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Film Study of “饮食男女”

"Eat Drink Man Woman," directed by Ang Lee, is a poignant exploration of family, tradition, and the complexities of multi-generational relationships, set in Taipei, Taiwan. Released in 1994, the film follows the story of Lao Zhu, a widowed master chef, and his three adult daughters as they explore the tribulations of life and love, with culinary arts acting as a tie between characters and generations. The Second daughter Jia Qian takes the role of the main character, with the story focusing on her modern and liberal lifestyle foiled by her father's traditionalism. The film follows her journey of facing the realities of how complex familial relationships and societal changes impact her trajectory and decisions in life. The vast desires and pursuits of supporting characters highlight the widening chasm between traditional values and modern aspirations, and ultimately the struggle between upholding age-old customs and embracing personal desires and goals.

Lao Zhu, the patriarch of the family is found deeply rooted in traditional Chinese culinary practices, where he embodies the essence of tradition. He has an adherence to strict rituals, portrayed foremost through the weekly Sunday dinners he puts on for his daughters, in which he presents them with elaborate traditional Chinese dishes, extravagantly filling the dinner table. Both his own and his daughter's attitudes towards the Sunday dinners reflect what can be

understood about generational and their own societal values. For Lao Zhu, the dinner shows his commitment to preserving cultural heritage and familial duty. He deeply struggles with communication, and he attempts to use this ritual as a performance of his love and care for his daughters, using actions and food to express his intentions where his words fail. To him, cooking is not merely a profession, but a beautiful tradition passed down through generations, symbolizing continuity and respect for the past. For the three daughters, however, every Sunday is a begrudgingly attended affair, filled with awkward silences, and a need to present themselves to their father in honourable ways. They each live vastly different contemporary lives, and rather than a dynamic of comfortably sharing their experiences at the dinner table, there seems to be a precedence for giving ‘announcements’ as the chosen form of communication.

Throughout the movie, Lao Zhu's traditionalist views clash with the desires and lifestyles of his daughters, reflecting the broader generational gap prevalent in contemporary society. This contrast is evident in their attitudes towards love, marriage, career choices, and personal freedom. Lao Zhu represents the older generation rooted in traditional Chinese culture, emphasizing discipline, hard work, and respect for tradition. In contrast, his daughters embody the younger generation's desire for independence, self-expression, and pursuit of personal fulfillment, seeking autonomy and self-expression in a rapidly changing world. Each daughter represents a different facet of modernity, challenging their father's traditional values and expectations. Jia Ning, the youngest daughter, yearns for independence and adventure, pursuing her own path despite her father's concerns and little regard for her sisters. Jia Zhen, the eldest daughter, deals with deep concerns regarding her religious beliefs and repressed romantic aspirations, conflicting with her father's conservative views on marriage and relationships. Jia

Qian, the middle daughter, epitomizes the clash between tradition and modernity, as her career ambitions and unconventional lifestyle challenge her father's expectations of filial piety and conformity. The differing characters form a continuum of traditional and modern ideals, Lao Zhu and Jia Qian taking opposite ends of the spectrum. This contrast is immediately presented within the film with Jia Qian announcing her motivation for moving out and investing in property, and then the subsequent call to action Lao Zhu has to 'save the day' at the banquet kitchen, which sets the precedence for the plot.

Throughout the story, Jia Qian and Lao Zhu are forced to face their own realities and the hardships that befall them before they're able to understand and pursue their personal desires. Jia Qian watches both of her sisters make incredible life changes for themselves, each overcoming traditional values that were inhibiting them. Witnessing such changes while also navigating her own ambitious goals leads her to understand what she truly wants out of her own life. She is faced with an abundance of possible directions she could move in, each of them increasingly new and exciting. Part of her ability to acknowledge the changes she makes further into the film was to first be overwhelmed with invigorating options. The possibilities of what she could do let her to see what she wasn't allowing herself to do; to settle into a less ambitious, less taxing life, and just enjoy the home and food she seemed so eager to dispose of to start with. Then Lao Zhu, struggling to connect with his daughters, while finding a connection with Jin Rong, demonstrates his battle between his self-imposed traditional limitations and the freer desires he held at heart. Each of their greatest hurdles in the film underscores the challenges of navigating cultural shifts and evolving family dynamics, which provides a mirrored effect between the two main characters' journeys. Each one of their journeys for autonomy and identity reflects the universal

struggle between tradition and modernity faced by many young adults and even older folk who have lost their own sense of direction.

The film portrays generational gaps not only as a source of conflict but also as an opportunity for growth and understanding, where the clash between tradition and individual motives becomes a transformative journey. Through their interactions and experiences, the characters learn to bridge the divide, finding common ground amidst their differences and ultimately reaffirming the enduring bonds of family and love. Where Lao Zhu discovers his more modern and somewhat 'taboo' needs, Jia Qian realizes the traditional aspects of life that she too finds value in, each trading off parts of their initial selves. The characters can reconcile their differences and find a balance between honouring the past and embracing the future. “饮食男女” celebrates the resilience of the human spirit and the enduring power of familial bonds, even in the face of cultural upheaval and generational change.