

YOU ARE WHAT YOU EAT:

Food, Taiwan, and Ang Lee



The audience members listen to Dr. Chien-hsin Tsai (right) of UT-Austin delivering the lecture

On Thursday September 25, the East Asia Institute invited Dr. Chien-hsin Tsai, assistant professor of Asian Studies of the University of Texas at Austin to give a lecture entitled “You Are What You Eat: Food, Taiwan and Ang Lee”. Tsai has been teaching Comparative Literature on Modern Chinese Society and Cultures at UT-Austin since 2009. Dr. Tsai’s expertise is contemporary Sinophone literary and cultural studies. He received both his M.A on East Asia Regional Studies and his Ph.D. on Modern Chinese Literature from Harvard University.

There were more than 70 people in attendance that packed the venue with standing room only. At the beginning of the lecture, participants were given chicken fried rice for food tasting. Tsai began his lecture explaining that foods in their basic state are not as appealing to many people and that it is up to a culture to make the food complex, appealing, and delicious. For example, lemons are turned into lemonade among several other examples.

Tsai approached food from literary, philosophical, historical, and cultural perspectives through this very interactive presentation with a multimedia approach. He talked about some of the movies Academy Award winning director Ang Lee produced. He also touched on how Lee uses movies to show customs of Taiwan among other film clips that depict food, cultures and traditions. “Food is memory, history, and personal stories,” said Tsai. “In Lee’s film, Eat Drink Man Women, food and dining scenes were portrayed as family dynamics and family history. The last scene of this movie is not just a family eating scene. It was carefully and thoughtfully created by Ang Lee to present the family and Taiwanese culture.”

Another scene shown was that of an extended family eating at a round table with dishes in the center that were shared with each other. Through these clips and screenshots, Tsai was able to show how important eating with extended family is in

Taiwanese and Chinese culture. Tsai explained that eating this way brings people together.

In contrast, a screenshot from another of Lee's movies was shown but instead with an American family. Tsai explained that American families usually eat with their nuclear family on a square table with members eating with their individual plates. Thus, comparing the two different dining scene can tell cultural differences.

Tsai pointed out that a statement of "you are what you eat" may be true; however, nowadays how you eat can tell a lot more about individuals. What kind of utensils are used, how you present (serve) dishes, and ways of eating food are influenced by cultures and regional background. It is also you are how you eat.

The history of Taiwan was also mentioned on how many cultures had a significant influence in Taiwanese food. At the beginning, the Portuguese and Spanish had influenced a lot of the culture when Portugal colonized the island. The Japanese colonized the island from 1895 to 1945. During that time many Japanese people moved to Taiwan and with them brought their own culture including foods. After World War II, the Nationalist soldiers escaped the communist control of China to live on the island. Most of the

Taiwanese food we see today is heavily influenced by Chinese foods.

At the end of the presentation, Tsai opened the floor for discussion and he also answered questions the audience had. One of the first questions asked was "Why was Taiwan named Formosa?" Tsai answered that "the name Formosa means 'beautiful island' in Portuguese. When Portuguese visited Taiwan for the first time, they saw this beautiful island and named it as is". Another person in the audience asked, "Will Taiwan be able to join the United Nations again?" Tsai replied that it would be a very complex political negotiation. More questions were asked as well as comments were expressed on how cultures influence foods.

A short survey was given at the end. For everyone who took the survey, it was unanimously agreed upon that Tsai's lecture helped them understand Taiwan and its culture better. One comment says "He taught me a lot about the culture that I had no idea about! Very eloquent, funny and interactive!" Another attendee commented, "I found this lecture fascinating. The speaker has true talent in teaching and presenting."



Attendees listen to Dr. Tsai's lecture



Audience members join the Q & A session

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