

FILM

Taiwanese Filmmaker Sees His Art As a Delightful Culinary Adventure

By David Sterritt

Staff writer of The Christian Science Monitor

IT'S easy to list the main ingredients of Ang Lee's artistic career: film, family, and food.

Lee first cultivated these interests in his native Taiwan, and delved more deeply into them while studying theater and cinema at two American universities.

Now an acclaimed filmmaker with admirers on both sides of the Pacific, he's still fascinated with the vicissitudes of family life and the satisfactions of culinary skill. Not surprisingly, these are at the heart of all his movies - including "The Wedding Banquet," which captivated American audiences last year, and "Eat Drink Man Woman," now opening in US theaters after a well-received debut at the Cannes International Film Festival.

Lee discovered movies in Taiwan, where he grew up watching Chinese melodramas and Hollywood pictures with subtitles. His cinematic style is offbeat and eclectic, reflecting these varied influences - much as Chinese cooking incorporates a wealth of ingredients and techniques pragmatically borrowed from other national cuisines.

"Food is a serious matter in Chinese culture," the filmmaker told me in a recent interview. "I guess it has something to do with being an agricultural society in the past.... It's a big nation with a combination of hundreds of races, so the melting pot is always there - in food, music, culture, costume. It's always changing, and for the past 200 years Western influences have been tremendous.... Food is something we [Chinese] can be proud of and sell to the whole world."

While his own love for food started in childhood, thanks to a food-loving father and a talented cook who lived with his family, he stayed out of the kitchen until he arrived in the US and had trouble adjusting to American cuisine. He honed his kitchen skills during the six years it took to get his first movie project off the ground.

Making food is not very different from making films, in Lee's opinion. "Cooking is very comforting and relaxing to me," he says. "It's similar to any creative art, like directing. You get ingredients, you foresee some kind of taste or product, and you execute it with skill and the right propor-



ANG LEE *The filmmaker's 'Eat Drink Man Woman,' a thoughtful comedy that explores culinary and familial themes, opened in US theaters Aug. 3.*

tion and color. When your family swallows it, you feel you're taking care of them. And then you wait for a response, like in a theater."

This explains why Lee takes particular delight in films about cooking - like his new "Eat Drink Man Woman," a thoughtful comedy dealing with a modern Taiwanese family that's held loosely together by food-related activities. "It's very satisfying to make a movie that makes people feel

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hungry," says Lee with a smile. "It's pure cinema, beyond language, universal. People all over the world intuitively respond to it."

Lee's other preoccupation, family life, has roots in his own experience and in his observations of Chinese society.

"I've always been very close to family life," he says. "I grew up in a very stable and happy family, and then I formed one of my own. Seeing how a family changes has made me sensitive to how life and society and values change. Seeing people grow older and mature and have children tells me things about time, in a philosophical and sensuous way."

Family structure also makes a good microcosm for observing social changes, Lee continues.

"For thousands of years," he says, "the feudal and agricultural Chinese society was based on family as a unit. What held us together was filial piety and social rank. Filial piety was the first and utmost moral virtue - you were somebody's son more than your own self. This has changed re-

cently, and things are breaking apart. Family values and personal, social, political values are getting chaotic. We're moving toward a democratic world, and people do whatever they want, irrespective of each other."

Lee explores this situation on a miniature scale in his movies about family life. "The father always stands for the head of the old patriarchal society," he explains, "the monopoly force that's facing a change in the modern world. He's confused and struggling [because] each movie has some force that's deconstructing the family - in 'The Wedding Banquet' it's the challenge of a son being gay, and in 'Eat Drink Man Woman' it's the different romance, of each of the three daughters. At the end they find a new energy in life, and that's ... my blessing on them all."

Do the changes and pressures of contemporary life spell turbulence and unhappiness for the future, or does Lee believe things will evolve in positive directions?

"I don't make a judgment on this," he replies. "As an artist, I try to show things and reach people's feelings, and let them make up their own mindset.... But history is moving forward, I think, and there's no way to go back - to repress sexual preference, or to think women should rank beneath men.... You have to make adjustments every if it's painful."

"I do the same thing in my life," he adds with another smile. "I treat my parents in one way - the older way - and I treat my kids in a different, American way. Sometimes it can be a problem when all of us are in one room, and I get pulled between!"

Asimov the Explainer Explains Himself

By Simson L. Garfinkel

ISAAC ASIMOV was his own book-of-the-month club. Between 1950, when Doubleday published his first science-fiction novel, "Pebble in the Sky," and his death in 1992, Asimov wrote more than 470 books - both fiction and nonfiction - on every topic imaginable. To be fair, more than 100 of those volumes were anthologies that Asimov merely edited or coedited. Still more were collections of his stories and essays that had been previously published in magazines or newspapers.

Nevertheless, Asimov remains one of the most prolific writers of the 20th century - a distinction he achieved working on his own, without the help of a research or support staff.

Now, posthumously, Asimov has added to his list of books a new autobiography. Called simply "I. Asimov: A Memoir," this book refrains from the relentless month-by-month sequential account that characterized his earlier two-volume effort, and instead describes Asimov's life as a whole.

Asimov wrote most of "I. Asimov" from his hospital bed during the first few months of 1990. The author thought that he was about to die and his second wife, Janet, demanded that he write a subjective account of his life. Everybody would be interested, she assured him.

"I didn't really believe any of this," he writes. "I am not a deep philosopher and I can't make myself believe people are dying to hear my thoughts. However, I know that I have a pleasant writing style and can keep people reading, whatever I write. And I also had the sensation that I was racing death. And, as ever and always, I wanted to please Janet."

What he created is a marvelous story that traces his life from his beginnings as a poor Russian immigrant in Brooklyn, his unpleasant experience in the United States Army in 1946, and his years as a chemistry graduate student, a professor, and finally as a successful author.

Is the "Great Explainer" successful in explaining his own life? Absolutely. With his easy-to-read writing style that he says took him years to develop, Asimov's pen cuts straight to his inner core, baring his thoughts and feelings, portraying himself as a good-natured, kind-hearted man. Asimov is blunt in acknowledging his faults - an ego the size of the Empire State Building and a tendency to keep track of those with whom he had disagreements. Asimov's relentless score card of who was right (almost always he) and who was wrong does detract from the volume.

Child prodigies and their parents are likely to find more of interest in "I. Asimov" than the author's science-fiction fans. Although he spends many pages writing about his friends in the science-fiction community, the true value of Asimov's insight is his reflections on his life - and, in his mind, Asimov was first a genius, second a prolific writer, and only thirdly a sci-fi writer.

Asimov tells the reader repeatedly that his life would have been easier if he had learned to submerge his ego and get along with others. "It really puzzles me as I look back on it that I didn't make a greater effort to placate the powers that be," he writes. Indeed, it was this inability to get along with others that forced Asimov out of academia and into the solitary life of a freelance writer.

Edited by Janet Asimov, "I. Asimov" is a captivating history. And lest the world think it has heard the last of Asimov, fear not: Doubleday is publishing a book of his letters in the fall of 1995.

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BOOKS



I. ASIMOV:
A MEMOIR
By Isaac Asimov
Doubleday, 562 pp., \$25