

The Politics and Aesthetics of “Asian American” Sexuality in Ang Lee’s Cross-Cultural Family Dramas

A Case Study on *The Wedding Banquet* and *The Ice Storm*

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Date: December 6, 2007
Class: History 59

The definition of Asian American Cinema is as difficult to pin down as the term Asian America is itself, a term popularized by Japanese American political activist Yuji Ichioka in the 1960s. Used originally to unify the political interests of Asians living in the United States, the term “Asian America” has since been used in a myriad of other contexts, such as race studies, cultural studies, and art history. However, upon closer inspection in the field of contemporary cinema, the term seems to run into enormous complications, often failing to differentiate between the highly varied experiences of Asian filmmakers living in the United States. For instance, first generation Asian filmmakers who identify themselves as members of a transnational Asian Diaspora are clumped problematically into the same category as filmmakers who are second and post-second generation Asian Americans. In fact, as Hamamoto explains, the post-1965 immigration that constitutes what he calls Neo-Asian America, “increased the numbers and intra-ethnic diversity of Asian Americans- making the task of (film) criticism- like that of mapping the shifting terrain of sexuality-more complex” (6, Hamamoto). In today’s film festival circuits, Peter Feng suggests that Asian films, American films inspired by the visual style of Asian films, and American films made by ethnically Asian filmmakers are all “lumped in with the Asian American stuff,” (3, Feng) thus complicating the film theorist’s task in tracing the development and progression of an Asian American Cinema.

Indeed, even if Asian American filmmakers had common backgrounds, the multitude of contexts in which their films can interpret “common” experiences (e.g. from a racial context, historical context, a political context, etc.) counteracts the unity forged from similar socio-historical backgrounds. For instance, Hamamoto claims that, “the career trajectories of filmmakers such as Wayne Wang and Ang Lee illustrate the impossibility of pinning down (even if this were desirable) the idea of an Asian American cinema. They began by making exceptional films that brought the textures of Asian American lived experience to the screen in highly original ways, but both then made self-conscious moves to *break out of the ethnic ghetto*...those directors who decide not to foreground Asian American characters and themes have made a political choice to hide behind the mask of a “*color-blind*” *race-neutrality* in the name of a false universalism and bourgeois humanism that nevertheless defers to Whiteness as the presumptive standard of superiority” (15, Hamamoto). Clearly, Hamamoto assumes that maintaining race-specificity is a crucial aspect of Asian-American film. However, as a purely race-based definition fails to take into account the importance of films that interpret Asian American issues from race-unrelated contexts (such as from national and political contexts), we will define “Asian American” cinema in the most conservative way possible: films where the *narrative* content deals explicitly with Asians living in the United States.

By this definition, Ang Lee, a director who appeals to “a more globalized audience” (280, Marchetti) and makes “Americanized Chinese films” as well as “foreign, art house” American films, indeed follows the pattern that Hamamoto speaks against. Lee began by making Asian American films in his “Father Knows Best”

trilogy (*Pushing Hands* (1992), *The Wedding Banquet* (1993), *Eat Drink Man Woman* (1994)), then branches out to direct not only American films such as *The Ice Storm* (1997) and *Brokeback Mountain* (2005), but also alternates these with Sino-American co-productions such as *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* (2000) and *Lust, Caution* (2007). Both reflecting and attempting to breach the impossibility of categorizing Ang Lee's filmmaking, Gina Marchetti suggests that *The Wedding Banquet*, rather than being simply an Asian American, American, or Chinese film, "may be even more daring in its ability to *bridge the gap* between Chinese film and Asian American film culture" (292, Marchetti). While her argument suggests that *The Wedding Banquet* is neither purely Asian American nor purely Chinese but is a hybrid film that serves to connect the two cinemas, she does not extend her argument to explain cultural connections in Lee's explicitly non-Asian films, such as *The Ice Storm* (a film that is not "Asian American" according to any conventional definition based on narrative content). Although such an extension to Marchetti's argument may initially seem overly generalizing, Lee's own statement that "(filmmaking) used to be a one way street from West to East," but is now more globalized because "the gap between the cultures is getting erased every day," (48, Dilley) suggests how "eastern" influences may play a part in his "western" films.

As an in-depth comparison between *The Wedding Banquet* and *The Ice Storm* will demonstrate, *The Ice Storm* can indeed be read as a bridge between American and Asian American film culture, where narrative structures (script and editing) and stylistic (composition, framing, etc.) tropes that Hamamoto may deem "universalizing" and "bourgeois," in fact turn out to be highly derivative of Lee's post-1965 immigrant background. Despite the fact that Lee may alternate seemingly haphazardly between making "Asian American", "American", and "Chinese" films, it is arguable that the underlying themes and stylistic tropes that extend through his works are emphatically "Asian American".

Lee, currently living in New York, arrived in the United States as an immigrant in 1978 to study film at New York University. He has a rather typical background of many of the Chinese arriving during the "Neo-Asian American" period, characterizing himself both as a filmmaker with strong ethno-national roots and ties, but with an equally confused identity: "I have always had identity problems. People like me, second-generation mainlanders from Taiwan, are a rare breed. They last only about two generations and account for a very small proportion of people among Chinese...And in Taiwan there are all kinds of local groups who have different cultural affiliations...and many of us came from Taiwan to the States, where we are foreigners. So all our lives we have identity problems" (332, Berry). As studies on the Hong Kong and Taiwanese cinemas have pointed out, many renowned Asian filmmakers such as Wong Kar Wai reflect identity confusion through their commitment to filmically depicting postmodern alienation. Lee, on the other hand, thinly veils his identity insecurities under an issue that he believes is at the heart of being Chinese: the instability of family life, conveyed through the breakdown of the traditional father-figure as a "losing" or "already lost" figure of

patriarchal authority. In an interview conducted in 2005 by Michael Berry, Lee comments on the importance of the father figure in his films-

“I think the influence of the father is something that weighs heavy on most male Chinese filmmakers...I think the father figure represents the Chinese patriarchy, the social and psychological structure of society...My mother was very nice, but I was raised under that patriarchal shadow...(My father) didn't speak much and was a very serious man; very Confucian...I had a lot of guilt that I didn't follow his path. Instead I became the funny guy who wanted to make movies. And somehow that has become my creative force, and the irony of how I see the world...That comes with the Nationalist regime, that whole Chinese cultural influence in Taiwan and the social structure. That is where I grew up, and I cannot really get out of it. All though my work, I always tend to think that making films was a way of getting away from my past, but you always have to come back to your roots” (329, Berry).

From this passage, it is clear that Lee embodies identity issues stemming from his inability to exactly pinpoint the home country in which he is a “foreigner” from. However, it is equally important to note that Lee highlights his experiences growing up under a traditional father figure as a *unifying*, and not divisive force in his works. In other words, it is his belief in the overarching importance of a father figure that perhaps rationalizes the “irony of how (he sees) the world” and transcends cultural or racial boundaries. It turns out that in both *The Wedding Banquet* and *The Ice Storm*, the patriarchal figure becomes a literal, if not allegorical central character, who's problematic situation in a rapidly changing world serves to organize other generational, cultural, racial, and historical clashes and contradictions. As Lee states, “For me, all of my first three movies...are actually a trilogy about my father...and the need for the releasing of the Chinese tradition, so to speak...The thing that used to be [the backbone of Chinese society] and provide us security is now drifting away” (64, Dilley). Here, we see yet another strand of Lee's sense of cultural transcendence: while he may identify himself as a Chinese filmmaker, the loss of Chinese-ness through the breakup of traditional values and the patriarchal system is a recurring theme in Asian American works, especially among literature written by first and 1.5 generation immigrants.

Other significant thematic interests shared by Lee and his Asian American counterparts include three themes that micro-organize *The Wedding Banquet*, each of which dialectically relates to the demise of the traditional patriarchal system: the construction of the cultural “Other”, the generational conflict between 1st and 2nd generation Asian Americans, and the breakup as well as partial rejoining of the family through a series of family crisis. While the first two themes are culturally specific, it is particularly revealing to mention their “universal” analogs, which turn out to be the most important themes in *The Ice Storm*: the construction of the generalized “Other” (a sexual, generational, or cultural “Other”), power dynamics amongst groups and individuals, and generational conflicts as a subset of clashes in power dynamics. As a matter of fact, the latter

set of themes are perhaps even more applicable than the former in situating Lee as a culturally-transcendent auteur, since they are more “universal” issues that being culturally and politically removed, can be applied to, as Lee himself states, “anyone, from any culture” (113, Dilly).

However, Lee does not simply stop there- both *The Wedding Banquet* and *The Ice Storm* investigate how these cultural and generalized conflicts, respectively, originate through issues such as the formation, repression, and most importantly, the **ritualization** of human sexuality. More specifically, cultural, social, or political “Others” may even be seen as superstructures over the two most fundamental “Others”: womanhood in a patriarchal context, and manhood in an era where the patriarchy is threatened. From this perspective, cultural, social, and political otherness arise from how the patriarchy establishes rules of social conduct on the basis of the *innate differences* in male and female sexuality.

Following the interpretation that Lee’s films are fundamentally grounded in the investigation of human sexuality, the generational conflict in Lee’s cinema stems from the collision of irresolvable and irreconcilable differences in the ways sexuality is practiced and repressed by characters from separate generations. More specifically, the younger generation embodies a less ritualized, unmediated, and more private form of sexuality that is defiantly unburdened by social decorum and cultural norms, while the older generation unknowingly imposes the burden of tradition on both themselves and the younger generation, playing out sexual urges in the forms of convoluted and decadent rituals. As it turns out, the prevailing function of the rituals is to help mediate the public and private dimensions of sexuality, i.e. to help individual participants in the ritual comfortably connect to the social group in issues pertaining to sexuality, via rules that define what issues are and are not appropriate. However, when the public and private dimensions of sexuality are irreversibly blurred, as we will see in both *The Wedding Banquet* and *The Ice Storm*, social rituals eventually implode, thus creating crisis that first threatens, and subsequently destroys the ephemeral stability of a family. From a comparison of *The Wedding Banquet* and *The Ice Storm*, one can see how while these three primary issues (racio-cultural otherness, generational conflict, and family instability) may be recurring Asian American themes, the similarities in which these problems are played out across completely different cultural contexts, serve to demonstrate how Lee prefers to investigate universalizing human themes rather than culturally, racially, or nationally specific issues.

In *The Wedding Banquet*, Lee presents the viewer with three polyvalent “Others” that combine sexual otherness with racial, cultural, and even national differences: the sexual other of Wai Tung, the sexual and racio-cultural other embodied by Simon (Wai Tung’s white American gay lover), and a third sexual and national other of Wei Wei (Wai Tung’s fake Mainland Chinese fiancée). One may make the claim that ultimately, since 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. However, because the film deals largely with how Wai Tung plays the part of a filial son by subjecting himself to the traditional social decorum and not manipulating but playing into his father's desires somewhat unsuccessfully, homosexuality remains the identity that should be "swept under the rug". As for Wai Tung's lover, although the film takes place in New York City, Simon is clearly identified as a racio-cultural other because of his flagrant racial and cultural foreign-ness in a family that consists of Wai Tung, Wei Wei, and Wai Tung's parents. Indeed, Simon's sense of estrangement ultimately becomes a divisive factor between him and Wai Tung. Finally, Wei Wei, besides being a national other (by being a Mainlander rather than Nationalist Chinese), is also treated as a sexual other by Simon and especially Wai Tung, who both condescends and manipulates her heterosexuality. As we will now demonstrate, with a palette of only five main characters consisting of a younger generation and Wai Tung's parents, Lee paints a highly convoluted landscape of how various "Others" intersect.

The battleground of these "Others" is the family ritual, where the various notions of otherness are shaped, intensified, and brought into conflict with each another. More specifically, rituals such as seemingly benign family dinners that include both the young and older generations, are socially acceptable activities where cultural traditions thinly (and not so thinly) veil the rules of the Chinese male patriarchy and repress an individual's sexuality. As the title of the film suggests, and as depicted explicitly in the script, the obsessive ritualization of family life goes beyond a simple family dinner. A rather convoluted series of social events leading to the wedding banquet take place, including wedding banquet "performances" and a wedding photo-shoot. Immediately after the wedding banquet, a decadent and frenetic pre-lovemaking celebration even takes place in the bridal suite. In these scenes, Lee implements a combination of nuanced editing, blocking, and framing strategies to visually create repression and to establish a mode of spectatorship that exposes the patriarchal hierarchy. Before we demonstrate how these techniques are expanded upon in depicting yet more complex family and group dynamics in *The Ice Storm*, it is important to see how they are used effectively in a *Wedding Banquet* scene that most spectators would not identify as being immediately repressive or traditional.

These techniques are carried out in terrific subtlety, during a strikingly awkward post-ceremonial "mini-banquet." The results of the mini-banquet is that authority is placed in the hands of the father and Old Chen (both patriarchal figures of the Nationalist regime, where Old Chen used to serve under the father in the Nationalist army), while Wei Wei's importance is diminished, and Wai Tung and Simon become "rabbits in the headlight." Framing and blocking play a momentous part not only in separating the individuals sitting at the dinner table into groups, but also in portraying divisions within a single group. Editing, on the other hand, pits one group uncomfortably against another, where the character who is situated in the "middle" comes out as a figure who both mediates and exposes the discomforts of the dinner. Indeed, already in the first establishing shot of the sequence (see Figure 1), the father is clearly situated at the "head" of the table, between the women

who are sitting on screen left, and the men, who are sitting on screen right¹. This position in the middle as a figure of authority who exerts the greatest control over the conversational dynamics, is intensified in the ensuing shots, where Old Chen (through his biting comments) joins forces with the father (through his silent authority) to direct the conversation.

The moment Old Chen greets the father as the “Commander”, Simon becomes the cultural and racial “Other”, excluded from the conversation by his language impediment. As a result of this, Simon acts awkwardly for the remainder of the conversation, not knowing which comments are directed at and perhaps even mocking him. While this sense of exclusion persists throughout the sequence, as the second shot will demonstrate, Simon’s discomfort arises also from being placed unwillingly in the limelight together with Wai Tung as invisible (to the parents and Old Chen who assume their heterosexuality) sexual “Others”. Indeed, as Figure 2 shows, the camera presents an exquisitely framed medium shot of Wai Tung and Simon sitting on either side of Old Chen, who is standing divisively between them, while the foreground is an over-the-shoulder close-up of the parents with their backs facing the camera². Here, Simon and Wai Tung are placed in the limelight, packed uncomfortably and literally repressed into their positions by the oppressive framing from the parents and Old Chen. The editing then alternates between these two shots as Old Chen states, “Don’t you keep flattering Old Chen. With (father and mother) here, how do I even dare sit at the table,” after being invited by the father to sit at the other end. No doubt, his comments, together with the carefully designed framing, emphasizes how seating at a dinner table maintains the traditional social hierarchy.

After first addressing the parents, then Wai Tung and Simon, Old Chen finally greets Wei Wei, who not only has not spoken a single word thus far, but also fails to appear on the frame (even while she is addressed), since the camera stays on the packed medium shot (Fig. 2) and refuses to provide a conventional “reverse shot” close-up of her. In fact, she doesn’t appear in a medium shot where her face is visible until much later. Thus, Wei Wei’s foreign-ness in the family is established by her exclusion from the visual field.

After the camera alternates a few times between the establishing shot and the medium shot, it cuts to an even denser medium shot of only the father, Old Chen, and Wai Tung, with the waiter’s position in the foreground blocking out Simon in the beginning of the shot. Here, white space between the “father-Old Chen-Wai Tung” trio and Simon asserts yet again how Simon is a racial and cultural “Other” (see Figure 3). This shot is edited to oppose the symmetrically composed shot of the females at the table (Figure 4), where differences in Wei Wei’s apparent frustration and the giddiness of the mother “internally” divide the female side. In the remainder of the conversation where Old Chen discusses the possibility of arranging a wedding banquet and a private suite for the newlyweds, the camera switches between the shot with only males, and a shot with only females, thus exposing how in a traditional setting, men and women are treated unequally in issues pertaining to marriage, with the men being the makers, and the women being the bearers of meaning³.

However, as a result of the internal divisions within the frames, this imposed opposition of male and female groups becomes highly unnatural, coercive, and uncomfortable to the spectator. Furthermore, these internal contradictions in the male and female groups (that originate from the younger generations' differences in approaching sexuality) are utterly ignored by Old Chen and the father, who comfortably command control over the situation by pitting the females against the males, appearing as if the family had no problems whatsoever. Most importantly, Wai Tung only worsens the situation by disguising his sexual frustration as a matter of generational difference. For instance, Wai Tung tells Old Chen that he doesn't like to be called "young master", causing Old Chen to pick up on the fact that Wai Tung, being of a younger and more liberal generation, prefers to have a simpler and more straightforward wedding celebration. While this is indeed true, Wai Tung makes his obvious annoyance and apathy at the table more "acceptable" by claiming how his frustrations arise from generational and not sexual differences. His real frustration, on the other hand, arises from how he is unable to reveal to his parents his true sexual identity. Finally, as the camera returns to the original establishing shot of the table, Old Chen again proclaims how he won't permit the father to lose face, going so far as to vociferate while pointing his finger rudely at Simon, "If we lose face, at least we can't lose it to America," again implicating Simon's outsider status.



Fig. 1: Establishing Shot showing relative character visibilities



Fig. 2: Medium Shot showing discomfort through framing



Fig. 3: The "male" side, with Simon ostracized from the group



Fig. 4: The "female" side, with acting as the divisive factor

This shot analysis is an example of how generational conflict and family divisions arise not simply out of dialogue, but also from the internal divisions that arise from the construction and continual suppression of various "Others" during family rituals, where the less obvious but more significant discomforts arise from

sexual repression. Indeed, Wei Wei is frustrated by her seemingly secondary status as a new wife, a condition that is exposed and only worsened by the fact that Wai Tung refuses to introduce her to Old Chen, because of her heterosexuality. As a new wife, she properly waits for the husband to speak for her, but as a result of his sexual otherness, this social custom becomes not only embarrassing but repressive as well. Simon, on the other hand, is excluded in even more ways, where his racial and cultural otherness first constitutes a topic for Old Chen's joke, but his sexual otherness causes greater internal frustration, as the spurious assumption that he is both heterosexual and white cuts him off from Wai Tung.

A similar analysis of other rituals (the wedding banquet, post-banquet events, and so on) will demonstrate how borderline "erotic games," where the husband and wife are coerced to make a spectacle of themselves (e.g. by taking off their clothes under the bed-sheet while being watched by their peers), only antagonize and clearly establish divisions enforced upon male and female categories by the patriarchy. As a result of this, rituals become forms of social imposition that appropriate patriarchal views of sexual hierarchy through the guise of "marriage traditions". Furthermore, the formidable sense of sexual suppression perpetrated by the older generation, only becomes more evident as Lee occasionally presents the fragile, but highly intimate encounters where Wai Tung is alone with Simon, and oppressive framing and blocking strategies are no longer applicable. Indeed, similarly intimate moments in *The Ice Storm*, where sexual otherness is momentarily suspended, only serve to generate a sense of fleeting fragility, in the face of a larger patriarchal social order.

As hinted at previously, *The Ice Storm* is essentially a case study in how separate categories of otherness work dialectically with power dynamics between individuals and groups. While this is also true of *The Wedding Banquet*, the basis in which we can say that *The Wedding Banquet* is an Asian American film is on its explicit critique of the generational and sexual dynamics of Asian Americans living in New York. This however, cannot be applied to *The Ice Storm*, which while being an Ang Lee film, is not according to our definition Asian American. This is because the narrative does not deal at all with Asian American experiences, and instead focuses on the problems of white Connecticut families in the Nixon era. On the other hand, it is precisely because of our inability to categorize *The Ice Storm* as being Asian American that makes it a "problematic" film to analyze, since it can be shown to embody many similar thematic, structural, and stylistic tropes extended from *The Wedding Banquet* (it is, after all, an Ang Lee film). Nonetheless, a tremendous number of dissimilarities do exist on the surface, each of which we will discuss in the ensuing paragraphs. By illustrating how underlying each of these differences in thematic and content matter, are similar investigations into the intrinsically sexual nature of family rituals, we hope to illustrate the common links between an Asian American and non-Asian American film.

First, the most glaring thematic difference between the two films is that the cultural "Other" is absent in *The Ice Storm*, a role that is embodied prominently by Simon in *The Wedding Banquet*. This lack of a cultural

“Other” seems to deal a rather severe blow to the notion that *The Wedding Banquet* and *The Ice Storm* may be linked in any significant way. However, otherness does not disappear. Instead, it is simplified into two categories: sexual and generational otherness, where generational otherness can be seen as a subset of sexual otherness. In other words, the exclusion of the younger generation from participating in adult rituals, and vice versa, often hinges on how differently the two groups both view and practice sexuality. For instance, in the pre-Thanksgiving neighborhood get-together that we will analyze in greater detail subsequently, the children are the ones excluded from the adults’ conversation not only by being servers at the table, but also by being somewhat but not completely unaware of the highly charged sexual undercurrents of the conversation. Clearly, the children do not fully understand the conversation, but they are catching onto the fact that something sexual is being discussed. This partial knowledge then becomes a source of *curiosity*, which characterizes the children’s primary expression of sexuality. Thus, upon closer inspection, one notices that the children are analogous to Simon, both curious about the social situation and careful not to be provocative, but completely left out at the same time. Thus, while the cultural other has disappeared, the “Other” that was ostracized vis-à-vis its exclusion from participating in a social event, has now resurfaced in the form of the generational “Other”. Simon, in a sense, has become a model for the outsider, now embodied by the children in a film lacking a cultural context.

Secondly, sexual otherness is entirely stripped of the issues pertaining to homosexuality (an issue Ang Lee won’t return to until *Brokeback Mountain*), so advocates of the study of homosexuality as an integral part of the Asian American experience may dismiss *The Ice Storm* as being linked to *The Wedding Banquet*, on the grounds that it reflects none of the complexities embodied by the unconventional situation of having the “female” figure in a homosexual relationship be white, and the “male” be Chinese American. As a result of this simplification, however, sexual otherness now becomes a tool that specializes in studying sexual differences between males and females, a dichotomy that was introduced in the analysis of the mini-banquet, where male-female divisions were used to construct the traditional patriarchal order. In *The Ice Storm*, Lee explores the same male-female divisions on an even more rudimentary level: through the gender dynamics of the children.

More specifically, there are four children in the film: Wendy and Paul from the Hood family, and Mikey and Sandy of the Carvers. The relative ages of the children become crucial in showing how sexuality is intrinsically related to age: Sandy is clearly the youngest, while Wendy and Mikey are peers, and Paul is slightly older than Wendy. “Gifted” with a rather acute sense of gender politics even at her tender age, Wendy takes an interest in both Sandy and Mikey, where her relationship with Sandy is one that is based predominantly off of sexual curiosity, and her relationship with Mikey is a combination of curiosity and a nascent desire for sexual control. Indeed, she uses her attraction with Sandy to antagonize Mikey, who is utterly tormented by her fickle switches in sexual interest, a form of manipulation that has fully matured in Janey Carver, the mother of Sandy and Mikey. Paul, on the other hand, takes an interest in Libbets (a girl from his boarding school) and not

only exhibits a desire, but also designs a more elaborate plan for taking advantage of her (he tries to trick his friend into taking over-the-counter prescription so that he will be alone with Libbets), but learns a lesson in sexual morality by deciding not to take advantage of Libbets after she has accidentally taken the same drugs and passes out. Thus, it is clear how Lee presents sexuality as being more elaborate, convoluted, and most importantly, increasingly social, as the age increases. The tendency for Paul, for instance, to take advantage of a social situation to further his private sexual desires, is a fully matured “tactic” in the adult world. Thus, this tie between sexuality with age difference can easily be extended to demonstrating how sexuality is played out differently between a younger and older generation.

Thirdly, the observant spectator may notice that unlike *The Wedding Banquet*, the social rituals in *The Ice Storm* are simplified and thus more “game-like,” stripped of all the tradition that characterized *The Wedding Banquet* as an “Asian American” film. For instance, characters engage in the most “everyday” activities, such as watching TV, holding dinner parties, and so on, all outside of a traditional or cultural context. Nonetheless, family and social rituals in *The Ice Storm*, like rituals in *The Wedding Banquet*, are often facades for an undercurrent of repressed individual sexuality. Rather than relying on tradition, however, Lee shows how these rituals operate via unmediated power dynamics between individuals and groups, and between “outsiders” and “insiders”. In other words, alliances and affairs hinted at through “small talk” no longer rely on tradition or culture to mask sexual issues. As a result of this simplification, when divisions and alliances appear in social gatherings in *The Ice Storm*, they seem to occur causally, directly related to how each individual carries out their own sexual agenda. Needless to say, this is in clear contradistinction with how the ruptures in the ritualistic events of *The Wedding Banquet* take place suddenly and often without explanation. Indeed, the illogical and roundabout nature of how these divisions seem to appear can be traced to the dominance of tradition as the mediator of sexual politics. In a sense, tradition constitutes a set of rules that are convoluted and far removed from direct “small-talk” confrontations regarding sexuality. Responding to a question as to why he uses the family structure “as the basis for all of (his films)”, Ang Lee stated, “Family life to me is very solid. It provides beliefs that can keep you from boredom, from being destructive. These usually involved bondage of some sort—social bondage, family, nation, religion. But it gets very complex” (2, Moverman). By stating that bondage can “get very complex” as one becomes further removed from the individual, Lee suggests that rituals are clearly oppressive in all situations, but also more difficult to unpack in *The Wedding Banquet*, where family life runs by the rules of tradition. Therefore, rituals in *The Wedding Banquet* are “taken for granted”, too complicated (by tradition) to be fully taken apart or analyzed. While this may be desirable in a film that attempts to construct the enormity and monstrosity of tradition (it is formidable because it is not able to be analyzed or taken apart), tradition may easily obscure the individuals’ expression of sexuality, and thus become an actual hindrance in a film that investigates sexuality on a more fundamental level.

Lee seems to wrestle with this problem in *The Ice Storm* by presenting a nuanced study of the *formation* of ritual by comparing and juxtaposing how rituals are different social forms of sexual exploration, played out in different generations and ages of Americans. This is indeed a film where he explores on a fundamental level, how the imposition of “social bondage” on “boredom” is both necessary yet oppressive. More specifically, Wendy’s interest in sex is almost entirely devoid of ritualistic elements, since it takes off whenever the parents are not around, thus engaging in sexual activities with Sandy and Mikey alternately while watching TV, being in the restroom, and even while being bored. Paul, on the other hand, exhibits early forms of adulthood as he disguises his sexual interest in Libbets through the small and innocent get-together he planned for his friend, him, and Libbets. Finally, the adults play out their elaborate sexual politics through events such as a key party (where the couples leave their keys in a jar at the beginning of the party, and at the end of the party, women randomly pick a key out from the jar, going home with the man who owns the key), and dinner parties where they simultaneously gossip about each other and engage in their own private affairs⁴.

The final, and perhaps most significant difference between the two films is that the real sexual “Others” in *The Ice Storm* are the male figures who have lost their patriarchal status, and dominant female figures exert a force not seen in *The Wedding Banquet*. The “lost father” figure is embodied by Ben Hood, who is struggling with a rather dismal affair with Janey Carver, the “female patriarchal figure,” who not only foreshadows what Wendy might become, but also manipulates Ben’s emotions in a way that Paul is most easily affected. One may argue that as a result of this seeming disintegration of the patriarchal order, none of Lee’s background and use of the father figure as a unifying force, would inform *The Ice Storm*. One can make the case, however, that Lee essentially paints a portrait of a world where the patriarchy has *not dissipated*, but has simply been transferred to a separate group, where the male sexual “Other” is dually repressed by a female patriarchy and by their own fantasy of maintaining patriarchal power. As Lee himself responded in an interview on *The Ice Storm* about his choice of casting Kevin Kline as the father, “I’m in the habit of doing father figures to see the collapse of patriarchal society from the past...this one I was putting myself on the line, or at least my fear as a father” (3, Hardesty). In other words, the father figure has not “fallen off the map”; the power the “father figure” originally held has simply been turned over to a female character. Perhaps most revealing of this phenomenon is that out of all the children, Wendy is the one exerting the most control over her relationships, while in the adult world, women such as Janey Carver are the ones commanding respect and directing conversations, as we will now demonstrate in an in-depth analysis of the pre-Thanksgiving neighborhood get-together at the Carver’s.

The scene begins with a long shot that pans left, tracking Mikey and Sandy Carver carrying food from the kitchen to the dining room, where the establishing shot is similar to the beginning of the mini-banquet described earlier. Here, the establishing shot of the dinner table clarifies the relative seating of the adults. The Carvers are sitting opposite each other on either end of the table (appropriate because they are the hosts of the

dinner), while Ben and Elena Hood are sitting diagonally across each other on either side of the table, and the remaining two spaces are occupied by a third but unimportant couple. It is critical in the remainder of the analysis to note that in sitting diagonally and not directly across from Elena, Ben is seated adjacent to Janey, where they unsuccessfully hide their attraction to each other.

The editing then takes us to a medium shot of Janey alone in the frame, where she looks up, commanding an eye-line match to her view of her husband speaking to Elena. The children are now walking around the dinner table, pouring wine in the adults' wine glasses. It is critical to note that in the beginning of the shot, the heads of the children are cut off in the frame, with a tilt up revealing their expressions. These bemused expressions are highly reminiscent of Simon's, simultaneously curious and overtly meticulous. Thus, far from being an accident in the cinematography, this selective framing emphasizes the children's outsider role in the dinner rather than in their unique presence. Already, they are literally "cut off" from the conversation, which they remain for the rest of the dinner. Isolated from the social event, their sole purpose to the adults (unlike Old Chen) is to fill in the white space between the characters. While the in-between position of the children serves to pictorially divide the adults in the same way Old Chen "divided" Simon and Wai Tung, their in-between position is now a signifier of their exclusion rather than division between the adults, especially since the adults talk *over* their wine pouring, almost completely ignoring them. It turns out that internal divisions between the adult "insiders" only become obvious through devices that will be mentioned subsequently.

This then cuts to a second establishing shot that again clarifies the spatial relationships of the characters. However, it is important to note that out of all the characters, the only one who avoids the "look of the camera" and has her back facing us is Janie Carver. This is reminiscent of Figure 2 in the mini-banquet sequence, where the parents in control of the situation also have their backs against the camera. While there is no longer a sense of victimization or characters being placed in the limelight due to a much looser framing strategy (i.e. the screen is not as tightly packed), the compositional trick of having those in command of the situation facing away from the camera is apparently derived from *The Wedding Banquet*.⁵

As the editing jumps a third time to the medium shot of Janie, she commands yet another eye-line match to the second "pair", this time Elena and Ted. Note that the children's faces are completely cut off this time, and there is no attempt even in a tilt up to make the children's faces visible, thereby continuing their isolation from the conversation. Immediately, we switch back to the medium shot of Janie as she makes her first witty remark, "Oh Ted, how romantic," embarrassing Ted. Thus, rather than having framing and blocking (as in Figure 2) place people uncomfortably in the limelight, editing now takes its place, where Janie's snotty but revealing remarks create eye-line matches to individuals made uncomfortable by her awareness of their secret affiliations and affairs.

As we return again to the establishing shot, Sandy, who has until now had his head down, raises his face surreptitiously twice, apparently doing his best to listen in on the conversation as we cut to a close-up of his ears. This then cuts to a shot of Mikey pouring wine for Ben, who upon hearing the sentence, “I’ll have to admit, the movie didn’t do much for me. But being surrounded by all those young horny college kids and perverts,” loses his concentration, misses the glass, and spills wine over Ben’s crotch. The editing then cuts two more times to the establishing shot and yet another medium shot of Janie, who this time reaches out with a cloth to dry Ben’s crotch, invoking a truly shocked and embarrassed look from Mikey. This cuts very quickly to an emblematic shot of Janie’s back, this time in close-up, against the camera, framed so that her husband and Elena are barely visible on either side of the frame. Again, what we have is that the controlling figure in the frame, through blocking, has separated the individuals at the dinner table, not surprisingly the figures of Janie’s husband and Ben’s wife. After a few more cuts to Mikey still recovering from the shock, we are finally presented with a medium shot of Elena by herself, who catches on for the first time in the film that Ben and Janie may be having an affair. This medium shot on Elena does not stay for long, as we soon return to the same medium shot of Janie as we had previously, taking command of the conversation after “fixing Ben up”.

The sequence gradually tones down its explicit sexual references after this climactic rupture, with a series of shots pairing different people together in the frame, and ends when Janie repeats a final incisive remark about Ben and his wife, “It appears you won.” Thus, like a combination of Old Chen and the primarily silent father, Janie has now usurped the role of both the mediator and the commander of the conversation. Indeed, as we saw in the shot list, Janie is a silent authority figure, mostly listening to what people say, but then responding with a biting comment that like Old Chen’s, first places people embarrassingly in the limelight, then divides the table into separate groups, pitting one against another as in the male-female division in the mini-banquet. However, rather than relying on four shots, this sequence relies much more heavily on editing to connote a sense of urgency that erupts in the children’s mistake, where the mistake is clearly caused by sexual and not purely generational differences. In other words, generational differences and generational exclusion in this sequence arise not from any cultural or traditional pretexts, but from differences in sexual awareness that originate from the adults’ sexual ignorance and the children’s sexual curiosity.

As a matter of fact, the assumed lack of sexual understanding by the children, like the assumed heterosexual identities of the characters in *The Wedding Banquet*, are examples of ignorance that further uphold social appearances, very thinly veiling the obviously sexual undercurrents of the conversation. It is the children’s brief but singularly violent breach of their outsider status (when Mikey pours wine on Ben), that prompts the crotch-wiping, which lifts the thin veil of appearances and reveals internal alliances that Elena soon catches, via eye-line matches and divisive framing techniques. While one may note correctly that the mini-banquet scene that was analyzed did not have an “eruption of realization”, this breaking apart of appearances,

which momentarily breaches the rigorous patriarchal structure commanded by Danie, is almost directly analogous to a later dinner scene in *The Wedding Banquet*, where the “Others” embodied by the younger generation finally explode in anger, revealing to the parents that there is something seriously out of joint and that all appearances are false. Indeed, through editing, blocking, and framing techniques that are not simply duplicated from *The Wedding Banquet*, but also developed and further matured, Lee portrays a mesmerizing visual landscape of power dynamics in a society where the patriarchy has changed hands.

Noting *The Ice Storm*’s structural and technical links to *The Wedding Banquet*, vis-à-vis the construction as well as disturbance of the patriarchal order, is crucial in understanding how the exploration of sexuality ties together an explicitly “Asian American” with a culturally de-contextualized film. Having a background steeped in the Chinese patriarchy, Lee is highly sensitized to the underlying dynamics that are even more fundamental than the ideologies themselves. To Lee, culture may even be a rhetorical device used to exaggerate and thus to expose fundamentally universal power dynamics. As he stated after being asked to explain the production process during the shoot of *Sense and Sensibility*, Lee answered, “After a period of time, I almost forget I am a Chinese doing this. To me, I don’t divide my work between Chinese film and American film” (338, Berry). In doing so, he may become under attack by those who believe that “Asian American” films must deal with culture, and that culture is irreducible to a study of basic human power dynamics.

On the other hand, one may also argue that his extension of themes made evident through “Asian American” experiences (his personal experience of extreme male patriarchy) allows his future films to be informed by such immigrant mentalities, where the sensitivities to such power dynamics are much more pronounced and often lacking in mainstream filmmakers. His final remark in an interview conducted by Moverman, regarding his growth as a filmmaker significantly bolsters this way of reading his family dramas: “I started out with three personal films. But what you know about, your neighborhood, can be very limiting, I think. That’s why I wouldn’t make ten films like that...once a film is done, it’s time to move one notch higher. To me, directing is about learning...” (4, Moverman). Thus, perhaps “Asian American” films are not simply about explicit “Asian American” narratives. Rather, it may be a cinema that is sensitive to issues that are more pronounced in a certain culture over another, extending a mode of critical interpretation originating from immigrant experiences, to analyzing yet more complex social phenomenon. It is a cinema that is invisibly “Asian American”.

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Notes

1. One must also notice that as a result of the camera placement in a position diagonally across from the space between Wai Tung and his father, the relative visibilities of the characters' faces also corresponds directly to which characters demands greater respect and attention received from Old Chen. Thus, as we will see this technique played out again in *The Ice Storm*, the visibility of characters' faces creates a hierarchy of who commands more respect at the table. In this scene, the father and Wai Tung are the most visible, while Simon and Wai Tung's mother follow closely, and Wei Wei is the least visible, with only a profile of her face somewhat visible.
2. This foregrounding effect gives the parents an aura of authority, being the ones "commanding" the frame but not the ones who are being looked uncomfortably at.
3. This is a term first used by Linda Williams in her seminal work on female spectatorship- *Film Bodies: Gender, Genre, and Excess*.
4. In a longer study of ritual formation in *The Ice Storm*, it doesn't take very long for the viewer to realize that rituals participated in by the different generations can be differentiated based on how "social" they are. The older the generation, the more sexuality becomes mixed with the public sphere. In the younger generations, explorations of sexuality tend to be highly private (This is portrayed much more comfortably, suggesting that Lee advocates sexual innocence and privacy), whereas older generations use rules (such as the rules of the key party for *The Ice Storm*, and tradition in *The Wedding Banquet*) to mediate sexuality (which Lee sees as being intrinsically and naturally private) between private and public spheres. Problems from these rituals, such as sexual suppression, thus arise from this innate contradiction between social rules and the highly private dimension of sexuality. This view of ritual formation is further supported by how Lee's cinematography often emphasizes the contradictions between public and private spheres.
5. One may argue that since visibility implied importance in the mini-banquet, Janie's back against the camera in this establishing shot may in fact illustrate her lack of importance. This is actually a misreading of the technique, because the importance of the characters must be read in relation to how editing juxtaposes the shots together.