massacre (Lu 284; Marcetti 194). Nansan falls down in front of a white sculpture in a park, with his red notebook on the ground. The cover of the notebook is inscribed with Mao’s calligraphy of his own famous saying, “Serve the people.” The statue is a likeness of the Statue of Liberty, but more closely mirrors a replica of the Statue of the Goddess of Democracy erected by demonstrators in Tian’anmen Square in 1989. Nansan’s stay in New York also coincides with the time span of the movement. Marchetti notes that Law actually changed her original conception of the film in the wake of the Tian’anmen incident (7). However, this insertion of current news events is obtrusive, awkward, and aesthetically out of place. As Shiao-Ying Shen comments, “It was surprising and disorienting to witness the appearance of such a politically and historically loaded icon at the end of a heavy melodrama lamenting the Chinese obsession with migrating to the United States in pursuit of the American Dream” (120).

The finale raises the question of whether the film is an accusation against the Chinese government or the evil capitalism and imperialism of America. Some critics believe the film was intended to be a criticism of the Chinese Mainland. Lu contends, “[Chinese Mainland] has deprived its citizens of a home. The ideological premise of films such as this one is that the bad
policies and malpractices of the nation-state are pitted against its innocent powerless citizens and area indeed the cause of their misfortunes” (284). Yue also posits that this film challenges the conventions of patriarchy, and its dominant ideologies of nationalism, colonization and reunification: “the film questions the handover by focusing on female immigrants and situating the diaspora as an excentric space of reunification and re-turn” (53-54).

But the film also can be seen as a deterrent to potential emigrants by portraying the failure of immigrant life. Wanning Sun suggests that the film was made during the years prior to Hong Kong’s takeover, when the citizen’s desire to leave Hong Kong paralleled the Chinese nationals’ desire to leave China (51). Marchetti believes that this film can function “as a cautionary tale for those planning to emigrate from China to the West” (193). And New York is far from a dreamland in Law’s depiction. Louie points out that all the elements of the “yellow peril” genre can be found in this film (98). Wanning Sun claims that “the film records the pathological yearning for ‘America,’ the global city, the Other. It was also a moment when the Chinese state was keen to discredit that foreign vision and the people who shared it, taking pains to demonstrate the dystopian aspects of the United States and the Western world in general” (51). All in all, the film sees the foreign other as a differentiating entity from which a distinct Hong Kong or Chinese identity is constituted. The West definitely does not provide a safe haven for Chinese immigrants.
Teo states that “Law sees America in symbolic terms, as the land of liberty (the better to shatter this image), than the land of milk and honey…. Their tragedy is the tragedy of China, which is the real theme of the film” (216-7). If we try to interpret the names of the protagonists, the same conclusion can be drawn. Hung can be seen as a symbol for Communist China; her name connotes the color “red” and conforms to the symbolic color of the Chinese Communist party. The name “Nansan” can be interpreted as “born/lives in the south”, hinting that he will become rootless or even die if he leaves his rural land. In a scene when Jane asks Nansan why he chose “Lincoln” as his English name, Nansan tells her that Lincoln was so honest that he admitted he chopped down the cherry tree. His ignorance is clear not only in his mix-up of George Washington and Abraham Lincoln, but also through his belief of the fictional story for propaganda. His statement implies the immigrants’ distorted vision of the American dream.

The film concludes with a gaze back on China, presenting a peaceful, unpolluted, and nostalgia-inducing Chinese rural setting. Compared to the dystopian New York that the protagonists escape from, the ending looks fictional, unlike any real place in China. The shot also looks suspiciously like a return to a grand narrative extolling the static, unchanging and impeccable life in China and subdues the power of criticism throughout the film. It is worth wondering whose glance or recollection we are seeing in the final sequence. Nansan is dead, Hung has lost her mind, and Jane has no memory or understanding about China (she even has
never heard of the Cultural Revolution), so it does not make sense to attribute the vision in the last shot to any of them. The only possible interpretation is that this coda is a final glance on China from the filmmaker herself. With complex love and affection toward her nominal country and nationality, Law throws her gaze back and waves farewell to China in this work. In the 1990s, just following the release of *Farewell, China*, she and her family would begin their emigration to Australia.
Ang Lee's Early Works

When speaking of New York based filmmakers and directors, Ang Lee’s name seldom comes to mind relative to other famous directors like Woody Allen, Spike Lee and Martin Scorsese. Probably, this is because Lee’s later works, such as Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon (2000), Brokeback Mountain (2005), and Life of Pi (2012) overshadow his earlier creativity in terms of mass appeal and commercial success. Rightfully, however, Lee should be included in this peer group. Lee received his master’s degree in film production at New York University (NYU) and has been living in New York for the past thirty years. Furthermore, his Fine Line (1985), Pushing Hands (1992) and The Wedding Banquet (1993) are all stories about New Yorkers. His particular status and his identity imbue his New York narratives with a unique sense of empathy and understanding for the people who live in this city, as well as a sincere concern with cultural hybridity and diversity that arises from issues related to the Chinese/Taiwanese diaspora experience.

This chapter examines how Lee’s New York narratives use the tension between identity and alterity to make cinematic sense of a world of cultural clashes. The strength in his style is in appreciating the importance of self-knowledge through tradition, whether that tradition is Asian
or American. At the same time, he understands the value (and the necessity) of responding to a new culture; in trying to survive his uprooted characters are forced to relearn their lives. It is natural, then, to look at Lee's own life partially as a reaction to cultural alterity.¹

Lee moved to the United States in 1978. He left his homeland Taiwan because he failed the college entrance exams and could not enroll in any reputable university. Initially he planned to go to France because he was immersed in The French New Wave, but he later changed his mind when he found French too difficult for himself. Although his English was not fluent either, he chose to matriculate at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign (UIUC), because a neighbor who studied there told him that the campus had a big theater. Lee completed his bachelor’s degree in theater in UIUC in 1980, whereupon he entered the Tisch School of the Arts of NYU. At Tisch, he learned film production for the first time and earned his MFA alongside now-famous classmates Spike Lee and Jim Jarmusch.

While at NYU, Lee sublet a room in a deserted warehouse from an African sculptor who was staying in New York under sponsorship from The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO). According to Lee’s friends, the interior of the house was

¹ “Cultural alterity” is typically viewed as negative. The predominant culture sees itself as the most complete or advanced version of civilization and awards the members of its group the most social and political privileges. Other groups are judged by their perceived distance from the normative group and their contributions are isolated, minimized or disregarded (Pierres 104).
a total mess. Film storyboards covered the walls and his sublessor later died due to a drug overdose. Yet despite living in chaotic, impoverished conditions, Lee later described his years at NYU as the best time in his life. He was so immersed in filmmaking that he even felt lost on days off (Zhang 47).

Lee’s hard work and natural talent did not go unrecognized. During graduate school, he shot a 16mm short film, *Shades of the Lake* (1982), which won Taiwan’s Best Drama Award for a Short Film. That same year, he served as an assistant cameraman on Spike Lee’s NYU thesis film, *Joe’s Bed-Stuy Barbershop: We Cut Heads* (1984). The two directors have kept in touch and are still good friends; Lee even visited Spike Lee’s class at NYU in March 2013 (Keshishoglou 2013). Meanwhile, Lee’s own thesis work, a 43-minute film entitled *Fine Line* (1985), won the Wasserman Award for Outstanding Direction and Best Film, NYU Film School’s top honor recognizing outstanding achievement in film, and the film was later selected for the Public Broadcasting Service.

*Fine Line* (1985)

*Fine Line* was Lee’s first film in which the story and characters were located in New York. The film title refers to Canal Street in Manhattan, which separates Little Italy and China Town in races and culture. The two main characters, Mario and Piu Piu, live separately in these two areas and are both outsiders in the city. Mario, of Italian descent, was imprisoned in the Wards Island
Mental Institution until his escape. He wants to reunite with his wife, but she has left with her lover and taken all of Mario’s savings with her. Mario’s friend later involves him in a drug deal at an abandoned warehouse (just like the place Lee used to live in), but the friend asks Mario to wear headphones so that he cannot listen to the transaction. The headphones symbolize Mario’s status as an outsider among his ethnic peers. They also prevent him from hearing the police sirens, and he is left behind with the drugs and thus gets into more trouble. The drug dealers are presented as silhouettes in the backlight. When Mario sees all the black shadows scatter, he cannot help but start to run. We hear the balladic Italian tenor from his headphones continue with the chasing scene. However, the music abruptly stops when the policeman running after him falls and injures himself. In silence, Mario experiences a sudden, injurious emotional tension. He picks up a rock and smashes it on the policeman’s head.

Mario encounters Piu Piu by chance while he is still on the run. Piu Piu is a Taiwanese girl but is usually mistaken for Chinese by people who do not care about her ethnic and national identity. To support her theater studies, she works in a Chinese takeout restaurant, which exploits her because she is an illegal worker. She is an outsider in New York and is also an outsider to her boss and co-workers, even though they are considered to be from the same ethnicity. The scene in the Chinese takeout is shot with rapid tilt up shots and pans, showing that she is in a spin. Standing in front of dishes to serve, Piu Piu looks lost.
When immigration officers raid the restaurant, Piu Piu is forced to run away. That is when she meets Mario, who is wearing a stolen police uniform as a disguise. The background music of Piu Piu’s runaway is very different from Mario’s. Chinese opera is employed here to highlight her cultural background and also creates a jocular juxtaposition. After some heated misunderstandings between Mario and Piu Piu, the two loners unite to help each other escape in a rowboat across the river to New Jersey.

This film was shot largely in New York’s Chinatown and Little Italy, two of the most famous immigrant enclaves in this city. It is about ordinary people who get into scrapes over which they have little or no control. It also strongly reflects the reality of ethnic immigrants in the 80s. For instance, we can see how adept these officers act when catching illegal workers in the raid scene. The officers walk directly into the basement, and knock at the door of a room to get the chef out when they see a chopper left on the cutting board. They also grab another man from the restroom on their way out. Mario and Piu Piu, the two outsiders in the city, forge a relationship by chance, for fear of being swallowed by the environment around them. Ellen Cheshire recognized how the cinematography underscored the story’s narrative:

One of the most striking visuals in the film is the wide expanse of the Jersey River where Mario and Piu Piu are rowing. The dull grey water and sky swallowed up their small rowboat…. Once they land in Jersey, Piu Piu glances
longingly over her shoulder at the Statue of Liberty—a symbol of freedom that she cannot enjoy. (23)

The early success of *Fine Line*, however, did not translate into immediate creative opportunities. True, the famous William Morris Agency in Hollywood successfully persuaded Lee to stay in New York to develop his film talent, but Lee never considered that this would mean unemployment for the next six years. During that time he and his wife moved to Westchester, New York. Lee describes that time as the hardest period in his life. He had development deals but no offers to direct a film came his way. He finished two scripts but no one was interested. In his interview with *The Guardian*, Lee said, “When I sent those scripts, that was the lowest point of my life. We’d just had our second son, and when I went to collect them from the hospital, I went to the bank to try and get some money to buy some diapers, the screen showed I’ve got $26 left.” (*The Guardian, n. pag)*

Not until 1991 did Lee finally sit back in the director’s chair (actually, his “chair” was a wooden box at that time). In 1990, Lee had participated in a screenwriting contest held by the Taiwanese government to develop the fledgling Taiwanese film industry. He submitted two screenplays, *Pushing Hands* and *The Wedding Banquet*. The screenplay of *Pushing Hands* won the first place “Excellent Screenplay Awards” from the Taiwanese government in 1990. *The Wedding Banquet* won the second place award in the same year. Together, the prize award added
up to US$16,000. The new head of Taiwan’s Central Motion Picture Corporation, which was sponsored by the government, also rendered his support by gifting Lee an additional US$400,000 to produce *Pushing Hands* and *The Wedding Banquet*. Meanwhile, James Schamus and Ted Hope had begun to organize a firm called “Good Machine” to help talented directors finance projects. After seeing *Fine Line*, they too voiced their interest in collaborating with Lee.

**Pushing Hands (1992)**

With new funding in place, *Pushing Hands* (1992) had a chance to go from a script to a movie. It was shot in Riverdale, an upper-middle-class residential neighborhood in the northwest region of the Bronx. In fact, Riverdale is the most expensive Bronx neighborhood and is considered one of New York City’s best residential areas, known for having the lowest crime rate in the Bronx (“Riverdale, the Bronx”). Riverdale has also been referenced in other films; in Woody Allen’s *Husbands and Wives* (1992) the middle-class couple, Jack and Sally, reside in Riverdale. In Spike Lee’s 25th *Hour* (2002), Naturelle (Rosario Dawson) snaps at Monty (Edward Norton), saying, “What, I can’t be from Riverdale?” referring to the bourgeois Riverdale lifestyle. In George Clooney’s *Good Night, and Good Luck* (2005), Fred W. Friendly relays that he and his family are relocating to a “nice house in Riverdale.”

I was unable to find a Riverdale census from 1990, but according to the 2000 census, the racial makeup of the neighborhood was 78.74% White, and 5.36% Asian. Asians are a clear
minority there. In 1990, there were only 35,021 Asians residing in Bronx County out of 123,789 residents, or 2.9% of the total population. According to the U.S. Department of Commerce Economics and Statistics Administration Bureau of the Census 1990, 7,015 were Chinese. The protagonist of Pushing Hands is a Chinese man who lives in Riverdale with his wife and son. Because of where he lives, he is considered a “successful” immigrant who can afford a well-off lifestyle.

The basic storyline of Pushing Hands begins with a widowed Tai Chi master, Mr. Chu, who moves from China to New York to live with his only son Alex, his American daughter-in-law Martha, and his grandson Jeremy. Family conflict ensues as Mr. Chu and Martha have a hard time co-existing in the same space. Martha is a budding writer who works at home and suffers from writer’s block. Mr. Chu’s presence is a distraction for her. Compounding the issue is Mr. Chu’s unfamiliarity with Western lifestyle and his inability to speak English, both of which broaden the gap between them. Very soon quarrels unfold between the married couple over the husband’s father. After several incidents, Mr. Chu decides to leave and live alone in Chinatown, finding a job as a plate washer in a Chinese restaurant. However, he is too old and too slow, and the unsympathetic owner fires him. Mr. Chu refuses to leave the restaurant and uses Tai Chi to stand rooted in place, resisting the gangsters and police who are called by the restaurant owner. The television news coverage brings about a reunion between Mr. Chu and his son while he is in
jail. While Alex breaks down in tears, Mr. Chu makes up his mind not to disturb Alex and Martha’s life anymore. He chooses to live in Chinatown alone.

The title *Pushing Hands* is based on the name of a Tai Chi movement and sets the theme that runs throughout the film. Unlike most Tai Chi moves, which can be practiced alone, “pushing hands” is a training movement that requires two people. The key to doing it properly is to utilize the correct force to push forward while the other person simultaneously applies and eliminates the approaching movement. A person should not resist the pressure from the other and should borrow the strength from the opponent, then exert the strength to flow together until the two feel they have fused into one and achieved harmony. The practice of pushing hands symbolizes the encounter of American and Chinese cultures, and the people involved in between.

This uncomfortable cultural encounter is epitomized by the opening of the film, which features twelve minutes of scenes with only Mr. Chu and Martha in the house. This is one of the most pertinent sequences to portray the characters’ loneliness and alienation in the film. Lee indicated that he chose that house to shoot in because the rooms inside are isolated but spatially connected. It is easy to view what others are doing in separate rooms, allowing him to highlight the tension between Mr. Chu and Martha due to their lack of privacy (Zhang 74). In the twelve-minute sequence, Mr. Chu and Martha deal with their own business separately. No dialogue occurs. While Mr. Chu performs Tai Chi, Martha sits in front of her computer, racking her brain
for an opening to her novel. She pauses and laughs after typing the words “grandfather clock” before the camera cuts to Mr. Chu, still doing Tai Chi.

Different scholars have offered diverse descriptions of Lee’s opening in *Pushing Hands* although they all emphasize the aspect of visual juxtaposition. For instance, Whitney Crothers Dilley describes the opening sequence as “only visual action to establish these glaring cultural differences” (53). She gives detailed descriptions of other scenes illustrating the cultural clash between Mr. Chu and Martha as well:

The camera focuses on the paragraph on the screen with the cursor blinking, and the viewer can make out the words ‘children’, ‘white linen’ and ‘homestead’—a traditional American pioneer narrative reminiscent of Laura Ingalls Wilder’s *Little House on the Prairie* (1935) and another marked contrast with Chinese culture. (Dilley 54)

Sheng-mei Ma describes the opening scenes as conveying “both nostalgia over lost Self and exoticism for Other” (96). Cheshire similarly points out contrasts in this sequence:

His room is tidy and organized, her desk cluttered and her study area a mess. His appearance is smart and trim, hers bohemian with her wild mane of blonde curly hair falling around her face. He practices the ancient art of calligraphy, she furiously taps away at her computer. She
Wang 36

punches the air as she jogs; he meditates and practices the gentle art of

Tai Chi. (29)

The silent eating scene further demonstrates the identity conflict, and Martha and Mr. Chu’s reluctance to assimilate into each other’s culture. The two collide with each other when preparing their lunches in different ways in the kitchen’s confined space. Mr. Chu has to prepare his meal, which is obviously leftover from yesterday’s dinner, using the microwave oven. In traditional Chinese culture, it is unthinkable to let an elder prepare his own meal with the microwave; the younger generation would be labeled as unfilial bad children. Meals have always been crucial social occasions whereby Chinese family members or acquaintances strengthen their bonds, and filial piety is always upheld during mealtimes. Here, Mr. Chu realizes the Saran Wrap has run out and uses aluminum foil instead to cover the food. When he later goes to heat it up, the microwave oven sparks. Mr. Chu is startled and Martha rushes in and reproaches him, “No metal! No metal in the microwave!” Viewers can assume that Mr. Chu had never used a microwave oven in China, and was not accustomed to being reprimanded by someone younger. Thus, a convenient American household appliance becomes a symbol of frustration and humiliation for Mr. Chu.

At lunch time, Martha sits at the dining table, eating her salad and wheat crackers. Mr. Chu hesitates to sit at the same table with Martha. He debates eating alone somewhere else, but
after a brief consideration he chooses the former. However, no eye contact or conversation occurs between the two during the meal. Mr. Chu eats a mixture of food in a big bowl, which is later contrasted with normal dining customs presented in a Chinese video clip that Mr. Chu watches. In the clip, an old couple has bowls of rice with several dishes on the table, while their daughter (or daughter-in-law) sits on the side and sews. Mr. Chu’s meal in comparison is clearly “undignified” in Chinese culture.

Despite the lack of dialogue in the opening scene, language is a crucial element in this bilingual film, particularly dialogues at the dinner table. Questions like “What does that mean?” or “What did he just say?” reflect anxious, confused emotions. Alex, who is trapped in the middle of the strained relationship between his father and his wife, is too tired to translate for all other family members. He refuses to be the bridge across the communication gaps and asks Martha and his father, “Will you please cut it out, both of you? Just eat.” Martha blames Mr. Chu for not learning English in the month since he has arrived, although she has never felt the need to learn Alex’s native language even after living with him for seven years.

Even characters who speak the same language clash due to their cultural differences. For example, in a fight between Alex and Martha, Martha complains about living in the same space as Mr. Chu. She says, “I don’t have space to think [for my new book].” Alex snaps back, “Not enough space! This room is big enough for four people back home [in China].” Even if they use
the same word in English, their cultural backgrounds are totally different, causing a failure in communication. This shows how difficult it is for people in the film to find their own space and how tough it is to keep a proper distance between characters. Sheng-mei Ma comments on the successful use of spatial elements in Lee’s mise-en-scene to represent various types of conflicts: “Lee deploys such cramped urban spaces to frame tense and volatile human relationships” (196).

Mr. Chu is clearly an outsider in America and in the marriage of Alex and Martha. He is an outsider both in the house and outside the house. In the home, his presence seems an unwelcome intrusion. When he ventures outside, he cannot even tell what direction to go in. The tough martial arts master becomes helpless as a child and can only rely on a police escort to get home. However, Martha is another outsider in this family. With Mr. Chu’s arrival, she becomes the only one who cannot understand Chinese. When Mr. Chu comments on the violence in American cartoons and does not want his grandson to watch them, Martha fights back criticizing Chinese Tai Chi as more violent. Besides asserting her right to educate her own child, Martha is also protecting her own culture in this hybrid family.

Although both characters are outsiders, Mr. Chu, as a Chinese immigrant who barely speaks English and as an older man, is more socially vulnerable. In the latter part of the film, the shabby apartment in Chinatown is his only possible shelter; other boroughs in this city seem impossible for him to settle down in. But he becomes an outsider again when he cannot cope
with the high-speed pressures of a menial job in a Chinese restaurant. After all, this is New York and Chinatown is not China. His colleagues and boss also need to survive under capitalism’s predatory nature.

The scenes in Chinatown make it another crucial venue in *Pushing Hands*. The film delicately portrays the difficult social, ethical, emotional, and political position of elder Chinese immigrants in the city. In addition to Mr. Chu, another main character, Mrs. Chen, goes through a similar situation with her daughter and her son-in-law and ends up relocating to Chinatown.

The Asian population, especially Chinese, comprises a majority of Chinatown residents. In the 2000 census, Asians made up 66% of the total population in Chinatown; of those, 16% were aged 65 years and over. Between 1990 to 2000, elderly Asian residents in Chinatown increased by 30%, from 6,854 to 8,881; 71% of the elderly residents had limited English proficiency and about 35% lived below the poverty level (Sung, *n. pag*). These percentages were consistent with the more recent 2010 census, in which Asians made up 63.9% of the total population and 16.1% of Asians were 65 years old and over (U.S. Census Bureau 2010).

Strikingly, 27.5% of the elderly Asian population in the 2010 census lived alone (U.S. Census Bureau 2010). Virtually trapped in their homes, these older immigrants are “invisible” and “left with ‘nobody to talk to.’” (Leigh, *n. pag*) In a striking portrayal of their suffering, Brown describes the characteristics and mindset of elderly immigrants as a demographic:
Many are aging parents of naturalized American citizens, reuniting with their families. Yet experts say that America’s ethnic elderly are among the most isolated people in America. Seventy percent of recent older immigrants speak little or no English. Most do not drive. Some studies suggest depression and psychological problems are widespread, the result of language barriers, a lack of social connections and values that sometimes conflict with the dominant American culture, including those of their assimilated children. (Brown, n. pag)

Mr. Chu’s character perfectly aligns with Brown’s description. When he moves out, his note to his son indicates the sadness he feels. It reads: “In China we lived together happily through so many bitter times… but here in America, surrounded by so many fine material things, it seems there’s no place in your home for me.” His son later collapses and bursts into tears, saying: “I came to America to raise money to bring you here to have a good life.” However, the good life ushers in cultural differences, misunderstandings and maladjustment, another broken American dream for an immigrant family.

Toward the end of the film, Alex explains the meaning of pushing hands to Martha, “For dad, Tai Chi was a way to escape from the reality. Even when he did pushing hands, for him, it
was a way to avoid other people…. [Pushing hands] is like Tai Chi for two—a way of keeping your balance while you’re unbalancing your opponent.” Martha interrupts, “Like marriage.”

Alex responds, “If you try to unbalance me, I simply avoid your energy and turn it back on you.”

It seems that toward the end of the story, the American dream may be broken, but everyone compromises a little to strike the balance.

Some critics like Ellen Cheshire, argue that the film ends on an upbeat note (26). Whitney Crothers Dilley suggests the ending is sweet and understated (58). However, from a traditional Chinese point of view, Mr. Chu’s lonely life is miserable. In traditional Chinese culture, the practice of filial piety is a crucial responsibility, and elders should be looked after in their old age, just as parents look after their children when they are young. For the elder, a house without family does not qualify as a “home.” Mr. Chu brought up his son alone when he lost his wife during the Cultural Revolution. Therefore, it is not surprising for a traditional father figure like him to expect his son to take care of him in return. Nevertheless, the Chinese Communist Party refutes his position as the family head when he was in China, and now the Manhattan skyscrapers contradict his status again. When Mr. Chu and Mrs. Chen stand on a street in Chinatown, asking each other, “Anything to do this afternoon?” “Nothing.” “Nothing…,” viewers from a Chinese cultural background will watch the scene with bitterness instead of seeing it as a possible romantic beginning. The silence that falls and the fade to black reveals the
pair’s ineffectiveness to adapt to American society, and the permanent loss of their homes, whether in China or in America.

*The Wedding Banquet (1993)*

Lee’s second feature film, *The Wedding Banquet* (1993), is similarly based in New York. This time, however, the story takes place in Manhattan. This script was actually completed before *Pushing Hands*, but the shooting was delayed because of the less-than-mainstream subject matter. According to Lee, “It was written six years before it was made into a film. At that time making a Chinese-language film in America was inconceivable, no-one would give me money, no matter how small it was. And it was gay-related subject matter, so I couldn’t raise the money in Taiwan either, so it just sat there.” (The Guardian, *n. pag*). Not until *Pushing Hands* had succeeded at the box office did Taiwan’s Central Motion Picture Corporation invest in this film.

The protagonist in *The Wedding Banquet* is a homosexual Taiwanese immigrant, Wai-tung Gao, who lives with his Caucasian lover, Simon, in Manhattan. Wai-tung is a successful real estate entrepreneur but he hides his homosexuality from his parents, who are still in Taiwan. His parents are so anxious to have grandchildren that they fix him up on a blind date with someone picked from a matchmaking agency. Desperate to get them off his back, Wai-tung accepts Simon’s advice to enter into a sham marriage with Wei-wei, a Shanghainese artist and tenant of Wai-tung who is vexed about her undocumented status. The situation gets out of
control when Wai-tung’s parents decide to fly to New York to attend the wedding. The situation worsens when the parents expect to hold a big wedding banquet for them. Wai-tung and Wei-wei have intercourse after getting intoxicated at the banquet, Wei-wei gets pregnant as a result, and Wai-tung gets into a fight with Simon in front of his parents. The plot turns again as Wei-wei decides to keep the baby but asks Simon and Wai-tung to be the child’s fathers, and when Wai-tung’s father reveals to Simon that he knows everything and accepts him as another son.

This film never explicitly explains why Wai-tung relocated to New York, but New York is obviously a freer city with friendlier attitudes toward homosexuals and more living space compared to his native Taiwan in the 1990s. Charles Kaiser argues that “in the postwar period, New York City became the literal gay metropolis for hundreds of thousands of immigrants from within and without the United States…where they chose…to live openly, honestly and without shame” (xii). Julie Abraham likewise indicated a link between openly homosexual lifestyles and American cities suggesting that, “By the end of the twentieth century in the United States, the threat of homosexuality could represent the threat of urbanization. But internationally, the threat of homosexuality represented the threat of Americanization” (xvii).

This would be a logical reason for Wai-tung to leave Taiwan for New York. The city is the place for those who pursue urban freedom and individuality. For example, in New York-based novelist James Baldwin’s semi-autobiographical work *Go Tell It on the Mountain* (1953),
his protagonist flees to the city “as if the city will make [him] free” (190). In downtown New York City, the protagonist decides “He would not be like his father, or his father’s fathers [sic]. He would have another life” (19). Baldwin is also known for his homosexual orientation and the use of the city as a landscape for free expression.

Like the character in Baldwin’s novels, Wai-tung must have found more freedom living in New York, and he also found the one he loves. He does not want to live like his father. He identifies more with connections in New York City than with his biological family. The comparison is clearly and vividly demonstrated through a sequence in which the interior decoration speeds from gay men’s pictures into scrolls of Chinese calligraphy. In those scenes, Wai-tung’s pictures with smile and self-disclosure, i.e. his real self and identity, but are replaced by a picture of him wearing the military uniform, which represents his false self under the repression of Chinese patriarchy, his father whom he does not want to face. The background music in this clip is fast, tumultuous urban jazz music, reflecting his torn inner feelings and his American identity.

Even as Wai-tung wants to escape his father, he duplicates the patriarchal model in his own relationship with Simon. In the opening scenes when he makes a phone call to Simon, he speaks with an imperative tone: “Come here and meet me. I’ll take you out for dinner.” When talking about their vacation plans, Wai-tung says, “I’m taking you to Paris in September.” It
seems he is the one who issues orders, like his general father, instead of consulting with Simon.

Like in *Pushing Hands*, an underlying theme of “other” or “outsider” runs through *The Wedding Banquet*. Julie Abraham claims, “Cities are the homes of groups, yet belonging to a group is not in itself American.” (179). To some extent, these three young characters are not exactly American in different ways, demonstrating the hybridity of the city. Wai-tung is an outsider, for he is both Taiwanese and gay. He does not join the local gay activists like Simon does (there is one scene where Simon stands behind the “Silence = Death” booth with his friends), showing that he is still set apart from American gay men. But he also demonstrates a lukewarm attitude toward his Taiwanese countrymen when he bumps into one on the Brooklyn Bridge. He seems not to belong to any group. Wai-tung seems to keep a distance with everyone except for Simon. He even maintains a distance with Wei-wei in the beginning. Lan Dong explains this by saying, “As both diasporic and gay, Wai-tung becomes ‘an anomaly,’ and thus is doomed to have no fixed identity.” Gina Marchetti also considers Wai-tung to be “singular and atomistic” (275) and therefore has “no identity, because he has no fellows in the film” (297).

Wei-wei is like an extension of Piu Piu in *Fine Line*, but she is more willing and desperate to secure a green card and American identity. However, to acquire the status, she must disregard the mainstream value of marriage in the US, that is, to marry on the basis of love. Simon, as the only Caucasian major character, is ironically also the only one against the sexual prejudice openly
expressed through deprecating looks from their white neighbors. In the house, he is physically and linguistically different from the others, and his character is deliberately feminized.

The atmospheric and strained family relationships expressed around the dining table is a trademark in Lee’s first three features, including *The Wedding Banquet*. In the fight scene during breakfast, film dialogue is similar to that in *Pushing Hands*. Mrs. Gao dumbfoundedly watches the quarrel among the younger generation, asking her husband, “Are we overstaying our welcome?” Mr. Gao replies, “Shut up and eat.” She asks further, “Did Wai-tung pay his rent?” Mr. Gao scolds her, “You can’t put your foot in your mouth…if you keep it closed. Eat!” The scene recalls the one from *Pushing Hands* in which Alex refuses to face the problems and asks everyone to focus on their meals. The chopsticks are like swords crisscrossing and pointing at each other, yet chopsticks are also like needles weaving the web of kinship. Traditional Chinese tolerance and inability to articulate feelings are fully illuminated in these sequences.

When Wai-tung walks a step away behind his father on the Brooklyn Bridge as part of their morning exercise, even though they are physically close, the mental distance between them is huge. The traditional Chinese music playing in the soundtrack hints at Wai-tung’s efforts to play the traditional “good son” role. In Chinese, the character *wai* means “great,” and the character *tung* can stand for “homo,” another symbol of the tension Wai-tung experiences between who he is and who his parents want him to be. Thus, even though Wai-tung walks like
his father’s double on the bridge, there is no bridge to connect their hearts. One of the most surprising scenes occurs when Wai-tung goes upstairs to invite his father to breakfast but finds Mr. Gao collapsed on the chair with his eyes closed. At that moment, Wai-tung cautiously extends his finger under Mr. Gao’s nostrils to check for breathing. In this totally silent sequence we cannot really tell what is going on in Wai-tung’s mind during his actions. Does he secretly hope his old man is dead? Does he feel his own burden at the moment? Regardless, the scene is a very strong representation of the tension and emotion in the father-son relationship.

The movie reaches a climax during the wedding banquet of Wai-tung and Wei-wei. The banquet represents facets of traditional Chinese beliefs; Ang Lee called the customary Chinese wedding banquet “an infantile excuse” for people to throw off “five thousand years of sexual repression” (Pachecco, n. pag). This is in line with Sheng-mei Ma’s claim that “only a Bakhtinian interpretation of the wedding banquet as a carnivalesque transgression suffices to account for the extravaganza. The license to shed daily Confucian code of conduct gives rise to a communal ritual of Bacchus-like drunkenness and cavorting” (198). Dennis Lo also supports the concept of marriage as something other than a romantic partnership, contending that “rituals become forms of social imposition that appropriate patriarchal views of sexual hierarchy through the guise of ‘marriage traditions’” (Lo, n. pag). Wai-tung and Wei-wei’s ceremony is punctuated by carnivalesque pranks designed for the purpose of publicly deriding the newlyweds. People
ridicule the groom and the bride for kissing and they play some sexually suggestive games; all these are behaviors that Chinese would not normally dare to do in public. Ellen Cheshire suggests that the distasteful antics at the wedding banquet may seem a little over the top for a Western audience, like a spectacle for non-Chinese viewers (36). But, the scene resonates with a Chinese audience because it is so familiar to them.

The newlyweds, even though they are key figures in the ceremony, are also amusing buffoons for the entertainment of the guests. The true main characters of the wedding ritual are in fact the parents of the newlyweds. A grand and boisterous wedding banquet gives the parents a reason to be proud; otherwise, they will “lose face.” When Mrs. Gao finds out that Wai-tung and Wei-wei are planning to have a civil marriage ceremony at City Hall, she rails against the idea, crying, “We came all this way. How can you be so casual? Our friends and relatives gave $30,000 [as gifts] to have a grand wedding. What will we tell them?” Wai-tung responds, “We’re not marrying for them.” Mrs. Gao fights back, “If not for them, then for whom?” After all, marriage in traditional Chinese is more of a duty to your family and relatives than a pursuit of personal happiness. It is a link that continues and expands the kinships and maintains the patriarchal system.

Throughout the havoc in the ceremony, Mr. Gao’s true position as the head of the event is continuously reinforced. The emcee always politely seeks approval from Mr. Gao to proceed. Mr.
Gao nods slightly and smiles to grant his permission. When the restaurant owner, Old Chen, who is also the former subordinate of Mr. Gao in the national army, asks the chef if the meals are ready, the chef asks, “Who is talking now [to give a speech]?” The owner replies, “The groom’s father.” The chef then says, “Then it is early and I got 40 minutes.” When the banquet ends, the owner asks Mr. Gao, instead of the newlyweds, “Was it satisfactory?” The question once again manifests the status of the father, not only in the ceremony, but also in the hierarchical values of Chinese family norms and politics. Nonetheless, in real life outside of the wedding banquet, Lo points out that “Wai-tung’s father is ultimately unable to dictate how the wedding should work out, the real ‘Other’ in the film may even be the heterosexual, patriarchal figure in the film, who gets ostracized by his own son” (36). His power makes him the arbitrator in the traditional ritual, but he is still helpless to dictate Wai-tung’s life or oppose American values. At the end, Mr. Gao, the former general, raises both of his arms high when passing through the security check at Customs, as if conceding or surrendering to a more powerful system.

Even though about 60 percent of the dialogue throughout the film is in Mandarin Chinese and many of the references involve Chinese culture, The Wedding Banquet represents New York City in the early 1990s. The movie was mainly shot in Manhattan and Brooklyn, and viewers can see the Williamsburg neighborhood before it was gentrified. The house that Wai-tung rents to Wei-wei is so shabby that it is almost like a Chinese version of the setting in Rent. In addition to
architectural detail, the film also accurately sheds light on key aspects of 1990s New York
culture. In addition, in the early 1990s the “Safe Sex” campaign in gay groups was very
prominent (Brier, n. pag), and one of the reasons that Simon gets mad at Wai-tung is because he
has unprotected sex with Wei-wei.

Some scholars argue that The Wedding Banquet unites Eastern and Western cultures. For
example, Elisabetta Marino claims that Wei-wei’s pregnancy “enables the characters to bridge
their physical and mental distance and, eventually reconcile the opposites, like sweet and sour,
with a result that is as delicious as the Chinese food of the banquet, as constructive as the
development of the plot. Thus, Lee’s film opens new channels of communication between East
and West” (Marino, n. pag). Certainly, the film does include relationships between Chinese and
American protagonists in a multicultural (New York) setting. But the crucial element to the plot
twist is not the pregnancy, but language itself.

Language plays a fundamental role as a bridge in this film. Unlike Martha in Pushing
Hands, Simon is more willing to learn his partner’s language and culture. In the beginning of the
film, he even reads a Chinese poem to his patient. He also expresses his friendliness and caring
using his awkward Mandarin with Mr. and Mrs. Gao. And surprisingly, Mr. Gao learns English,
too. This makes communication between the two cultures more possible, and in fact, leads to the
most surprising scene in the film: when Mr. Gao sits by the Hudson River with Simon and
reveals his understanding of their homosexual relationship. Mr. Gao says to Simon, “I watch, I hear, I learn. Wai-tung is my son. So you are my son, also.” “Simon’s” translation into Chinese can be interpreted “as good as the family/pedigree,” and toward the movie’s resolution, this is revealed to be true. Mr. Gao always wanted a grandson; in the end, he instead acquires another son. Meanwhile, the river that flows next to them symbolizes their connection and motion.

Despite the ultimate bond between Simon and Mr. Gao, The Wedding Banquet does not end on an upbeat note. All through the movie, everyone promises to keep secrets and knowledge from the others. Everyone is deceiving or being deceived. Everyone is trying to compromise and do what they feel is best for others. And everyone gets hurt. The past is also portrayed with sadness. There is heavy nostalgia when Mr. Gao recollects the slaughter of his entire family in the Chinese Civil War, and his singular escape to Taiwan to carry on the family name. The magazine he reads brings on a sentimental longing for the past. Even Old Chen, Mr. Gao’s former chauffeur, feels melancholy when he sends his old General out of the restaurant where they are holding the banquet. However, the strongest indication that interpretations of a happy ending are incorrect would be the director’s own view. Lee was stunned to hear people say that The Wedding Banquet has a happy ending. In the final scene everyone is crying. It never came into his mind to shoot a melodrama with a happy ending (Zhang 104).

Lee’s complex background makes it more difficult for scholars who assume a single
Asian viewpoint to intuitively interpret his work. Lo categorizes Lee with many of the Chinese that arrived during the “Neo-Asian American” period. “Neo-Asian American” is a term originally coined by Darrel Hamamoto to describe the post-1965 Asian-American immigrants whose life experience was the product of multiple cultural influences (6). In addition to the issues of his Asian heritage, Lee’s family history was especially turbulent: his family and military influences were from China, his childhood upbringing and educational experiences were from Taiwan, and he learned drama in America as a young adult. As Lee stated in an interview, “I was never a citizen of any particular place” (Ebert, n. pag). No wonder his narratives do not typically include a happy ending.

Lee continued his exploration of cultural “otherness” after The Wedding Banquet in his third feature, Eat Drink Man Woman (1994). In making this feature, he went back to Taipei to explore how the family structure is challenged by how individuals react to traditional Chinese culture. The basis for the film’s title is a link to the past, a phrase from Confucius describing human nature. The heart of the film however, is the Westernized behavior of the three daughters. The enjoyable emphasis of the film is on food and romance, but the tension underlying this is the change from tradition to the modern world. The characters are in the act of exploring the limits of their heritage by living in a new culture. Critics have characterized Pushing Hands, The Wedding Banquet, and Eat Drink Man Woman as a “Father-knows-best trilogy” because of the
presence of an important older male in each one. But, as importantly, in each film Lee explores
what happens when cultures collide. Critics have commented on this aspect. Sheng-Mei Ma
suggests that the trilogy “reveals an increasing propensity toward exotic travel in search of the
Other rather than nostalgic lamentation over the loss of the Self” (195). Wei Ming Ariotis and
Eileen Fung cite Lee’s work for “illustrat[ing] the inevitable conflicts and negotiations between
individuals bound by familial and societal obligations. These familial and societal dramas are
often set in scenes where the infiltration of Westernization is in direct conflict with orthodox
Chinese ideologies” (187). Lee’s first two New York–based films epitomized the struggle and
frustration in his life in New York, giving personal depth to scripted conflicts he captured on
camera. His return to Taipei revisited similar conflict on another familiar ground. Fundamentally,
Lee has always struggled between cultures:

To me, I’m a mixture of many things and a confusion of many things…. I’m
not a native Taiwanese, so we’re alien in Taiwan today, with the native
Taiwanese pushing for independence. But when we go back to China, we’re
Taiwanese. Then, I live in the States; I’m sort of a foreigner everywhere. It’s
hard to find a real identity. (Berry 54)

I don’t know where I am, but I never know where I am. I was born in China,
then my parents moved to Taiwan, where we were outsiders, then to the States,
then back to China, then back here. I trust the elusive world created by movies
more than anything else. I live on the other side of the screen. (Dilley 51)

Such quotes may explain why Lee’s films always express deep empathy toward characters that
live entangled in dilemmas. His words also capture the humanity that lies under his poignant
plots and descriptions. Like Marino says, Lee is all too familiar with the sweet and sour
combination in Chinese cuisine, and his characters likewise must face the journey of navigating
conflicting emotions.Ultimately, the reason Lee is able to convey a feeling of otherness so
effectively is because even after (and perhaps especially after) so many years living and filming
in New York, he knows how it feels to be an outsider. After all, he is one of them.
Conclusion

Law and Lee’s films both feature the main characteristics of diasporic or accented cinema. They depict the ordeal, maladjustment, and conflicts that stem from immigrants’ familial or ethnic values. Their films also capture the protagonists’ mindsets toward transition and liminality. However, their approach to similar subject matter is different. Lee’s films are undoubtedly not comedies, but he imbues them with some humor or lightness. In contrast, Law’s stories provide almost no softening of the anger, jealousy, and ignorance of the characters and their surroundings. In *Farewell, China*, Hung and Nansan’s characters face almost every possible adversity that characters in an immigrant movie could encounter: betrayal, exploitation, violence, poverty, prostitution and separation. This epitomizes a typical “traumatized migrant” movie that tells of the horrors of immigrant life in New York City. Lee has a more humane approach; Law tells a more rigid and afflictive story.

Diasposa should be seen as a pervasive idea or ideology in Lee and Law’s films. Immigrants from upper and lower social classes both experience a sense of otherness, no matter how much they try to assimilate into the host culture. This fact reminds us of how dominant and minority identities are constructed. The representations of different groups are usually not
controlled by those groups themselves, but instead, created by groups that have greater political power. Therefore, almost every immigrant in these films undergoes and experiences a crisis of identity. Their identities are forcibly reshaped when they emigrate to a new society. Many immigrants experience downward mobility in their social class, like Nansan in *Farewell, China*, who goes from a school teacher to a pimp, or Mr. Chu in *Pushing Hands*, who goes from a Tai Chi master to a pot washer.

Native citizens also go through a sense of otherness that results from the collision of different cultures or ethnic groups. For instance, Martha in *Pushing Hands* and Simon in *The Wedding Banquet* both experience feelings of marginalization and being misunderstood as the Other. However, in *Farewell, China*, immigrants do not seem to impact the locals. This missing representation prevents the film from portraying a holistic macroscopic view on the diasporic experience.

Lee and Law also diverge in their representation of kinship and mutual-aid networks among Chinese immigrants in New York City. In *Farewell, China*, the lack of support from family members, friends and other familiar social networks make the protagonists more vulnerable in the new environment, especially when they perceive the environment to be threatening. The cause of their predicaments is unclear. Do the protagonists inevitably suffer from these trials because they are from an economic minority or “Downtown Chinese” group? It
goes without question that they have fewer resources and choices available. However, Law’s portrayal takes their hardships to an extreme. Given that immigrants from Guangdong Province, where Hung is from, represent the dominant group in New York’s Chinatown (Kwong 19), it seems inconceivable that Hung would not have initially chosen to settle in a Chinese enclave until she had adjusted to the new society. New immigrants, like Mr. Chu in *Pushing Hands*, are likely to visit Chinese community centers, or compose a “de facto” family as in *The Wedding Banquet*. Mr. Chu’s character is thus a closer approximation to the actual situation of Chinese immigrants in New York City.

The directors’ own backgrounds likely impacted how the diasporic experience was illustrated in both films. Law is from Hong Kong/China, unlike Lee, who comes from Taiwan. The function and value of family are relatively weak in Law’s film, probably reflecting the migration pressures and hybridizing tensions in Chinese or Hong Kong diaspora. *Farewell, China* appears more concerned about the spiritual malaise gripping the Chinese than a distorted version of the American dream. Law does not explain why Hung is so desperate to emigrate, nor why Hung applies for a visa to America instead of Nansan. Perhaps the tragedy could have been averted if her husband had gone abroad instead. All of the movie’s dramatic changes happened in just one year, which made the story less convincing. Hung stabs Nansan, but Law is an accessory to the tragic end of the couple. Nansan’s death implies Law’s pessimistic view toward the
assimilation of immigrants. His death could also connote the internalization of hatred toward an unwisely chosen hostland, and the rationalization of mistreating one’s own people. In contrast, although family and kinship in Lee’s films are cornered and conflictive, family and community members still have strong bonds and homeland ties between them. They try to comprise and aid each other in a symbiotic system. The Chinese takeout owner in Law’s film, who happens to be Taiwanese, may be more representative of this standard “Downtown Chinese” experience based on the lifestyle he describes to Nansan.

Rey Chow raises an important question in her study on Chinese cinema: “Where is the movie about me?” (1) Chow points out that inquiries like the one explored within this thesis have increasingly drawn cinema into studies of group cultures. The desire to become visible, or have a voice in cinema, pertains to identity politics as well as the relationship between representation and interpretation of subjective histories and locations within a globalized context. Law and Lee’s films in many aspects, neatly illustrate how the Chinese immigrant community navigates encounters with mainstream American culture. While Law’s film resorts to melancholic victimization and sentimentalism, Lee’s films bring out a unique Chineseness and construct his cinematic worldview through a diasporic construct of feelings.
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