

In Search of Self-Narratives: (Re) Imagining Intimacy and Diasporic Identities in Ang Lee's *The Wedding Banquet* and Alice Wu's *Saving Face*

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Thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts in the Department of Asian & Middle Eastern Studies in The Graduate School of Duke University
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ABSTRACT

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Abstract

This project explores the intersection between diasporic identity negotiation, gender, sexuality, and multi-cultural experiences portrayed in Ang Lee's *The Wedding Banquet* (1993) and Alice Wu's *Saving Face* (2004). It features two main chapters, an introduction, and a conclusion. Chapter One focuses on the intimacy aspect in *The Wedding Banquet*, examining how it intersects with gender and sexuality in promoting cross-cultural identity formation. Through analyzing intimacy as the site of contestation between alienation, ambivalence, and sacrificial narratives, all of which contribute to the formation of a nuanced, multi-layered Asian American identity. I argue that Lee's portrayal of familial intimacy challenges stereotypical depictions of Asian American family units and proffers a nuanced yet intricate understanding of cross-cultural identity formation, uncovering the dilemma and hypocrisy inherent in the Gao family narrative that is manifested as social critique under the guise of a romantic comedy. Chapter Two analyzes *Saving Face*, focusing on the intersection between the discourses of indebtedness, guilt, and female liberation. I argue that by paralleling the dilemma and different forms of oppression and alienation faced by Hwei-Lan and Wil, Wu provides insight into the elastic relationship between the liberation discourse and indebtedness, guilt, and filial responsibilities of 'Chinese daughters'. Through the constant negotiations of these elements, self-narrativity is achieved through the construction of flexible identities that strive to attend to both filial responsibilities and the search for individual narratives and autonomy.

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1. Introduction

Immigration is not simply geographical relocation, as it also challenges the immigrant's identities in many other aspects. Cultural identity, for instance, relates to adopting the culture of the host country while making necessary adaptations to their native culture accordingly. During this process, the immigrants' identity is often reconstructed to survive the alien environment, and sometimes their native culture is completely abandoned. During this process, assimilation becomes the perpetual theme in identity formation, which often involves negotiation between the native culture and the host culture. Further, both first-generation and second-generation immigrants are equally likely to be challenged by the differences between their native and host cultures, as identity negotiation seems to be a perpetual theme when it comes to immigration.

Though it has gained a considerable amount of media representation in recent years, Asian Americans are historically categorized as minorities. For instance, from as early as the 1850s California Gold Rush, stereotyping has been plaguing the identity formation of Chinese laborers in the United States, flattening their voices and narratives into over-generalized tropes, a phenomenon that needs to be demystified before a comprehensive, nuanced narrative for Asian Americans could be achieved. In this sense, Ang Lee's *The Wedding Banquet* (1993), and Alice Wu's *Saving Face* (2004), the two films tackling Taiwanese and Chinese family issues could be considered the most representative of its genre. Both films tackle similar family issues, including generational

conflicts, identity negotiation, homosexuality under a heteronormative social order, and the discourse on liberation, each film proffers different solutions to defuse the various types of ideological conflicts that yields opposing narratives on essentially the same issue.

The Wedding Banquet, directed by Ang Lee and released in 1993, centers around a staged wedding that was intended to cover up the protagonist's homosexuality. Gao Wai-Tung, a successful Taiwanese-American businessman living with his boyfriend Simon in New York, marries Weiwei, a Chinese illegal immigrant in need of a green card, to satiate the Gao couple's obsession for a grandchild. Though the staged wedding was initially intended to only stretch as far as a marriage certificate, the Gao couple's uninvited visit to New York escalated the event into a lavish wedding banquet that diverged drastically from Wai-Tung's initial plan. Alice Wu's *Saving Face* explores similar themes. The protagonist, Wilhelmina (Wil) Pang, is the daughter of a Chinese American immigrant family, a successful surgeon in her twenties who navigates through her biological family with caution as her homosexual desires are considered deviant in the eye of her grandfather, Mr. Gao, a university professor who immigrated to the US decades ago. While Wil at first appears to have found the balance between concealing her romantic relationship with openly lesbian ballet dancer Vivian and performing her duty as a Chinese American daughter, the unexpected pregnancy of Hwei-Lan, the mother of Wil, breaks the equilibrium. Exiled from her parents' residence because of the unborn,

fatherless baby, Hwei-Lan moves into Wil's apartment, impeding the blossoming relationship between Wil and Vivian.

Both films explore the themes of identity negotiation, the generational dynamic, and homosexuality under a heteronormative, patriarchal social structure. From the homosexual child, the overbearing father figures, and the split identities, to the resolution proposed for 'happy endings', both films proffer valuable insights into the narratives on Taiwanese American and Chinese American communities that contribute to the demystification of stereotypes surrounding these two specific groups. However, a closer examination and comparison of these films reveal that they are in fact composed of opposition tones. While the theme of identity negotiation is centralized in both films, it is achieved through different mechanisms and with different emphases. The storyline in *The Wedding Banquet* revolves around different forms of sacrifice: from Wai-Tung forfeiting the freedom of explicating his sexuality to maintain the 'face' of the Gao family that prevents it from falling apart, to the Gao couple's demand for a grandson as a moral reciprocation for raising Wai-Tung, to Mrs. Gao's ignorance and stance on patriarchy, the Gao family is stratified into two layers, with the harmonious, model family image on the surface for public demonstration, while underneath the illusion of happiness, each member keeps their own secret which, once revealed, would tear the Gao family apart. In this sense, *The Wedding Banquet* is essentially a tragedy, though Ang Lee's mastery of cinematic language camouflages the misery of the characters and turns it into a romantic

comedy, which is how the film is usually categorized. The audience witnesses Wai-Tung's liberated self slowly retreating back into the state of oppression created by heteronormativity and patriarchy, and the presence of the Gao couple, which is supposed to be heart-warming, becomes a cruel reminder of his filial responsibility as a Chinese son. Interestingly, alienation in *The Wedding Banquet* necessitates the act of sustaining filial relationships within the Gao family, which is Lee's use of irony in commenting on the hypocritical and illusive image of a model family masking the scattered parent-child relationship within the Gao family.

On the contrary, in *Saving Face*, alienation caused by generational conflicts and cultural clashes becomes the element impeding Wil's identity formation process and obstructing the embracing of her sexuality. Wu's film starts with Wil hiding in the closet to maintain peace with Hwei-Lan and Grandpa, both of whom appear to be on the side of heteronormativity and uphold traditional Chinese value systems. As the plot proceeds forward, the audience witnesses the dilemma of familial responsibilities that traps Wil between the ambiguous state of identity formation slowly decomposing, with the reveal of Hwei-Lan's secret-having an affair with Xiao Yu, a man of Wil's age, consequently bearing his child, and later Wil's coming out to Hwei-Lan, Wu turns what appears to be a story of generational conflicts in Chinese American immigrant families into a tale of liberation: the narrative progression of Wil and Hwei-Lan liberates women from the male gaze, and Chinese Americans from the model minority myth. The ending of the film

suggests the ridicule of clinging onto traditional ideologies in a foreign environment, which usually urges adaptations and modifications accordingly. Further, the courage demonstrated by the characters in embracing changes that diverge from the beliefs they are accustomed to, be it Grandpa's acceptance of Hwei-Lan's relationship with Xiao Yu, or Wil's homosexuality, contributes to the co-existence between queer futurity and stringent gender norms and the heteronormative discourse within the diegesis of the film. Compared to the masked tragedy portrayed in *The Wedding Banquet*, the resolution proposed in *Saving Face* appears to be applaudable as the flexible identities developed by the two main female protagonists reconcile with, and to some extent, eliminate the ambiguity that haunts Wai-Tung's identity reconstruction.

Both *The Wedding Banquet* and *Saving Face* portray the theme of closetedness, and the dynamics between being in and out of the closet permeate the character development of the two homosexual protagonists. To discuss the mechanism through which the concept of the 'closet' simultaneously impedes and facilitates the pursuit of liberation and the process of identity negotiation, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's book *Epistemology of the Closet* should be foregrounded in examining the meaning of the concept of 'the closet'. Sedgwick's focus on the binarized constructions, for instance, the homo/heterosexual binary, offers insight into the artificial nature of the closet, modifying and simultaneously restricting how Western society comprehends sexuality and power

relations. Sedgwick also argues that the act of coming out has ripple effects on the homosexual individual's family, and it might cause negative influences as well (80).

Ang Lee's canonical status in the realm of filmmaking has attracted much scholarship. Lee's mastery of cinematic language is one of the aspects that has generated much discussion. For example, in William Leung's article, "So Queer Yet So Straight: Ang Lee's *The Wedding Banquet* and *Brokeback Mountain*," Lee's filming style fuses neutrality with diversity, facilitating the production of queer films that diverges from the usual theme of subversion, aggression prevalent in 'New Queer Cinema' (25;26). Leung further contends Lee's cross-cultural experience positions him as an 'outsider working from the inside,' (26) contributing largely to his unique brand of cinematic language in the two queer-centered films that discuss queer identities without foregrounding homosexuality (38).

While much scholarship has been produced on Lee's auteur status, his works attract equal attention in the realm of cultural studies, where a hybrid identity is proposed to be a solution to multi-cultural identities. For instance, in the article "Manifestation of Chinese and American Values in *The Wedding Banquet*," scholar Yu Jiefei argues that the cultural identity of the protagonists in Lee's film *The Wedding Banquet* is a constant contestation between their will to assimilate into the US culture and the 'hybridity-phobia' inherent in the host culture, and their diasporic identities will only be stabilized with the balance found in-between the two cultures (1103-1004). Yu's

argument illuminates the dilemma of immigrants, especially the first-generation immigrants' will to assimilate into the foreign culture while still retaining the beliefs and practices in their native culture. In her other article, "Seeking Identities Across the Worlds," Yu further illustrates the implication of hybridity in cultural identities and argues that the fusion between the native and host cultures is to be considered a site for resistance against the dominance and arbitrary system of identity formation imposed by the dominant culture to cultural minorities (99). Yu's argument could be conceptually situated within a post-colonial framework, where the voice of the subaltern is under scrutiny. In Chapter Three of his book *Racial Castration: Managing Masculinity in Asian America*, David Eng takes up the challenge of making whiteness visible (137). Eng explores the intersectionality between race, gender, and sexuality in the formation of Asian American racial identities. Focusing on David Henry Hwang's canonical drama *M. Butterfly*, Eng argues that even in a Western context, heteronormativity is sustained by the effacement and marginalization of gender minorities, epitomized by Gallimard's concealing his homosexual desire in exchange for the acceptance of heteronormativity that rewards him with reputation and social standings, at the cost of turning himself into the subject of fetishism of his superior Toulon (163;164).

In one way or another, Chapter Three could be seen as Eng's urge for a reexamination of heteronormative discourse and whiteness as the universalized standards, upon which other racial identities and sexualities are formed and evaluated (138).

Gallimard's tragic ending in *M. Butterfly* reveals the power of heteronormative discourse, and the willful ignorance of Song's genitalia reveals the insecurity of white masculinity, which Eng contends hinges upon a clear boundary between white/non-white and hetero/homosexual identities.

Reticence appears to be another element under discussion regarding Lee's films. In his article "Repression, silence, and cinematic language," Dhawa points out that Lee's use of silence in *Brokeback Mountain* adheres to the correlation between silence and sensibility in East Asian cultures (92). Though the use of silence is justified in Lee's usual themes of hidden emotions and inexplicable feelings, whose affect could be maximized when concealed behind the silent power of reticence, it has the potential to pose detrimental consequences to Asians as well. In her book *Articulating Silence*, Cheung King-Kok reveals the abusive power of silence in other Asian Americans. As Cheung contends, the image of the often quiet, speechless Asians is associated with stigmatized and feminized images, contributing to the East-West binary (2).

Though the scholarships on *Saving Face* appear to be not as abundant as that on *The Wedding Banquet*, the exploration of identity construction also frequently appears in articles analyzing the film. In many ways, *Saving Face* witnesses the protagonists breaking their silent narrative in searching for visibility and identity. Further, although the narrative lens through which the story is told is not explicitly Western-centric, the defiance against a white-dominant narrative becomes the backdrop of *Saving Face*, which

Wu takes the chance to rectify the stereotypical images regarding Chinese women. Zhang argues in her article “Deconstructing the Other’s Other”, that Wu challenges the binarized construction of East and West by de-feminizing Wil and portraying her co-existence with hospital colleague Randi (97-99). One of the similarities between *The Wedding Banquet* and *Saving Face* is the shared theme of reticence. Scholars Liu Jen-peng, and Ding Naifei in their article “含蓄美學與酷兒政略” discuss the function and implication of reticence in the heteronormative Taiwanese society. Focusing on the novel *The Unfilial Daughter* (《逆女》), they proffer insight into the correlation between reticence and the marginalization of homosexual individuals in Taiwan. As Ding and Liu contend, ‘所以，讓不可說的留在陰暗的影子下面吧，那麼秩序就可以永保，’ (‘So, let the unspeakable remain under the shadow of darkness, and order will be preserved,’ 37) the ‘shadowy’ (‘陰暗的影子’) existence propels the dominance of heteronormativity, creating what they refer to as a ‘gentle’ form of homophobia (32). Ding and Liu’s argument will help us comprehend Wil’s split identity portrayed in the first two-thirds of the film, where the intimate scene between Wil and Vivian only takes at night, echoing the ‘shadowy’ status Ding and Liu refer to. Further, the term ‘不可說的’ (‘the unspeakable’) points to the feeling of guilt and indebtedness deeply rooted in the character development of both Wil and Hwei-Lan as their sexuality fails to comply with the image of a ‘filial daughter’ defined by traditional Chinese value systems.

Theoretically based upon the above-mentioned works, this thesis project analyzes the elements of diasporic identity construction, intimacy and the discourse of liberation in *The Wedding Banquet* and *Saving Face*. Rooted in diasporic identity construction, my thesis aims to explore the intersection of race, gender, and sexuality in forming multicultural identities. This project has two main body chapters analyzing *The Wedding Banquet* and *Saving Face*, respectively. Chapter One explores the mechanism through which the pursuit of familial intimacy exposes the hidden struggles of homosexual individuals as disposable bodies, camouflaged by the illusive harmony of a traditional, heteronormative family narrative. The irony in Lee's commentary speaks to the performative, illusive nature of the Gao family image, inviting the audience to reconsider the cost of conformity. Further, within the diagenesis of the film, intimacy becomes a site of contestations for alienation, intimacy, and sacrifice, and the elasticity between these elements creates interstices permeated by ambivalence that encapsulates the dilemma of Asian-American identity formation. Chapter Two focuses on Alice Wu's *Saving Face*, examining themes related to intergenerational conflicts, female liberation, and flexible identities in diasporic identity formations. Contrary to the tragedy in disguise that is *The Wedding Banquet*, *Saving Face* appears to boldly embrace true liberation, which presents the audience with a narrative towards female liberation channeled through constructing a flexible identity that challenges the ambivalence ingrained in the mode of cross-cultural identity construction adopted by the protagonists in *The Wedding Banquet*. In addition,

the female-oriented perspective adopted in *Saving Face* prompts the discussion to the perspective of critical feminism, where different forms of oppression and a more imbalanced power dynamic are portrayed, Wu has the protagonist challenge this norm and cleverly find a way for justice.

2. Chapter One: Intimacy and Identity Construction in Ang Lee's *The Wedding Banquet*

2.1 Introduction

As a melodrama that deals with the issue of sexuality and immigrant identity formation, *The Wedding Banquet* by Ang Lee is no doubt one of the canonical works that portrays the narratives of familial issues and cultural conflicts with much nuance and depth (Lee). The most intriguing aspect of the film is perhaps Lee's ability to weave social commentary with a comedic tone, which in contrast makes the inconspicuous social critique even more fascinating. Focusing on the aspect of intimacy construction, I argue that the film presents an intricate narrative of intimacy that serves as Lee's critique of the hypocrisy inherent in the superficial harmony of the Gao family image. Within the diagenesis of the film, intimacy becomes a site of contestations for alienation, sacrifice, and an alternative reading of womanhood; the elasticity between these elements creates interstices permeated by ambivalence that encapsulates the dilemma of Asian-American identity formation.

2.2 Food As Non-verbal Communication

To start the chapter, I would like to focus on the presence of food, which is highly valued in Chinese culture. I argue that the presence of Chinese culinary cuisine becomes a vicarious method for communicating affection, a tangible link of Wai-Tung's Taiwanese

heritage that serves as a cold reminder of his filial responsibility and exposes the gender hierarchy that runs through the Gao family which plagues Wai-Tung's pursuit of liberation and impedes his embracing of an authentic self.

According to empirical observation and personal experience, the very idea of homesickness is in most cases associated with the yearning for Chinese cuisine that is integrated into the idea of home. In *The Wedding Banquet*, food not only carries the weight of representing the Chinese cultural roots of the protagonist, Wai Tung but the way Lee frames the presence of food points to its hidden significance as a form of women's labor. I argue that food becomes a way of communication and, embodied in the interaction between Weiwei and Mr. Gao, a proxy for Lee's critique of the dynamic between women and patriarchy.

With the absence of articulations of affection, nonverbal communication becomes an alternative method. In the case of *The Wedding Banquet*, the expression of intimacy is outsourced onto culinary cooking and calligraphy (Lee), two subjects that are loaded with cultural significance. Shih argues that in Ang Lee's 'Father Knows Best' trilogy (49), food could be considered an exotic element in the representation of Taiwanese culture when facing a Western market (52). Shih uses the example of *Eat Drink Man Woman* (Lee 1994), another film in the trilogy when contending the gender dynamic weaved into the fetishization of Chinese cuisine in the West: the three good-looking sisters in the film are equated to scrumptious Chinese dishes (53-54). In *The Wedding Banquet*, food has

taken on a double-layered significance. Firstly, similar to Shih's argument on culinary and womanhood (53-54), cooking is represented as one of the standards in evaluating if a woman is qualified to become a wife. For example, when the Gao couple first arrived in the US, Weiwei cooked dinner for them as a gesture of hospitality (Lee); Later, at the dinner table, Mr. Gao was asked to comment on the dish (Lee). 'Right amount of soda, perfect soaking time. Just the right tenderness,' answered Mr. Gao after he chewed the shredded tofu for a few seconds in silence (Lee 00:31:09-00:31:14). Considering the fact that Mr. Gao has no past career as a food critique, his meticulousness and ability to decipher the cooking process simply from its taste indicates his 'professionalism' at being a husband, and the comments from the patriarch in the household decides the wife or daughter-in-law's proficiency in cooking, one of the many criteria in evaluating the 'quality' of a woman in China. As the Chinese saying goes: '上得厅堂, 下得厨房', ideal women are expected to be both presentable in the kitchen as well as hosting guests; thus, Mr. Gao's comments could be seen as the epitome of the self-conflicting criterion regarding ideal wives. For one thing, according to the above-mentioned saying, women are expected to possess a wide variety of skills, which could be interpreted as the expectation for independence and self-sufficiency. For another, similar to the 'perfect' shredded tofu that should be both chewy and tender, women are also expected to be neither overly independent; at the end of the day, her light should, and could, never outshine that of the patriarch's. In the case of *The Wedding Banquet*, validation from Mr.

Gao still becomes the single determinant of whether Weiwei passes the daughter-in-law qualification test, and positive feedback becomes the first step in showing Mr. Gao's welcoming attitude toward a future daughter-in-law. However, we can not simply overlook the fact that all the dishes served on the dinner table were in fact cooked by Simon (Lee), which complicates the dexterity of Mr. Gao's compliments: had he known his validations were directed towards Simon, would he still be as positive?

David Eng argues in his book *Racial Castration*, that the blurred lines between women and labor set the foundation of capital exchanges in transnational patriarchal order (223). Following Eng's argument, one can argue that Weiwei can be considered a surrogate for multiple elements in the film. For one thing, in the dinner scene, the patriarch's validation of the dishes appears to be directed towards Weiwei on the surface, yet a closer scrutinization would reveal that Weiwei's cooking, a form of labor, is in fact a portal to which Mr. Gao builds intimacy with Simon, as all the dishes are produced by Simon. For another, Weiwei's role as a surrogate is more prominent in the alternative family structure proposed at the end of the film, where two homosexual fathers and a heterosexual mother agree to co-parent the unborn child of Wai Tung and Weiwei (Lee). The existence of the unborn child serves as the glue to the Gao family, or, in Eng's terms, her contribution to the exchange of capital (223). To be more specific, the entire plot of the film, from the initiation of staging a wedding to the proposal of a new form of family structure as the final solution, could be seen as different forms of capital exchange, one

way or another. For the former, Simon explicates the motive of faking a wedding, that ‘...we can pay less taxes’ (Lee); for the latter, the child could be seen as Weiwei’s share in the exchange of transnational capital exchange which promises her a less precarious future, as her identity as Wai Tung’s legally wedded wife grants her access to a green card in the US. Equally important is the marriage between Wai Tung and Weiwei that sustains and promises the branching out of the original Gao family patriarchy, though with some alternations. Further, although the new family structure proposed by Weiwei, and the film portrays it as a result of love, one might still speculate whether there are undercurrents that also contributed to Weiwei’s proposal, for instance, her legal citizenship that would lift her out of the ‘abject’ state of being an illegal female immigrant. Certainly, love and understanding are the major factors in this scene, and Weiwei is not the only person benefiting from this exchange either. Aside from less taxes (Lee), the staged marriage also puts a closure to Mr. Gao’s responsibility as a father, which could be analyzed from both perspectives of social expectation. For instance, the unborn child secures the Gao family’s reputation and creates more flexibility for the patriarchy that runs within the family unit: Wai Tung’s homosexuality becomes a ‘no tell no show’ situation where his sexuality is predicated upon the sight of a promised continuation of patrimony. Further, it could also be considered a gesture of saving face for the Gao family, as much expectation of adherence is attached to Mr. Gao’s past career as a military officer (Lee), an occupation that is automatically associated with masculinity

under the heteronormative discourse. Though the appearance of Old Chang might be a convenience for the plot, the existence of this character nevertheless serves as evidence for Mr. Gao's past glory and his imperative to maintain his 'face' by publicly demonstrating that he has a 'perfect' daily, through hosting a grand banquet (Lee).

2.3 Male Hysteria and Generational Intimacy

In Chapter Four of Eng's book *Racial Castration*, male hysteria becomes the focal point of analysis. The concept is historically associated with women as the term derives from 'uterus' in Greek (170-171), but Eng builds his argument following Freud's attempt at clarifying the symptom is not gender-based but instead a psychological condition (173), and contends that hysteria demarcates the line between the universal normative subject, the white, heterosexual male, and their counterparts who are politically, financially in a less advantaged stage compared to the former (179). Therefore, the notion of hysteria could also be interpreted as the male anxiety of invisibility and being abandoned by the patriarchal order. In *The Wedding Banquet*, I argue that both Wai and Mr. Gao have different hysterical moments that serve as their 'common ground' on which they build their intimacy. In one way or another, the common ground points to the continuity of cultural trauma experienced by both Wai Tung and Mr. Gao, accounting for their dual identities and the performativity inherent in the peaceful father-son dynamic. These fabricated identities across generations are all to sustain the imagery of a 'happy'

family, which alludes to Lee's criticism of the rather rigid familial dynamic that runs through the Gao family. However, reading it from another perspective, the two protagonists' mutual deceit and mutual sacrifice for subjectivity become the bridge between heteronormativity and homosexual desires, and it is precisely this type of fabricated identity that works to balance and ameliorate the potential conflicts when the two opposition discourse clashes.

2.4 Sacrifice, Reciprocity, and The Question of Victimhood

Sacrifice appears to be another building block for inter-generational intimacy in *The Wedding Banquet*, with four of the main characters sacrificing on different levels for varying reasons that contribute to generational intimacy in different manners. In this section, I analyze the sacrificial narrative of Mrs. Gao, who appears to be the most 'innocent' character in the film at first glance. The most inspiring aspect of the character of Mrs. Gao is perhaps her embodiment of the relationality inside the question of victimhood, and Lee does so by constructing a narrative of self-sacrifice for Mrs. Gao which ultimately becomes a critique of the transactional nature of the mother-son dynamic.

Firstly, the narrative self-sacrifice constructed by Mrs. Gao demands reciprocity from Wai Tung, contributing to a type of illusional intimacy. Echoing Eng's argument on women's labor in patriarchy (223), Mrs. Gao's character epitomizes the conflation

between the idea of women's labor and women's labor. The above-mentioned lines from Mrs. Gao point to the labor of reproduction, which is probably the core component in women's narrative on sacrifice. For instance, the lines of Mrs. Gao, 'I had a hard time with Wai Tung. He was a Caesarian birth. I almost died' (Lee 01:28:59-01:29:03), and 'I did not know how I raised him [with Mr. Gao away in military]' (Lee 01:29:17-01:29:20) delivered with tears welling up in her eyes, justifies her demands and standards for Wai Tung to be academically successful and morally descent. Fortunately, Wai Tung is indeed a good and pious son, as Mrs. Gao describes him as a '... big, able and handsome man (健康正常的有为青年)' (Lee 01:29:27); but it does not take much effort to realize the image Mrs. Gao has of her son does not align with the reality. Aside from his performative heterosexuality, Wai Tung as a landlord appears to be arbitrary and a bit unreasonable, as he ignores Weiwei's poor living conditions and insists on her paying rent (Lee). Therefore, though from the perspective of Mrs. Gao, Wai Tung is the 'perfect son' she could have, their intimacy becomes the idea of reciprocity that turns their mother-son relationship into a transactional one. Further, one might also argue that the illusional intimacy between Wai and Mrs. Gao only serves as the prelude to the potential failure of her own marriage, had Mr. Gao been a closeted homosexual man all his life and their marriage is only for the purpose of covering up his sexuality, pointing to the illusional intimacy between her and Mr. Gao, exemplified by the scene where Mr. Gao

caresses her hair in the back seat in Simon's car after the wedding banquet (Lee 01:06:26).

Though Mrs. Gao's character faces multiple layers of deceptions that might trick one into arguing the deprivation of her subjectivity, the film does not portray her as completely ignorant of the 'truth'. Though her character is neither overly vocal nor faces much repression in terms of speech, from the viewers' perspective, the sheer amount of ignorance of circumscription imposed by male dominance onto her subjectivity would easily leave the audience with the impression that Mrs. Gao is victimized by the systemic violence targeted towards women and her character is designed in resemblance to a mouthpiece for patriarchy. However, one can not ignore the fact that Wai confesses his sexuality to her but not Mr. Gao, which makes her a part of the white lie that sets the tone of the film (Lee). Further, her line 'We old women sometimes envy young women like you. Independent, well-educated, with your own life' (Lee 01:30:38-01:30:42), is quite telling. Mrs. Gao appears to recognize the fact that she as a woman who married a military general, a job that is usually well-paid and with a high societal reputation, is not presented with many choices regarding career paths to begin with. Further, though she appears to be a defender and active participant in sustaining patriarchal orders with her keen yearning for a grandson (Lee 01:30:30), a system that is historically exploitative, she does not appear to endure physical suffering. This brings the discussion to the definition of victimhood, and in this case, it is highly subjective.

2.5 Nostalgia and Intimacy

Rey Chow argues in her article ‘Women in the Holocene: ethnicity, fantasy, and the film *The Joy Luck Club*’, that the representation of the characters in *The Joy Luck Club* by Wayne Wang is intervened by multiculturalism, where the Asian-American subjectivity is captured by the contestation between ‘fantasy and recuperation’, making the four pairs of mother and daughter grounded in both imagination and reproduction (218). Though *The Joy Luck Club* (Wang) deals with similar topics as *The Wedding Banquet*, the two films approach memory in opposing ways, with the former presenting history through flashbacks and the latter through the presence of old objects (Lee). If the visualization of memories creates a concrete space that parallels the present which contributes directly to the existence of the ‘third space’ within *The Joy Luck Club* (Wang) that appears to be essential to the identity formation of the four mothers, then the ‘third space’ in *The Wedding Banquet* exists because of the absence of such visualization. In other words, the present-oriented structure in *The Wedding Banquet* leaves much space for an imagined past that leaves the question of ‘Chineseness’ partially unanswered. As Chow argues in her article, in *The Joy Luck Club*, the scar on An-mei’s neck is a signifier of women’s ‘origin’ within the patriarchy that is a form of displacement at its core (Chow 213). Chow’s argument could be applied in analyzing the identity construction of Weiwei, and the process is reified in the two different photo albums present in the film. These two photo albums could be seen as a psychological anchor for the personal

histories that preserve the past versions of the characters, either it is Wai Tung's portrait as an infant or the younger Mrs. Gao whose portrait receives praise from Weiwei (Lee 01:28:46). While not explicated, the contrast between the present Mrs. Gao, whose hair is mostly gray and her younger self might contribute to the sentimental moment in the following scene, urging her to question whether her commitment to patriarchy is worthwhile. This argument could be supported by her plea to Weiwei in the sequential scene, where the line 'A woman is still a woman, husband, and children are still most important to us,' (Lee 01:31:02-01:31:06) is delivered by Mrs. Gao with a quivering voice, as if she is seeking validation for her sacrifice from Weiwei, who is practically still as stranger at this point. Echoing Chow's argument, Mrs. Gao's origin can only be traced as far back as the photo album she holds in her hand, and everything before that is left to the audience to imagine. In this sense, the photo in black and white embodies the entire history of Mrs. Gao and becomes the only 'evidence' of her origin. In a similar manner, the identity reconstruction of Weiwei as a legal US citizen is partially based on the wedding photos presented at the end of the film before the Gao couple's departure back to Taiwan (Lee). While everyone is aware of the lies imbricated in these photos, all of the characters choose to ignore facts. In this way, Weiwei's identity has no concrete grounding spot except for those wedding photos, which again appear to be illegitimate, speaking to the exilic nature of immigrant identity reconstruction.

2.6 Gender Violence and Intimacy

Interestingly, within the diagesis of the film, gender violence and intimacy, the two seemingly opposing concepts, intertwine with each other. There are various manifestations of gender violence in *The Wedding Banquet* (Lee), including Mrs. Gao's questionable victimhood, Weiwei's identity as a 'bride of convenience', and, perhaps the most intriguing example of the gender violation opposed to Wai Tung on his wedding day (Lee). All these manifestations of gender violence, with its various perpetrators and victims and of different levels, seem to be Lee's strategic move, putting the nuanced family narratives and the rule of heteronormativity at two opposite ends of the same floating boat, and for the Gao family, balancing the boat is an 'either-or' question: if one end outbalances the other, the boat is destined to sink. Therefore, I argue that the rather distorted relationship between gender violence and intimacy sustains the Gao family patriarchy, and it is, at its core, a critique of the overarching impact of heteronormativity that flatten and erase the interiority of individual narratives.

As discussed in previous sections, whether Mrs. Gao is victimized by patriarchal orders seems to be an unanswerable question, as it is highly subjective and relational. I came to the conclusion that Mrs. Gao seems to be at least partially complicit in perpetuating the patriarchal and heteronormative order, and her character can not be simply defined in terms of black and white. Similar to the nuanced and intricate character of Mrs. Gao, the characters of Weiwei and Waitung are multi-faced as well. To start with,

though the marriage of convenience is proposed by Simon and Wai Tung, Weiwei shows her consent to participate in this lie with the driving force of a promised legal citizenship (Lee); similarly, on their wedding day, though Weiwei and Wai Tung are practically forced into sexual intercourse, Weiwei's consequential pregnancy points to both the fluidity in Wai Tung's sexuality and the inversion of power dynamics that is both subverting and repressing simultaneously. As Angela Davis argues, during wartime, rape is closely tied to the knowledge production of power and dominance (24). The physical intimacy in the raping scene suggests both Wai Tung's psychical forfeiting of the privacy of his body alludes to its broader implication of the systemic abuse against LGBTQ+ groups, where the body becomes the archive for physical violence. Further, in the context of the conventional gender binary, Weiwei's proactiveness subverts the rigid and stymied stereotype of submissive Asian women, to whom sex is a taboo topic that should be avoided at all costs. The articulation of Weiwei's desire that contributes to her savior narrative ventriloquizes heteronormativity.

However, we should not simply overlook the fact that Weiwei is in fact the perpetrator in this situation which invites at least a two-folded interpretation that simultaneously subverts and perpetuates heteronormativity. On the one hand, Weiwei's line, 'I am liberating you' (Lee 01:09:14), and her following act of sexual violation against Wei Tung could be interpreted as showcasing women's subjectivity, as Wai Tung takes the passive side in the situation. On the other hand, echoing what Rana Jaleel

describes as “unwelcomed yes”, referring to the absence of consent that does not require the presence of physical force due to the structural abuse of the narrative of marginalized groups (Jaleel 144). Weiwei’s position as the intruder is also supported by the gaze of heterosexuality, that the sexual intercourse between biological men and biological women adheres to the morale advocated by heteronormative discourses. In addition, the word choice, ‘liberate’ (解放) suggests the dynamic between heterosexuality and homosexuality, whereas the former is considered superior to the latter, echoing what Eng observes as the pathologizing of homosexuality that is considered deviance (Eng 13). Thus, Wai Tung’s resistance against Weiwei is an act of futility, for his ‘no’ is likely to be inaudible in the context of patriarchy that indicates the moral righteousness of sexual conduct between two adults of biological opposite sexes. In addition, alcohol might not be the only thing that contributes to Wai Tung’s quick forfeiting of resistance; rather, in his unconsciousness, Wai Tung understands profoundly the ‘positive’ impact a child could bring to him and his parents. The presence of a child equals the promise of the continuity of the Gao family bloodline that works to sustain the kinship structure that is the sole purpose of the Gao couple’s visit to the US.

In conclusion, the narratives on gender violence portrayed in the film could be interpreted as Lee’s attempt to reveal the rather chaotic interpersonal relationship under the cover of a harmonious family image. Profoundly impacted by the Chinese ideology of ‘he’ (和; harmony), gender violence becomes integrated into the narrative of sacrifice

which takes on a similar role as whiteness as the universalized standard (Eng 138). Lee portrays four out of the five protagonists in the film as Asians, with Simons as the only white character who only takes on a supplementary role; yet, the banquet scene is pivotal and reveals much about the discourse surrounding the idea of ‘face’ in Chinese culture, which I will discuss in more detail in the next section.

2.7 The Meaning of ‘Face’: A Burden, A Catalyst

Echoing the title of the film, the banquet scene is loaded with explicit and implicit cultural symbols. Perhaps here Lee is again subtly inserting another form of insinuation: the quiet and well-orchestrated Western-style wedding, as epitomized in the scene of the wedding registry (Lee); in direct contrast with it is the carnivalesque wedding banquet, with the presence of hundreds of banquet guests and games that are discomfiting for some audience to watch (Lee). The contrast between the two scenes could be understood as an allegory for the binarized construction between the public and the private. Similarly, the redecoration of Simon’s apartment also transfers the private space with a personal touch into a public space that could stand the scrutinization by the Gao couple, which conceptually represents the public eye. Inherent in the discourse of public is the idea of ‘face’, an essential concept with profound impacts in Chinese culture and one of the major driving forces contributing to the wedding of convenience between Wai Tung and Weiwei to maintain the peaceful image within the Gao family only for outsiders to

judge. Echoing the old Chinese saying, ‘家丑不可外扬’, which could be roughly translated as ‘What happens here, stays here’, the concept of ‘face’ becomes the cultural trauma Wai Tung has to live with and the catalyst for Mr. Gao’s wishes for both reputation and social standing.

In terms of Wai Tung, the imperative to ‘save face’ for his father requires him to forfeit his homosexuality and the freedom of articulating same-sex desires. This seems to echo the narrative of sacrifice surrounding Mrs. Gao, whose maternal love comes with conditions and requires recuperation. Guilt seems to be driving Wai Tung’s fabrication of lies and points to the exilic nature inherent in the identity construction for immigrants. Upon seeing the vulnerable Mr. Gao fast asleep on his sofa in New York (Lee), the responsibility to ‘please’ his father as a Chinese son overcomes his desire to be truthful to his sexuality, which ultimately leads to the ambivalence in the process of identity negotiation.

For Mr. Gao, ‘face’ catalyzes his wishes for a firm social standing as well as a grandson (Wang), as the moral responsibility as a son. The most typical example would be Mrs. Gao’s line: ‘[if you do not have a grand wedding] what will we tell them?’ (Lee 00:38:17-00:38:19). The wedding banquet, which is supposed to be an event of personal significance, becomes solely a demonstration of the family reputation for the Gao couple (Lee). Further, even though Mrs. Gao tries to convince her son to hold a banquet for the sake of Weiwei (Lee 00:38:07), though in fact this event is the only way for the Gao

couple to seek validation among their community, presumably people of their age and similar background, back in Taipei. This argument could be further supported by the sudden anger of Mr. Gao at the breakfast table upon hearing Weiwei's line: 'We are not into these traditions' (Lee 00:38:28). Much like the invisible burden that is the filial piety that weighs Wai Tung down, Mr. Gao's sudden rage is equally efficient in silencing Wai Tung's articulation of individuality. Therefore, the implication of the banquet is conflated with the fulfillment of filial piety, the very responsibility that troubles Wai Tung, which more or less serves as a coercive force that urges Wai Tung into agreement with his parents. More importantly, the dynamic between Wai Tung and Mr. Gao is permeated by Wai Tung's complement for Mr. Gao, echoing the Chinese virtue of 'never talking back' to one's parents as a way of showing reverence. For example, Mr. Gao's rage at the breakfast table hushes both Wai Tung and Weiwei (Lee), which reifies both repressions inherent in patriarchy and the systemic violence against marginalized groups, which makes Wai Tung's reasoning for not holding a banquet meaningless, just like his 'no' in the scene where Weiwei rapes Wai Tung on their wedding day (Lee). Therefore, this scene could also be considered Lee's commentary on the repressing familial dynamic within the Gao family, where the generational hierarchy renders Wai Tung's narrative silent, and the patriarch benefits from this type of effacement, achieving his wishes at the cost of his son's subjectivity.

2.8 The Wedding Banquet As A Public Display

Following the Gao couple's obsession with 'face', the wedding banquet becomes a site of cultural clash between the traditional Chinese wedding customs and the curious gazes of the foreign guests (Wang). With the visual display of the majority of Chinese guests moving around the venue and the white guests sitting at their tables and sporadically wowing at the traditional Chinese costumes (Lee). Though the caucasian guests are portrayed as laughing along with the game participants at one point (Lee 00:59:15), it still can not resist the reading of the 'white' gaze, and their presence is more or less a voyeuristic one that speaks to the dynamic between the 'civilized' and the 'primitive', as Edward Said mentions in the introduction of his book *Culture and imperialism*, that in writings produced by the Europeans, the discourse surrounding 'the East' is always predicated upon the binary of 'civilization and primitive' (xi). In this case, chaos seems to embody the idea of backwardness, signifying the lack of discipline, reason, and rationality. As Yu argues, the Chinese wedding banquet is an 'exotic tour' for the foreign guests (1000), which makes the middle-aged white male guest's laughter not from genuine entertainment but more from mockery or the satisfaction of curiosity. This argument could be further supported by the iconic conversational exchange between the director himself and one of the white guests. 'You are witnessing the result of 5 thousand years of sexual repression' (Lee 01:01:09), says the guest played by Lee with a witty smirk on his face, responding to another guest's comment on the stereotyped image of

Chinese people (Lee 01:01:07). Though one could perceive Lee's remark as an attempt to clarify the name of his nation, the scene is still at the risk of being misinterpreted as reinforcing the stereotypical image production of the rather rigid gender hierarchies in China, for the prevalent element of exoticism ingrained in the banquet scene only works to reinforce the superiority and entitlement that already exists in the construction of racial hierarchy.

In addition, the banquet scene also suggests the intertwinedness between intimacy and alienation, which could be perceived as a mask for covering the chaos and insecurity underneath the myriad images of peace and happiness. The most typical example would be the guest who attended the wrong wedding: as he picks up a piece of lobster from the main dish, he asks 'Gao? Isn't this the Chen wedding?' (Lee 01:01:56). This is Lee's another attempt at instituting one of the 'national characters' of China: the obsession with '热闹', or the crowd. Though in general, this is a harmless behavior, in the context of the film it suggests the hollowness woven into the interpersonal relationships, as the wedding banquet is simply a 'form' of gathering, not a gathering out of genuine wishes for the newlyweds. In one way or another, the banquet scene is also commenting on the convoluted interpersonal and generational relationship within the Gao family, that under the cover of stable family lines, a pious son and reverent parents lies the invisible and unbridgable distance with sexuality and familial responsibility as the obstacles.

Here I would also like to introduce *Saving Face* by Alice Wu, which deals with a similar premise and themes as *The Wedding Banquet*, and both have scenes set in public spaces. While *The Wedding Banquet*'s public scene is the banquet, *Saving Face* uses the community dance hall as the public space where the protagonist finds ways to articulate her same-sex desires. The point of bringing up *Saving Face* is that though the two films both incorporate the element of publicity, the 'public' scene in the two films has different meanings. In *Saving Face*, the ending scene, set in the community dance hall more or less signifies the generational reconciliation between Grandpa, Ma, and Wil, the protagonists of the film. Further, the scene portrays all witnesses being Asian, who in the film represents a rather conventional perspective on sexuality, making the kiss shared between Wil and her same-sex partner Vivienne a powerful demonstration of the brevity in facing homosexuality head-on and being genuine oneself. However, the entire sequence in *The Wedding Banquet*, though visually more crowded and sensually more lively, is nevertheless a grim reminder of the destined gradual alienation between the characters, epitomized by the group photo capturing the moment when the entire wedding crew stands in the corner of the newly wed's bedroom with a child on their wedding bed (Lee 01:41:43). Firstly, the framing of this photo is quite telling: with the child on the center of the bed and all the adults crammed into one corner of the frame, the child is perceived as the 'apple of the eye' by the adults, so is the unborn child by the Gao couple. Secondly, the physical distance between Weiwei and the child in the photo seems to suggest the

intricate dynamic between Weiwei and her desired identity, a legal citizen within the United States: If she reaches out her arm, she can certainly grasp and hold as well as the green card, but in the process, she risks the spiritual ‘decomposition’ of her arm.

Decomposition here means the fragmentation of her identity that serves as the prelude for the reconstruction of Weiwei’s identity transformation from an illegal immigrant to one with legal citizenship and the details of such transformation will be analyzed in the following section.

2.9 The Discourse on Liberation

In this section, I would like to focus on the identity (de)construction of Weiwei and Wai Tung, and I argue that though the two protagonists appear to have achieved what they set out for at the beginning of the film, the seemingly perfect resolution proposed at the ending fails to guarantee the liberation of neither of the two protagonists.

This discussion on the discourse of liberation is inspired by the frequent mention of the word ‘liberate’ by Weiwei. For instance, Weiwei is introduced into the plot with her line ‘This building has been liberated’ (Lee 00:06:34), when Wai Tung collects rent from her. While the use of ‘liberated’ is more of a sarcasm for the abject living conditions Weiwei has to deal with, this articulation nevertheless alludes to a gesture of wish fulfillment. Further, it could also be interpreted as her comment on being physically in the US, where she has the freedom to be an amateur artist without being scolded by her

parents, presumably. In addition, the idea of freedom is also embodied in her choice to not wear underwear (Lee), which points to the liberation from physical confinement. In this sense, Weiwei's search for subjectivity is catalyzed by her escaping her home country, where womanhood is confined to rules and moral virtues. The second 'liberation', as discussed in previous sections, is uttered by Weiwei moments before she rapes Wai Tung. Though she claims her behavior is to liberate Wai Tung, which alludes to the problematic perception of homosexuality as something that needs salvation, the dynamic in this scene is perhaps a more obvious liberation for Weiwei herself. Whereas she previously lived in a crumbling apartment that does not really allow her articulation of desire, the promise of a paper wedding eliminates the element of precarity in her future. In other words, the marriage of convenience deceives Weiwei into believing in a brighter future and more freedom, yet she soon realizes the transnational nature of this wedding, epitomized by Mrs. Gao's line, 'I want my daughter-in-law. I want grandson.'" (Lee 01:30:30) The gifts from the Gao couple are, in one way or another, an invisible contract that demands Weiwei's labor of reproduction in return. In addition, the audience can clearly observe Weiwei gradually hiding her articulation of desire as her journey towards legal citizenship progresses forward: from the initial scene where she flirts with Wai Tung, to her frustration and tearing eyes when she calls her parents in Shanghai the morning of her wedding day, Weiwei's margin of freedom is diminishing. This reading might shed light on the unexplained decision to keep the child, that the unborn baby is

seen as insurance for her standing in the Gao family and a promise of never returning to the crumbling apartment as well as her old identity as an illegal immigrant. Further, Weiwei's sudden silence when her father calls her name on the phone, and the cut to Wai Tung's voice calling her name superimposed onto the voice of her father could be understood as Weiwei's farewell to her old familial kinship structure back in Shanghai. However, her frustration and silence could be seen as her realization that no matter her physical location, independence is still only a dream; either in Shanghai or in the US, her subjectivity and legal status both need to rely on the existence of the patriarch, and her silence on the phone marks her departure from both the older abject self and her biological kinship structure.

In one way or another, the identity reconstruction process of Wai Tung is similar to that of Weiwei, though with minor differences. The most salient example would be the redecoration of the apartment he shares with Simon, replacing his photos with Simons with the calligraphies by Mr. Gao. Echoing the first section of this chapter, where the cultural significance of food is extrapolated as a vicarious practice of articulation of affection, Mr.s Gao's calligraphy carries similar meanings in the context of *The Wedding Banquet*. The fact that Wai Tung preserves Mr. Gao's works but does not usually place them in visible places in the apartment he shares with Simons points to the convoluted relationship he has with the gaze of heteronormativity. He stores the calligraphy writing instead of throwing it or giving it away suggesting his attempt to avoid facing directly the

potential conflicts between him and his father caused by his homosexuality. It is a ‘Don’t ask don’t tell’ situation where avoidance might be a better solution considering Mr. Gao’s health condition. These works are where Wai could potentially anchor himself and find resonance with his native culture, but ultimately they become his baggage that he does not dare or ever can get rid of. Therefore, the ambivalence in Wai Tung’s identity construction is reified by the change of interior decoration, where he constantly looks back and forth between the older self who is in the closet, and the one who is comfortable expressing his desires based in New York.

2.10 Conclusion

In this chapter, I examined the construction of intimacy in *The Wedding Banquet* by Ang Lee and how the film could be read as Lee’s critique of the Gao family’s obsession with ‘face’ that costs Wai Tung and Weiwei’s subjectivity. From the perspective of food as the vicarious practice of affection, to male hysteria as an articulation for ameliorating generational conflict that bridges the discourses on heteronormativity and homosexual desires, to the incorporation of nostalgia and the old family photo album as a sign of the groundlessness of the two female characters, to the discourse on ‘face’ and personal liberation, this film, which in many cases is listed under the category ‘comedy’, in fact, speaks to the rather depressing familial dynamic represented by the Gao family. This chapter ends with a discussion on the idea of

liberation, and I came to the conclusion that the resolution of an alternative kinship structure proposed at the end of the film, which appears to appease all the characters, is in fact another shackle that traps both Weiwei and Wai Tung into a deeper uncertainty of self-validation. As briefly mentioned in the section titled 'The Wedding Banquet As A Public Display', the film *Saving Face* by Alice Wu deals with similar themes as *The Wedding Banquet* and is also listed as 'comedy' in many cases. If in *The Wedding Banquet*, the figure of the solemn father takes center stage and is portrayed as the only character whose wishes are all achieved, then *Saving Face* is a film that places much emphasis on the influence and the complementary role of the matriarch that helps the protagonist discover her self-identity through true cultural reconciliation. The following chapter focuses on *Saving Face* and analyzes the portrayal of female liberation, which proffers a more optimistic outlook on reclaiming female autonomy in the age of multiculturalism.

3. Chapter Two: Female Liberation and Identity Negotiation in Alice Wu's *Saving Face*

3.1 The Dilemma of Chinese Daughters: Indebtedness and Guilt

One of the themes prevalent throughout the character development of Hwei-Lan (Ma) and Wil in *Saving Face* is the elasticity between the invisible social obligation of Chinese daughters and the yearning for autonomy. By paralleling the dilemma and different forms of oppression and alienation faced by Hwei-Lan and Wil, Wu provides insight into the elastic relationship between the liberation discourse and indebtedness, guilt, and filial responsibilities. Through the constant negotiations of these elements, self-narrativity is achieved through the construction of flexible identities that strive to attend to both filial responsibilities and the search for individual narratives and autonomy.

Scholar Han Qijun argues that the portrayal of Asian-American identities in *Saving Face* is transnational yet rooted in Chinese value systems, which involve the rising awareness of ethnicity and sexuality (340). Further, Han refers to the endings of both films (*The Wedding Banquet* and *Saving Face*) as 'resolutions' with different methods of addressing homosexuality under a patriarchal family structure (339). Though Han's emphasis on the resolutions proposed in the two films is certainly valid, I would add that one of the vital aspects of the resolution proposed in *Saving Face* would be the sense of indebtedness and guilt, epitomized by the father-daughter relationship between

Grandpa and Ma. For instance, when Grandpa confronts Ma about her unexpected pregnancy, Grandpa accuses Ma of wasting his time and energy:

外公:想想当年,在那么险恶的环境下,我为了给你提供一个好的环境,吃尽了苦头。早知如此,我就该把你一个人丢在那里。

Grandpa: Think about it. All the hardships, and all the suffering I had to endure to provide you with a good environment in such a treacherous time. Had I known that, I should have left you alone.

(Wu 00:18:48-00:19:06)

The above lines delivered by Grandpa suggest he views his familial bond with his daughter as a transaction, as the father protects her daughter from possible precarity and expects the daughter to reward him with the stability of family reputation and a continued family line. From this perspective, the characters of Wil and Ma could be seen as occupying two opposite ends on the spectrum of Asian-American identity reconstruction. For Ma, although the film does not specify when she immigrated to the US, from the excerpt above, the audience could speculate Ma left China as a young woman. This might explain why she speaks Mandarin for the majority of the film, even if Wil talks to her in

English. Ma's insistence on speaking Mandarin points to her attempt at clinging onto her Chinese roots verbally.

Shih argues in her book *Visuality and Identity* that artist Hung Liu's identity could be as an assemblage, whose multifacetedness reflects different resistance forces against various forms of oppression (Shih 65). Following Shih's contention, one could argue that the reconciliation between Ma and Wil at the end of the film could be interpreted as a reunification of two different iterations of 'Chinese daughters', with the same trajectory of character developments yet slightly different forms of oppression. On the one hand, Ma's identity formation is circumscribed by the overarching nature of patriarchy, manifested in her pre-arranged marriage with Wil's biological father, who remains anonymous throughout the film. The prolonged impact of such imbalance in the power structure is evidenced by Ma's moral obligation to save her father's face yet again even after her first husband passes away, while she chooses to silence her desires for Xiao Yu, a young man from the same generation as Wil. Such a phenomenon points to the regulatory effect of patriarchy, where the two forms of oppression, one on sexuality and the other on autonomy, are not only forced onto Ma due to the imbalance in power dynamic but internalized by her as well. The most typical example of internalizing guilt presented in the film would be the anonymous and absent father, who only exists in the narratives constructed by Ma. Along with her apology to Grandpa at the wedding, '爸, 我真的是对不起你' (Wu 01:20:49), Ma considers her attempt to drag herself out of the

shadow of Grandpa as impious and ungrateful, suggesting Ma's position as a Chinese daughter is defined by her consciousness of indebtedness towards Grandpa, which works together with the patriarchal order in systemically silencing the narratives of women like Hwei-Lan.

3.2 The 'Glass Closet' and The Feeling of Guilt

As a second-generation immigrant, Wil also appears to be trapped in the interstices between traditional Chinese family responsibilities and the Western lifestyle. Her identity construction could be encapsulated by her sense of guilt and failure to satisfy either societal or generational expectations, with her sexuality as the contributing factor to her alienation from her family and the Chinatown community. The manifestation of Wil's guilt towards Ma includes her 'double life and the construction of a 'glass closet' that echoes the ambivalence in Wai Tung's identity construction as portrayed in *The Wedding Banquet*.

Firstly, Wil's 'double life', with the 'glass closet' as the division, is similar to Wai Tung's dual identity and the fabricated marriage of convenience with Weiwei. Both characters are forced to silence their sexuality in exchange for the 'face' of themselves as well as their family, but Wil's dual identity differs from Wai Tung's in that Wil does not camouflage her same-sex desires with fabricated heterosexuality like Wai Tung does in *The Wedding Banquet*; rather, Wil's desire and affection for her partner Vivian is mostly

portrayed in private settings, usually at night with no other people around. The spatial and temporal disconnection between Wil's two lives symbolizes the fragmentation of Wil's Chinese heritage and her native American culture, where, similar to Wai Tung's identity negotiation process, uncertainty and equivocality pervades. In addition, contrary to Wai Tung's performed homosexuality in *The Wedding Banquet*, whose primary purpose is for public display, the discretion associated with Wil's homosexuality gestures towards the internalization of guilt and symbolically represents the silenced narratives of minority subjects, which aligns with Lee's critique on queer individuals are considered disposable in the heteronormative discourse.

Further, the 'glass closet', as Sedgwick mentions in her book *Epistemology of the Closet* could also be seen as a manifestation of Wil's feeling of guilt. Sedgwick argues that the glass closet has the potential to either facilitate more hospitality and intimacy or become the source of exploitation, where the homosexual individual is haunted by the possibility of other people's acknowledging of their homosexuality, or even the homosexual individual might not be aware of such (80). Yet, the exploration of the 'glass closet' in *Saving Face* is a modified version of what Sedgwick originally proposes, as the glass closet does not act as a potential threat for people on both sides; rather, it is a layer of protection for both. By avoiding discussions on this topic, Ma manages to continue living in her reality where she is a 'good mother', whose daughter would, under her positive influence, be 'good' in every aspect, including sexuality. As Wil's first coming

out scene goes, ‘妈, 我爱你。我也是gay’ but was countered with Ma’s cold response: ‘我是一个好妈妈。我的女儿不会是gay.’ Though only implied, Ma’s response points to the association between homosexuality and impiety, since the former is in conflict with the promise of the continuation of family lines, which resulted in the strained mother-daughter relationship, and Wil’s breaking up with Vivian. If we consider Wil’s sexuality as partially out before her coming out to Ma, then Wil’s reaction to her presumably unsuccessful coming out could be seen as taking several steps backward, going back completely into the closet. Hence, Wil’s relationship with Ma goes back to the state of reticence and total avoidance again. However, the contributing factor to this avoidance is not only due to the ‘deviant’ nature assigned to Wil’s same-sex desires in the context of heteronormativity, but it could also be Ma’s way of protecting Wil from harsher punishments once Grandpa is informed. Fearing that Wil might face the same exile as her because of Ma’s unexpected pregnancy, intentional ignorance becomes the preferred method to seal the secret away from the patriarch in the Gao household. Therefore, aside from interpreting Ma’s strategy of using willful blindness as a motherly instinct to protect her child from harm, one could also see her initiating a plan that tricks the patriarch as a way of demonstrating agency.

The fact that Ma is unable to choose her own life under the impact of Grandma yet takes the initiative in protecting Wil suggests the generational intimacy between Wil and Ma, as both start with the purpose of protecting each other. It is also worth pointing

out that Ma's consciousness of agency gradually awakens as she moves out of Chinatown in Flushing, and as she moves into Wil's apartment and dines with Jay, Wil's African-American neighbor, her stance on people of color gradually changes. As Wil mentions to her co-worker, 'She [Ma] never leaves Flushing' (Wu 00:19:30), the Chinatown in Flushing could be seen as a physical restriction, while the community featuring exclusively Asian immigrants psychologically circumscribes Ma's pursuit of liberty, both in terms of self-narrative and of the right to express desires. Further, in examining women's agency portrayed in the film, one could not overlook the character of Grandma, who appears to be rather vocal about her thoughts and adopts a rather liberal view regarding gender norms. There will be more discussion on the purpose of Grandma as a character in the section on unassimilability.

3.3 Consent, Invisibility, and Inaudible Scream

While the case of intentional ignorance portrayed in *Saving Face* might be an idealization considering it ends with both female leads reclaiming their own narratives from Grandpa, consequently making the minorized or wilfully overlooked narratives heard, several incidents that took place in China present a more realistic insight into the systemic violence women suffer from in a patriarchal society. The most widely discussed incident would be the 'Tangshan Restaurant Attack' (唐山打人事件), with scholarly articles produced on this subject matter. To briefly summarize the incident, at a Barbecue

restaurant in Tangshan, Hebei, where two young women were brutally beaten by a group of men who were allegedly gang members after the former refused to be sexually taken advantage of by the latter (Wang). Though the original footage of the entire incident was leaked online, the Chinese government quickly censored the spread of the video and banned discussions of the incident on major social media platforms (Wang). From personal encounters with posts and discussion threads on social media platforms such as Red and Weibo, the government's stance on censorship is probably the major contributing factor to the public despair, as it not only points to the historical exploitativeness of patriarchy but the systemic silencing of women and minoritized groups as well, which is connected to Wil's concealing of her sexuality.

However, I would like to start by discussing how the Tangshan Attack is revealing the imbalance in gender dynamics in China. Wil's closetedness and the Tangshan Attack both tackle the issues of consent and invisibility. Firstly, the two young women's 'no' resulted in them being hospitalized, suggesting the two men's 'invitation' for the two victims is merely formalism where the two perpetrators assume their behavior is appropriate and their motive justifiable. This is quite telling regarding women's position in China, where they are branded with the stereotypical image of weak, malleable, and submissive, and the derogatory impact of such stereotypes is manifested in these two men's anger after they fail to obtain what they desire without putting too much effort. The phrase '妈宝男', which is equivalent to 'mother's boy' in English, refers to adult men

who are indulged as a child and become arrogant, violent, and unreasonable, which is a direct result of preferring boys over girls at birth. Therefore, one might speculate that whatever these two victims respond to the perpetrators' 'invitation', the result would be the same; either way, they would endure physical violence or sexual violence, and perhaps both if they say 'yes'. In terms of invisibility, the government's exercising censorship epitomizes the systemic silencing faced by women in China, where they not only endure patriarchal oppression but are also unbelieved as well. The incident is exacerbated by the absence of any media coverage following up on the two hospitalized young ladies, as the method, ironically enough, is also 'wilful ignorance', as discussed in the previous section, and the public is expected to simply forget about the incident. The absence of media coverage renders the two young ladies voiceless, even though they scream in agony in the original footage that no longer exists on the Internet. In many ways, the two young ladies' narratives in the Tangshan Attack echo that in *Saving Face*, as in both cases reticence becomes the mechanism with which women and minoritized groups' voices are muffled and their bodies considered disposable.

In *Saving Face*, however, the idea of coercive consent is manifested in Wil's choice of hiding her sexuality, not only because it is a challenging factor towards heteronormativity but it might jeopardize her connection to her Chinese heritage as well. Unfortunately, the Chinese side of her identity, pervaded with values such as 'women's virtue' and the emphasis on gender norms becomes the very baggage that constricts Wil's

self-expression. Wil is portrayed as making an effort to preserve her Chinese roots even though her native language is not Mandarin and she is portrayed as not having to China (Wu), which could be supported by the shift between Mandarin and English. Further, Mandarin is used at ‘vital moments’ in the film, for instance, the coming out scene and Wil interrupting Ma’s wedding with Mr. Zhou in persuading her to marry the man she loves. One could understand Wil’s effort to speak Mandarin as a way of bringing herself closer to both the community in Chinatown as well as an attempt at cultural conformity, as both her grandparents speak Mandarin.

3.4 The Narrative of *The Closet* and *The Articulations of Desire*

The regulatory effect of heteronormativity manifests itself in various forms, two of which are hysteria and reticence. While hysteria is commonly assigned to bear negative connotations in present-day cultures, Freud’s documentation on Dora provides alternative understandings of such a term (Eng 174). Essentially a kind of ‘complaint’ to patriarchy, Dora’s refusal to be married off rebels against the regulatory effect of societal norms under patriarchal orders that emphasize rigid gender norms (Eng 174). Ding Naifei and Liu Jen-peng in their article ‘Reticent Poetics, Queer Politics’ examine a similar phenomenon portrayed in Du Xioulan’s book *The Unfilial Daughter*, where the heteronormative discourse demonstrates a similar regulatory effect, though such an effect manifests itself in the reticent attitude towards homosexual individuals adopted by the

Taiwanese culture. The most intriguing argument in this article by Ding and Liu would be the repressive and disciplinary potential of reticence (34), which they argue for a ‘gentle’ form of homophobia being nurtured under the guise of a reticent attitude towards homosexual individuals deployed in Taiwan (32). In the translated version of this article, Ding and Liu made yet another interesting argument:

在此，恐同的力道可能並不表現於對著你的臉吐口水，而是，努力保護其他人的臉，以保存一個完整美好的形式整體。

Here, the homophobic force may not manifest itself in spitting in your face, but, rather, in an effort to protect other people's faces in preserving a complete and beautiful tangible whole.

(Ding and Liu 13)

This argument is quite telling about how most Taiwanese and Chinese families would perceive homosexuality: in most cases, the son or daughter’s homosexuality is a family secret that is shameful in the eyes of an outsider. It is also intriguing that Liu and Ding use the phrases ‘臉’ and ‘形式整體’, in particular (13). In both *The Wedding Banquet* and *Saving Face*, the child’s homosexuality becomes a shadow of patriarchy where it only survives because the family line somehow finds its way to be continued, which promises the saving of the ‘face’ of the family name, though it would be more accurate to describe it as saving face for the patriarch of the household, Mr. Gao and

Professor Gao, whose characters value their reputation due to their past careers as military leaders and professors, respectively (Lee; Wu). Further, the two Mr. Gaos' characters are portrayed as aligning with traits of traditional masculinity: rational, self-disciplined, and rather stubborn in defending their 'face' and the family honor. Wai Tung's parents appear to be both loyal defenders of the family reputation which contributes to the evasive attitude adopted towards Wai Tung's romantic relationship with Simon. Echoing Ding and Liu's argument: '這世界的秩序就是, 有一些東西比其他東西更可說, 所以, 讓不可說的留在陰暗的影子下面吧, 那麼秩序就可以永保' (37), the parting scene Lee sets as the final sequence of *The Wedding Banquet* cleverly weaves the silenced abuse on familial intimacy together with the lack of closure: On the one hand, the suddenly disappeared smile on Mr. and Mrs. Gao's face when going through the wedding photos connotes the dilemma the Gao family is facing due to their son's sexuality. While Mr. Gao appears to have approved Simon as his son-in-law with his red packet, his reticence towards Wai Tung's homosexuality is another form of disapproving, as if the son who has a male partner is born out of wedlock and thus illegitimate; the rightful son should be a cisgender male who marries a woman who is biologically capable of continuing the family lineage. Therefore, as per Ding and Liu's argument, Wai Tung's relationship with Simon is the '不可說的' ('unspeakable'), which is doomed to be in a 'shadowy' state ('陰暗的影子下'). However, it is worth pointing out that Wai Tung is unaware of his father's acquiescence to his sexuality, which is ironic as it indicates Mr.

Gao's emphasis on the 'face' of the family only stems from the fear of being judged by other people. Between saving the face of the Gao family and mending the father-son relationship, he chooses the former and strangles Wai Tung's opportunity to articulate his genuine desires. While, in Ding and Liu's terms, although the '形式整體' ('the tangible whole', 13) is preserved, the undercurrent caused by the staged wedding is gradually tearing the Gao family apart. Wai Tung fails to be embraced by his parents for who he is, and Weiwei is trapped in the staged marriage. Thus, only the face of the patriarch is saved, while the reputation of homosexual individuals are rendered insignificant.

The analysis in Chapter I reveals one of the crucial elements in defining Wai Tung's character is his ambivalence when negotiating the Gao couple's expectations and his sexuality. We can consider Wai Tung's compromising his rights to articulate his desires as a way of assimilation, though it goes backward: Wai Tung is depicted as comfortable with his sexual orientation in his New York neighborhood, and one can speculate the gaze of heteronormativity does not bother him (as evidence by the interaction between a middle-aged white couple and Simon's friend; Lee); the Gao couple's uninvited visit pressures him into submitting to an essentially patriarchal social order. Yet, the patriarchal order depicted in *Saving Face* demonstrates more flexibility and offers the audience a similarly flexible patriarchal system that allows the female characters autonomy to some extent.

3.5 The Male Gaze

The analysis in this section focuses on the autonomy of Hwei-Lan. Interestingly enough, her character development is a constant battle between submission, resistance, and resubmission to the male gaze. An alternative reading of the restricting effects of the male gaze is provided, in which Hwei-Lan uses adversity as a source of subversion in challenging the strict gender binary upheld in her Chinatown community in Flushing.

In her article ‘Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema’, Mulvey argues that the ‘male gaze’ is the way heteronormativity objectifies women into spectacles of desire, one which bears the burden of being looked at and one who is a reflection of the patriarchal power that ‘cannot bear the burden of sexual objectification’ (62; 63). Though portrayed in an inexplicit manner, Ma in *Saving Face* experiences a discrete and rather complicated version of the male gaze, manifested in the closeup framings of her appearance and her attire on date nights. As attested by Wil’s colleague Randi, ‘your mom is pretty memorable,’ the physical appearance (in other words, beauty) of Hwei-Lan is the most direct impression she leaves on Randi, even though the two are only acquaintances. A more explicit example would be the shift in one of her suitors’ attitudes upon seeing Hwei-Lan in her red dress when the gentleman’s facial expression changes from slight boredom to surprise and even traces of fawning (Fig. 1). Although the intonation of sexual objectification in this scene is under the guise of reticence, similar to the way homosexuality is treated in Taiwan (Liu and Ding), it nevertheless renders Hwei-Lan a

spectacle that is out there on display for the eyes of Mr. Fu, the rich single Chinese man. This argument might be supported by the unexplained, yet the copious amount of male suitors who demonstrate much enthusiasm in courting Hwei-Lan, even though she is widowed, is already a mother, and is pregnant as a middle-aged woman. Though one could only speculate the reason for these gentlemen's passion, Hwei-Lan's beauty could not be ruled out as one of the factors that contributed to her desirability as a wife. Further, though beauty is an artificial construct that is confined to biased standards, it still brings Hwei-Lan to an advantageous position, and in this case, her liberty to choose among the various suitors for a husband; Hwei-Lan, on the other hand, appears to have been bribed into the benefits of the male gaze, with her submissive attitude towards both her arranged marriage and her engagement with Mr. Chou, the ideal candidate for his son-in-law according to the standards of Mr. Gao, the patriarch of the household.



Figure 1: Hwei-Lan wearing a red V-neck dress. *Saving Face* (2004).

For the first two-thirds of the film, Hwei-Lan seems to be rather conscious about her age. When she struggles with whether to attend her date with Mr. Fu, Hwei-Lan counters Wil's compliment on her charm: '谁高兴看一个50岁的中国老太婆sexy啊' ('Who would appreciate a 50-year-old Chinese lady's sexiness', translation mine; Wu 00:43:27). Similar to how gender norms assign each individual a prospective position according to their biological sex, Hwei-Lan's internalized ageism becomes another contributing factor that defines her womanhood. It is rather intriguing that Hwei-Lan refers to herself as '老太婆' ('elderly lady'), whereas Wil points out she is, in fact, a middle-aged woman (Wu 00:43:29). Even in present-day China, modesty in women is still much appreciated: when people praise a woman's beauty, the patriarchal orders expect her to respond in a way that denies such praise. In a similar manner, twenty-five-year-old ladies are considered 'old' and soon to be eliminated from the market of marriage. Further, even though people are obsessed with younger appearance when praised for looking younger than their real age, their response would still always emphasize that they are not young anymore. It is paradoxical, for sure, and it also points out the narrative of undeserving under which most Chinese girls are raised. The case of Hwei-Lan is much the same. Her character is a charming lady regardless of her age, yet she chooses to willfully ignore it under the pressure of Mr. Gao who pressures her into his standards of 'model daughter': neatly pinned-up hair, modest clothing style, always

reserved, obedient, and well behaved. These standards, if examined from a binarized gender construction, make women essentially controllable semi-human beings who rarely oppose the view of the patriarch. Evidenced by the contrast between Hwei-Lan's modestly cut all-black dress and her red v-neck dress and unpinned hair under Wil's suggestions, the audience observes Hwei-Lan's gradual breaking away from the shackles of womanhood imposed by Mr. Gao as she slowly maneuvers out of her Chinatown community in Flushing, which is a displaced Sinophone community in the first place. Therefore, Hwei-Lan faces double exile in a Chinese community located in New York due to her failure to conform to gender-coded, heteronormative expectations.

However, this double exile is not entirely an adversary regarding Hwei-Lan's looking for self-narrative. If we examine the first encounter between Hwei-Lan and Mr. Fu from the perspective of subverting gender norms, the red dress, a gender-coded piece of clothing, could also be a demonstration of power. Firstly, aside from the meaning of auspiciousness assigned to the color red in both Taiwan and mainland China, red is also a color that suggests confidence, power, and dominance. One does not need to look too far away to observe the gendered use of red; Weiwei's red polka-dotted dress in *The Wedding Banquet* can be interpreted as a signifier of femininity in a traditional framework of Chinese womanhood, as shown in Figure 2.



Figure 2: Wai-Tung (left) and Wei-Wei (right) picking up the Gao couple at the airport. *The Wedding Banquet* (1993).

Similarly, Hwei-Lan is also self-conscious regarding color use. As she rebuts Wil's suggestion for a yellow dress as her date night attire: '我早就跟你说过了, 中国人不能穿黄颜色的, 显得更像个黄脸婆。' ('I told you, yellow is not the right color for warm skin tones,' Wu 00:44:39) Just like Hwei-Lan's despise towards yellow clothing yet she possesses several articles of yellow clothing, her final decision to wear the red dress can be seen as her first step in defying patriarchy under which she is accustomed to. It is worth pointing out that this first attempt at defiance is accomplished outside the purview of the patriarch. By distancing herself physically from the Flushing Chinese community and her father, Hwei-Lan appears to have found the courage and freedom for both self-expression and assurance. From her calm demeanor in rejecting her talkative suitors to finally demanding Xiaoyu to explicate his love for her in public, the audience

witnesses Hwei-Lan's gradual breaking out of the shackles and shadows of Mr. Gao and her voice becoming audible. Further, Hwei-Lan's red date-night dress also allows her the freedom to lift the veil of shame from expressing sexuality, as red is often associated with women's attractiveness. The gradual shift towards sexual liberation is also suggested by the scene where Hwei-Lan purchases pornography. In the scene at the video store, Hwei-Lan appears to be startled by the cover of pornography featuring Asian women, which causes her to hurry out of the frame; yet, merely a second later she returns to the frame, her gaze fixed upon the pornography that made her feel shameful and startled just moments ago (Wu 00:28:49-00:29:45). Hwei-Lan's leaving and re-entering the frame echoes her negotiation with both the interdependence of her original family and the self-narrative she wishes to construct. Further, Hwei-Lan's sexual liberation is achieved in a public setting: without the presence of Mr. Gao and outside her Flushing Chinatown community, the articulation of sexual desire for the first time is not something to be avoided and be ashamed of. Contrary to the reserved attitude towards sexuality under which Hwei-Lan is accustomed, her new-found liberation is reinforced by her facing her sexual desires and consequently renting/purchasing one of the videotapes, which suggests her recognition of such desires as part of her narrative, which is one of the crucial steps in making her narrative audible.

Unfortunately, Hwei-Lan's identity reconstruction does not adhere to a linear structure of storytelling; rather, her departure from her biological family is interrupted by

the command to marry Mr. Chou, a mild-natured Chinese man who appears to be single-sided in love with Hwei-Lan. It is quite interesting that Wu chooses to capture the critical moments in Hwei-Lan's identity shift in the dressing room. If we consider the scene set in Wil's restroom the way Hwei-Lan reclaims her autonomy, the wedding preparation scene is the manifestation of her resubmission to patriarchal orders. In the dressing room for her wedding, the preparation process is portrayed through close-up shots of Hwei-Lan's bridal attire: the pins on her cuff, a woman putting on a pearl necklace for her, a downward-turning gaze (Wu 01:18:09-01:18:32). The sequence ends with a close-up on Hwei-Lan's expressionless face fading into blurriness, which symbolically represents the gradual dissolution of Hwei-Lan's autonomy yet again as the wedding ceremony progresses.

Further, the blurriness portrayed at the end of this sequence conceptually aligns with what Liu and Ding describe as the 'shadowy existence' (37) that is also applicable in analyzing the dynamics between the heteronormative discourse and Wil's sexuality. While Wil's homosexuality is opposed by patriarchal societies as the 'unspeakable,' ('不可说的', Liu and Ding 37) and abnormal under the guidance of self-centrality inscribed in the heteronormative ego, the patriarch disapproves Hwei-Lan's relationship with Xiao Yu out of inconvenience. Going back to our earlier discussion on Freud's Dora (Eng 174), which signifies the failure of the regulatory effect the patriarchy strives to achieve, both Hwei-Lan and Wil's sexuality challenges the binarized gender norms established in favor

of men who are in control. Similarly, Mulvey argues that under the guidance of heteronormativity and the dominance of patriarchy, narrative story-telling often centers male characters as the motivations of the plotline as well as the anchor for the position of the spectator with whom the audience identifies, through which process the scale of controllability grants both the audience and the spectator/ male protagonist a satisfaction of ideal ego which is separated from the status of an 'icon' often assigned to female characters (63). In one way or another, the opposition against deviance of any kind stems from the fear of uncontrollability, and in the context of *Saving Face*, Mr. Gao's concern stretches to both Hwei-Lan and the community gossip that spread at a rapid speed through chit-chats among members of the Flushing Chinatown community. While on the surface Mr. Gao appears to be pressured into maintaining the face of the Gao family due to the potential risk Hwei-Lan's relationship with Xiao Yu poses, his uncertainty and lack of confidence in his role as the head of the household serves as the root cause of his hostility towards his 'unfilial' daughter. In other words, Hwei-Lan's pregnancy challenges both Mr. Gao's patriarchal value system which only allows women who are deemed 'virtuous' (for instance, modest style of clothing, only sex after marriage, etc.) to be present, while those who fail to conform to these men-made standards are expected to be abandoned and despised. This might account for the exilic status Hwei-Lan is subjected to, which caused her exile from the Flushing Chinatown community, causing a modified version of identity split that obfuscates Hwei-Lan's identity construction by

shifting between the states of liberation and oppression, manifested in her dilemma of the interdependence of the Gao family and the yearning for autonomy and self-narratives.

3.6 Between Liberation And Reunion

In the second chapter of his book *Celluloid Comrades*, titled ‘The Burden of Representation’, Song Hwee Lim points out the two main aspects that trouble and upset the narratives for minority groups: it becomes necessary to rectify the historical misinterpretations of their culture, while the non-linear trajectory requires constant contestation between new and old modes of representations, and the historical stereotypes are likely to haunt future progression (46-47). In *Saving Face*, the representation of multiculturalism conceptually aligns with Lim’s discussion of minority representations. For example, in the video store scene discussed above, Hwei-Lan asks the cashier for Chinese films; yet, due to her limited English competency, her request was simplified into the word ‘China’ instead (Wu 00:29:05). The following sequence representing the available Chinese film productions is quite telling regarding how Chinese women are minoritized and exoticized in the American context. As Hwei-Lan glances over the display shelf, *The Last Emperor* by Bernardo Bertolucci and *The Joy Luck Club* by Wayne Wang is displayed on the top shelf at the most conspicuous spots, with pornographies featuring Asian women in revealing clothes displayed on the neighboring shelf (Wu 00:29:14-00:29:28). The close-ups on these two films among all the available

influential films in the store indicates these two movies are most representative of how the Chinese culture is represented and perceived in America; yet, none of them are directed by Chinese directors. A cursory search would reveal that *The Last Emperor*, a story about Pu Yi is written and directed by two Caucasian males ('The Last Emperor). Though this film is highly appraised and its production team demonstrates their cinematic excellence, one might still wonder if this film is filtered through a Western narrative that somehow frames the narratives based upon biased standards. Similarly, though Wayne Wang is of Hong Kong descent, and the cinematic representation of *The Joy Luck Club* is an adaptation of Amy Tan's novel, it has nevertheless been criticized for its self-orientalizing tendency. As scholar Yu Su-lin insightfully argues, Amy Tan's portrayal of the Chinese mothers in *The Joy Luck Club* fulfills the historically absent, Western-centric narrative on 'Third World women' (48-49). From the perspective of the liberation discourse, Hwei-Lan in *Saving Face* does try to rectify the stereotypical narratives constructed for 'Third World women', whose life is integrated into unresolvable sufferings and haunted by past traumas as in *The Joy Luck Club* (Wang). The character development of Hwei-Lan is based upon a sense of rebellion against the power superiority assigned to Mr. Gao as part of the patriarchy, though the happy ending is also closely related to the flexibility demonstrated by Mr. Gao in adapting to new frameworks of family unit and articulations of sexuality. It is certainly inspiring to see Hwei-Lan gradually find her own narratives and the intergenerational conflicts running

through the Gao family conclude with reconciliations, but whether Hwei-Lan's newly found freedom in both her sexuality and individuality is indeed liberation is still up to debate. For one thing, Hwei-Lan's character development strives to contest Mr. Gao's perception of female virtue and decency, evidenced by her apology to Mr. Gao in the middle of her wedding ceremony with Mr. Zhou: '爸, 我真的是对不起你,' (Wu 01:21:07) which would yield two consequences. If Mr. Gao refuses to accept Hwei-Lan's persistence in reclaiming autonomy, the Gao family will be torn apart as Wil is more likely to side with Hwei-Lan and Mr. Gao would be left alone; the other possibility would be the seemingly consummate ending presented in the film, where the family unit adapts and evolves as the traditional nuclear family structure is deconstructed. While Mr. Gao's choice is supported by his love for Hwei-Lan and Wil, it is rather intriguing to investigate a bit more in the framing of Mr. Gao in the ending sequence.

In the ending sequence, the camera pans over the family reunion, starting with Mr. and Mrs. Shing, then a frame is dedicated to Grandpa who stands alone in front of a pillar holding a chopstick and a bowl, which is then followed by a frame featuring Wil, Vivian, Hwei-Lan, and Xiao Yu sitting crowding in four seats placed right next to each other (Wu 01:31:49-01:31:55). The way Wu portrays Grandpa in this sequence, with his solitude among the reunion, seems to suggest a sense of departure: even though Mr. Gao finally approved of his 'indecent' daughter and 'abnormal' grand-daughter and agrees with be part of their lives, he still believes the two younger women's sexualities are to

‘contaminate the child’, and by suggesting that the unborn child should be raised by him (Wu), Mr. Gao attempts to reclaim his control over younger family members that reinforces the self-assurance he used to uphold. However, his claim is only treated as humor, as Hwei-Lan simply laughs it off shortly before she praises Vivian’s tank top, and Xiao Yu leaves the scene (Wu 01:32:00-01:32:06). In this short conversational exchange, the audience witnesses Mr. Gao’s losing his advantageous position of the patriarch and his failed attempt at reclaiming it as well as his compromise driven by generational affections for Wil and Hwei-Lan. Considering the nature of *Saving Face*, which is a romantic comedy, this is perhaps the best and most reasonable solution Wu could propose: the elder generation finally lets go of their children, for their visions and their children's progress in opposite directions. In this sense, Mr. Gao is to be psychologically abandoned as his perspectives on traditional masculinity (the position being in control) and filial structure are subverted.

Yet, perhaps it is because of the echoes of indebtedness and guilt-conscience that urges Hwei-Lan to seek reconciliation with Mr. Gao rather than exiling herself. Hwei-Lan’s attempt at fighting for liberation while simultaneously trying to maintain family unity under patriarchal orders epitomizes the plight faced by the children of first-generation immigrants, where preserving one’s Chinese cultural heritage constantly contests with Americanization. Similar ideas have been brought up in Ninh’s book *Ingratitude*, where she argues: ‘[Jade Snow] Wong’s immigrant family operates as it does

not because it thinks itself Chinese in China, but because it knows itself to be Chinese in America,' (22) as the children of Chinese-American immigrant families experience the clash between the American culture in public and the Chinese value system uphold by their parents at home. This type of negotiation is clearly demonstrated in Wil's character development whose homosexuality contests with filial responsibility as a progeny to Chinese immigrant families and gender binary, both of which contribute to Wil's initial strategy of burying part of herself to sustain the unity of the Gao family. However, Grandpa in *Saving Face* proves that the feeling of cultural split is not exclusive to the children of Chinese immigrant families, as he also faces the plight of exile, both physically (standing and eating alone at the family reunion), and on a spiritual level (his demands no longer effective). Through this mutual sense of cultural split, the interdependence within the Gao family is reinforced, which accounts for the story's ending with family and community reunion.

4. Conclusion

In exploring the nuance in Asian American diasporic identity construction, I analyzed *The Wedding Banquet* and *Saving Face*, two canonical films directed by two directors who themselves possess cross-cultural experiences. The shared theme of family drama directs the audiences to focus on the familial dynamics which, according to Asian philosophy, are supposed to be kept private. The bold and unconventional portrayal of sexuality, generational intimacy, and cross-cultural experience in these two films undoubtedly promotes the dismantling of stereotypes forced on Asian American individuals.

Chapter One explored the intricate narratives of intimacy woven into the story told in *The Wedding Banquet* and how it intersects with gender, sexuality, and cross-cultural identity formation. Starting with a discussion on culinary cooking, the section reveals the multi-layered meanings of Chinese cuisine presented in the film and how it becomes a vicarious practice for non-verbal affections. The dishes present at the wedding not only reunite Wai-Tung with his native culture but also serve as a cold reminder of the familial responsibilities assigned from the moment he breathes air. Further, aside from its role as the tangible link between Wai-Tung's Taiwanese heritage and the Americanization that appears to define his identity on a superficial level, food also exposes the gender hierarchy within the Gao household, where womanhood is identified through inanimated objects - culinary cooking, in this case - instead of the

individuals. The question of victimhood is also examined. Through the exploration of Mrs. Gao and the narrative of victimhood surrounding her, I concluded that Lee proffers an alternative mode of reading feminist autonomy, one that is not constructed through explicit utterance but rather the ability to know and willfully unknowing simultaneously. Despite the fact that Mrs. Gao is mostly presented as a mouthpiece for patriarchal orders, Lee's proposal of womanhood still has subversive potential when encountered with patriarchy as Mr. Gao, the patriarch of the household appears to be oblivious of the situation. Through the complexity and depth of Mrs. Gao as a character, Lee urges his viewers to reconsider the definition of womanhood outside the periphery of patriarchy, which in its essence is rather feminist gesture.

Similarly, Weiwei's narrative construction is also predicated upon subverting binarized readings of gender hierarchy. While Mrs. Gao's narrative is examined through the victimization of women from the standpoint of male dominance, Weiwei's narrativity is constructed intricately through an inversed gender violence. Evidenced in the scene on her wedding night with Wai-Tung, Weiwei's adopting the position of a sexual predator is her gesture of reclaiming autonomy while sustaining the abusive structure of patriarchy, an act of perpetuating heteronormativity and patriarchy, the very systems that confine her. Further, the dynamic between gender violence and the Gao family intimacy is rather complicated: Wai Tung's absence of consent on their wedding night does not stop Weiwei from becoming a sexual predator, and the abuse she imposes on Wai Tung, resulting in

Weiwei's pregnancy, becomes essentially the most crucial reason the Gao family is not torn apart by Wai's rejection of conforming to heteronormativity. In general, I consider Lee's depiction of the two female characters as an alternative lens through which female narratives could be examined, one which is situated between the interests of the victim/perpetrator narrative, and they claim a third space where they demonstrate fluidity on their stance on patriarchy to maximize their survival in structures that are historical to women's disadvantage.

Chapter One concludes with an analysis of the discourse on liberation. Focusing on Wai-Tung and Weiwei, I analyzed their attempt at identity reconstruction but concluded that though the film presents them as achieving their goals, the resolutions at the end of the film do not ensure their liberation. Weiwei's pursuit of subjectivity is triggered by her move to the US, but she realizes that societal norms restrict her freedom and her relative freedom is exchanged for her tie with traditional gender roles. Wai Tung also grapples with his sexual identity, evident in his apartment redecoration to avoid clashes with his father. Ultimately, the film presents a tragic story in which characters strive for new identity formation but ultimately failed due to the force of heteronormativity and the prevalence of gender hierarchy.

Chapter Two focuses on Alice Wu's *Saving Face*, which offers a more optimistic outlook for queer futurity. The chapter starts with an analysis of the indebtedness and feeling of guilt ingrained in the identities of Hwei-Lan and Wil, contributing to the idea

of a 'Chinese daughter' that is a synonym for self-sacrificial narratives for the greater good, in this case, the 'face' of their biological family as well as the father figure, Mr. Gao. Conceptually aligning with the wedding of convenience portrayed in *The Wedding Banquet*, Hwei-Lan's downcast eyes and Wil's double-life, young surgeon by day and a lesbian by night, both female leads choose to forfeit the opportunity of embracing their authentic selves to protect their dignity of the father figure. Indebtedness here becomes a delicate object through which Hwei-Lan and Wil preserve their Chinese heritage; that is, filial piety outweighs the pursuit of self-narrative and liberation. 'Chinese daughters,' in this sense, becomes a universal symbol that captures the indebtedness and urge to reciprocate in Wil and Hwei-Lan as well as the strive for patrilineal recognition and feeling of guilt in Wai-Tung. Contrary to the multi-layered female narratives constructed in *The Wedding Banquet*, the two female leads in *Saving Face* are silenced due to the pressure of neighborhood gossip and the disappointed face of Mr. Gao.

In the case of Wil's identity construction, the idea of a 'glass closet' is pertinent and complicated Wil's identity formation process. For one thing, it serves as a layer of protection for the mother-daughter relationship in *Saving Face*, as their relationship is sustained by the avoidance of the discussion on Wil's sexuality. However, the 'gentle homophobia', as Ding and Liu contend, is perpetuated by this type of reticence, which impedes Wil's search for liberation and self-narrative. Hence Wil's 'double-life' and all the intimate scenes with her girlfriend Vivian are exclusively set at night, further

contributing to the association between homosexuality with shame and the need to privatize. Yet, due to the comedic nature of this film, the detrimental effects of a lifestyle split into two halves still manage to find a way out, instead of further deterioration.

In one way or another, the choice of self-silencing is not only pressured by the presence of Mr. Gao and the ‘face’ of the family but also the awareness that vocal resistance might not elicit substantial changes. In the section titled ‘Consent, Invisibility, and Inaudible Scream,’ I first referred to the much-debated ‘Tangshan Restaurant Attack’ (唐山打人事件) that took place in mainland China in 2022. This incident, though was a hot topic when it first came out, was quickly censored by the government and not much relevant information was left searchable at the moment. This tragic incident concerning three young three who bravely rejected sexual harassment but were unfortunately beaten and hospitalized is quite telling about the gender dynamics and hostility concerning women even in modern Chinese society. For one thing, it reveals the lack of consent constructing gender dynamics, as these women’s rejections do not prevent them from physical violence; for another, the lack of news coverage, assumably due to the government’s active censorship and the prevalence of male privilege, reveals the invisibility faced by many women in multiple aspects in the society. The identity negotiation process of Wil echoes these nameless, faceless victims whom the public simply ‘forgets’ as time goes by.

I then examined how the regulatory effect of heteronormative discourse is manifested in both hysteria and reticence. Drawing on David Eng's *Racial Castration* and Ding Naifei and Liu Jen-peng's "Reticent Poetics, Queer Politics", I argue that homosexual individuals like Wil and Wai-Tung, under the regime of reticence, are discriminated against into a ghostly state and become the 'unspeakable' that bring only shame only the two Gao families in the perseverance of '形式整體' ('the tangible whole', Ding and Liu 13). Thus, their bodies become disposable, and their narrative is only manipulated for the benefit of heteronormativity. However, the patriarch portrayed in *Saving Face* appears to have more flexibility compared to the one in *The Wedding Banquet*, in that Grandpa in *Saving Face* in fact allows Hwei-Lan, the 'unfilial' daughter a certain level of freedom for self-expression, manifested in Hwei-Lan's exile out of her Chinatown community in Flushing. Thereon, though Hwei-Lan is still groped in a binarized gender construction, and under the constant scrutiny of the male gaze, she manages to gradually reclaim her autonomy by choosing a marriage partner, Xiao Yu, of her own. The presentation of being the object of men's desire and finally articulating her own desires is symbolic of Wil's positionality within the battle between her Chinese heritage and Americanization, where homosexuality fits into the latter but conflicts with the former. To attend to both sides, I argued that Hwei-Lan and Wil both develop a flexible identity which also requires effort from the patriarch.

Chapter Two concludes with a discussion on reunion and liberation. I argue that the representation of minority groups, for instance, homosexual individuals and female immigrants, explores how minoritized individuals negotiate between larger social frameworks and personal identities. Further, the narrative in the film also has the potential to be filtered through a Western perspective, which I believe Wu actively challenges. The ending family reunion sequence also suggests that cultural splits might be a perpetual theme in immigrant identities, as Grandpa's solitude indicates not only cultural but generational split as well.

The identity construction process for Asian Americans is intricate and should be examined critically. Aside from deconstructing binaries and stereotypes, the opportunity for self-expression also begs the question of how can rectification work in favor of those formerly marginalized. Certainly, cinematic representations would be a powerful strategy in demystifying stereotypes historically imposed onto Asian Americans. While, as Lim argues in *Celluloid Coemrade*, the burden of representation is not only the access of visibility but also if such visibility would yield substantial changes that directly challenge a Western-centric perspective (46;48). With recent productions such as *Beef* (2023) and *Mr. & Mrs. Smith* (2024), and numerous other films and TV series featuring more characters played by actors who are non-Caucasians, the issue of visibility seems to bear an optimistic outlook. The same would be applicable to LGBTQIA+ representations. LGBTQIA+ characters have appeared more frequently on the screen in recent years,

which, when done in the right manner, would certainly help these historically marginalized groups gain more attention, increase their visibility to the public, and ultimately add nuance to their narrative that was intentionally muzzled. One example that came to mind is Alice Wu's recent release *The Half of It* (2020), which could be seen as a modern reiteration of the story portrayed in *Saving Face* (2004). While both films still center around the questions of diasporic identities and Chineseness in a Western context, the most significant difference between this set of films is the attitude towards homosexuality adopted by the parents: the hostility presented in *Saving Face* renders homosexuality a core element in Wil's exploration of cross-cultural identification and Chineseness, while in *The Half of It*, the father's acceptance of Ellie's sexuality eliminates the burden of heteronormativity during her journey towards young adulthood and self-exploration. With the wide audience base that comes with mainstream media platforms like Netflix, films such as *The Half of It* would most certainly increase the visibility of both Chinese Americans and LGBTQ+ members.

In the age of multiculturalism, it is certainly inspiring to see more nuanced representations of Asian Americans in the realm of film and television production. Yet, as optimistic as its future may seem, and progress has undoubtedly been made in the industry, the issue of power imbalance persists, and so does the question of rectifying stereotypes. Further, the effects of combating stereotypes by producing stereotypes, as is done in *The Wedding Banquet* and *Saving Face*, risks being misinterpreted by audiences

who are unable to capture the irony in such representation. The journey to true visibility for Asian Americans in Western society has only taken the first few steps, and it required collective effort in dismantling several centuries of privileges and misconceptions. I only hope my project is one of those first steps in surfacing the interiority of Asian Americans, and it sheds light on the nuanced and elastic identity construction processes in the context of Asian American diaspora, as proposed in the two films.

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