

# 行政院國家科學委員會專題研究計畫 成果報告

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## Ang Lee's Angst

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When first meeting Anne Proulx, whose short story "Brokeback Mountain" Ang Lee was to make into a film, he told her of his father's recent death. The mourning event, it seems to us today, was what occupied Lee then, soon to furnish his film adaptation a unique perspective and paint it with a certain tonality Proulx might or might not have foreseen. She recalls:

He said he had recently lost his father. I remembered from my mother's death a few years earlier [...]. I had a glimmering that Ang Lee might use his sorrow creatively, transferring a personal sense of loss to this film about two men for whom things cannot work out, that he might be able to show the grief and danger that builds when we must accept severe emotional wounding. (136)

What Proulx was unaware is that what was then involved went beyond the matter of how Lee was to mobilize the sadness of his loss for his creative use. While Proulx would freely associate to the loss of her own mother, Lee remained fixated on his father's death. This is the fixation that would soon build up the world *Brokeback Mountain* was to inhabit, the world in which Lee's fear of his father remained unsurpassed. The film would allow him to look hard into this fear to query why it

still dogged him after so many years and now pressed so hard on him. What we later witness on screen is some sort of primal fear that happens to lock the boys up in their closet, where incestuous wish could safely be played out, which is to have sex against the father's will with the partners of their same sex; and in the ultimate form of that wish, to have sex with the paragon of one's own sex, which is the father himself.

*Brokeback Mountain* is by far the most salient manifestation of Lee's struggle on film with the overwhelming father figure. It is salient in that his wish to have sex with him and the wish's subsequent repressions, modifications, and transformations have never been so boldly and forcefully played out. Lee's compromises, as can be expected from any form of repression, offers the film a glossy surface, in which Lee's fear is subtly, though not entirely, camouflaged. Among the compromises Lee makes is his attempt to paint Ennis del Mar and Jack Twist, the "gay" lovers in the film, as family men, as loving fathers to their children, and therefore loving husbands to their wives. But this is a glossy surface: it is Lee's phantasy that by offering such a surface, the father's will can be defied; that family values, being the father's decree, can be evaded by being propped up as a surface; and that, finally, staying in the closet to keep an affair going would seem a perfect solution to this fear. Lee, in short, is here making a homosexual wish, but the irony is that, unlike what the rest of the world would love to believe, he ends up making a homophobic film.

*Brokeback Mountain* is the film in which Lee shows that he has lost his struggle with the father figure. He is in a very bad shape none other films of his have ever portrayed. He is more boxed in than ever in that he presents a castrated corpse of a gay man on screen, and that this castration threat is the source of the fear that dominates the whole film. He feels totally castrated, that is, feeling crushed and beaten up. No possible sublation was in sight, not even sublimation, to dispel this fear. *Brokeback Mountain* presents Lee's angst at its highest intensity.

How has this angst been accumulated in Lee's long career? To trace its genealogy is what the present paper sets out to do. It turns out that this angst takes place far way back in his first films made in the early 1990s, known today as his Father-Knows-Best trilogy (*Pushing Hands*, *Wedding Banquet*, *Eat Drink Man Woman*). There the love and reverence addressed to the father figure are highly intense and formidable: he is put upon the pedestal, acting as the final arbitrator of all events that befall him, despite his anguish decrepitude. The next three films in English, *Sense and Sensibility*, *The Ice Storm*, and *Ride with the Devil* present the consequences after the paternal function has gone into default. The drama of *Sense and Sensibility* is triggered by the passing away of a father, the consequence of which leaves his women—his wife and three daughters—homeless. The paternal function remains at work by default therefore, until the right men show up to recuperate it by

marrying his adult daughters. In *The Ice Storm*, fathers of all kinds, from the President of the United States to those of the suburban households, are brought to face their own moral crises that culminate in a wife-swapping key-chain party. It is the postmodern rite of the exchange of women, in which the taboo is torn down along with the paternal totem, a revenge of sort on Freud's sly depictions in his *Totem and Taboo* that traces the genealogy of patriarchy. *Ride with the Devil* rides straight into the core of social and political upheavals in which all the founding fathers are at war. In a highly metaphorical way, they, too, are dead, or else the sons in the land would not have butchered each other so heinously, in so orgasmic a manner. The apocalyptic vision in W. B. Yeats' prophecy as "Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold" (211) depicts this craze, and is again echoed by Lee's *wuxia* film *Crouching Tiger Hidden Dragon*, in which patriarchy, consolidated as the law and decorum preserved by the upright in the *jiang hu*, is precisely the center that cannot hold. Despite the variety of cultural backgrounds and generic conventions that bring these films into being, Lee's paternal fixation remains as it is the dominant code that breathes them into life.

With the advent of *The Huck*, it becomes clearer to us that this fixation has become stronger at each going, and that it must now merit its due attention. What comes to greet this stronger fixation of Lee is the desire of the father, which has

become more looming than ever. The fathers in *The Hulk*, the senior Banner (Nick Nolte) and General Ross (Sam Elliott), whose daughter Betty Ross (Jennifer Connelly) is in love with the Hulk, Bruce Banner (Eric Bana), are sadistic parents that beat their children hard. The latter are expectedly masochistic, either yoked by the Oedipal trauma of yesteryears or hemmed in by the unbearable love from some law and order incarnate, sending the unwavering indication that somewhere, sometime, “a child is being beaten.” In fact, *The Hulk* could have been made into a film noir, in which the nation, represented here by the institution of national defense, would project the accompanying chiaroscuro onto the psyche of the persecuted. Yet Lee’s fixation on the paternal function thins down this possibility, and he makes inroads rather upon the ancient drama of tragic parenting. One handy allusion is *King Lear*. Gale Anne Hurd, a producer of *The Hulk* writes of the film in her essay “A Shakespearean Tragedy”: “I always thought the story of the Hulk, as presented in the Marvel Comics, had elements of a Shakespearean tragedy that had great cinematic potential.” “Looking at Ang’s movies,” she continues, “I felt his keen interest,” among other things, “in the relationships of fathers and sons” (20-21). Even without Hurd’s reminder, allusions to *King Lear* are abound in *The Hulk*. The incestuous relation of Lear and Cordelia is taken up by the unhappy Ross’s, whereas the tumultuous tie between Gloucester and Edgar finds its answer in Banner’s household.

Edgar must stay in disguise, in the way Banner, Jr. does, according to Gina Marchetti, as an Asian American in hiding. Like an Asian whiz kid, good at math but bad in communication skills, he, like Wen-ho Lee, is himself zeroed in as a piece of formidable weaponry devised and given birth in a laboratory in Alamo. So the Big Brother must watch. But Ang Lee's fixation on the paternal function gives the disguise of Banner, Jr. a more psychological shade, in which the latter finds that he has now surpassed his father in all forms of power, either moral aptitude or emotional quotient. Whence the fear of the father is derived: fearing him in that the son cannot evade his insatiable desire and make himself understood before him. Since equally at work is his love for the father, the son must now live in disguise.

It soon becomes clearer in *Brokeback Mountain* that all that is in the father's desire is to inflict punishments upon the sons. Punishments are already at work in *The Hulk*, causing the son to flee across the landscape of Americana. In *Brokeback Mountain*, fleeing is again the theme, but also the cause of the sons' downfall. The never-never land just below the snowline works first as a safe haven for them to flee to, one that is modeled after the closet, in spite of the vastness of landscape. But when the people they try to flee from are their fathers and women, it simply means that the boys remain locked within their Oedipal fate, which is now sealed, and that their final day of being castrated is nigh. Once again the paternal function exerts its

power by default: the father is either away or dead, but his threat lingers in their memory. The most startling of all memories is the one in which Ennis' father brought him and his brother to visit the castrated corpse of another (homosexual) father. This may have deeply castrated Ennis that he feels decapitated throughout his life. The only permissible escape that is left now is women. So the boys get married—knowingly, in that marriage is to them an escape. Women, then, is used by them and the film as a ploy and decoy, a screen, a façade, to “remodel” the boys' unconscious fantasy, which is to have sex with the father. When this last attempt to flee into marriage also fails, the father's punishment, in all his hatred to afflict pains, fills Lee's film with its homophobic angst.

The boys' wish to have sex with their fathers needs further unpacking before the nature of this punishment can be satisfyingly explained. Children's phantasy of being beaten by their parents, according to Freud's seminal essay “A Child Is Being Beaten,” proceeds in three stages. The first stage is conscious in the children's memory, filled up with a sadistic scenario in which some other child is being beaten. The trick lies in the second stage, always repressed and unconscious in the subject's memory, in which sadism in the first stage is set to turn against his or her ego to give forth guilt and shame. In particular, the male subject would develop the passive and feminine role towards the father who beats. In the third stage, this same memory



gets transformed into a sadistic and conscious one again, in which the male subject does feel being beaten: yet this time by the mother.

Freud considers the second and unconscious phase the most important of the three:

Nevertheless, the second phase, the unconscious and masochistic one, in which the child itself is being beaten by its father, is incomparably the more important. [...] People who harbour phantasies of this kind develop a special sensitiveness and irritability towards anyone whom they can include in the class of fathers. They are easily offended by a person of this kind, and in that way (to their own sorrow and cost) bring about the realization of the imagined situation of being beaten by their father. I should not be surprised if it were one day possible to prove that the same phantasy is the basis of the delusional litigiousness of paranoia. (1919e: 195)

For those who are familiar with psychoanalytic literature, Freud is here making an important statement having to do with homosexuality. According to Jean Laplanche and J.-B. Pontalis, “paranoia is defined in psycho-analysis, whatever the variations in its delusional modes, as a defense against homosexuality” (297). The cases in which Freud makes this claim include Schreber’s case (1911c: 59-65), a case

of paranoia of a young woman (1915f: 265, 271), and two male paranoiacs (1922b: 225-30). The finding we can infer is this: whereas the difficult relation with the father figure and superego—difficult in the sense that involved is the incestuous love with the father—must now be repressed and made unconscious, the price to pay is paranoia.

Two more quotes from Freud are needed to establish the nature of this incestuous love with the father. Freud makes this observation of the second phase of the beating phantasy:

In the male phantasy [...] the being beaten also stands for being loved (in a genital sense), though this has been debased to a lower level owing to regression. So the original form of the unconscious male phantasy was not the provisional one that we have hitherto given: “I am being beaten by my father” [in the first phase], but rather: “*I am loved by my father*” [in the second phase]. The phantasy has been transformed by the processes with which we are familiar into the conscious phantasy: “*I am being beaten by my mother*” [in the third phase]. The boy’s beating-phantasy is therefore passive from the very beginning, and is derived from a feminine attitude towards his father.

It corresponds with the Oedipus complex just as the female one (that of

the girl) does [...]. *In both cases the beating-phantasy has its origin in an incestuous attachment to the father.* (1919e: 198)

The following finding on the third phase is also important to our subsequent discussion of *Brokeback Mountain*:

The boy, on the contrary, changes [in the third phase] the figure and sex of the person beating, by putting his mother in the place of his father; but he retains his own figure, with the result that the person beating and the person being beaten are of opposite sexes. [...] The boy evades his homosexuality by repressing and remodeling his unconscious phantasy; and the remarkable thing about his later conscious phantasy is that it has for its content a feminine attitude [i.e., being passive to the father, as a token of the love for him] without a homosexual object-choice [i.e., since the beating person is no longer the father in his conscious phantasy, but the mother]. (1919e: 199)

That is, the boys in *Brokeback Mountain* are harshly beaten up by two parties in their Oedipal love affair: first by the father, later by their women. No wonder they are hard hit facing their own wives. These women, that is, appear in the film to solely camouflage the boys' incestuous wish; they are a decoy in the latter's phantasy, in which a homosexual object-choice can be sidestepped. But this decoy soon falters,

as the father himself is the final arbitrator: the father is dead, long live the father. He rules nonetheless; he makes the boys love him more than ever, so long as he, but not the women, weighs down on the boys—so long as he preserves for them a closet as a shrine to worship him.

*Brokeback Mountain*, then, is a mourning event, as that which is in Ang Lee's inkling when first meeting Proulx. Her intention to breathe life to the story has a broader scope, universal in that she is keen on knowing how life in general could survive in a rugged landscape at all. Lee's landscape is more private: it is, rather, an inscape that he has unwittingly sent to the couch, where fears of all kinds—fear of the father, fear of women—can safely be acted out. Thus Lee, by meeting Proulx and making her story into a film, has come full circle in his private act of mourning. He is still homophobic in a disturbingly repetitious way, but this is let pass without being noticed when the world at large becomes, once again, repetitiously and unconsciously more homophobic than ever after attending the screening. So we cannot but be buried along with the death of the father; afterwards he rises again, and lives on playing his sadistic havoc among the incestuous sons.

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