

In the Taiwanese film *Eat Drink Man Woman*, we see a unique way in which meals are used as rituals. Set in Taipei, *Eat Drink Man Woman* deals with basic human desires which one cannot avoid – food and sex – or more appropriately, the communication of meaning through commensality and love making.

The central characters in *Eat Drink Man Woman* are Master Chu, a master chef at Taipei's premiere hotel restaurant and his three daughters: Jia-Jan, Jia-Chien, and Jia-Ning. The focal point of their encounter is their regular Sunday meal, which Jia-Chien styles as "the Sunday torture ritual."

Master Chu is an old man who takes incredible pride in his cooking, despite his failing taste. He takes care of his daughters, by cooking for them, doing their laundry and providing a home for them. He is a profoundly quiet man, keeping to himself, although he enjoys the company of his daughters, neighbor and friends.

Jia-Jan is a chemistry instructor at Chen Kong University. She is a member of the Christian community and is regularly seen wearing her headphones listening to the Christian hymns. While a student in university Jia-Chien had created a story about her relationship with a young man. She lives at home and is largely responsible for being the woman of the house.

Jia-Chien is a very successful businesswoman, currently the deputy director of an airline company. She is described as having the best qualities of both her father and mother: stubborn, willful, picky, and pompous. She has an interesting intimate relationship with a friend of hers with whom she agreed to not tie each other down, but still meet for occasional sexual liaisons. She clashes with her father on many occasions, although or perhaps because she lives at his home as well. She has purchased an apartment and is looking forward to moving out when it is completed.

Jia-Ning is a twenty year old who works at McDonalds flipping burgers. In the course of the film, she ends up stealing her coworker and friend's boyfriend, Li Kai. Jia-Ning has a special relationship with Shan-Shan the daughter of their neighbor, Jin-Rong.

The film opens with Master Chu preparing the first Sunday meal, an elaborate affair making use of dozens of types of food and a huge preparation time. Master Chu goes about the preparation of the meal like an artist at work. Jia-Jan arrives for the meal on a motor bike of friends, arrived straight from her Christian worship service. Jia-Ning comes by bus, after having left her job at McDonalds. Jia-Chien arrives last in the BMW of her friend and sexual partner. The meal begins with Jia-Chien criticizing the food her father has prepared, since he has lost his taste. Jia-Jan attempts to reconcile them, by asking Jia-Chien to be silent, not to communicate their differences. Then comes what one soon recognizes is the ritual speech, "I have an announcement." This time it is Jia-Chien informing her family that she has purchased an apartment and intends to move out. She is not allowed to complete the announcement, as she is cut off by a telephone call. Master Chu is called to an emergency banquet for the Governor at his restaurant.

The second Sunday dinner comes around with yet another elaborately prepared meal. Again, the ritual speech of "I have an announcement" is made and once again cut-off. Jia-Chien was going to tell her family about her promotion and potential appointment to the Amsterdam office of the airline company. She has also learned that her apartment venture has fallen through and all of her investment is lost. Her father interrupts and comments that he already knows about her failed venture, but that she is welcome to stay there. She never tells her family about the promotion and possible appointment to the Amsterdam office. Later Jia-Chien makes what comes to be the most important observation of the film: "we communicate by eating, they by singing." She has recognized that the meal is itself the medium through which the family expresses itself, for good and for ill. Jia-Chien may not really like her father's cooking, but more importantly, she has problems with the way the relationship between her father and her has deteriorated. Food not only forms the medium of communication for the Chu family, but is also commented upon as meta-communication. This is the only meal which is allowed to come to completion in the course of the film.

The third Sunday meal is again accompanied by the ritual speech, "I have an announcement." This time Jia-Ning announces that she has become pregnant by her boyfriend, Li Kai, with whom she will now live. The dinner does not happen, since Li Kai shows up and whisks away Jia-Ning in a taxi. Master Chu is saddened as he sees his

daughters slipping away from him. His youngest is now gone, his oldest is ruined because of her boyfriend, Jesus Christ, and his middle daughter is in a constant state of animosity with him.

The following meal is prepared like all the rest. Once again the ritual action that something is about to happen occurs. Jia-Jen says, "I have an announcement." She has fallen in love with the coach from the all male university where she teaches, Chon Ming-Dao. As she is a Christian, she could not consummate their love in good conscience until they were married, so Ming-Dao and Jia-Jen have been married in secret. This is the content of the announcement at the fourth Sunday dinner. Ming-Dao joins them for the remainder of the meal, then the two ride off on his motor bike.

Having discovered that her apartment venture failed, suspecting that her father's health is failing as well as his taste, and lastly being informed that her friend with whom she continued to be sexually active was soon to be married, Jia-Chien has come to a point where she has lost a great deal. Because of this, however, she has come to recognize the importance of her family, especially her father. Her father's cooking partner, whom she referred to as Uncle Wen, also dies, leaving Master Chu vulnerable and alone except for Jia-Chien. She turns down the promotion and the position in Amsterdam to remain with her father. Thus the stage is set for the largest and most formal of the failed meals *chez* Chu.

Master Chu has prepared an elaborate meal once again. He has sent out official invitations to Jia-Jen and her husband, Jia-Ning and her boyfriend, his neighbor Jin-Rong, her daughter Shan-Shan, and Jin-Rong's mother who had recently returned from America, Mrs. Liang. Mrs. Liang had been developing an interest in Master Chu and the expectation is that they will be married – two lonely old people coming together for mutual aid and comfort. But Master Chu dispels this myth with his own announcement. Beginning, of course, with "I have an announcement," Master Chu announces that he and Jin-Rong shall be married and he will adopt Shan-Shan as his own daughter. He is planning to sell the Chu house and move into a nice apartment. Mrs. Liang is, with Master Chu's daughters, outraged, and passes out. Once again, even the most formal meal of the film is not allowed to come to completion.

The last meal of the film is set several months later, after Jia-Ning and her boyfriend have given birth to their child, after Jin-Rong has become pregnant by Master Chu, and on the same Sunday that Ming-Dao is baptized into Jia-Jen's congregation. Master Chu has sold the house and only Jia-Jen remains there. She has prepared a great meal for everyone, but only Master Chu can come. All the others have excuses, honest though they are. Master Chu arrives and he and his daughter have enjoyable conversation. Most important, however, when eating Jia-Chien's ginger soup, Master Chu realizes that he can taste the soup; his taste has been restored. As Jia-Chien had said earlier, "we communicate by eating," and here the communication is unmistakable. They have reconciled their differences and they can now share a common meal.