



Research Article

**A LOOK AT THE FAMILY STRUCTURE
AND CINEMATIC IDEOLOGY IN DIRECTOR ANG LEE'S FILMS:
LIFE BETWEEN TWO WORLDS**

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ABSTRACT

*This article analyses the family structure commonly seen in director Ang Lee's trilogy of films about families (*Pushing Hands* (1991), *The Wedding Banquet* (1993), *Eat Drink Man Woman* (1994), also known as Ang Lee's family trilogy or "Father Knows Best Trilogy") and divides them into three types of structures: the missing structure, the swap structure, and the fusion structure. It also explores the way Lee uses his films as a means to express his ideas about the way certain Asian families struggle to incorporate a combination of Eastern and Western ideology, as well as traditional and modern thought.*

Keywords: family structure; cinematic ideology; Ang Lee; *Pushing Hands*; *The Wedding Banquet*; *Eat Drink Man Woman*

1. Introduction

“Family” is a popular topic in cinema, but one that can prove both challenging and interesting (in equal measure). Everyone in society has a family and their concept of family. This is true, of course, of Ang Lee as well, and his movies express his personal feelings and thoughts about the subject represented on the big screen.

Ang Lee started his career with three films about Taiwanese or Mainland Chinese families living in Taiwan and the United States: *Pushing Hands* (1991), *The Wedding Banquet* (1993), and *Eat Drink Man Woman* (1994). These three films share a standard ideological circuit related to Eastern family traditions facing the changes of the times. Each one tends to focus on the father (or patriarchal/masculine ideology) as the basis for the development of conflicts.

There have been many critical studies on Ang Lee's films. Still, none have focused on analysing the family and his ideological aspects, nor have any studies examined the use of

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family structure in his films. The contribution of this work is to find ideological similarities between the films. In his movies, he places the family between the East and West worlds to forge a better understanding of the connection (and correlation) between tradition and modernity.

2. Research Objects and Methods

The research objects of this article are the the family structure and cinematic ideology of Ang Lee in his first three films: *Pushing Hands* (1991), *The Wedding Banquet* (1993), and *Eat Drink Man Woman* (1994).

The research method used is an interdisciplinary method between cinema, culture and philosophy to find the connections between the family structure in Ang Lee's cinema and Eastern and Western thought, thereby establishing Ang Lee's position in the East-West ideological exchange of world cinema.

3. Results and Discussion

3.1. Results

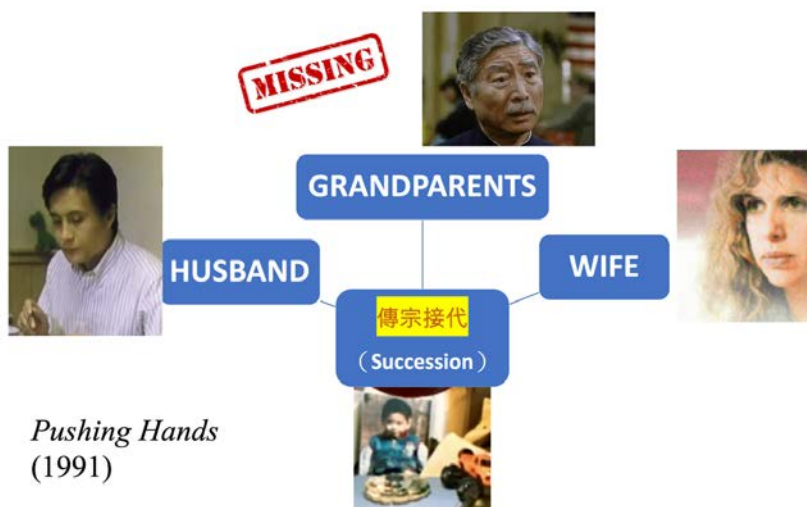
The family structure in Ang Lee's first three films conveys traditional ideas in the face of modern challenges and the clash between Eastern and Western cultures.

Ang Lee was born and raised in a traditional family in Taiwan but studied in the US before becoming successful in Hollywood. His background gives him a rare understanding of Eastern and Western culture. His work has shown a unique combination of Eastern and Western ideas, particularly in the search for knowledge and coexistence among people worldwide.

3.2. Discussion

3.2.1. The 'missing' structure

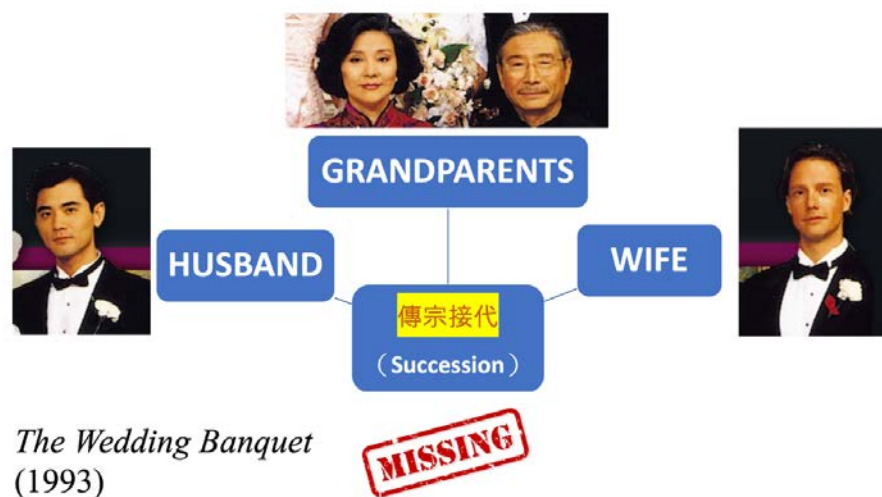
A missing structure family is one in which a critical family member (mother, father, grandmother, grandfather, a child) is absent. Ang Lee films often focus on the position of the father or the man in the family, so the image of the mother/wife is typically lacking.



Picture 1. The 'missing' structure of *Pushing Hands* (1991)

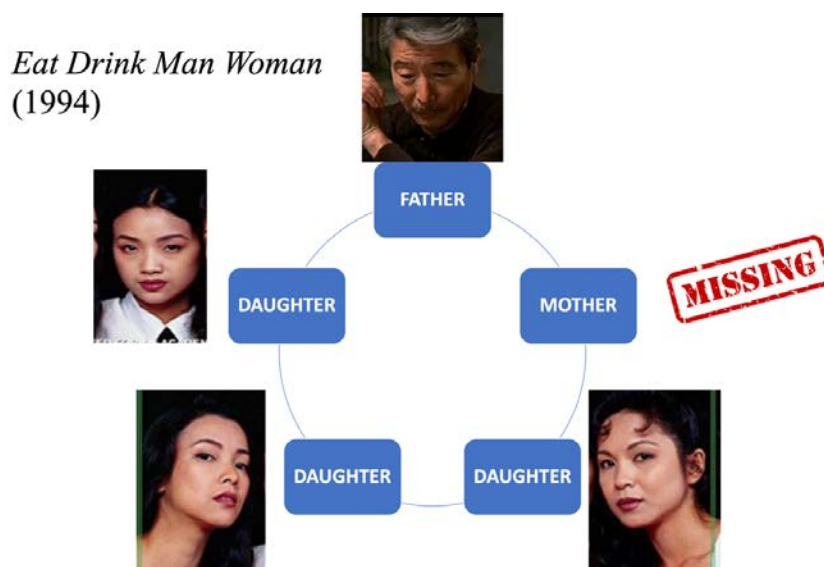
An example of this is the way the absence of the mother/wife character in the movie *Pushing Hands* (1991) causes Mr. Chu (Sihung Lung), a tai chi master who travels to the United States, to feel lonely constantly. Meanwhile, his traditional Chinese-style behaviour creates trouble in his relationship with Martha Chu (Deb Snyder), his American daughter-in-law, which ultimately forces him to leave their home and go on his own to America, a foreign land to him.

The unrealised "succession" from father to son can also be seen as a significant flaw in the family structure according to traditional Asian thinking. Therefore, *The Wedding Banquet* (1993) created the reluctant situation of Wai-Tung Gao (Winston Chao) when he had to organise a wedding with female painter Gu Wei-Wei (May Chin) to hide the fact that he is gay. It's illustrative that when Wai-Tung Gao introduces his fiancée to his parents and his mother (Ah-leh Gua) asks his father (Sihung Lung) what he thinks of his prospective daughter-in-law, the father answers succinctly: "She can give birth and raise children".



Picture 2. The 'missing' structure of *The Wedding Banquet* (1993)

Another example would be Mr Zhu (Sihung Lung) in the movie *Eat Drink Man Woman* (1994), who is also a single father, or, Asians might say, a "rooster raising children" who tries unsuccessfully for 16 years to overcome his instinctive needs. As a chef, his "loss of taste" is a subtle metaphor for his struggle to find the meaning of his life and the lack of joy in the family's overall life. Five critical scenes from the film revolve around the family having dinner on Sundays. The father has lost his sense of taste from the first meal scene. The fact that a chef who has lost his sense of taste can still display his talent by cooking a meal full of delicious-looking dishes is impressive, but the soul of the dish is no longer there. In the same way, the family reunites to eat a hearty meal, but everyone keeps their distance and has their plans, like an aesthetically beautiful meal that somehow lacks "flavour".



Picture 3. The ‘missing’ structure of *Eat Drink Man Woman* (1994)

Eat Drink Man Woman (1994) also shows Mr. Zhu's secret wish for a son. While he does not admit this, the fact that he chooses a woman of childbearing age (the same age as his daughter) to build a family, researches remedies for kidney tonics, diligently works to maintain optimal health, etc., reveals that he still wants to “try his luck” at the end of his life, even though he already has three daughters.

3.2.2. The ‘swap’ structure

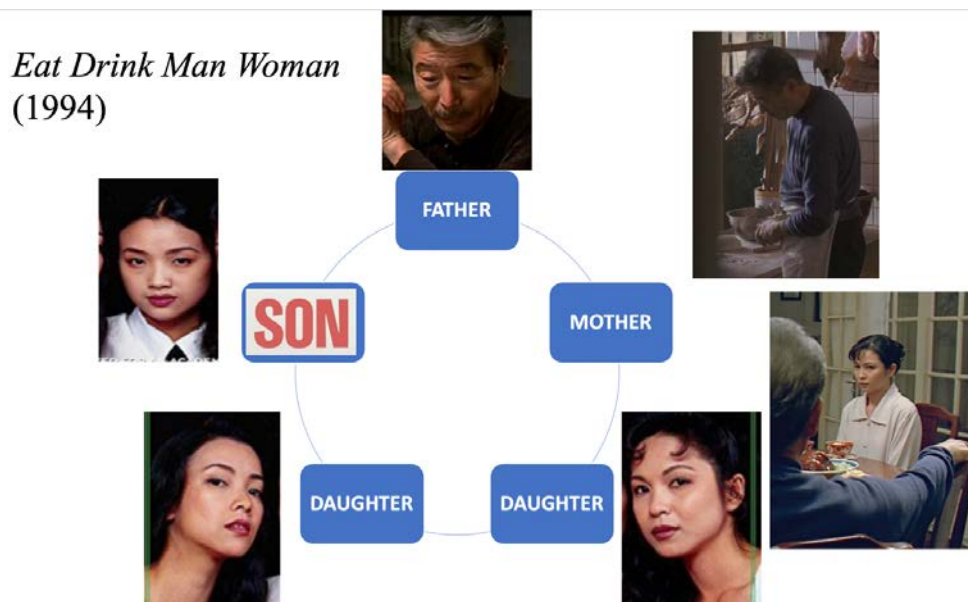
The swap structure reflects when a family member or members attempt to fill the void left by the ‘missing’ family member from the ‘missing’ structure.

The father in *Eat Drink Man Woman* (1994) stands up for himself as the ‘mother’ of three daughters. In the morning, he enters each room to wake his daughters before lapping their underwear with a slightly confused and resigned expression, showing his discomfort in the role. He has to suppress his private desires to handle the responsibilities of being a busy ‘housewife’: cooking, washing dishes and clothes, and only jogging or doing other activities when he has time... His family is a traditional family, reflected by their habit of gathering around a large dining table and the old-fashioned style exhibited by the three daughters. The lack of a son is a vacancy. Everyone notices the elephant in the room, even though no one mentions it.

The eldest daughter, Zhu Jia-Jen (Kuei-mei Yang), who has a strong desire for love hidden under her rigid shell, is not the right person to shoulder the burden of family succession. Unconsciously, she also tries to play the role of a mother by dressing like an elder, always sitting next to her father at meals, being strict with her sister, and never having boyfriends. But this is an incomplete exchange or “swap”, as she does not know how to express her feelings to people adequately, and at the same time, cannot act as a wife in the

family but can only be an ally of her father on the battlefield of the suppression of his personal feelings. The youngest daughter Zhu Jia-Ning (Yu-wen Wang), lacked her mother's love all her life, so when she becomes an adult, she is the most decisive person when it comes to the desire to leave the existing family to build a new family and quickly become a mother.

Only the second daughter, Zhu Jia-Chien (Chien-lien Wu), who looks exactly like her deceased mother and wants to follow her father's culinary career, can fill the void. She plans to use her career and cooking prowess to compete for her father's love. By the end of the film, she is the only one who successfully "swaps" to the position of her father's son. In doing so, she also gives up the opportunity to go abroad, instead staying in the house where only she and her father are left. The final scene, where she cooks a delicious dish for her father and helps him regain his taste and spirit, represents the meaning of family and life.

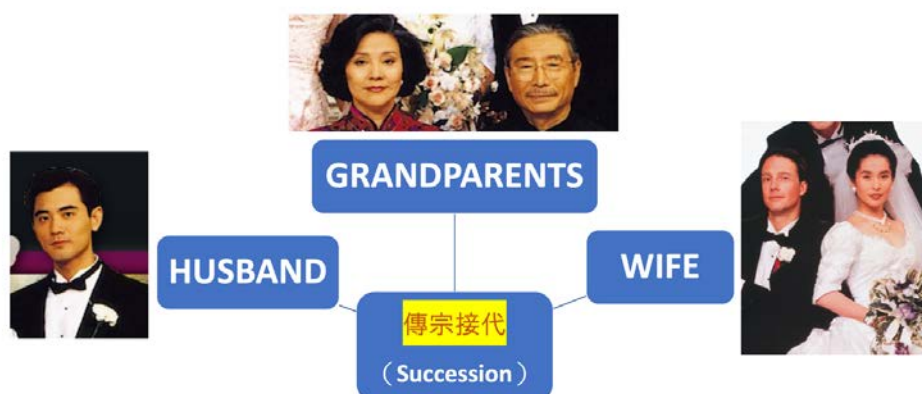


Picture 4. The 'swap' structure of *Eat Drink Man Woman* (1994)

The end of the movie *Eat Drink Man Woman* (1994) shows that each character has returned to their proper position: the newly remarried father builds a family as a husband, the eldest sister builds a family as a mother (controlling and guiding her new husband), the youngest builds a family with the role of a woman (pregnant, pampered and protected), while the second sister is alone in the house, having filled the succession role of "inheriting" the house.

The swap structure can also be reflected in a situation involving a 'gender swap' or the compensation in the character's psychology. The father's decision to ultimately live with his daughter's schoolmate represents a shift of "incest" feelings in the subconscious. Meanwhile, his young wife-to-be, the character Liang Jin-Rong (Sylvia Chang), who 'lost' her father at a young age after a divorce, has moved on to a partner the same age as her father, expressing the emotional void in her subconscious.

The gender swap structure is shown in *The Wedding Banquet* (1993). Wai-Tung Gao and Simon (Mitchell Lichtenstein) are a gay couple who, due to pressure from Wai-Tung Gao's family and with Simon's consent, arrange for Wai-Tung to marry Wei-wei to build a "normal" family according to the Chinese traditional point of view.



The Wedding Banquet
(1993)

Picture 5. The 'swap' structure of *The Wedding Banquet* (1993)

The swap manifests when Wei-wei moves in with the two of them, and Wai-Tung Gao has to share a room with her to hide his genuine relationship from his parent's eyes, but his affections and sexual needs are directed towards Simon. An exciting scene demonstrates this swap structure when, in the 29th minute, Wei-wei is standing drinking beer while Simon is cooking. Still, upon seeing Wai-Tung's mother about to enter the kitchen, they quickly and seamlessly swap positions so that the scene Wai-Tung's mother sees is Wei-wei working in the kitchen as a good wife and Simon appearing manly.

3.2.3. The 'inclusive' or 'fusion' structure

The 'inclusive' or 'fusion' structure relates to the tolerance of new or "foreign" outside members becoming an integral part of the family and also manifests itself in the acceptance of differences that were previously unacceptable.

The fact that this structure has not been formed in *Pushing Hands* (1991) partly shows the inability of Ang Lee to resolve the conflict between "East and West". However, the family conflict in the film is temporarily resolved when the Asian son moves into a new house, prepares a large room for his father to live in when he can visit them and explains to his American wife the principles of tai chi.

The film's ending opens the possibility that the families can live together again one day, evoking a vision of fusion. By the time *The Wedding Banquet* (1993) and *Eat Drink Man Woman* (1994) were completed, the importance of this structure in his films was

apparent. Meanwhile, in a drama that was meant to conceal the reality of his sexuality from his parents, the marriage between Wai-Tung and Wei-wei established a bond representative of actual family members. Wei-wei is pregnant with Wai-Tung's child, Wai-Tung's parents accept Simon, and the three youngest members, Wai-Tung - Simon - Wei-wei, rely on each other as they wait for the baby to be born. Likewise, the daughters of Mr. Zhu of *Eat Drink Man Woman* (1994) have finally accepted that their father married their former classmate and had their own children.

3.2.4. Ang Lee's cinematic ideology

In his first film, *Pushing Hands* (1991), viewers can see the depth of Ang Lee's ideology through the skilful application of Eastern philosophical thought to the presentation, analysis and interpretation of conflicts between the East and the West, shown through the most basic example: a family.

This family has a Chinese husband and an American wife, a situation where things are temporarily balanced. That balance is broken when a new factor is added: the Chinese father-in-law also moves in. Interestingly, the film's first ten minutes do not have any dialogue, just the image of the door frames cutting the space of human existence into many layers, symbolising the difficulty of harmony between the American daughter-in-law and her Chinese father-in-law. The American daughter-in-law constantly sits at a computer on a cluttered desk, writing novels, with the keyboard making repetitive, dry, mechanical sounds. Meanwhile, the Chinese father-in-law looks out of place as he quietly and flexibly practices Tai Chi beside the Chinese calligraphy amid a Western-style space.

From the very beginning of the film, the director forces viewers to constantly reflect on the issues between East and West, male and female, old and young, motion and stillness, calligraphy brush and computer keyboard, tradition and modernity, highlighted especially by the fact that a "common language" does not exist between two of the characters. These appear to be a dualistic structure of two opposing forces at first glance. Still, they are operating according to the principle of yin and yang: balance and counterargument. This principle is evident in tai chi, a martial art that Mr. Chu constantly practices: using softness to gain power, exploiting power opportunistically and following the rule of reciprocity, aiming for balance.

The *Book of Changes*, also known as 《易》, "I Ching", "Yi Jing", wrote: "The successive movement of the inactive and active operations constitutes what is called the course (of things)." (《周易》：一阴一阳之谓道。) In the normal state, yin and yang will balance each other, but when a conflict arises, i.e. the yin and yang have a change, yin will turn positive, and yang will turn negative. This is on display in the beginning, as Mr. Chu is in a static state, and Martha Chu, his daughter-in-law, is in a dynamic state. But after a

conflict arises, Mr. Chu gradually moves into a dynamic state: leaving home, looking for a job, and ultimately fighting for his dignity... while Martha has switched to a static state, engaging in less arguing, being less attached to the computer, and gradually accepting that her family can peacefully exist with a new member.

In the movie titled *Eat Drink Man Woman* (1994), the yin-yang relationship between "drink and food" and "male and female" was clearly shown, but there are other examples as well. In the first scene of the film, when vehicles flow through the intersection, we see the meaningful division of "empty" and "full", but also that the "positive pole (represented by heavy traffic) generates yin, while the yin pole (represented by an absence of vehicles) generates yang". The flow of traffic in the opening scene symbolises the suppressed human desire, wanting to continue forward even when forced by law to stop at a traffic light but still ready to rush forward as soon as possible.



Picture 6. *The cinematic ideology of Eat Drink Man Woman (1994)*

Eat Drink Man Woman (1994) is a film about family relationships, exploring the different layers of human instinctive desire. Although there is no mention of East-West ideological conflict, it still revolves around the opposing pairs of men - women, old - young, traditional - modern, thereby seeking unity and reconciliation. The idea of "conditioning" is subtly expressed in this movie through the scene where the traffic policewoman stands in the middle of the control intersection, and the traffic passes around her smoothly. The scene which takes place towards the end of the film might seem random initially. Still, it actually has a close connection with the original noisy and chaotic traffic scene, showing the "unlocking" of the instinctive human desire and metaphorically representing that the initial conflicts have been resolved.

Another (primary) technique Lee uses to portray his ideology in this film is the "dining table" scene. It seems to him that the "dinner table" represents the family, or sometimes, the "Platform for the Consciousness of Id" (Miao, 2021). For many families, mealtime is a precious time of the day to gather together, interact with each other, and to maintain the affection of loved ones. At the same time, it is also a time when arguments can break out, particularly in some Asian families.

However, through his filmmaking, he also points out the dining table has a typical East-West distinction: the Chinese dining table is round, and the American table is square or rectangular. The round dining table can also be considered as a symbol of "tai chi" (in fact, Chinese-style dining tables are usually round and can be rotated), in which there is a conflict of yin and yang, but there also exists the ability to move and therefore neutralize the yin - yang.

The image of a "fusion family" of 5 people in *The Wedding Banquet* (1993) demonstrates this. We see them sitting together around a square table, but their way of sitting is like a semi-circle, showing that their conflicts are gradually being resolved, and the separation and The East-West distinction is gradually erased. "More interestingly, Ang's oriental story might be more acceptable by the occidental audience, because of the proper coexistence of immemorial eastern thoughts and the western expression. To some extent, Lee Ang is the best oriental storyteller in the Western film industry." (LIU Bo, LIANG Hai, 2019). It can be seen that Ang Lee has skillfully, profoundly, and rationally connected the yin-yang issue in Chinese thought with the East and the West, the old and the young, the traditional and the modern, etc. As Whitney Crothers Dilley wrote in *The Cinema of Ang Lee: The Other Side of the Screen*: "He is a postnational artist because he has crossed and blurred the boundaries not only of the Chinese diaspora (the meaning of the word diaspora is, literally, "the scattering of seeds"—a reference to the dispersed and displaced transnational communities of ethnic Chinese living outside of China and all around the globe) but of the cultures of East and West. Lee's duality—this unresolved tension—is his trademark" (Dilley, 2007). His cinematic thought is closely tied to tradition. Still, it is richly brought to the screen by modern, evocative, sensual images and, at the same time, handled with an open mind, a tolerant soul, and a readiness to accept cultural differences.

4. Conclusion

Ang Lee has demonstrated his Eastern background through his search for a "common language" to serve as a bridge for Asians to better communicate with the Western world and deepen understanding between the two cultures. Meanwhile, his use of the missing, swap and fusion structures shows his desire to enhance understanding and coexistence among the world's people.

His efforts to portray cultural conflicts and reconciliation are depicted in the efforts by members of immigrant communities to maintain their identity while simultaneously integrating and assimilating into a new culture. He uses a variety of techniques to illustrate this struggle and resolution. These include symbolic representations such as the relationships between family members or the flow of yin and yang as visualised through traffic movement. Other examples involve physical imagery, such as the way the structure of a building provides separation between family members and the process by which something as basic as seating arrangements can illustrate both division and unity. Cultural and ideological studies in Ang Lee's cinema, as well as cinema in general, still have a lot of room to develop. Doing so is helpful because it can help create better connections in understanding and coexistence between traditionally different but now often interconnected communities like the East and West.

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**CẤU TRÚC GIA ĐÌNH VÀ TƯ TƯỞNG ĐIỆN ẢNH
TRONG PHIM CỦA ĐẠO DIỄN LÝ AN: GIỮA HAI THẾ GIỚI**

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TÓM TẮT

Bài viết phân tích cấu trúc gia đình phổ biến trong phim của đạo diễn Lý An về đề tài gia đình (Thôi thủ (1991), Hy yển (1993), Âm thực nam nữ (1994), còn được biết tới như “gia đình tam bộ khúc” hay “phụ thân tam bộ khúc” của Lý An) và chia các cấu trúc này ra làm 3 loại: cấu trúc thiếu khuyết, cấu trúc hoán đổi và cấu trúc dung hợp. Bài viết cũng đi sâu tìm hiểu cách mà đạo diễn Lý An dùng phim của mình để bày tỏ những ý tưởng về nỗ lực dung hoà tư tưởng Đông – Tây cũng như tư tưởng truyền thống và hiện đại trong một số gia đình châu Á.

Từ khoá: *cấu trúc gia đình; tư tưởng điện ảnh; Lý An; Thôi thủ; Hy yển; Âm thực nam nữ*