

# *The Conflict and Counterbalance of Different Cultural Contexts*

## *— Take Ang Lee's Father Trilogy as an Example*

Xier Wang<sup>1,a,\*</sup>

<sup>1</sup>*School of Literature, Zhejiang University, Hangzhou, Zhejiang Province, 310058, China*

*a. wxe200243@icloud.com*

*\*corresponding author*

**Abstract:** Ang Lee's *Father Trilogy* shows the conflicts and counterbalances generated in different cultural contexts, presents the problems based on family, expounds the identity dilemma of individuals in cross-cultural communication, and leaves a space for better solutions in cultural communication. By discussing different dimensions of eastern and Western culture, tradition, and modern culture, this paper analyzes the causes and manifestations of conflicts in different cultural contexts, the distinct mechanisms of mutual conflict, and the final result of conflict. Through the study of typical individuals, it explains the characteristics and difficulties of cultural exchange at the present stage, and further concludes that the inducement of cultural context conflict is that different ideologies represented by various cultures stimulate different behavior patterns, thus causing conflicts. The rivalry between the two sides leads to different outcomes, such as isolation, compromise, and absorption.

**Keywords:** Father trilogy, Ang Lee, cultural context, conflict, counterbalance

## 1. Introduction

*Father Trilogy* (1991 *Pushing Hands*, 1993 *The Wedding Banquet*, 1994 *Eat. Drink. Man. Woman.*) is an early work of Ang Lee. Ang Lee was born in Pingtung, Taiwan, China, in 1954. He changed schools with his father many times in primary school and experienced the American and traditional Taiwanese education styles [1]. Later, Ang Lee stayed in the United States for development, and was double influenced by Chinese and Western cultures, which is clearly reflected in his films, especially the *Father Trilogy*. The consistent theme of these three films is not only "family", but also the conflicts and conflicts of contrasting cultural contexts within each family.

The *Father Trilogy* involves multiple cultural contexts, including different dimensions such as eastern culture and western culture, traditional culture and modern culture, and dissimilar words competing to speak out. This is inspired by ideology, which then reflects the genre structure of human behavior patterns and information transmission. On the other hand, different cultural contexts merge and produce different effects. This paper will take the *Father Trilogy* as an example to analyze the conflicts in various cultural contexts, so as to promote the further development of cross-cultural text research and the communication and development of dissimilar cultures.

## 2. Conflicts

As an essential content of film and television drama, conflict is also reflected in the contradiction of different cultural contexts in the *Father Trilogy*, and its way of presentation in the audio-visual language is developed around several families. As the carrier of culture, the various thinking and behavior patterns of different people in a family are the typical presentation of contrasting cultures.

In *Pushing Hands*, Mr. Chu is the typical symbol of Chinese culture, and he and his foreign daughter-in-law, Martha, are in conflict with the Chinese and Western cultural context. In addition, the cultural context does not depend entirely on the blood race, but on the cultural imprint formed on a person. For example, after Mr. Chu ran away from home, he worked in a Chinese restaurant. His boss said that "there's no communal property" and "you have to earn everything yourself". The boss speaks Chinese, but his behavior shows western ideology. Mr. Chu could not find a cultural context to belong to in the United States, and the cultural conflicts could not be resolved. Finally, he chose to live alone away from his son's home, just like in the title, *Pushing Hands*. The traditional Tai Chi project of pushing the hand emphasizes the balance of power between the two sides. They will be defeated if they do not find the balance [2]. This is Mr. Chu's escape from the depressed family, and also the last self-isolation and persistence of the Chinese culture he represents in the context of western culture. The conflict between the Chinese cultural context and the American cultural context is concentrated in Mr. Chu.

Wai-Tung in *The Wedding Banquet* is a contradictory individual from various cultures. Wai-Tung not only wants to protect his love for his boyfriend Simon, but also needs to meet his parents' desire to get married (with the opposite sex). There is a clear contradiction between the two distinct cultural contexts. In the film, they hide, disguise, and compromise with each other, which means trying to reconcile the conflicts of dissimilar cultures. Still, the final awkward ending is also the unexpected result of the outbreak of cultural context conflicts. On the wedding night, Wai-Tung and Wei-Wei had relations, inseparable from the Chinese marriage custom. When Simon and Wai-Tung quarreled, Simon shouted "I can say anything in my own language and in my own house", which also exposed the dominance of Simon as the representative of local culture—here, his voice is unshakable. In relationships, the traditional Chinese culture is represented by Wai-Tung's parents, and the western culture is represented by Simon. On the personal side, the filial piety and the pursuit of free love are also important causes of conflict. The cultural context presents itself in various forms, and the conflicts caused are therefore more complex.

Unlike *Pushing Hands* and *The Wedding Banquet*, *Eat. Drink. Man. Woman.* is set in Taiwan, China. The characters in the film all show traces of the common influence of different cultural contexts. In such a traditional Chinese family, the eldest daughter, Jia-Jen, believes in Christianity, the second daughter, Jia-Chien, works for a foreign company, and the youngest daughter, Jia-Ning, works in a western fast food restaurant. The father seems to be the head of the dignified family, but his love behavior with Jin-Rong leaves people around stunned. The combination of eastern and western cultures, traditional and modern cultures makes each character reasonable and unexpected. In the film, the final result of "I announce" again and again is the disintegration of the traditional conservative family of the Chu family. Family members find their own desires and ideals, and these conflicts are finally solved through separation.

The dissimilar details of the *Father Trilogy* show the collision and conflict of contrasting cultural contexts. For example, in the three films, "table", the Chinese and Western dishes on the table are also symbols of eastern and Western cultures. In *Pushing Hands*, the Chinese father has Chinese food in front of the table, and the foreign daughter-in-law is in front of the western food, distinct; in *The Wedding Banquet*, everyone seems to eat Chinese food together; even the foreigners use chopsticks, but under the harmony, everyone has his mind, and conflicts surge under the calm table; in *Eat. Drink. Man. Woman.*, the Chu family's dining table is full of classic Chinese food, while the youngest

daughter works in the foreign fast food restaurant, and she is the first person to walk out of the traditional conservative patriarchal family. The table is the place of the family in the film, and also the bridge of cultures. People with various identities and thoughts meet at a same table. Just as contrasting cultural contexts overlap at one intersection, this ideological conflict is presented through the most basic carrier of human appetite.

The three films show multiple cultural contexts. Director Ang Lee did not give an affirmative or negative opinion here but only narrates them, which is why the *Father Trilogy* can be used as a good sample of cross-cultural research. Although these three films more or less show the director's personal value judgment, perhaps also because of his "multiple cultural" identity as a Chinese-American, the ideological judgment in the film is not obvious, which makes the film's presentation of various cultural contexts relatively objective.

### 3. Counterbalance

If there are dissimilar values and lifestyles in two cultural contexts, there must be a conflict. Mr. Chu, the father in *Pushing Hands*, is faced with the dilemma of cultural identity selection and identity. The environment of western culture represented by the foreign daughter-in-law in the family activated the ideology and behavior of Mr. Chu, and his Chinese cultural characteristics were set off more obviously in this environment. However, the language gap made Mr. Chu have no voice in the western cultural context and retreat in the conflict. In order to find a familiar cultural context in a foreign country, he went to a Chinese school to teach and came to work in Chinatown, but these spaces did not isolate the western culture. In other words, this cultural context itself is based on Western soil. Every root system absorbs the nutrients of Western culture, so it is naturally difficult for Mr. Chu to find a sense of identity and belonging. Finally, Mr. Chu escaped from the environment of the cultural context and preserved the purity of his own cultural context through self-isolation. Overall, this is the result of the forced compromise of the weaker party in the cultural context.

In contrast, the function of the cultural context in *The Wedding Banquet* is the combination of burst and compromise under repression. Wai-Tung's wedding was even more "Chinese" than the Chinese wedding in Chinese mainland. In the United States, the cultural context of China is almost a cultural island. When the instinctive desire of human beings is frustrated, a state of repression in human beings can be completely stimulated and released [3]. That is why these pent-up cultures need a burst. And Wai-Tung's Chinese wedding has become the carnival of this group of Chinese in the American cultural environment - "you are seeing the result of five thousand years of sex repression", This sentence was uttered by Ang Lee's cameo character in the film. The Chinese culture here has been more intense than the local outbreak, and the wedding has become the dominant party. And the whisper of American guests also suggests the context. At the end of the film, Wai-Tung's father raises his hands through security and "surrenders" to the fact that his son is gay; but on the other hand, it is the success of his parents - Wei-Wei finally agrees to give birth to his child, satisfying their desire to carry on the family line. However, the relationship between Wai-Tung, Simon and Wei-Wei has also undergone an irreversible change, so it seems that the cultural context represented by Wai-Tung's parents has won the final right to speak. But for the individual in this cultural context dispute, Wai-Tung's parents are hit by the fact that their son is gay; Wai-Tung and Simon's relationship went into a more embarrassing situation; Wei-Wei had to conceive and have a child for a person who does not love him. All the problems have been solved, but everyone is crying. This is not a happy ending, but only an acceptable result. Everyone must take a step back [4]. This is also an insurmountable pain point in the cultural context of struggle, alienating every individual.

In *Eat. Drink. Man. Woman.*, the film adopts two lines: "food" and "men and women", implying "It is in human nature to need food and sex". According to the screenwriter Wang Huiling, eating is the thing on the table, and desire is the thing under the table [5]. In the context of the patriarchal family, the desire cannot be directly explained; but with the loss of the daughters, the traditional

patriarchal family is gradually abandoned. The Chu family successively "fled" and actively turned from one cultural context to another. Even the father was no exception. This can be seen as an iteration of time from tradition to modernity. But there is also an obvious regression phenomenon: the second daughter, Jia-Chien, is the most "modern" and the most rebellious, but in the end, she buys her father's house and returns to the family. In this change of cultural context, unlike the mutual confrontation in the first two films, each character in *Eat. Drink. Man. Woman.* naturally moves towards his or her own desires, but this does not mean that confrontation does not occur. When the Chu family, freed from the shackles, enters a new role and identity, the tradition only appears on the individual in a more hidden form. A dominant cultural context engulfs the other, and the other naturally becomes part of the dominant one.

Of course, different cultural contexts can coexist. In the cultural identity characteristics of Ang Lee's films, the cultural conflict is multi-dimensional, and making peace is bidirectional. There is a conflict between individuals, but they influence and believe in [6]. The cultural collision on the same individual may make it move freely in both cultural contexts. This is one of the great ideas provided by Ang Lee for the collision of cultural contexts. For example, Simon in *The Wedding Banquet* is American, but he can speak Chinese and cook Chinese food. Apparently, Simon volunteered to learn Chinese culture, which makes him and Wai-Tung get along better. Similarly, although Jia-Chien in *Eat. Drink. Man. Woman.* finally chose to go to Amsterdam, she bought her father's old house and cooked Chinese food in it, which achieved a clever balance between Chinese and Western culture. There are conflicts in various cultural contexts, but this doesn't mean that different cultural contexts cannot speak out at the same time. Whether for individual or group, the conflict between contrasting cultural contexts will eventually reach some form of balance.

#### 4. Conclusion

Taking *Father Trilogy* as an example, this paper analyzes the conflicts between different cultural contexts in the East and the West. *Father Trilogy* shows various cultural context and interactive ways. When individuals from dissimilar cultural backgrounds communicate, the conflicts between different cultural contexts, consciously or unconsciously, result in mutual isolation, mutual penetration, and erosion from one side into the other, with various results. In the current era of globalization, cultural communication has become more extensive and close, and the conflict and counterbalance of cultural context are gradually shown; in contrasting cultural contexts, the dissimilar ideologies are further activated, showing the conflict between individuals. This is a common situation in cultural exchanges at the present stage, and it is also a cultural pain point that needs to be paid attention to.

Due to the limited research sample, the results of this paper still have some limitations. In future research, we will further expand the research sample, select a wider range of overseas Chinese film and television works, and look forward to obtaining a more comprehensive conclusion.

#### References

- [1] Peng Yuhao.(2018). Take the "Father Trilogy" as an example to analyze the creative psychology of the director Ang Lee. *Audio-visual* (02), 64-65. doi:10.19395/j.cnki .1674-246x.2018.02.034.
- [2] Su Ye.(2014). Pushing Hands: an irreconcilable cultural conflict between China and the West. *Literature education* (top) (01), 21-23.
- [3] Han Yujuan.(2018).- Take the "Father Trilogy" as an example to discuss the aesthetic characteristics of Ang Lee's films. *Media Forum* (11), 147-148.
- [4] Zhang Xiaoxi.(2020). On the intercultural conflict and fusion in Ang Lee's Father trilogy. *Media Forum* (08), 130-131.
- [5] Meng Chunrui.(2009).- Ang Lee film interpretation. *Literary and artistic contention* (09), 120-124.
- [6] Li Rui.(2021). Conflict and Harmony: An Lee's "Father Trilogy" Cultural Identity Studies (Master's dissertation, L anzhou University).[https://kns.cnki.net/kcms2/article/abstract?v=LD-wYsOa3DjMph2Xw\\_t8P-pWIKbFTeXVfqjz6bHgO8pYmui6aJeeAA1lEE2djzVgkP7z2HG5nLu7oPq762Nvo5NxbYIaAY-2aJIm\\_9pmD-gQHJ7auvkTPTOKRuLmH1H-tKUxIylxQPY=&uniplatform=NZKPT&languange=CHS](https://kns.cnki.net/kcms2/article/abstract?v=LD-wYsOa3DjMph2Xw_t8P-pWIKbFTeXVfqjz6bHgO8pYmui6aJeeAA1lEE2djzVgkP7z2HG5nLu7oPq762Nvo5NxbYIaAY-2aJIm_9pmD-gQHJ7auvkTPTOKRuLmH1H-tKUxIylxQPY=&uniplatform=NZKPT&languange=CHS)