

Food is the Asian Way of Showing Love: a Semiotic Analysis

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Food is the Asian Way of Showing Love: a Semiotic Analysis

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Abstract. This study aims to figure out the signs behind the "Let's Eat" animation film regarding food to show love in the Asian community and the symbol of love in the "Let's Eat" animation film. This qualitative study uses Roland Barthes' semiotic theory to analyze the data. The results show that the sentiment of food as a symbol of love in Asian culture is deeply rooted in the historical famine. Food as a symbol transforms from a means to survive to a casual way of showing love. This ideology of love is well-represented in the film, which concludes with five main points of implied meaning.

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I. INTRODUCTION

There are many ways of showing love. Gary Chapman¹² explicated the five love languages in his book titled *The 5 Love Languages: The Secret to Love That Lasts*.⁸ The five love languages are physical touch, words of affirmation, quality time, gifts, and acts of service. These are the primary love languages that every human has within themselves. However, culture may affect people in perceiving and delivering love. Szilvia (2022) states that people of the same culture will most likely value the same things in a relationship.²

Jacob (2022) stated that the expression of love through food is also a global phenomenon experienced by all despite socio-cultural or economic differences.² He further described how foods associated with the expression of love, from a mother feeding a child to a philanthropist distributing food among the needy, are all expressions of love and compassion. However, the Asian community seems to take food as a love language to another level. Matsuoka (2022) stated that around fifty or a hundred years ago, the way

Chinese people greeted each other on the streets was by asking, "Have you eaten yet?" which was equivalent to "How are you?". Similarly represented in the "Let's Eat" animation video where the daughter gives the mother a drawing of them with "Happy Birthday" written on it.



Picture 1. Ma asked if Luan is hungry (0:45)

In the animation film, the mother says, "How pretty! Thank you" as a form of appreciation to her daughter. However, instead of saying "I Love You," the mother asks if the daughter is hungry. Huang (2022) shared that food is more than a meal in Asian culture; it represents love and care. In Pakistani culture, love is shown by having a huge dinner together. This ideology of love

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experienced among the Asian community is often represented in media as a universal shared sentiment.

One of the representations of food as a way for Asian people to show love is shown in a short animation film on Youtube titled "Let's Eat,"¹ uploaded by Anamon Studios. The story centers on the relationship between a mother (Ma) and daughter (Luan) in¹ Chinese-American immigrant family and the unspoken translation¹ of love into food. As the film describes, Ma's entire life centers around raising Luan. However, as Luan grows up, the mother-daughter relationship grows apart. By channeling their feelings into cooking, the two strive to find their way back to each other, one homemade meal at a time.

This paper aims to figure out the signs behind the "Let's Eat" animation film regarding food as a way to show love in the Asian community as well as the symbol of love in the "Let's Eat" animation film.

II. METHOD

This study directs to⁵ qualitative research, which involves collecting and analyzing non-numerical data (e.g., Text, video, or audio) to understand concepts, opinions, or experiences (Bhandari, 2020). The object of this research is a short animation film titled "Let's Eat," which is analyzed using Roland Barthes' semiotic theory.

In Barthes' semiotic, text is a familiarly used term. However, text is not always in the written form. Torop (2019) explained that text is a ternary⁷ whole made of signs, specifically used and constructed in a certain cultural-historical context, including the author's worldview, life experience, etc. Therefore, pictures, films, paintings, and other literary works are also categorized as texts.

This research analyzes the film using Barthes' two-staged significations: denotation and connotation. Denotation is the first level meaning; it describes what is shown in a text. Meanwhile, the

connotation is the second level meaning, which reveals a deeper meaning of the Text with consideration of environment, psychology, history,¹¹ and other surrounding aspects. These layered signs eventually lead to a new definition of meta-language or meta-text.⁸

Barthes also sees another aspect of labeling, the "myth" that marks a society. The myth theory was developed by Barthes to critique the ideology of mass culture or media culture. Myth is a vehicle where ideology manifests. Rahayu (2020)

There are several steps in doing this research. The first step is data collecting by focusing on taking relevant (similar or contrary) scenes of the film. The next step is comparing the relevant scenes to be analyzed using the Barthes' semiotic theory. In analyzing the selected data, the research focuses on placing the data as the psychological phenomena to be interpreted to answer the research questions regarding food as the way Asian people show love.

III. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

As stereotypical as it is, food is indeed one of the ways to show love. However, the Asian community has experienced a deeper connection with food rather than just seeing it as love. The researcher found that this deep connection comes from a historical background that Asian people seem to share. Giving food to a loved one is not just a cute way of showing love; instead, it is a habit that comes from generational trauma. Furthermore, the researcher also found how this ideology of love is represented in media, one of them being in "Let's Eat" film.

Food is the way to show love in the Asian community

Asians ask, "Did you eat?" or "Have you eaten?" whenever they meet anyone. Asians ask those questions more than they say, "I love you." The reason is that Asians seem to share nostalgic experiences like a packed lunch box for the field trip, big meals at grandparents' house, special or traditional meals on birthdays, homemade foods that parents bring when visiting, and vice versa.

Historically, China, Vietnam, Indonesia, Myanmar, and other Asian countries experienced many famine cases.

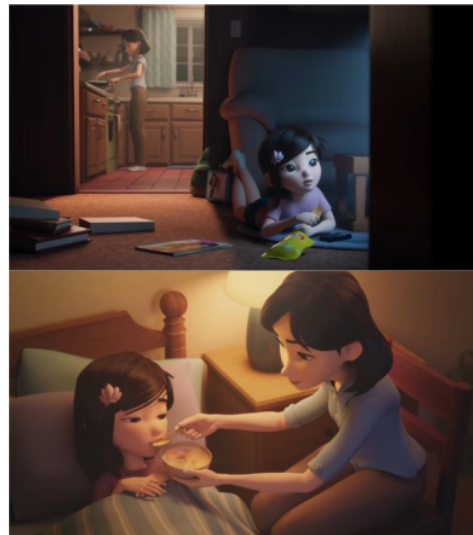
Wang (2020) explains in her research about the Great Famine of China that during 1959-1961 food was strictly rationed and distributed by the Chinese government to citizens only once a month. The amount given was based on the number of registered family members. At that time, saying "I Love You" would not save someone's life; only food will. Thus, serving food is a greater way to say "I Love You". During this period, people would do everything they could to ensure their loved ones were alive and well by giving them food to survive—this was the act of love.

Psychologically, the idea of love transformed from words of affirmation to an act of service, which in many Asian cases are by giving food to loved ones to survive. Thus, in most Asian cultures, food is the symbol of love.

Food as the symbol of love in the "Let's Eat" animation

As many proverbs say, from "The people who give you their food give you their heart" by Cesar Chavez to a very famous anonymous quote, "The way to a man's - and woman's - heart is through their stomach" food has always been a symbol of love. This is also well-shown in the film titled "Let's Eat." However, this film not only shows food as a symbol of love but also carries a more profound meaning within many scenes.

The idea of love in Asian culture is represented in the 8-minute film. The scenes from the film are compared and analyzed using Roland Barthes' semiotic theory. The denotation and connotation meaning from the scenes are analyzed, then generate a specific idea called myth.



Picture 2. Ma is taking care of Luan by making food (0:48 – 2:00)

Denotation: The top picture shows Ma cooking in the kitchen while Luan is watching the TV. The picture under shows that Ma is feeding Luan soup, and the daughter (Luan) seems sick as she is lying down with a blanket over her.

Connotation: Love, as represented through food, is present in times of health and sickness.

Myth: Unconditional love exists in any situation, during good and bad times.



Picture 3. Ma and Luan fight (2:15 – 2:44)

Denotation: Ma and Luan are fighting in the picture on top. Meanwhile, the picture under

shows that a meal is being served on the table after the fight.

Connotation: Ma made after the fight shows even in the hard times, love still exists.

Myth: Food is a greater act of love and apology.



Picture 4. Ma and Luan spend time in the kitchen (3:05 – 3:19)

Denotation: The four pictures show a similar atmosphere of Ma and Luan having a meal in the kitchen. Ma is doing the same routine in all four pictures; preparing the food and cleaning the dinner table. However, Luan seems to go through different phases from school, part-time work, going to an event, and going to a

full-time corporate job.

Connotation: In any stage of life, food is the way to bond between Ma and Luan. It is always served, as love will always be.

Myth: People go through phases but love stays the same.



Picture 5. Luan takes care of Ma and Ma eventually passed away (4:27 – 5:16)

Denotation: The picture on top shows Luan feeding Ma food while Ma is sick and hospitalized. The picture under shows Luan feeling sad at the dinner table with two servings of food and a picture of her and Ma.

Connotation: Luan is serving two bowls of rice, indicating that even though her mother has passed away, she still has love served for Ma.

Myth: Love does not have a timeline; it exists even when the loved one has passed away.



Picture 5. Luan and her daughter are eating together (5:59)

Denotation: Luan is having a huge meal with her daughter.

Connotation: Luan shows love to her daughter the same way Ma did it to her. She serves her daughter a huge meal representing how big her love for her daughter is.

Myth: Love will continue to be shown through food, as that was how she learned it.

IV. CONCLUSION

The sentiment of food as a symbol of love in Asian culture is deeply rooted in the historical famine. To survive during the hard famine, people had to share a certain number of meals with their family members. Many parents would sacrifice their food to be given to their children, which is continuously carried from generation to generation, from a means to survive to a casual way of showing love. This idea is well-represented in Youtube's "Let's Eat" film. The implied meaning in the film concludes with 5 main points, such as:

1. Unconditional love exists in any situations, during good and bad times.
2. Food is a greater act of love and apology.
3. People go through phases but love stays the same.
4. Love does not have a timeline; it exists even when the loved one has passed away.
5. Love will continue to be shown through food, as that was how she learned it.

There are many concerns regarding this topic, such as the generational trauma involved in creating this habit of showing love through food, including the analysis of the historical event causing it. Therefore, further research is possible to be conducted on this topic.

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