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# Diasporic Chinese family drama through a transnational lens: *The Wedding Banquet* (1993) and *Saving Face* (2004)

**ABSTRACT**

*The immigrant Chinese family has increasingly been represented in transnational Chinese cinema(s) over the past three decades. Two representative films,* The Wedding Banquet *(Lee, 1993) and* Saving Face *(Wu, 2004), are chosen to shed light on Chinese filmmakers' engagement with the complex process of identity formation for immigrants through the artifice of family conflict. Both movies examine how homosexuality can pose a threat to traditional Chinese family ethics such as filial piety, family continuity and family reputation, and how the seemingly incompatible ideological standpoints can be accommodated in the end. In both cases, on the one hand the depicted denial of homosexuality comes from its association with failed family education and bad ethnic and cultural practice, and its violation of traditional Chinese values. Therefore, sexuality becomes linked to the effect of Americanization and what it means to be Chinese. On the other hand, the 'undesirable' homosexual identity can be accepted or at least tolerated within the family as long as the family lineage is ensured, or the family remains intact. The disaporic subjects show us that submission to one's ethnicity can be modified or unlearned.*

**KEYWORDS**

Chinese family
Chinese cinema
homosexuality
identity
Ang Lee
Alice Wu

The immigrant Chinese family has increasingly been represented in cinemas over the past three decades. Given that migration has led to significant changes in Chinese families, transnational Chinese films have focused on the changing family structure and destabilized family values, and the gender and generational relations within the family.

Paradoxically, the visibility of the Chinese American family is made evident by the underrepresentation of the Chinese family – or the stereotypical images of the Chinese in American films (Moy 1993; Xing 1998; Lee 1999; Chan 2009). This theme has been substantially explored by ethnic Chinese filmmakers. *Dim Sum: A Little Bit of Heart* (Wang, 1985), *Eat a Bowl of Tea* (Wang, 1989), *The Joy Luck Club* (Wang, 1993) and *A Thousand Years of Good Prayers* (Wang, 2007) brought Wayne Wang high acclaim. Ang Lee's 'Father knows best' trilogy, including transnational family tales *Pushing Hands* (Lee, 1991) and *The Wedding Banquet* (Lee, 1993), earned him international recognition. Other less well-known but no less important feature movies about Chinese American families include *A Great Wall* (Wang, 1986), *Two Lies* (Tom, 1990), *My American Grandson* (Hui, 1991), *My Mother Thought She Was Audrey Hepburn* (Jue, 1992), *My American Vacation* (Hsu, 1999), *The Guasha Treatment* (Zheng, 2001), *Red Doors* (Lee, 2005), *Saving Face* (Wu, 2005), *American Fusion* (Lin, 2005), *Americanese* (Byler, 2006), *Asian Stories* (Oda, 2006), *Ping Pong Playa* (Yu, 2007), *Children of Invention* (Chun, 2009) and *Baby Steps* (Cheng, 2015), to name but a few. There are also documentaries made to capture the life of the immigrant Chinese family, such as *Sewing Woman* (Dong, 1982), *Anatomy of a Springroll* (Kwan, 1994) and *Chinese Couplets* (Lowe, 2015).

Through the transnational Chinese filmmakers' lens, the family stories usually reveal the history and life experience of the Chinese in the United States, including life-long identity crisis, memories of traumatic life events, long-time exclusion and repressive and revitalizing forces of Chinese traditions. Therefore, the fictional families in the films open a window for us to study ethnicity, culture and identity. While on the one hand ethnic Chinese representation is characterized by boundaries that establish and define the Chinese American community against other communities, and thus are almost prescribed, on the other the representation of family life and structure of Chinese immigrants is multiple and fluid, as culture is unfixed and uncertain. A process of fixation and fluidity take place at the same time.

## FAMILY MATTERS IN DIASPORA

The family has occupied and still occupies a central position in the Chinese society (Baker 1979; Giskin and Walsh 2001; Santos and Harrell 2017) as the Chinese family is not just a social unit, but represents a whole codified societal ideology. In the traditional Chinese world, nation and family were isomorphically structured and family was the 'smallest nation' (Han 2012). *Guojia*, the Chinese equivalent for English word 'state', consists of two components: *guo* represents nation or state, and *jia* means family. Thus, Chinese perceptions of family are to some extent beyond those individual units labelled as family.

The rapid increase in transnational mobility has greatly affected Chinese family life. Through migration, the displacement of cultural identity has influenced family structure and destabilized family values. Kinship is an issue of universal relevance and families across many different countries share common elements. Yet family structures, values and beliefs concerning marriage and family life are always culturally specific. In the context of transnational migration,

families are transformed in more complex and unpredictable ways. To a certain extent, the diasporic Chinese family has become a dilemma: both the cultural symbol and solution, and oppression and liberation.

On the one hand, the Chinese immigrant family can be interpreted as 'the mediator' (Handel and Whitchurch 1972: 19), providing a platform to define and shape the identity of each family member. On the other, the displacement of cultural identity has correspondingly influenced the forms and structure of the Chinese immigrant family. In this respect, transnational Chinese films have depicted the Chinese immigrant family as the 'mediator' – family discursively constructs the identity of family members, and as the 'mediated' – the reconstructed identity of each member in turn reshapes family structure. A question therefore arises: what do cinematic representations of diasporic Chinese families contribute to our understanding of re-articulated Chinese cultural identity, and the survival and adaptation of Chinese culture in the form of the Chinese immigrant family?

To narrow the scope of discussion, I focus on two films: *The Wedding Banquet* and *Saving Face*. These two films are juxtaposed and studied because of their similarities: both films are made by Taiwanese-American filmmakers – Ang Lee as a second-generation male offspring of a conservative mainlander Taiwanese family and Alice Wu as a second-generation immigrant and a lesbian daughter in a Taiwanese American family; both films involve US film producers and aim at global audiences, screened at different international film festivals; each family is preoccupied with the conflict between homosexuality and family needs; and each family has a patriarchal father figure and a young woman coming from the outside serving as an instigator of conflict resolution.

In *The Wedding Banquet,* Mr and Mrs Gao (Sihung Lung, Ah-Lei Gua) are concerned about the marriage of their only son Wai Tung (Winston Chao). Yet Wai Tung has kept the secret from his parents that he is gay and has lived with his Caucasian lover Simon (Mitchell Lichtenstein) for five years in New York. To prevent his parents from trying to send him more potential bride candidates, at Simon's suggestion Wai Tung arranges a paper marriage with his tenant Wei Wei (May Chin). In return, Wei Wei would get her green card. However, Mr and Mrs Gao invite themselves over to get to know their daughter-in-law and are heavily disappointed when it turns out that Wai Tung has planned to get married at a sterile and unimpressive city hall. Interrupted by an old family friend Lao Chen, the simple wedding ceremony turns into a lavish wedding banquet. On the wedding night both Wei Wei and Wai Tung get drunk and end up having unprotected sex. This leads to Wei Wei's pregnancy and a subsequent family crisis. The family conflict is eventually resolved: while the parents get a baby to continue the Gao family, Simon also is secretly approved by Mr Gao as a homosexual 'daughter-in-law'.

The story of *Saving Face* spans three generations in a Chinese American family. While the young Chinese American surgeon Wil (Michelle Krusiec) lives in Manhattan, her mother Ma (Joan Chen) and grandparents live in Flushing, the second largest Chinatown in New York City. The plot interweaves and juxtaposes two important secrets. Ma, a 48-year-old widowed mother, is banished from the family when her father discovers that she is pregnant. Refusing to reveal the identity of the baby's father, Ma is forced to move to Manhattan to live with her daughter Wil, who at the same time also attempts to hide a secret from her mother. Wil is in love with the daughter of her boss at the hospital, the dancer Vivian (Lynn Chen). Whereas Ma is pressured by her father to marry Cho, a sweet but boring man, as a condition to be allowed to

return to Flushing, she pressures her daughter Wil to find a boyfriend, when in fact she already knows that Wil is a lesbian and that Vivian is her girlfriend. After several confrontations taking place within and outside the family, both Ma and Wil reconstruct their identities.

Before moving on to the detailed analysis of the cinematic construction of family conflict, and reestablishment of cultural identity, this article first turns to the discussion of 'transnational', since this term cannot be used uncritically and without qualification. Although various terms have been adopted elsewhere, including 'Chinese cinema', 'Chinese national cinema', 'Chinese-language film', 'comparative Chinese cinemas', 'Sinophone cinema' and 'Huallywood', this article adopts the term 'transnational Chinese cinema(s)' (Lu 1997; Berry 2010) to encompass film-making activities that are located in various geographical regions but share cultural traits of 'Chineseness'. The concept serves as a useful research tool to provide insights into the importance of localized transnationalism and transnational locality in studying Chinese-themed movies or Chinese-language films.

## THE THREAT POSED BY HOMOSEXUALITY TO THE MODERN CHINESE FAMILY

Although the more recent *Saving Face* has yet to generate much scholarship, the film *The Wedding Banquet* has been well studied (Ming and Fung

1997; Shih 2000; Marchetti 2000; Berry 2003; Martin 2003; Kloet 2005; Lim 2006), especially with respect to its homosexual themes, since 'it is generally regarded as the first gay film in contemporary Chinese cinemas' (Lim 2006: 41). Homosexuality (accompanied by self-seeking and self-affirmation) and traditional Chinese family values and ethnic culture in diaspora provide melodramatic conflict in contemporary Chinese American families as depicted in the films. However, the flexibility of each family member in both films allows for a resolution of incompatibilities in homosexual and heterosexual practices, in turn giving room for individual expression while at the same time keeping the family intact. The Chinese family has generally been perceived as 'tradition in the face of modernity', and yet the cinematic construction of personal family stories enables us to see how the ideology of a seemingly static tradition can actually accommodate new social needs. It is against this background that I situate the discussion of the representation of homosexuality in these two films.

The ideal traditional Chinese family has been essentially patriarchal, patrilineal and patrilocal (Johnson 2009), with the key pillars being filial piety, which is commonly recognized as China's national essence. It focuses primarily on the indebtedness to parents and elders and the demand of filial obligations. It is considered that hierarchy and obedience play central roles within the codes of filial piety, which is a linchpin for familial and social order.

An interpretation of filial sensibility is related to a set of issues in contemporary society, for instance, transnational mobility, free love, sexual orientation or reproduction. As two informed expressions of filial respect, family continuity and family reputation are also important for understanding Chinese family ethics. Continuity, recognized in China as the primary goal of family, offers an apparently straightforward moral code. The children of any family bear filial responsibility for maintaining the family by producing more children after they have grown up. As Mencius, a close follower of Confucius, put it – *bu xiao you san, wu hou wei da* (Of the three unfilial acts, the worst is having no heir). In the pre-industrial period, it was even written into law. During the Ming and Qing dynasties, if a man had no male offspring he was urged to adopt a male heir of the same surname. According to law, adoption of an heir with a different surname was not allowed. Thus, the notion of family continuity is to ensure the prosperity and maintenance of the family.

A family's prosperity is then, to a degree, the measurement of family reputation – also called 'family face'. It is generally accepted among Chinese communities that family reputation occupies a central position in establishing family ethics. The family member is expected to perform his or her role properly to maintain the family reputation. As such, face-saving is important, and strongly monitored by the community.

Indeed, both family continuity and family reputation can be viewed as the extended meaning of filial piety. However, homosexuality poses a threat to these Chinese family values, deviating from the Confucian family norms, undermining family lineage and destroying family reputation. Therefore, homosexuality is almost consensually regarded as being 'undesirable', especially among the older generations concerned about family continuity.

However, upon looking more closely at scholarship on Chinese homosexuality, it is clear that it is not a contemporary phenomenon. Kang (2009) has summarized an extensive Chinese vocabulary describing male same-sex relations in China, suggestive of a long history. These terms include duanxiupi (the obsession with the cut sleeve), fentaozhihao (the love of sharing a peach),

Longyangjun (the name of a male favourite in history), nanchong (male favourite), nanse (male beauty), nanfeng (southern mode or male mode), xianggong (young gentlemen or Peking opera actors who play female roles working as male prostitutes), tuzi (rabbit), pijing (ass expert), renyao (freak, fairy, or human prodigy), jijian (buggery or sodomy), zouhanlu (to take the land route), houtinghua (flowers of the rear garden), jiangnan zuonü (to use/view a man as a woman) and tongxing lian'ai (same-sex love or homosexuality). The equivalent term for lesbian love is 'mo jing', which means 'women mirror rubbing' (Sang 2003: 199). Despite the patriarchal and patrilineal structure of the Chinese family, the same-sex desire and marriage tried to find ways to eschew the conflict between homosexual relationships and bearing children to continue the family and maintain the family reputation.

In contemporary China, homosexuality and family continuity seem to be more at odds, as the polygamous marriage was abolished and monogamy had established itself as the dominant moral standard. The old sociocultural environment that allowed the coexistence of the homosexual relationships and the polygamous heterosexual marriage was eliminated, resulting in the disappearance of the traditional homosexuality paradigm. Whether the homosexual in China has now been more repressed and is circumscribed to a life of public invisibility and private shame, or whether homosexuality is a private or public issue is still up to debate, one cannot overlook the ongoing negotiation process between queer identity, activism and governmentality in China, as Bao (2018) has documented how the term tongzhi, which means 'comrade' in the communist dominant discourse, has become a popular term referring to gay people and sexual minorities more broadly.

Rather than a biological explanation, homosexuality is still commonly seen in China today to be a cultural phenomenon, imported from the West, even though there has been a well-established literature that shows a rather tolerant tradition for homosexual love between men in ancient China (Hinsch 1990). In the Chinese immigrant community in the United States, homosexuality is often portrayed as influences of western culture and a sign of the rejection of one's own ethnic culture in favour of acculturation to a more powerful 'white' culture (Chan 1989; Neil 2011; Ruan 2013). Homosexuality is generally considered to have elements of contagion that should be eradicated, or an abnormal behaviour that can be corrected, as it poses a threat to the modern Chinese family. In the face of two prominent issues – Chinese ethical values concerning marriage and procreation, and preserving ethnic Chinese culture in the context of immigration – transnational Chinese films fixate on the negotiation of Chinese family culture, and sexual, gender and ethnic identities.

Both Ang Lee and Alice Wu show the conflict and negotiation of Chinese family ethics and homosexual desires, namely, the family demands and the individual's needs. Interestingly, in both films the patriarchal family order seems to be secured, or supervised, to say the least, by the mother figure – Mrs. Gao in *The Wedding Banquet* and Ma in *Saving Face*.

In *Saving Face*, Wil's mother Ma appears to the audience as both victim and victimizer, and both liberal and traditional. As a middle-aged Chinese widow, Ma lives in a Chinese community in New York with her parents. Her father is a respectable scholar, a community leader and a devoted follower of traditional Chinese culture. As the emotional strictures imposed by ethnicity and family seem to be the least escapable ones, the figure of Ma in whom Wu places her vision for liberal change is often trapped. Having difficulty in reconciling her

own needs with family needs, she often resorts to exactly the same traditional Chinese cultural values from which she is trying to break free. Thus, in most cases Ma is presented as a typical Chinese daughter and mother. To please her father, she was forced to marry a man who she did not love, and has been a widow for many years. Like every other Chinese mother in the film, she is concerned about her daughter's clothes, friends and marriage, and frequently arranges dates for Wil.

Ma distrusts Vivian, Wil's secret lover, the family outsider. Even though Vivian is Chinese, her broken Mandarin does not bring her closer to Ma. When Wil brings Vivian over for dinner and tells Ma that Vivian is a dancer, Ma deliberately interprets it as 'wu nv' (a Chinese word referring to dancing girls, who in fact practice prostitution). Ma demeaning Vivian's profession epitomizes Vivian's exclusion. The interaction becomes more complicated when the camera captures Ma's look of embarrassment when asked by Vivian, 'How is your baby doing?' Ma strategically turns to Wil and pats her, 'My baby is fine, but she is too busy and I can barely see her'. For Ma, the pregnancy is still a family 'secret' that should not be shared with anyone outside the family, let alone discussed over dinner. When Ma realizes the extent of Vivian's relationship with Wil, she soon shifts the topic to Vivian's boyfriend, and tries to set up Vivian with Jay, Wil's black neighbour. In a way one can interpret Ma's behaviour as an attempt to exclude Vivian from Wil's life, so as to 'correct' her daughter's sexual orientation. Although Ma is aware that her daughter is a lesbian, she believes that homosexuality can be cured with proper family influence and surroundings.

Directly after her break-up with Vivian, Wil decides to disclose the 'secret'. She tells her mother that she loves her, but that she is also gay. In comparison with Mrs Gao's reaction, Ma appears to be rather calm, 'How can you say those two things at once? How can you tell me you love me, and then throw that in my face? I am not a bad mother. My daughter is not gay'. Yet there is a point of similarity between these two mothers' reactions: in both cases homosexuality is denied for its association with ethnic and cultural practice. According to Mrs. Gao's logic, her son was dating girls when he was in Taiwan, and so it must be Simon – the ethnic and cultural other – who has set a bad example. Ma's logic indicates that homosexuality aligns more with bad ideology, which discards her ethnic background and family education. Both mothers attribute homosexuality to the effect of Americanization.

At the same time, Ma is the object of blame from her father, coming from the same tradition she applies to her daughter. For Ma's father, Ma is 'the biggest disgrace, the ultimate shame', and 'no daughter has shamed her parents more' because of her scandalous pregnancy. Ma's refusal to reveal the identity of the baby's father makes her father furious. He yells at her, 'What have we done to deserve this? When I think of all we've sacrificed in the old country, to give you kids a better life in the new one. Had I known, I would have left you behind in the mainland'. Just as Ma's sorrow seems to result from heterosexual patriarchal culture, Wil too is victimized by a similar domination within Chinese family life. At a time when Ma feels the need to correct Wil's mistakes, she plays the maternal card and refers to Wil as the 'ungrateful' daughter. One can note the remarks made by Ma whenever she feels disrespected, 'who worked nights so you could eat? Who stayed in labor without painkillers, so you wouldn't turn dim-witted like your cousin Jimmy?'

The grandmother's death serves as a turning point in the film: it drives Ma to marry a man to fulfil her father's wish, and yet it also drives the mother and

daughter together, when the daughter shows up to interrupt the wedding, thereby saving Ma from an unwanted marriage. As a result, the wedding is stopped, the identity of Ma's secret lover is revealed, the guests are astonished and Ma runs away from the ceremony. It is the reconciliation of two selves inside Ma that turns her into a new woman, eventually serving to empower her daughter. It is not until she accompanies Vivian's mother to bring the separated lovers back together that she finally achieves her personal enlightenment and becomes a mother in a real sense. Thus, *Saving Face* places narrative emphasis on a journey from maternal loss to regaining maternal presence.

## THE PROGRESS OF SELF-IDENTIFICATION

Sexual identity follows different trajectories through Wai Tung and Wil in *The Wedding Banquet* and *Saving Face*, explained by, first, the fact that the former is shot from a dominant male perspective while a female point of view is more privileged in *Saving Face*, and second, the juxtaposition of two different systems as being compatible in *The Wedding Banquet*, and an emergent liberal view as to what counts as a modern family in *Saving Face*.

While *The Wedding Banquet* is still told from the dominant male perspective, what is privileged in *Saving Face* is a female point of view. The male figures are mostly peripheral supporting cast. The mother–daughter relationship occupies a central role, as the film focuses on female protagonists and the changing female consciousness arising from their development. Identity appears to be an evolving process defined by one's relations with others.

The film narrative consistently points to the dilemma that Wil, as a lesbian Chinese woman, has to face. Wil's life is divided between her career as a promising Manhattan surgeon and her family living in Flushing. Before she becomes involved with Vivian, her life is punctuated with matchmaking dances set up by her mother. However, her life is abruptly changed after Ma shows up pregnant on her doorstep. Wil is forced to combine two very different worlds embodied by a Chinese mother who insists on her daughter's heterosexual marriage and by her Americanized lover who wants Wil to come out of the closet. Similar to *The Wedding Banquet*, where Lee arranges Wai Tung to marry a Chinese woman to satisfy his parents' needs, Wu explores lesbianism in *Saving Face* by depicting the closeted Wil as hiding behind her job and the occasional heterosexual date set up by her mother. In this way, Wil is able to keep her 'secret' from her mother. Nevertheless, Wil's sexual identity is progressively revealed in her relationship with Vivian.

Wil's reluctance to acknowledge her lesbian feelings and identity is made most visible by three scenes: the scene in which Vivian is teaching Wil 'how to fall without hurting yourself' set in Vivian's apartment, the park scene on Vivian's birthday and the airport departure scene.

In the first aforementioned scene, after Vivian demonstrates how to fall without hurting oneself, Wil is too awkward to practice. The angle of the camera places the two characters in the centre of the frame facing each other. While Vivian's body is rather relaxed and soft, Wil's appears to be stiff. With a medium shot, the film shows Vivian holding Wil's arms and opening them next to her sides. The following scene shows that Vivian leans forward and gets very close to Wil's body, and then suddenly Wil falls. Wil chooses to fall to reject the intense sexual attraction.

On the day of Vivian's birthday, the protagonists are depicted meeting in the park and yet the fence separates their bodies. The camera captures them holding hands across the fence, and soon cuts to a shot of Wil taking her hand away after she is asked by Vivian to give her a birthday kiss. When Vivian asks Wil where she was last night, Wil's cell phone rings. The camera shows disappointment on Vivian's face and embarrassment on Wil's.

Following her mother Ma's suggestion, when Wil rushes to the airport to persuade Vivian not to go to Paris, Vivian says to Wil, 'You're too scared to look the world in the eye, and let it watch you fall in love. You're off and running without a fight'. Vivian's decision to leave Wil is visualized through a shot of her disappointed face upon seeing Wil's suggestive body movement – her lowering of her head as a reaction to her last request, 'Kiss me. Right here, in front of all these people'. What Vivian demands from Wil is a symbolic act of coming out of the closet, a self-acceptance and reaffirmation of her gay identity, and the integration of her private and public identities. Being subject to the public gaze, Wil's reaction has reinforced the closet.

Since *Saving Face* privileges the female voice to that of the male, male figures are therefore peripheral supporting cast. Accordingly, this article argues that the happy ending of the film – or the resolution of the family conflict – is made possible mostly through the ambivalence of the mother figure. The triangular relations among Wil, Ma and Vivian play a crucial role in the achievement of personhood and the empowerment of the female characters. The progressive liberating process of coming out of the closet embraced by Ma and Wil in the end also invokes cultural change in the Chinese American community.

## A GRADUAL AWAKENING OF FEMALE CONSCIOUSNESS IN *SAVING FACE*

Although Ma strives to be a good daughter and mother, she is not portrayed in traditional roles. On the contrary, she appears to be liberal and openly defies the norms set by the family and the community, given the fact that she is pregnant and decides to keep the baby without revealing the identity of the father. Ma's pregnancy not only functions as a dramatic element that destabilizes the conservative Chinese community but also makes the everyday mother–daughter interactions possible as it provides an ideal reason for her to move in with her daughter. Ma's autonomy over her own body is reflected, first, in her pregnancy, and second, in maximizing the range of options available to her, which enhances her bodily autonomy. Here I focus on one particular sequence.

Wu strategically arranges two thematically parallel stories: in the evening when Vivian takes Wil back to her apartment, Ma at the same time is also breaking free from sexual repression by committing a socially 'inappropriate' act of watching sexually explicit DVDs. To show two stories happening simultaneously, Wu alternates between the different locations: Wil and Vivian are shown together first in a clothing shop and then in Vivian's apartment; Ma is first placed in a street and later in Wil's apartment.

The camera cuts from Wil and Vivian to Ma, following her wandering in the street. The mother is eating chips and looking around. The camera offers a medium close-up of her face, suggestive of her curiosity about the world around her. Ma wanders into a video shop asking for Chinese movies. The camera focuses on Ma's eyes and follows her gaze around the DVD collection

on the shelf. What appear in the frame are *The Last Emperor* (in which Joan Chen was cast in a major role), *The Joy Luck Club* and some Asian porn films.

The interesting part begins when Ma stops in front of the porn movies: she looks first to the left and then to the right. After some hesitance, she disappears from the frame and appears again. Wu intercuts from close-up shots of Wil and Vivian kissing in Vivian's apartment to a long shot of Ma sitting on the couch watching television. The camera zooms in and focuses on Ma holding the cushion tightly. The director leaves the image that Ma is watching off-screen, and yet she keeps the diegetic sound, 'Who is your Asian daddy?' At this moment, the audience realizes that Ma has rented a pornographic film.

In her essay 'Film bodies: Gender, genre, and excess', Linda Williams categorizes porn, horror and melodrama as 'body genres'. As she suggests, the porn film strives to move the spectator to sexual arousal. As a result, the body of the spectator is caught up in mimicking the sensationally displayed bodies on the screen. In *Hard Core: Power, Pleasure and the Frenzy of the Visible*, Williams argues, 'pornography [has] long been a myth of sexual pleasure told from the point of view of men with the power to exploit and objectify the sexuality of women' (1990: 22). While porn is traditionally made for men and about women, women can also appropriate the dominant form of heterosexual pornography for their own readings. As McNair says, 'in the private worlds of fantasy and sexual relationships […] women have increasingly used pornography – subversively decoding male-orientated material on the one hand, consuming material produced by women for women on the other' (1996: 129). Therefore, by depicting Ma walking into the video shop under the male gaze, and watching sexual scenes in the movie that she rents, the film suggests that the mother has reclaimed autonomy over her own body.

The values that Ma embodies are socially constructed, but at the same time they are in constant negotiation and interaction by individual and group. Cultural life in the Chinese American community does not remain static; instead, it underlies a process of constant formation and change due to new cultural influences. To further illustrate this point, I compare the concluding sequence with a dance party sequence near the beginning of the film; both are taking place in the dance hall in the Chinese restaurant, consisting of almost the same group of people.

The first of the two selected sequences provides the site where Wil first meets Vivian, although later we learn that Vivian has remembered an encounter with Wil from when she was 8 years old. The closing sequence is meant to reunite the two lovers. The final scene deliberately echoes the earlier scene. In the first scene both Wil and her date Raymond are aware that their mothers have tried to set them up, and yet they are willing to play the game, which offers two points: on the one hand, Raymond attempts to protect Wil from the Chinese community that is not ready to accept Wil's homosexuality; on the other, by introducing Wil to Vivian through Raymond, the encounter between Wil and Vivian in the future is predicted. Wil and Raymond, while striving to satisfy their parents, seek to fulfil their own needs outside the traditional family roles. The ideology of holding the family together also explains why the grandfather is forced to accept the unconventional relationships of Wil and Ma in the closing scene. A comparison of these two sequences demonstrates the restructuring of the Chinese community that is at the same time defined and shaped by traditional patriarchy, heterosexuality and family-kinship systems.

The *mise en scène* suggests that the dance party is defined in an explicitly heterosexual and ethnic manner. First, the dancehall – a performing

stage – evokes a sense of collective identity, as the group exclusively consists of Chinese participants. This explains why Mrs. Wong is upset when her son Raymond is dating a white girl. Nevertheless, the mixed use of English and Chinese at the party suggests the 'hybrid' nature of the community, and the possibility of breaking down the old ethnic and cultural exclusiveness.

Second, through framing and editing, the filmmaker hints at the social reinforcement of heterosexual boundaries. The social separation of men and women is conveyed visually. The camera switches between shots with only men and shots with only women, indicating that both occupy different spaces and are socially separated. The two groups are facing each other. The editing creates an opposition of male and female groups. After the camera alternates a few times between the long and medium shot, between all-female and all-male groups, it cuts to a medium close-up of Ma's face, who obviously is embarrassed by the discussion of a group of Chinese women about the divorce of Vivian's mother. Other Chinese women surround Ma, as if she were one of them, and yet the isolated shot singles her out from the rest. In this respect, the display of the scenes at the dance hall has added a further dimension of identification with others.

The heterosexually defined community is visually constructed by the dancing couples. Davis summarizes that 'dance is commonly described as a courtship activity, as a means of getting sex, or as a male predatory activity' (Davis 2000: 228–29). Ward points out that 'dance is not just a means to sex (although of course it may be such) but […] can be a form of sexual expression in itself' (Ward 1993: 22). Unsurprisingly, the dance area functions as a stage on which the 'performance' of the participants constitutes their subjectivity and their sexual identity. They are placed under the social gaze. Thus, one can see that only the opposite-sex couples are dancing here and the heterosexist assumption is implied and emphasized in the scene. Clearly Wil and her male dancing partner are playing along with the rules.

Third, ideologically speaking, the notion of inclusion and exclusion is applied to perpetuate the binary opposition of heterosexuality–homosexuality, male–female and Chinese-American. While the camera switches between different groups, it also gives a single isolated long shot of Jenny, Vivian's divorced mother, who is sitting alone. The long shot distances Jenny in the far background. The fact that she is left alone suggests that she is different from the group, as illustrated by the remark made by a woman in the group, 'Why be like those Americans, divorcing all the time?' The collective body of values and beliefs by which the ethnic Chinese group is defined and identified is challenged by Jenny and her divorce, subsequently alienating her from the group.

If the beginning of the film more or less shows a clearly defined set of social rules that are meant to protect ethnic traditions, the closing sequence serves to challenge the assertion of social norms and eliminate the traditional restrictions placed on ethnic group and family relationships. In the closing scene, the basic assumption that everyone should be heterosexual is broken, signified by the fact that two female characters are shown dancing together. Their climactic reunification kiss implies a symbolic homecoming for Wil, who is no longer following the rules of the heterosexual social contract. Eventually she comes out of the closet. The grandfather who holds on to Chinese values against American culture appears to be a defeated patriarchal figure. In reaction to the remark by a Chinese man that 'the world is getting too hard to predict', he says, 'It just keeps getting worse'.

The film presents a compassionate view of the lesbian relationship and the Chinese community in transition: some participants leave the dance hall but some choose to stay and to dance to the music. The exploration of gender and sexual identity is contained mainly in the stories of Wil and Ma, and yet the effort to empower less privileged groups such as women and homosexuals is complex in the sense that it involves several female characters – grandmother, Ma, Jenny, Wil and Vivian – that are from three different generations and are shaped by different cultural and social factors. Nevertheless, the negotiation of family values is ongoing, as suggested by the closing lines of the film. The grandfather is not off the stage, as he speaks, 'the moment that girl is born, I'm coming over every day. God knows how she'll turn out if she's brought up by you two'.

## CONCLUSION

Chinese American subjects are a powerful geo-cultural space and a rich middle ground that can move beyond the cultural boundaries of China and the United States. As Ang (2001: 34) puts it, displaced people are 'fundamentally and inevitably transnational in their scope, always linking the local and the global, the here and the there, past and present', and they 'have the potential to unsettle static, essentialist and totalitarian conceptions of 'national culture' or 'national identity' which are firmly rooted in geography and history'.

The representation of the diasporic Chinese family is a transnational phenomenon, collecting images not only of China but of America, not only of traditional Chinese family values but also of modern ones. *The Wedding Banquet* and *Saving Face* emerged in a context where traditional Chinese culture continues to affect and conflict with the experience of modern Chinese family living in the United States. An examination of the multifaceted and intertwined relationships between sexuality, gender and ethnicity reveals the dialectic movement between the changing social settings and people's interactions with these changes. The conflicts are displayed as a result of modernization and migration, leading inevitably to the transformation of family structures and values.

By reworking traditional Chinese values and the socially constructed signifying system in the context of transnational mobility, these two films illustrate the negotiation process of the national, the ethnic and the transnational. At the same time, though, the resolutions are achieved in different ways in two films. *The Wedding Banquet* offers a set of coping strategies for different needs, and family continuity is achieved at the expense of the less privileged – in this case Wei Wei. In comparison, *Saving Face* is more liberal, which can be viewed by the gradual awakening of female consciousness. While the sexual 'other' is silenced and tolerated as a family secret in *The Wedding Banquet*, *Saving Face* acknowledges and embraces the difference. The contrast perhaps has to do with the different positionality of the filmmakers. As a second-generation offspring of a conservative Taiwanese family, Lee tends to resort to traditional Chinese culture for resolution for keeping the family intact: using *renqing* to make Wei Wei keep the baby, accepting Simon as a 'good' foreigner and tolerating the homosexual relation alongside the heterosexual marriage. On the other hand, as a second-generation immigrant, Alice Wu has less attachment to the Chinese tradition. The reputation and face of family as a collective unit – which functions as the main self-governing mechanism in the Chinese context – is challenged by the individualization and empowerment of women

and by the changing social and cultural context. The sexual liberation and female empowerment even have gradually changed the Chinese American community, as the film suggests.

By analysing the conflict and resolution of the Chinese family tales through a transnational lens, I have sought to illuminate the dynamic process of constructing a Chinese identity, which seeks to blend sexual orientation and ethnic identity. 'Chineseness' in these two films is constructed and rearticulated through the interpretation of the experiences embodied in different characters. To this end, both films put the traditional Chinese family ethics into question, if not to delegitimize it.

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