

Chapter 7

Saved by Betrayal? Ang Lee's Translations of "Chinese" Family

Jeroen de Kloet

I think the American president, not only in the nation, but worldwide, is the ultimate father figure. So when he fails, it's like robbing people of their innocence. There's a great sense of loss of trust, of faith. The Chinese see that a bit differently, though – we lost our innocence 3.000 years ago.

*Ang Lee, 1997*¹

I think translation is defined by its difference from the original, straining at identity. The management of this difference as identity is the varied politics of the situation of translation.

*Gayatri Spivak, 2001*²

Born on the First of July

On 1 July 1997, a hot and rainy Tuesday, Hong Kong, which had been under British colonial rule for 150 years, was, in the dominant discourse at least, returned to Chinese rule. BORN ON THE FIRST OF JULY was the title given to a compilation CD produced and released precisely on 1 July 1997 by a Taiwanese record company "What's Music". The Taiwanese, Hong Kong and mainland Chinese bands featured on the CD were invariably part of the semi-underground, alternative music scenes of the respective places.³

¹ Quoted in Jennie Yabroff, *Stranger in a Strange Land*. 1997 (<http://www.salon.com/ent/int/1997/10/17lee.html>, available, November 28, 2003).

² Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, "Questioned on Translation: Adrift." *Public Culture*, vol. 13, no. 1, 2001, pp. 13-22, p. 21.

³ The music cultures in China, Taiwan, and Hong Kong are by and large dominated by the more commercial sound of *Canto* and *Manda* pop, a sound that is often, and unfortunately, downplayed by academics as, for example, "sickly sweet love songs". See Michael Dutton, *Streetlife China* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998, p. 239). Beijing, in particular, has emerged as the center of what is often constructed in popular and academic discourse as the more alter-

Quite apart from offering alternative constructions, the contributions on the CD not only incorporated the hand-over into the dominant narrative of a family reunion, the reunification of the Chinese family, but also injected this family with a strong sense of patriotism. The hand-over to China was *celebrated* as a happy family event, rather than a complex shift in power (by some referred to as a re-colonization of Hong Kong).⁴ The CD *BORN ON THE FIRST OF JULY* underlines the power of a political identity that thrives on the notion of the Chinese family. Among the CD's fourteen songs, only one voice raises critical questions about the familial return of Hong Kong to its motherland. In the song, "Beyond that day", by Beijing rock star Cui Jian, the singer-cum-songwriter asks his mother (that is: the mainland authorities):

Do you really understand the sister I have never met,
or do you really understand me?
If we all of a sudden fall in love with one another,
what are you going to do?
.....
Mother,
the day my sister comes back, is a chance
to go beyond that traditional concept of family.⁵

Like the CD's other contributions, this song illustrates the pervasiveness of family ideology, and how this ideology is transposed towards the general level of Chineseness. Cui Jian, like the other contributors, invokes the family reunion as a metaphor for the political event; yet, unlike the rest, he pushes the metaphor to the limit of an incestuous affair, forcing his audience (including the mainland authorities) to test the boundaries of the traditional concept of family.

But what lies beyond the family? If even alternative bands have a uniform voice when it comes to the family, and the only subversive note is the insinuation of incest, arguably the ultimate intrafamilial formation, how can one move beyond the family? The CD project was essentially intracultural – all the featured bands perform within the context of Greater China (here understood as comprising China, Hong Kong and Taiwan) and their audiences remain by and large confined to Chi-

native and (counter-) political sound of rock music. See Jeroen de Kloet, "Let Him Fuckin' See the Green Smoke beneath My Groin: The Mythology of Chinese Rock" (In *Postmodernism and – China*, edited by Arif Dirlik and Xudong Zhang. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2000, pp. 239-274). However, Hong Kong and Taipei also have their own rock cultures.

⁴ Ackbar Abbas, *Hong Kong: Culture and the Politics of Disappearance*. Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 1997.

⁵ Translated by Chow Yiufai.

nese audiences. Intracultural, here, is signified in terms of authorship (since all of the bands are based in Greater China), production (the CD was produced by a Taiwanese company) and consumption (the audience is located in Greater China).⁶ In this chapter, however, I take Cui's appeal seriously and search for ways to move beyond the traditional concept of family. It is perhaps necessary to leave the safe and familial grounds of the homeland to offer some new perspectives of the Chinese family. I will, therefore, leave behind the *intracultural* in favor of the *intercultural*. This chapter, then, searches for authorship, production, and audiences no longer within cultures, but rather in between cultures.

This chapter explores the possibilities intercultural expressions offer for the interrogation of the highly politicized Neo-Confucian Chinese family ideology, with its particular focus on its articulations of harmony, hierarchy, filial piety, and patriarchy. It singles out the work of diasporic filmmaker Ang Lee to critique this Chinese family ideology.⁷ Drawing on both Rey Chow and Walter Benjamin, I will interpret Ang Lee as a translator of the theme of the Chinese family into different settings (or combinations of time and space). In my analysis, I will be (ab)using bits and pieces from his oeuvre, namely *THE WEDDING BANQUET* (1993), *THE ICE STORM* (1997), *CROUCHING TIGER HIDDEN DRAGON* (2000) and *HULK* (2003). It is my contention that such *intercultural* translations open up readings of Chinese family ideology that remain often unspeakable or inaudible in *intracultural* articulations exemplified by the CD *BORN ON THE FIRST OF JULY*.

Global Cultural Impurity

Lee's oeuvre oscillates between places and times, between genres and styles, inevitably pushing such dogged questions of authorship, authenticity and tradition on the one hand and questions of translation on the other to the forefront. I will search for the cinematic tactics by which Lee translates Chinese family ideology in terms of specific places and times. The diasporic background of the maker, his intercultural oeuvre, ranging from the American suburban *THE ICE STORM* to the chivalric *wuxia* epic *CROUCHING TIGER HIDDEN DRAGON*, as well as the diverse background of his (imagined) audiences offer me the perfect cultural mix (or what Benjamin would call "flux"⁸) to delve into issues of translation.

⁶ Examples of Chinese popular music that reaches Western audiences are extremely rare. See De Kloet, "Let Him Fuckin' See".

⁷ See also Tarja Laine's chapter in the previous section of this volume, for an explanation of Confucian family ideology, and for an analysis of the importance of food in the work of Ang Lee and Chinese family ideology.

⁸ Walter Benjamin, "The Task of the Translator". In *Illuminations*, edited by Hannah Arendt. New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, 1968, pp. 69-82.

Ang Lee, born in 1954, Taipei, moved to the United States at age 21. Given his diasporic background and the times and places in which his movies have been made, Ang Lee's oeuvre can be considered profoundly *impure*.

I prefer to use the concept of impurity, rather than hybridity, so we can both circumvent the discursive and often celebratory burden of the latter concept, and foreground the cultural ambiguities or pollution involved in the processes of translation.⁹ Impurity implies a proliferation of dirt,¹⁰ the looming possibility that it may unsettle, betray any neat and tidy, hopefully healthy and self-perpetuating ideology such as the Chinese family – a pollution of origins. Ang Lee's impurity is further propelled by the uncertainty of the audience's gaze both in Greater China and in the rest of the world. Ang Lee's intercultural translations negotiate not only his own diasporic status, but the different implied audiences as well.

Reflections of cinematic travels tend to center around the formalistic rather than the thematic aspect of translation. For instance, Tarantino's *KILL BILL* is considered to be a translation of the filmic language of Hong Kong *kung fu* cinema, just as *THE MATRIX* relies heavily on the martial arts aesthetics of Hong Kong films. Here I am less concerned with the formalistic translations in Lee's work than with his thematic translations, in particular those of the family. Drawing on Walter Benjamin, cultural theorist Rey Chow warns against the danger of reifying the origin into the real and most truthful source when analyzing cultural translations. Translation not only refers, etymologically, to "tradition", it also refers to betrayal.¹¹ To insist on seeing a cinematic work as a translation is to insist on the questions of tradition and betrayal. Likewise, my choice of reading Ang Lee's works as thematic translations is to invoke the theme of the traditional Chinese family and the possibilities of moving beyond, or betraying, these traditions.

The act of intercultural translation is crucial if we are to move beyond the traditional concept of family. However, this requires further reflection on the relationship between the "original" and its translation. "It is assumed that the value of translation is derived solely from the 'original,' which is the authenticator of itself and of its subsequent versions."¹² Inspired by Benjamin's essay on translation, Chow instead interprets translation as "primarily a process of *putting together*."¹³ Consequently, translations may produce meanings that remain invisible or unspeakable in the "original". "Translation is a process in which the

⁹ Homi K. Bhaba, *The Location of Culture*. London: Routledge, 1994.

¹⁰ Jo Tavener, "Media, Morality, and Madness: The Case against Sleaze TV." *Critical Studies in Mass Communication*, vol. 17, no. 1, 2000, pp. 63-85.

¹¹ Rey Chow, *Primitive Passions: Visuality, Sexuality, Ethnography, and Contemporary Chinese Cinema* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1995), p. 182.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 184.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 185-6.

'native' [here: Chinese family ideology, JdK] should let the foreign affect, or infect, itself, and vice versa."¹⁴ The native is infected by the foreign, just as the foreign is infected by the native – thereby contaminating, polluting the "origin."¹⁵ A translation consequently contaminates rather than copies. In the words of Benjamin: "A translation touches the original lightly and only at the infinitely small point of the sense, thereupon pursuing its own course according to the laws of fidelity in the freedom of linguistic flux."¹⁶ The freedom of linguistic flux is, however, not unlimited. When Lee translates the theme of the Chinese family into different periods of time (past, present, or future), different places (the US, China, or a fantastical world), different articulations and betrayals begin to emerge, as my analysis will show.

I would also argue that producers of diasporic culture like Lee are in a particularly good position to engage in intercultural translations, a task that has hitherto been colonized by Western anthropologists. Lee thus becomes a kind of new ethnographer, which Chow calls for:

A new ethnography is possible only when we turn our attention to the subjective origins of ethnography as it is practiced by those who were previously ethnographized, and who have, in the postcolonial age, taken up the active task of ethnographizing their own culture.¹⁷

Chow focuses on the works of acclaimed fifth-generation filmmakers like Zhang Yimou, arguing that their work can be interpreted as cultural translations that parody Western orientalism. Their ambiguous translation of orientalism exoticizes China and at the same time reveals its dirty secrets, its violence, and its corrupt traditions.¹⁸ In a similar way, albeit not as strongly related to orientalist discourses as the Fifth-Generation filmmakers, Lee's cinematographic and thematic translations – most significantly the theme of the family – become acts of betrayal. And it may well be that in the current postcolonial period, betrayal is what we need, since it implies an interrogation of reified traditions like the Chinese family. I believe my analysis can be taken beyond the boundaries of Chineseness and family ideology: I consider Lee's position emblematic of contemporary cultural production in an increasingly globalized world, where directors are constantly in-

¹⁴ Ibid., p. 189.

¹⁵ Michel Foucault argues that the origin was never pure in the first place. See Foucault, "What Is an Author?" (In *The Foucault Reader*, edited by Paul Rabinow. New York: Pantheon Books, 1984, pp. 101-20).

¹⁶ Walter Benjamin, "The Task of the Translator", p. 80.

¹⁷ Chow, *Primitive Passions*, p. 189.

¹⁸ Ibid., p. 202.

volved in intercultural translations of forms and themes. To be sure, Lee's diverse intercultural oeuvre is a reflection of a personal condition, but it also embodies a cultural predicament of a globalizing world that is increasingly in flux, in translation, in which no one, no thing can truly claim to be original.¹⁹

Family Matters in China

According to Martin King Whyte, Confucian norms of family life are usually seen as offering sharp contrasts to the patterns of Western family life. The Chinese emphasis on family obligations and the use of filial piety to reinforce these obligations in the younger generation is considered overwhelming.²⁰ I will single out four conspicuous characteristics of Chinese family ideology:

1. The importance ascribed to *harmony*, which is crucial if a society is to flourish; harmony will, according to Confucius, be sustained if each individual knows his or her role.²¹
2. Consequently, a strict and transparent *hierarchy* is considered pivotal in Confucian ideology; examples include the dualistic relationships between emperor-subject, husband-wife, brother-sister, older brother-younger brother, and father-son.²²
3. Familial relations are characterized by the power of the father, which is indicative of the *patriarchy* that permeates Confucianism.²³
4. Parallel to patriarchy, the obligations of the child towards the parents are crucial. Confucianism requires the unconditional *piety* (*xiao*) of children towards their parents, particularly the father.²⁴

The four elements – harmony, hierarchy, patriarchy and piety – are closely intertwined, forming a web that strives to keep every one in place. Filial piety, for example, is just one instance of the patriarchal hierarchy of Confucianism that serves to safeguard the harmony of the Chinese family. Yet, for analytical reasons, I consider it useful to disentangle the four elements from each other, and track how they change, are contaminated to the extent of betrayal, in the process of Ang Lee's intercultural translation. My analysis follows the chronology of the movies under

¹⁹ Arjun Appadurai, *Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996.

²⁰ Martin King Whyte, "The Fate of Filial Obligations in Urban China". *The China Journal* vol. 38, July 1997, pp. 1-31, p. 1.

²¹ John Fuh-sheng Hsieh, "Democratizing China". *Journal of Asian and African Studies* vol. 38, no. 4-5, 2003, pp. 377-391, p. 381.

²² *Ibid.*, p. 380.

²³ Chengyang Li, "Confucianism and Feminist Concerns: Overcoming the Confucian 'Gender Complex'". *Journal of Chinese Philosophy*, vol. 27, no. 2, 2000, pp. 187-200.

²⁴ Whyte, "The Fate of Filial Obligations", p. 1.

consideration (THE WEDDING BANQUET (1993), THE ICE STORM (1997), CROUCHING TIGER HIDDEN DRAGON (2000) and HULK (2003)) and traces possible changes in Lee's translations of the familial theme over time.

The Wedding Banquet: Masking Reality, Keeping the Family Harmony

In THE WEDDING BANQUET, a gay couple (Taiwan-Chinese Wai Tung and American Simon) is trying to come to terms with family ideology by staging a straight marriage for the Chinese parents. Everyone involved knows it is a performance, including the parents themselves. The girl Wei Wei, whom Wai Tung marries, is an artist from mainland China, who wants to secure her resident status in the U.S. by obtaining a green card through this marriage. One of the central crises in the narrative occurs when Wei Wei realizes she is carrying her fake husband's baby, after some real sex on the wedding night. The translation of this complex pseudo-romantic triangle, consisting of Taiwan, mainland China, and the US, profoundly politicizes the familial theme. The US provides the place while Taiwan supplies the means to rescue a mainland Chinese citizen from having to return to what the West and Taiwan consider a repressive communist regime. The politicization of the Chinese family is anything but new,²⁵ but the explicit translation in THE WEDDING BANQUET of the political into the familial renders it more visible.

By the end of the movie, Lee offers the audience a dramatic turn: the father, who is normally very reticent, very patriarchal, a stereotypical Chinese Head of the Family, reveals to Simon that he actually understands English and hints at his knowledge of their gay relationship. Despite this disclosure, he immediately requests secrecy from Simon: "No, not Wai Tung, not mother, not Wei Wei should know our secret." Then he continues in Chinese, "If I hadn't let them lie, I would never have gotten a grandchild." The movie can be read as a celebration of the lie that keeps the harmonious family intact and secures offspring. Here, the tactic of masquerading the real is used, a masquerade that is performed with the knowledge and consent of all the parties involved. Betrayal seeps through from the theoretical to the textual level. The characters lie, hide, and betray each other in order to sustain the required harmony of the family; in other words, they may be betraying their family members, but never the family itself.

This celebration of the lie allows Chinese family ideology to remain firmly in place. The artist and illegal migrant from mainland China, Wei Wei, not only marries Wai Tung but also becomes pregnant. The marriage and pregnancy grant

²⁵ See Jinhua Dia, "Behind Global Spectacle and National Image Making" (*Positions*, vol. 9, no. 1, 2001, pp. 161-86); and Susan L. Glosser, *Chinese Visions of Family and State: 1915-1953* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003).

them the respect of his parents and guarantee the maintenance of the family. In the last scene of the movie, the parents are sitting together with Wei Wei, Wai Tung and Simon in the airport, poring over the wedding pictures. They are shot from the front: the parents sitting shoulder to shoulder, with the younger generation standing behind them, as if they were posing for a happy, perfect family portrait. When the parents have to leave for their flight back home, the farewell that the father offers Wei Wei is: "The family Gao will be grateful to you." After all, she has secured the family line. Consequently, the filial piety of the children towards the parents remains in place, like the insistence put on harmony.

When Wai Tung's father, a retired nationalist army officer, meets his former army chauffeur Chen, the latter insists on offering his former boss a wedding banquet. He insists on a "real" Chinese banquet, in which the main actors – Wai Tung and Wei Wei – must undergo the stress of excessive food, alcohol and countless games, culminating in their significant marital sexual act. Rather than a betrayal of Chinese family ideology, the insistence put on harmony, hierarchy, patriarchy, and filial piety indicates that what may at first appear to be a daring cinematic project, including an interracial gay couple in potential conflict with the Chinese parents, "fails" to spread much dirt on Chinese family ideology.

But it does stir up some dust. *THE WEDDING BANQUET* lays bare the secrecy and hypocrisy of a Chinese family while showcasing the survival tactics that keep the family intact. The theme of the Chinese family is translated into a contemporary American setting, inscribed into an interracial gay relationship. The translation into the West offers the possibility of displaying a relationship that often remains invisible in an Asian context. The dust, however, inevitably settles; the impurity caused by a Chinese man dating a Caucasian may potentially pollute family ideology – but it ultimately does not. The insistence on masquerading the real, with the consent of all, results in a betrayal on the personal level, while it safeguards the harmonious family, thereby containing the proliferation of dirt.

The Ice Storm: Harmony in Pain

Like *THE WEDDING BANQUET*, *THE ICE STORM* is set in the West, in a small town in Connecticut in the early 1970s. If the earlier work of Ang Lee is obviously about Chineseness, here it is characterized by an erasure of Chineseness (not counting the TV showing an old American series featuring the young Bruce Lee: *THE GREEN HORNET* (1966-1967)). It is my contention that this de-sinified setting paradoxically opens the space up to the betrayal of Confucian family ideology. In other words, while *THE ICE STORM* is often read as a critique of Western family ideology, I insist on reading it as a work of cultural translation, a critique of the traditional Chinese family. We see that hierarchy, patriarchy, and piety all fall out of place; yet,

somehow harmony is secured. This movie about dysfunctional suburban families features an opening scene that returns circularly towards the end of the film when the son, Paul Hood, is stuck in a train that has come to a halt due to a power outage. What he does not know – but the viewer does – is that a downed power line was the cause of the outage. This power line has just killed Mikey Carver, son of Janey Carver, the woman with whom Paul Hood's father has had an affair.

As in *THE WEDDING BANQUET*, the betrayal seeps down into the narrative of the movie itself: family members begin to betray one another. The pain of the family, magnified by the death of the son, stops their world. Outside, a violent ice storm rages across the empty Connecticut woodlands. Paul is reading *THE FANTASTIC FOUR*, and states in a voice-over (*italics mine*):

In issue number 141 of the *Fantastic Four*, published in November 1973, Reed Richards has to use his anti-matter weapon on his own son who Annihilus has turned into a human atom bomb. It was a typical predicament for the *Fantastic Four* because they weren't like other superheroes; they were more like a family. And the more power they had, the more harm they could do to each other without even knowing it. That was the meaning of the *Fantastic Four*: *That a family is like your own personal anti-matter. Your family is the void you emerge from and the place you return to when you die. And that's the paradox: The closer you're drawn back in, the deeper into the void you go.*

It takes a Western family in a Western setting, apparently devoid of Chineseness, to voice the otherwise almost unspeakable burden of the Chinese family ideology: the strength of the family is parallel to the pain its members inflict upon one another, without even knowing it. They can't know it; they just bear it. A frozen turkey from the fridge that proves too heavy to carry and is dropped symbolizes this burden of the home. Frozen meat and an ice storm signify the coldness and distance between family members.

It is reminiscent of the works of Taiwanese filmmaker Tsai Ming-Liang, because water is a recurring motif in *THE ICE STORM* that symbolizes, in my view, the pervasiveness and strength of the Chinese family ideology: water is everywhere, you need it, you can't escape from it, yet its fluidity, or the mutations of it, makes it nearly untouchable, slippery, and dangerous. An empty swimming pool, seen at various times in the film, is filled with precisely this absence of water, like the void the family ultimately turns out to be. The paradox of the all-embracing family ("it is the void you emerge from and the place you return to") makes the Chinese family an inescapable entity – symbolized by water that is both fluid and frozen.

THE ICE STORM is almost an inversion of *THE WEDDING BANQUET*. In this translation of a past, suburban America, Lee betrays the ideology of the Chinese

family by showcasing its potential suffocating power. Filial piety has evaporated, along with the hierarchy and patriarchy it is supposed to support. In the final scene of the movie, the son returns to the family. They are all sitting in a car, when the father starts to cry. The scene re-establishes the harmony of the family within the safe boundaries of the car. The father's tears are tears of regret for his betrayal of his wife, tears of sadness for the boy's death, and tears of relief that his family is still intact. There is a betrayal of filial piety, of hierarchy, and of patriarchy, all elements that remained intact in *THE WEDDING BANQUET*, yet the harmony of the family is restored. It takes a fantasy world to move beyond the family, but does this also mean a betrayal of its underpinning Confucian values?

Crouching Tiger Hidden Dragon: Confucian Ideals Without the Family

In swordsmen movies like *CROUCHING TIGER HIDDEN DRAGON* the fantasy world, *jianghu*, is created. It is a familiar world to Chinese readers of swordsmen novels (and later viewers of various TV series and movies). It is abundant and important enough to be considered a literary genre; it is a world where marriage is not desirable, where maternity remains invisible, and where comradeship and chivalry are on an equal footing with love, if not actually valued more highly. In the *jianghu* world, the swordsmen are invariably orphans, their families either invisible or irrelevant. In fact, they do not seem to occupy any fixed premises that could be called home in the usual sense; they are nomads, constantly on the move.

Like their family backgrounds, their occupations are also vague or irrelevant; none of them work to earn a living. Both the traditional extended family and the nuclear family are absent. There are no children in the *jianghu* world, while pregnant women are conspicuously invisible, and young girls aspire to the freedom of these swordsmen, when they choose their identities, their bonds, and even their gender. In *CROUCHING TIGER HIDDEN DRAGON*, the willful young aristocrat Jen desperately tries to escape from her arranged marriage. The minor acknowledgement of her family here provides nothing more than a dramatic ploy to launch Jen into *jianghu*. Jen assumes a secret, parallel identity as a sword fighter and pupil of the criminal Baihuri. Meanwhile, Jen enters into sisterhood through nominal, not natural, bonding with master swordswoman Yu Shu Lien. Jen also cross-dresses and appears in *jianghu* as a man.

This fantasy world, in short, is guided by a different set of logic. The swordsmen are capable of defying the basic constraints of humanity, culminating in their almost supernatural skills of overcoming the limitations of gravity: they walk across water, they glide along rooftops, they fight on tree branches, provided they are well trained in what the Chinese martial experts call *qinggong* (the skill of weightlessness). They are, one may venture to say, released from the burden of

the family, freed from its devastating weight, which enables them to literally fly.

In Ang Lee's *jianghu* world, there are comrades, but no couples; there is sex, but no procreation²⁶; there is love, but no marriage; there are swords, but no rings. This alternative world, however, is not one of chaos or anarchy. In *CROUCHING TIGER*, Ang Lee presents a regime of rules that smacks of the Confucian notions of, indeed, harmony, hierarchy, patriarchy, and piety, albeit here it is about the pupil's relation to the master rather than children to the father. In other words, if the translation of family ideology towards the world of *jianghu* implies a near-erasure of the family, its underpinning values remain firmly in place. The hero of the movie, swordsman Li Mu Bai feels obliged, out of piety for his murdered teacher, to assassinate the murderer. The notion of piety also feeds one of the movie's subplots in which Jen betrays the sisterly bonding with Yu Shu Lien. The swordsmen may occupy a world where family has ceased to function – not even as a deforming, burdensome force – but Ang Lee seems to remind us that this fantasy *jianghu* is still underpinned by a "Confucian" normative order. Life beyond the family may be weightless, but its inhabitants remain tied to the earth, by love, by loyalty, and by comradeship. This fantasy world may have blood, but it has no dirt.

Hulk: Pain and Pleasure of Breaking with the Family

Ang Lee's last translation is his most radical one yet: in *HULK* all four Confucian elements are betrayed, although the result is ambiguous. Chinese family ideology is, like in *THE ICE STORM*, translated into a Western setting. But the temporality of this translation is different: the movie is not set in the past but in a sci-fi future. The intertextuality between *THE ICE STORM* and *HULK* is significant: during one of the final, climatic scenes, the father of the Hulk is turned into an empty void that swallows the Hulk, just like the family depicted in *THE ICE STORM* is a void that one emerges from and then returns to. Yet, whereas *THE ICE STORM* displays a family subjected to the forces of nature, *HULK* presents a family mutated by the power of science.

In his appropriation, or indeed translation, of a classic American cartoon and TV series, Lee gives a significant twist to the original story. Whereas in the original version, the main character Bruce Banner is a victim of radiation, in Lee's version, Banner is the outcome of one of his father's experiments. Banner's greenish schizophrenia is caused by his father, a significant twist that can be read as symptomatic of Lee's subversion of Chinese family ideology: Confucian familial piety towards one's parents backfires or is inverted by the father who infects his child

²⁶ The rather explicit "sex scene" in *CROUCHING TIGER* is clearly at odds with generic conventions that would dictate a more sexless *jianghu*.

with a violent and unbearable abnormality. But, of course, the narrative is more complex and more ambiguous. The father, aware of the danger his child poses to society, tries to murder his son, but his mother protects him and gets killed instead, as witnessed by the four-year old Bruce. With his father sentenced to jail for 30 years, Bruce is adopted and told that both his parents died. Like in *THE WEDDING BANQUET*, a lie is required to keep a family intact. Years later, his colleague and girlfriend Betty (daughter of General Ross who once fired Bruce's father) finds it hard to believe Bruce does not want to find out about his "real" parents.

It is suggested that you need to know who your parents really are in order to discover yourself. But more often than not this knowledge is painful for the child. In Bruce's case, the pain comes from the traumatic witnessing of his father killing his mother, a memory that is pressed back into unconsciousness, only to be unleashed in his dreams or when he is transformed into the Hulk. That transformation is caused by his father's experiment. Bruce's father calls it "an alteration, genetic. A deformity, I guess you could call it that. But an amazing strength too". The green Hulk signifies the enduring pain caused by a repressed memory. The pain the father has inflicted upon his son is real enough; yet, the abnormality the son has inherited is not just painful (as Betty accuses Bruce's father: "All you've given Bruce is fear. A fear of life") it also is liberating: Bruce admits that he *likes* the transformation, that he enjoys the rage, the power, the freedom – and this pleasure of the beast inside frightens him the most.

Once again, betrayal seeps through to the textual level of the movie: the father betrays the son by killing the mother. The translation of the theme of Confucian piety towards a Western setting shows how the bond between father and son can be polluted, how patriarchy and piety are tainted by power, pain, and pleasure. The *Bataille*-like pleasure the Hulk eventually experiences in transgressing the boundaries of the father-and-son relationship, saturated with excess energy, underlines the ambiguous pollution of the family ideology.

Ang Lee falls back on the most basic dramatic forms and themes in one of the closing scenes of the movie. The father, infected by the same genetic alteration as his son, yet claiming to need the energy of Bruce in order to gain control over the Hulk inside him, confronts his son with his wish to merge with him, to absorb his energy. This showdown between father and son is set in a highly theatrical manner, reminiscent of a Greek tragedy. The *mise-en-scène* is simple and sober, the lighting is stark, the scene is devoid of Hollywood formulas, and the acting is verbally dramatic, as if both actors are delivering their lines on stage. The audience is temporarily drawn into a stage play, rather than a movie. The father, now contradicting his earlier resentment towards his experimenting on his own son, claims that the Hulk is the *real* Bruce, and that the deformity he inflicted on his son is a blessing in disguise, since it has enabled Bruce to become more than human. In

his own words: "I didn't come here to see you. I came here to see my son. My real son, the one inside of you. You're nothing but a superficial shell, a husk of flimsy consciousness ready to be torn off at a moment's notice." Both in form and in content, it is as if the director wants us to read the scene as an archetypal showdown between Father and Son.

The envious father reclaims the son, and not the human one made of (red) flesh and blood – the father screams at Bruce: "you weak little speck of human flesh" – but the green Hulk instead. The pain of the Chinese family, Lee appears to convey, cannot be resolved peacefully; a fierce battle is required to overcome the father. Such a battle requires a translation of the Chinese familial theme into a Western futuristic setting. What follows is a mythological fight between the father and the son. The father, able to merge with the substance that surrounds him, is transformed into lightning, then into rock, into water, into ice, and finally into an empty void. This void is greenish, glowing from the energy given by the son to his father, to be shot to pieces (and hence merge with the universe) by a nuclear device sent by General Ross. What remains is the Hulk, transformed back into Bruce, small, vulnerable and lonely, and stripped of his past as well as his present. He is forced to disappear and turn his back on Western civilization and its deformative rather than transformative technologies. Bruce ultimately retreats to the rainforests of South America to become a development worker.

The transformation of the Hulk represents the moment of truth, the moment in which the lie that keeps the family intact is finally surpassed. Towards the end of the movie, Bruce begins to desire truth more and more, which causes the further break up of the family and culminates in the final fight between father and son – leaving Bruce behind in solitude. This appears to be the price one has to pay if you move beyond the lie that keeps the harmonious family intact. In this sense, *HULK* can be read as a critical interrogation of Chinese family ideology, of the lies that are often used to keep the family intact. The once celebrated values of harmony, hierarchy, patriarchy, and piety are polluted as much as Bruce's genes, or, as it were, the American Marvel comic book series that has been translated by Ang Lee into a dramatic family saga. The translation propels the undermining of Confucian family values; the green dirt produced by this betrayal is ambiguously framed as both hurtful and liberating.

Familial Translations

The compilation CD *BORN ON THE FIRST OF JULY* offered an occasion for alternative bands from Hong Kong, Taiwan and China to reflect upon the political hand-over of Hong Kong to Beijing in 1997. The CD, just like many other commemorations during that time, has shown the pervasiveness of family ideology in China. If

even the presumably alternative Chinese voices, with the exception of Beijing rock singer Cui Jian, fail to interrogate Chinese family ideology, who will do so? Or, to put it differently, under what circumstances would it take place? I have taken my analysis from the *intracultural* to the *intercultural*. My analysis of selected works by the intercultural filmmaker Ang Lee suggests that his predicament as a Taiwanese filmmaker living in the United States for decades may provide some fertile soil to explore such contestations of (Chinese) family ideology. In other words, *intercultural* expressions – in terms of authorship, production as well as consumption – may offer a way to interrogate family ideology. They do so, I argue, since they are involved in a process of translation of both forms and themes. Such translations are crucial as they involve a betrayal of the “original”, as both Walter Benjamin and Rey Chow have pointed out earlier. New meanings that remain unspeakable in an “original” setting may emerge. Such meanings potentially pollute the original, trouble the neat and tidy thing called tradition, and result in an unsettling proliferation of dirt. It is my contention that cultural pollution and impurity are urgently needed to resist the contemporary essentializing of cultural currents, most notably nationalism and fundamentalist terrorism.

In my analyses, I consider Ang Lee to be, first and foremost, a “new ethnographer”, an intercultural translator, not only of formalistic, cinematic elements, but of themes. Such foregrounding of intercultural translation, I argue, opens up the possibilities of readings which interrogate the original, the traditional – possibilities that may simply be closed off by the closure of intracultural reading. As I have shown, Ang Lee’s translations of Chinese family ideology into different times and places involve a betrayal of its constitutive elements. Piety is not necessary, nor is patriarchy indispensable. Hierarchy can be subverted, and sometimes, the harmony of the family can be undermined. But is Bruce, the Hulk, better off knowing the truth? Is he better off moving beyond his family? The pollution of Chinese family ideology may be an important step against its reifications. I have argued that intercultural expressions in particular may have this kind of polluting power. My analysis shows that, when it comes to family ideology, the consequences of the proliferation of dirt are profoundly ambiguous. This indeed has been the main reason that I used terms like dirt, pollution and impurity. The Confucian elements may be unsettled, but whether life beyond the family is any better remains to be answered.

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank Chow Yiufai and Marcel Vergunst for watching and discussing the movies of Ang Lee with me.

Bibliography

- Abbas, Ackbar. *Hong Kong: Culture and the Politics of Disappearance*. Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 1997.
- Appadurai, Arjun. *Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996.
- Benjamin, Walter. "The Task of the Translator." In *Illuminations*, edited by Hannah Arendt. New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, 1968, pp. 69-82.
- Bhaba, Homi K. *The Location of Culture*. London: Routledge, 1994.
- Chow, Rey. *Primitive Passions: Visuality, Sexuality, Ethnography, and Contemporary Chinese Cinema*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1995.
- Dai, Jinhua. "Behind Global Spectacle and National Image Making." *Positions* vol. 9, no. 1, 2001, pp. 161-186.
- Dutton, Michael. *Streetlife China*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998.
- Foucault, Michel. "What Is an Author?" In *The Foucault Reader*, edited by Paul Rabinow. New York: Pantheon Books, 1984, pp. 101-120.
- Glosser, Susan L. *Chinese Visions of Family and State: 1915-1953*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003.
- Hsieh, John Fuh-sheng. "Democratizing China." *Journal of Asian and African Studies*, vol. 38, no. 4-5, 2003, pp. 377-391.
- Kloet, Jeroen de. "Let Him Fuckin' See the Green Smoke Beneath My Groin: the Mythology of Chinese Rock." In *Postmodernism and China*, edited by Arif Dirlik and Xudong Zhang. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2000, pp. 239-274.
- Li, Chengyang. "Confucianism and Feminist Concerns: Overcoming the Confucian 'Gender Complex'." *Journal of Chinese Philosophy*, vol. 27, no. 2, 2000, pp. 187-200.
- Spivak, Gayatri Chakravorty. "Questioned on Translation: Adrift." In *Public Culture*, vol. 13, no. 1, 2001, pp. 13-22.
- Tavener, Jo. "Media, Morality, and Madness: The Case against Sleaze TV." *Critical Studies in Mass Communication*, vol. 17, no. 1, 2000, pp. 63-85.
- Whyte, Martin King. "The Fate of Filial Obligations in Urban China." *The China Journal*, vol. 38, July 1997, pp. 1-31.
- Yabroff, Jennie. *Stranger in a Strange Land*. 1997. <http://www.salon.com/ent/int/1997/10/17lee.html>, available November 28 2003.

Filmography

- CROUCHING TIGER HIDDEN DRAGON / WO HU CANG LONG (Asia Union Film & Entertainment, China Film, Columbia Pictures Film Production Asia, EDKO Film, Good Machine, Sony Pictures Classics, United China Visions, Zoom Hunt International Productions, Taiwan/Hong Kong/USA, China: 2000) directed by Ang Lee.
- HULK (Universal Pictures, Marvel Enterprises, Valhalla Motion Pictures, Good Machine, USA: 2003) directed by Ang Lee.

THE ICE STORM (Canal+, Fox Searchlight Pictures, Good Machine, USA: 1997) directed by Ang lee.

THE WEDDING BANQUET / HSI YEN (Central Motion Pictures Company, Good Machine, Taiwan/USA: 1993) directed by Ang Lee.