

Interpreting Ang Lee's Family Trilogy from a Psychoanalytical Perspective

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Abstract

Family has always been a symbol that many films and TV shows cannot escape. As the most outstanding Chinese director in the world today, Ang Lee's works are always approachable, containing a strong cultural flavor, also good at revealing the beauty of human nature. The Family Trilogy, the most famous work of Ang Lee, reflects his ingenious plot design and his unique understanding of Eastern and Western cultures. This paper interprets Ang Lee's Family Trilogy from the perspective of psychoanalysis, and studies them from the aspects of plots, symbols and metaphors, based on the basic viewpoints of id, ego and superego.

Keywords

Ang Lee; Psychoanalysis; Id; Superego; ego.

1. INTRODUCTION

Ang Lee is a very unique director, as he has been a house-husband for many years, so his portrayal of family can be said to be brilliant. As a screenwriter, Ang Lee is also very good at impressing the audience with delicate plots and inventive dialogue, while at the same time slowly explaining to everyone in front of the screen the deeper content he wants to express in his films. Although Ang Lee has always been involved in overseas markets, his oriental mindset is deeply rooted, and his films often see the clash and blend of two different cultures. From Pushing Hands to Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon to Life of Pi, no matter what region or culture the subject matter is, most of Ang Lee's films have been able to please audiences of different cultures with their Western genre, and have eventually achieved both glory and box office success. This shows Ang Lee's unique and accurate understanding of culture, as well as his profound accomplishments in the creation of film art.

The Family Trilogy is the work of Ang Lee, a "late bloomer", each film revolves around an ordinary but unique family. Ang Lee once said in an interview, "A film is a world. Every time I finish a film, I feel like I've spent my whole life again". The trilogy shows both the philosophy of life that Ang Lee has learned when years of waiting for an opportunity, as well as Ang Lee's own life experiences, so all three films have a meaningful depth. The three stories are different, but they all deal with the psychological activities of breaking up old families and building new ones, mixed with the complexity of human relationships, as if thousands of threads are entwined. Although The Family Trilogy contains a wealth of research material, there have been few studies of the family trilogy from the field of psychoanalysis to date [1-3].

In 1895, Freud used the word "psychoanalysis" for the first time in his first book "Hysterical Studies", and a new school of psychology - psychoanalysis was born. Over the years, this unique vision of the philosophical world has been enriched and developed by Freud and his successors in medicine, literature, art criticism and other areas. Since 1911, when Ricciotto Canudo first called cinema the seventh art, psychoanalytic film theory, born from the fusion of psychoanalysis and cinema, has become an important theoretical foundation among the

resources of psychoanalysis, and psychoanalytic film theory has also had an important influence on the study of cinema and its development [1-2].

Therefore, using psychoanalysis to study Ang Lee's films is a meaningful entry point for an in-depth interpreting of these films. At the same time, analyzing the metaphors of the director's elaborate plots and symbols, as well as understanding the richness of what the film story is trying to convey the content, can both further learn the logic of psychoanalysis and provide a better empirical and theoretical basis for making more research in the future. Moreover, it is also possible to associate the meaning of real life with the philosophy of life that Ang Lee understands and demonstrates in the film.

2. "The Table" - A Platform for the Consciousness of Id

As the "id" that represents one's innate, primitive, unconscious and desire-seeking nature, it is completely hidden in the subconscious and is the psychological basis of the self-existence cognition of "I". Therefore, it can be understood that one's own nature, as well as the urge to satisfy instincts or to pursue innate desires, is an existence that only follows the "pleasure principle". Therefore, the "id" often has the upper hand in a conflict between spirits. When it is most evident, "id" is incapable of judging right from wrong. This is especially true of the desire to destroy the lives of others, the desire for one's own death, and the sexual urge, or the urge to perpetuate offspring (life) [4-5].

In the film "Pushing Hands", the happiness and pleasure ("id") pursued and desired by the father, Chu, is the traditional family life in which "the children take care of their parents, and the old people spend their twilight years in good health", that is the life in a patriarchal society in which the male elders are respected and accepted by the other family members. The son Xiaosheng also mentions in the movie that "In China, this house is big enough for four families", reflecting the traditional Chinese way of life in which small families form large families. This way of life includes what is known as "the elders come first" as a way of showing the younger generation's recognition of their elders. In the first apparent clash between Chu and his daughter-in-law, the "table" is used to bring the family together in the setting. Chu has been promoting Eastern traditions and culture in order to bring about changes in the other family members, even to the extent of creating quarrels or simple confrontations, which is the first manifestation of Chu's sense of id that craves recognition and attention. The second time the film shows the table where the family eats, it is because the daughter-in-law has a stomach bleed and is sent to the hospital, the table is only three generations old, the son and grandson all think that Chu hurt the daughter-in-law, the three hardly talk to each other. Here the footage shows also very obvious, before sitting at the table "seat of the host" of Chu is not in the center of the camera, instead, Xiaosheng substitute for his father. The only communication between the three of them is between the grandson, who is facing a table of Chinese food and expresses his desire for macaroni and cheese, and the Xiaosheng, who says, "Wait until Sunday when your mother comes home, all right?". Chu's silence fully reflects the gap between the change of his family status and the psychological change of the characters, reflecting the suppression and frustration of his id. The third time the imagery of the dining table appears is in the scene where Chu's family has dinner with Mrs. Chen's family. In the previous story, Chu's feelings for Mrs. Chen have always been implicit, but one can still feel Chu's desire for love. Here, Chu is more proactive, from massaging Mrs. Chen to communicating with the daily life of family, Chu says: "When I talk with you, I feel closer to you than with my neighbors in Peking", showing that he hopes to find the same sense of cultural belonging with Mrs. Chen, who is in a similar situation, and even go a step further by forming a new family with her, in order to regain the sense of family that he has been missing since his arrival in America [2].

In the film "The Wedding Banquet", the process of suppressing the id consciousness of the gay protagonist Wei-Tung is shown through the dining table. In the latter part of the film, Wei-Tung says to his mother, "It's exceptionally tough that homosexuals hit it off with each other and live together.", which frankly express that the joy that Wei-Tung seeks is to live on with a gay partner who has already developed a relationship. The first time the dinner table appears in the film is a candlelit dinner between Wei-Tung and his same-sex partner, Simon, which is a light-hearted affair that also reveals Wei-Tung's homosexuality through scenes and dialogue. This is in contrast to the film's opening scene where Wei-Tung is being pressured by his mother to get married, reflecting the ease with which Wei-Tung is coping with the pressures of family and tradition. By the second time the director uses the table to bring the whole family together, it is when Wei-Tung's parents first arrive at Wei-Tung's house and Simon cooks a sumptuous family dinner, but lies about it being made by Wei-Tung. Wei-Tung's father eats it and praises the meal. Wei-Tung is still at the stage where he can cope with his own lies. When Wei Wei is praised, he says: "I can't compare to Zhang's cooking", but his hand is gestured to Simon, and everyone is in a good mood. The third and fourth appearances at the table, firstly, Wei-Tung's wedding plan "notary only, no wedding banquet", his mother's incomprehension and persuasion, and his father's indignant departure from the table start to impact Wei-Tung's "id"; secondly, because the wedding is too simple, the atmosphere between the family becomes very awkward. At a dinner party that Simon had invited the family to, Wei-Tung met his father's old subordinate. With the use of words like "unfilial" and "I am doing this for my General (Wei-Tung's father)" and almost shouting by the old subordinates, Wei-Tung's sense of "id" is suppressed to its lowest point. From here onwards, Wei-Tung loses all control over his future and is forced to hold a grand wedding where all his friends and family are invited. At the wedding banquet, Wei-Tung is also wrapped up in various cultural traditions, constantly being manipulated by friends and relatives who shout "this is culture" and do all sorts of funny and even slightly crazy things. Here, Wei-Tung's sense of "id" has been completely lost, and his personality structure is in an unbalanced state. At the end of the wedding, the bride and groom enter the bridal chamber, and with Wei Wei saying "I want to liberate you", Wei-Tung has sex with Wei Wei after drinking, which is the boundary of this circumstances Wei-Tung's sense of "id" begins to reawaken, and it is not until the next family banquet that it explodes. Again, the imagery of the dining table brings together the two conflicting parties. Simon learns of Wei Wei's unwanted pregnancy and has an argument with Wei-Tung, which inadvertently spills the beans. Wei-Tung's father, who understands English, also suffers a stroke because he learns that his son is actually gay. Wei-Tung also takes the opportunity of his father's hospital visit to tell his mother, who is alone, that he is gay. By the end of the story, Wei-Tung is able to live with Simon again, not only he is understood by his parents to a certain extent, but also Simon has gained his father's approval, gratitude and blessing, and the happy ending symbolizes that Wei-Tung's personality structure has returned to balance.

The role of the dinner table as a "display platform" is even more pronounced in the film "Eat Drink Man Woman," in which the father, Chu, is an excellent cook. The family in this story initially consists of three daughters and an elderly father, and the family has a habit of gathering for dinner every once in a while. The table here still takes on the task of bringing the main characters together in the same scene, and in the movie, each character declares that the decisions they make are placed at each gathering. After the second daughter announces that she is moving out, she moves back in for various reasons. The youngest daughter, who seems to be the nicest and most obedient to her father, announces that she is unmarried and pregnant, and moves out the night of one of the family dinners. After that, the older daughter, who was previously honest and old-fashioned, also used the family dinner to announce that she had been notarized. Immediately married, she likewise left home the same night. In the end, even Chu, who initially wanted the family to be intact the most, and on the all the characters appear in the

most complete family dinner of in the film, announces that he and Jin Rong, whose romance is not easily accepted by the world, have also moved out. The family here is like a kind of rule, requiring everyone to follow the rule of "completeness", but when every member of the family is always following pleasure principle and diluting the meaning of "completeness", "id" will hit the seemingly unshakeable rule like a sharp weapon. At the end of the film, the large family is separated into several small families, symbolizing the disintegration of the rules. The former owner of the family's old house, Chu, even if he "comes home to visit", will think of knocking on the door and changing his shoes before entering. When he enters the house, he looks at the once brightly lit house in darkness and loneliness, with a bitter face, adding a feeling of sadness.

3. "Father" - the Propellant of "Ego" Consciousness

Freud believed that the ego is the executor of personality, the psychological component of personality. The "ego" can be the "self within the constraints of the real environment" and is the representative of rational behaviour. That is, it regulates itself and its environment, but the ego has no way of satisfying both the desires of the "id" and the restrictions and demands of the "superego" on behavior, and can only undertake the task of reconciling the contradictions and conflicts between the "id" and the "superego", so as to avoid imbalances in the structure of the personality due to the complete dominance of either the "id" or the "superego" [4-5].

"Retired old Tai Chi professor", "retired senior officer", "aged head chef" - The fathers in the Family Trilogy all have a strong and consistent traditional patriarchal image. However, the fact that the mothers have little influence in the films, and in some cases barely even appear (e.g., when the mother dies), accentuates the father figures in all three films. They are serious and wrapped up in tradition, or perhaps they are representatives of traditional culture. However, the three films tell three very different stories that reveal the different complexities of the three fathers.

In the film "Pushing Hands", although the father has been an influence on the son and the family from the beginning, as the story progresses, the son wants to turn his back on his father and is even convinced by his American wife to let father move out of the house. In the film, the "father", as a symbol of "ego" consciousness, appears once as "lost" and twice as "leaving home", representing the loss, awakening and maturity of the ego, respectively. In one part of the movie, the father wanted to go out for a walk, and the irritable daughter-in-law did not stop and accompany him, making the father lost in a foreign country, although the son was furious after learning the situation, hitting randomly and destroying the whole restaurant, but this "lost" like a demarcation point, from then on, although the father and daughter-in-law have a certain degree of reconciliation, but the son began to favor the daughter-in-law's decision, to set up the father and Mrs. Chen, hoping to use this euphemism to make the father move out, and the father does not blend into the family's sense of disharmony is even stronger. In addition, there were two instances of "leaving home". In the first of these cases, the father left passively, because he was well aware of his son's wish to leave the house on his own. So, the father was forced to leave home, out of pride, to live alone. Here, although the father left on his own, it is more like he was "kicked out". The second time he left home, he was arrested for a dispute in a Chinese restaurant. After his son's sincere apologies and pleas, Father says, "As long as you live a happy life, nothing else matters." He then told his son, "If you want to show me some filial respect, get me an apartment in Chinatown. Let me peacefully pass my days there disciplining my spirit. In your free time bring the boy to see me". "This way when we get together, there'll still be some good feelings", the play says in dialogue. This symbolizes that throughout the story, the father loses his balance and eventually regains it, and his sense of "ego" matures. There is also a cultural symbol of "Taiji Pushers" behind the image of the father, Chu, as a Taiji professor. At the end of the story, the son explains to his wife, who is trying to understand him, that "Taijiquan is a way

for Dad to escape from the hardships of reality, and he practices Taiji Pushing Hands to practice how to avoid people."The son's words here also show that the father's strategy for maintaining balance in "Pushing Hands" is neither "control" nor "influence", but escape [2].

In the film "The Wedding Banquet", "father" symbolizes ego-consciousness, and the father influences almost the whole story. In addition, the father's course of action in the whole story also reflects the ego-awareness of the characters' role management and the rebalancing of conflicts. The main character, a gay man named Wei-Tung, has abandoned his traditional duty of "getting married and having children", and Wei-Tung's parents have been urging him to "start a family". But what really forces Wei-Tung to act is his mother's words at the beginning, "I guess I'm getting old, and your father is getting older. Even though the retired general is sick, weak and always sleeping. However, from the way his old subordinates in the army, who have become hotel owners, still treat him with respect, we can see that "father" continues to play a pivotal role in the whole family. Later on, it is also the father who, through a clever little bit of wisdom, maintains the relationship between Wei-Tung and Simon, but also has the family generation - the grandson. In the ending, there is more unknown between Simon and Wei-Tung's relationship, Wei-Tung is forced to bow to tradition. And Wei Wei, the symbol of a progressive woman, has to spend her energy taking care of a child on her own path of struggle. Taken together, only the "father" achieves his goal: "the son has a family, the family has a generation". In "Eat Drink Man Woman", the representation of the father is somewhat subversive, but like a framework. This framework forces the second daughter to neither leave the house completely, nor is she trapped in the traditional mindset of the oldest daughter, who at the beginning of the film is "prepared to take care of her father for the rest of her life". At the beginning of the film, it is the father and daughter's lack of mutual understanding that makes the second daughter think and act of moving out of the house. In the movie, there is a character named "Wen" who is more like a father and the second daughter than the father Zhu. In the middle of the story, the second daughter witnesses Wen's death and her father's medical check-up at the hospital. Worries about her father's advancing age and health make her give up the opportunity to work abroad and develop a new relationship. However, the father, his eldest and youngest daughters all move out, and the second daughter, who wanted to move out at first, becomes the only one to cry and hold on to the family. At the end of the story, the second daughter, who is bound by tradition, holds on to the family. However, she is able to break her father's rule that no one is allowed in the kitchen and enjoys cooking under his watchful eye. This is a harmonious balance created by the sense of "ego".

4. The Stranger, Filial Piety, and Desire - Symbols of the "Superego"

In Freudian doctrine, the "superego" refers to the most civilized and moral part of the personality, which represents one's identification with the traditional values and ideals of society, and is also an internalized identification with the patriarchal image. At the same time, the superego is at the highest level of personality, based on the principle of the best, guiding the ego and limiting the "id". It can therefore define the moral standards of a given society through the social traditions and ideals of the self, so that if someone acts against his or her conscience and thus against moral standards, a sense of guilt and guilt may arise [4-5].

"superego" in "Pushing Hands" is based on the social traditions and moral rules of American culture. Because Zhu is far away from home and has not integrated into the local society, he has added a layer of "stranger" to his identity. Unlike the locals who have lived in America since childhood and are bound by American social traditions, Zhu, who has entered a new society in his old age and will continue to live here, always tries to use his local culture to fight against the American culture. In the film, it is clear that Zhu is always trying to promote traditional culture, from lifestyle to diet, and his son, Xiaosheng, mediates between his father and his wife, and

retains some of his Chinese heritage in him. The grandson, like daughter-in-law, does not like the Chinese food cooked by Zhu. The grandson speaks English most of the time, and even the basic Chinese baby tunes taught by Zhu are difficult for the grandson to say clearly once and for all. The idea of "id" contains an instinct for birth, that is, there is a continuation of the racial bloodline and the racial culture. Zhu, as a stranger who is eager to spread the traditional ideas for his descendants living in a foreign land, the grandchildren are separated from the cultural system he represents, and the son, under the pressure of his daughter-in-law, has the idea to ask his father to move out. That is undoubtedly the fatal blow of the "superego" to the "id".

The idea of "superego" in "The Wedding Banquet" focuses on the father and mother. As representatives of the traditional culture and moral values of the traditional society, they put pressure and demands on the main character, Wei-Tung, in his choice of marriage and partner. From the point of view of the moral system established by the traditional culture, "There are three things which are unfilial, and to have no posterity is the greatest of them". When Wei-Tung's father first meets the protagonist Wei-Tung's fake fiancée, Wei-Tung's mother secretly asks, "What do you think?", and Wei-Tung's father takes a look at Wei Wei and directly says, "Good, she looks like she can bear and raise children". In traditional Chinese culture, which is centered or based on Confucianism, "having no offspring" means that there is no offspring to carry on the important task of worshipping ancestors, which is indeed the biggest "unfilial" for the traditional culture of worshipping ancestors. Therefore, under the traditional moral system of "Superego", the main character, Wei-Tung, as the male heir of the Wei-Tung's family, is responsible for the continuation of the ancestral lineage, and must marry a man of the opposite sex at the right age and breed offspring of the Wei-Tung's family bloodline. When Wei-Tung came out to his mother, he said, "It's exceptionally tough that homosexuals hit it off with each other and live together." Weidong very much recognizes and enjoys this relationship and the satisfying life it brings him. This idea of the "id" results in the inability to produce offspring of one's own blood with one's spouse or partner, and thus stands on the opposite side of traditional moral principles, in opposition and conflict with the "superego" represented by parents, family and so on. Such conflict and the aggression of the "superego" against the "id" are especially evident in the film. Since Wei Wei and Wei-Tung are in a fake marriage, they decide to have a simple, or even humble, wedding to hide their parents. However, at a dinner party where Simon is trying to appease Wei-Tung's father and mother, who are angry and unhappy about the shabby wedding, they run into Wei-Tung's old subordinate, Chen. In front of Chen, all of Wei-Tung's previous efforts seem to have been in vain. With just the word "unfilial", Chen forces Wei-Tung to throw a banquet and invite Wei-Tung's friends and relatives. At the end of the story, Wei-Tung, who was going to get an abortion with Wei Wei and end all the lies, says, "I'm going to be a father," after learning that Wei Wei has decided to have the baby, before changing his expression and then saying, "I have to ask Simon what he thinks." Here, Wei-Tung goes from having sex with Wei Wei at the end of the wedding, when he betrays his feelings for Simon. Then he naturally accepts the reality of "having children" and the future of "having an inheritance. Such a choice could have destroyed the life he once enjoyed with his same-sex partner." "Superego" completes the management of "id" and brings everything back to the most basic, moral standards.

The "superego" in "Eat Drink Man Woman", is complex. The second daughter, who at the beginning of the story wants to be independent from her extended family and has a progressive, independent female image, ends up being the only family member who sticks to the family. As the father, who embodies the traditional patriarchal image of the traditional family structure, the structure of his personality has been incongruous, even unbalanced, from the beginning. The image of the second daughter and her place in the family structure initially belonged to the eldest daughter. The eldest daughter was a devout Christian, religiously ascetic and "I am to take care of my father for the rest of my life", the suppression of the "id" by the "superego" is evident

at this stage, before the eldest daughter becomes the pursuer of her own desires or "id". From the beginning, the second daughter pursues the freedom of life and sex, and even the freedom to cook, but in the end she is the only one who cries for the family's disintegration. In the film, the second daughter has several opportunities to pursue pleasure and desire, but after seeing her father's medical checkup with the hospital, she gives up her role as the mistress of her ex-boyfriend, the opportunity to work abroad on an expatriate assignment and the chance to develop a relationship or even become a partner with a suitable person. The idea of "superego" is a manifestation of the constraints imposed by traditional moral and family values on the desires and behaviour of the second daughter. The father, on the other hand, is a patriarchal figure dominated by the super-ego, and most of his superego thoughts are in the early stages. From the very beginning, the story shows that the father is gradually losing his sense of taste, with Wen tasting the food for him. The father, who has lost his wife as a widower, is almost going to the opposite extreme of "Food and sex are basic human desires", father's pursuit of desire is divided and suppressed. The degraded sense of taste here is actually a figurative manifestation of the "superego" suppressing the "id", and the father being forced by traditional culture and family values to suppress himself, thus creating an imbalance [3].

5. Conclusion

The Family Trilogy, one of Ang Lee's earliest films, portrays the most colorful cultural symbol in Chinese culture, the "family", in a simple and unadorned tone. The ending of all three films is that the interpersonal relationships existing at the beginning are destroyed, but a new "family" is left behind. At a superficial level, the disintegration of the family is the destruction of the old relationships that were implanted at the beginning and have an "indestructible" setting on the screen, it's a tragedy of old relationships. But from the inside, in "Pushing Hands", Zhu is not bound by the traditional concept of the arrival of family and can pursue Mrs. Chen; in "The Wedding Banquet", Wei-Tung's family has a family heir; in "Eat Drink Man Woman", the large family in Eating and Drinking Man and Woman is disintegrating into several small families, which also means the continuation of the "family", but it is a comedy of family. Just as in "Pushing Hands", the characters confront each other tactfully numerous times, but the outcome is never as comfortable as the final concession. At the end of "The Wedding Banquet", everyone seems to have something hidden in their hearts, but it's hard to tell, to have regrets and try to keep the house perfect. The extended family of "Eat Drink Man Woman" has broken up, but everyone is now able to be themselves, and even the initially discordant fathers and daughters are now able to talk to each other in a generous manner. The family is a huge personality formed by each member of the family, and a thousand threads of relationship maintain the dynamic balance of this personality all the time, and the absence or excessive aggression of any one of the "id", "ego", "superego", the absence or excessive aggression on either side can cause irreparable damage to the "human".

Ang Lee, in a cameo in the film, once said, "That's the sexual repression of the Chinese people for 5,000 years!" In a single sentence, from a seemingly crazy custom to the vast Chinese culture. For thousands of years, large families have lived together in large groups, bringing together countless small families of all shapes and sizes, and the habit of maintaining perfection has made everyone accustomed to disguise, forbearance and compromise, embodying the philosophy of the Middle Way in Chinese culture.

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