The Meaning of Liberation: From *The Joy Luck Club* to *Face* and *Saving Face*

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By 2003, Amy Tan's 1989 novel *The Joy Luck Club* had sold nearly four million copies and was already acclaimed as a classic of Chinese American literature (Chang 392). The film bearing the same title, directed by the Hong Kong-born Wayne Wang in 1993, was just as successful, winning various prizes and nominations, including one nomination for best screenwriter, at different film festivals. As far as films about Chinese culture made in the US are concerned, *The Joy Luck Club* can also be considered a classic, and even a standard to which successors will inevitably compare themselves.

Amy Tan and Wayne Wang, the scriptwriters of *The Joy Luck Club*, seem to have tried to be faithful to the original novel. Both the setting and the cast of characters remind the audience of the exact scenes in the novel. Just as in the novel, the cultural conflict between China and America and the clashes between the four mothers and their four daughters are the thematic focus of the film. One can find similar themes in two other films concerning Chinese culture made in the US after *The Joy Luck Club* — *Face* (2002) and *Saving Face* (2004). The three films tell stories set against the background of Chinese immigrant life in America, which represent the cultural conflict between mother and daughter or the young and the old, and, ultimately, to everyone's gratification, resolve the clashes through mutual understanding.

Yet if one takes a different perspective on the theme of cultural conflict, shifting one's attention from the difference between the cultures of China and America to internal clashes within American culture, especially in the context of multiculturalism, one may find that all these works deal with the theme of liberation, particularly the liberation of Chinese American women. This theme takes the shape of young women of Chinese origin making independent choices so as to complete the process of their liberation in the US. Such a theme pertains more to the cultural shifts within the US than to tensions between the Chinese and the American cultures. In the case of *The Joy Luck Club*, it is only after the

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four mothers come to the US that they are able to tell their stories: the US gives them an opportunity to look back at their past life in China and at the same time stimulates their impulse to share their humiliating experience with their daughters. While much of the plot in *The Joy Luck Club* is set in China before 1949, foregrounding the concern with Chinese matters, the stories of *Face* and *Saving Face* are set in the US — and yet the contrast between China and America is kept, less directly, by substituting Chinatown for Chinese society. Even so, much of the plot in the latter two films, such as the love affair between the Chinese daughter and the black man in *Face* and Ma's secret love for a younger man and her resulting pregnancy in *Saving Face*, unfolds against the background of the pursuit of greater freedom under the banner of multiculturalism in American society. Starting in the late 1970s and the early 1980s, the valorization of multiculturalism has transformed the American cultural landscape to a considerable degree. Pursuing the political agenda of equality in various aspects of cultural life, especially in ethnic and gender issues, multiculturalism has enhanced the cultural diversity in the country. As "concepts of race, class, culture, gender and ethnicity are the driving themes of multicultural approach," this approach "promotes respect for the dignity of the lives and voices of the forgotten" (Trotman ix). More importantly, drawing on the idea of cultural pluralism developed by Horace Kallen[1] as early as the 1910s and 1920s and criticizing the rigid adherence to the concept of the melting pot, multiculturalism, as some scholars have pointed out, "is the quest to achieve equal recognition and inclusion for the diverse cultures which constituted the United States" (Long, qtd. in Sengstock 243). Against this background, the Chinese women's pursuits of freedom reflected in the three films combine to map the movement towards a further liberation of Chinese American women in the United States.

I

There is a consensus among Chinese scholars that the major theme of Amy Tan's *The Joy Luck Club* is the cultural conflict between China and

[1] The philosopher and cultural critic Horace Kallen wrote a series of articles on democracy and the concept of the melting pot, which were later collected in his book *Culture and Democracy in the United States* (1924), where he associated cultural pluralism with "the view that democracy is an essential prerequisite to culture, that culture can be and sometimes is a fine flowering of democracy and that the history of the relation of the two in the United States exhibits this fact" (1998: 2).

America refracted through the relations between the Chinese mothers and their daughters. But the ultimate settlement of the conflict points to the cultural identity of Amy Tan as a Chinese American writer, a representative of the generation whose members "tried to make their voice heard so as to break up the Euro-American monolithism, and to win over a position for the Chinese Americans as well as Chinese culture in the US" (Cheng and Zhang 87). Amy Tan's writing has been regarded as, to some extent, a promotion of Chinese culture in the US. The opposite view of the novel accentuates the image of the other in the light of Edward Said's theory of Orientalism in Tan's depiction of the poverty, backwardness, and humanitarian disasters in pre-modern Chinese society; it is thus considered complicit in purveying Orientalism to Western readers (Pu and Rao 25–28). Despite their striking difference, these comments have one thing in common: they interpret Amy Tan from the Chinese position, a point strongly made in China by many scholars of Chinese American literature over more than a decade (e.g., Chen Kefeng, Mi Lina, Lu Wei, Chen Aimin), typically either stressing that her writing could help to remedy "the marginal situation" of Chinese culture in American society (Cheng and Zhang 86) or emphasizing that the stories of Chinese women in her book actually point to the break-up of their Chinese identity (Pu and Rao 25).

Such China-oriented interpretations[2] are problematic. It is true that Amy Tan is a Chinese American writer, or, to put it in the way favored by many Chinese readers, a writer with a strong Chinese background. But she was born in the US, grew up immersed in American culture, and addresses primarily American readers, some of whom are Chinese Americans speaking Chinese, others not (Amy Tan herself does not speak Chinese). This is not to take sides in the above dispute but to say that *The Joy*

[2] Over the past two decades there has appeared much scholarship on Chinese American literature in China. Some of it presents China-oriented interpretations: for example, *Identity and History: Reading Chinese American Literature* by Longhai Zhang attempts to situate Chinese American writers within the Chinese identity, and *Seeking Identity between Worlds: A Study of Chinese American Women's Literature* by Guan Hefeng analyzes the new image of Chinese American women with the help of the nourishing elements of Chinese culture. Others position Chinese American writers within the world of Chinese America and thus categorize them as American writers; a representative work of this kind is *Positioning Contemporary Chinese American Literature in Contested Terrains* by Zhao Wenshu. In the US scholarship on Chinese American literature the focus is different. In the studies on Amy Tan, for instance, the key themes are generational conflicts and model minority (see, e.g., Lowe 1996; Palumbo-Liu 1999).

Luck Club ought to be read in the context of American culture, complete with such essentials as self-identity, the quest for freedom, and the pursuit of happiness, as well as with the civil rights movements associated with the issues of gender, race, and class against the backdrop of multiculturalism. Read in this context, *The Joy Luck Club* complements the theme of cultural conflict by celebrating the specifically American idea of striving for liberation, especially the pursuit of personal freedom, in American society.

At the very beginning of *The Joy Luck Club*, there is a moving allegorical story about a Chinese woman and a swan. The woman has taken the swan with her to the US; to the swan she opens her heart to speak about her future daughter: "In America I will have a daughter just like me. But over there nobody will say her worth is measured by the loudness of her husband's belch. Over there nobody will look down on her, because I will make her speak only perfect American English" (Tan 3).[3] Here, the symbolic meaning of "America" begins to emerge. Unfortunately, after filling out one form after another as requested by immigration officers, the woman "forgot why she had come and what she had left behind" (3). Yet it is a temporary forgetting: the novel deals precisely with the purpose for which the woman, who has become an old lady when the main plot of the novel starts, came to America.

Following the book, the film begins with the same allegorical story accompanied by slow, sad, sentimental music, which creates a nostalgic atmosphere consistent with the style of the novel. Although at this moment the narrative voice does not reproduce every word the woman says in the novel, it places the same kind of stress on the significance of "America"; therefore the theme of the liberation of the self stands out no less conspicuously: as one can discern clearly from the story of the woman and the swan, "America" here represents the liberator for her as well as for her future daughter.

Amy Tan worked as a screenwriter with the director Wayne Wang. Much of the original novel was therefore transplanted to the film, especially the plots in which conflicts arise: the child Jing-Mei is asked to learn to play the piano; the child Waverly is forced to learn to play chess — the result is clashes with their mothers who expect their daughters to turn out to be very talented. In these scenes of generational conflicts the screenwriter and the director bring into relief the Americanized language

[3] The mothers in this novel know clearly that the future for their daughters lies definitely in the United States (see Yin 269).

and actions of the daughters. The audience is bound to be impressed when Jing-Mei confronts her mother, who has hoped that her daughter would become a prodigy, with a self-willed retort: "I am not your slave. This is not China. You cannot force me to do this, to do that." Jing-Mei has a typical Chinese face but speaks like a self-conscious American, whose rebelliousness would not be seen in a traditional Chinese family. By itself, this scene would not suffice for highlighting the theme of liberation and self-reliance; it could, rather, be considered a side-effect of the so-called cultural conflict. However, the theme of liberation gains prominence in the relationships between the mothers and the daughters after the latter have grown up to be independent adults. It is the mothers who actually help the daughters extricate themselves from various troubles in their lives, and the help usually consists of the advice to know themselves and recover their self. For instance, in the film, one finds that Lena St. Clare cannot bear her husband's strange demand that they should strictly share their living costs. It is her mother who tells her that she needs to know what she wants after all, and it is with her mother's guidance that Lena, long imprisoned in a failed marriage, is finally able to express her anger to her husband. One small detail in the film points to the success of this change: after presenting Lena's story, the film switches back to the frame scene of the Joy Luck Club at Jing-Mei's home and to the party held there, where we see Lena's boyfriend sitting beside her — evidently she has divorced her husband, found herself, and turned over a new leaf (the novel does not contain this detail). Similarly, Rose Hsu Jordan receives an important message from her mother when her marriage comes to an end: speak out in your own voice! Indeed, Rose, who has never expressed her own opinions to her husband, now cries out her own mind, and thus forces her husband to notice her existence for the first time. Once again, a small cinematic detail (absent in the novel) substantiates this point: at the end of the film, everyone gathers at Jing-Mei's home to celebrate her trip to China, and we see Rose standing beside her husband — they seem to have overcome their marriage crisis and to have reconciled with each other. One may infer that this reconciliation might not have happened if Rose had not been encouraged by her mother to express her feelings.

The emphasis on the self-consciousness of the daughters also finds its expression in the characters of the mothers in their youth, though only implicitly. For instance, in the story of Lindo's experience in China as a child bride, facing the seemingly inevitable fate of being controlled by an unknown man, the 15-year-old Lindo says to herself on the eve of the

marriage ceremony: "I made up my mind that I cannot forget forever who I am." The original sentence in the novel is different: "I would always remember my parents' wishes, but I would never forget myself" (Tan 53). The common denominator remains: the pursuit of the self is rooted even in the heart of a teenage girl in the Chinese countryside of the 1930s, which is very unlikely in the Chinese reality as those familiar with the emphasis on filial piety in Chinese feudal culture[4] would know. This scene, therefore, attains a better resolution for the theme of self-identity in the context of American culture. Like the child Jing-Mei who dares to challenge her mother in Americanized language, this child bride, living in the backward countryside of China several decades before, is shown speaking in a surprisingly similar language, especially in the film, where her sense of self is more American than Chinese.

When the daughters receive guidance from their mothers, they walk firmly out of their predicaments. What about the mothers themselves? They are encouraged to follow their own paths by the very act of recounting their stories of their past in China. It is from recollecting their past suffering that they draw lessons, which they pass on to their daughters. In the film's representation of this process one can feel the effects of American culture — the foregrounding of the themes of freedom, independence, and the rights of the individual self — particularly strongly. These concepts are reflected in the film's criticism of the victimization of the mothers in a patriarchal society, whether Chinese or American. The film takes the feminist stance which, however, risks being satirized as too pat. As a critic in *Washington Post* pointed out after film's release, it "fit(s) the pattern of feminist ideology" in that "listening to [the mothers'] tales of woe, you feel that they are all blameless; that their suffering was imposed from without — usually at the hands of men" (Hinson). The criticism is justified in exposing the obvious intentionality of the structured conflict between the female and the male characters in the film (and, in fact, in the novel), and of the oppression of women by men, but the main feminist gesture of the film is to endow the women characters, mothers and daughters, with a living force to have their view of life enlightened

[4] In the opening part of *The Confucian Analects*, Confucius quotes an ancient philosopher as saying: "They are few who, being filial and fraternal, are fond of offending against their superiors. There have been none, who, not liking to offend against their superiors, have been fond of stirring up confusion. The superior man bends his attention to what is radical. That being established, all practical courses naturally grow up. Filial piety and fraternal submission! — Are they not the root of all benevolent actions?" Filial piety has been the central idea of Confucianism in China for two thousand years.

and enlarged, in line with the core message about the symbolic significance of "America" reflected in the story of the woman and her swan.

The reviewer's comment, however, touches upon the central point in the film — the traumas that the mothers underwent in China before coming to America. Combined, the suffering of the four mothers represents the history of the oppressed women in China in the past. The traumatic experience of the four mothers in old China is strikingly represented in both the novel and the film. Though the original meaning of trauma in ancient Greek is an "injury" to the body, its current usage, especially within the vocabulary of Freudian psychoanalysis, is "as wound inflicted not upon the body but upon the mind" (Caruth 3). More importantly, "trauma seems to be much more than a pathology, or the simple illness of a wounded psyche: it is always the story of a wound that cries out, that addresses us in the attempt to tell us of a reality or truth that is not otherwise available" (4). The trauma that the four mothers received is both physical and psychic, but they work through it by way of psychological outcry rather than physical recovery. Rather than the memory of life-stories, theirs is the memory of existential perception. The former is "marked by a seeming actuality" while the latter "is what transforms the casual daily events into a functioning mentality or an existential concern that is not self-evident" (Xu 4). In other words, one's sense of the past is entailed not in actual happenings but in meaningful happenings (ibid.). What makes the mothers' memory meaningful is their sense of rebellion against a woman's worth being "measured by the loudness of her husband's belch" (Tan 3). Obviously, this is equal to their sense of the recovery of the self, which is more foregrounded in the new country, America, where their existential perception is formed. It is also there that their trauma is resolved, "not only by setting things right in the world, but by setting things right in the self" (Alexander et al. 5). In the case of the mothers, by drawing a lesson from their past about the importance of self-independence for women their traumas are settled "in the self."

The fact that their traumatic history is recounted, with an implicit feminist critique rooted in the valorization of self-awareness, after their arrival in America points to the regaining of the self as well as to the cultural difference between China and their new country. Yet the feminist ideological critique pertains not only to the mothers at their young age in China but also to the experience of the daughters in America: they also suffer from a form of patriarchal oppression. Two of the four stories of the daughters, those of Lena and Rose, show astonishing similarities with those of their respective mothers, which may be what made the *Wash-*

ington Post critic comment that the film was "the latest in multicultural haute couture," adding that political correctness had never "looked so sumptuously handsome as it does here, and in its perfect-pitch instinct for the cultural vibe" (Hinson). This remark sounds ironic, though the specific ideology of "political correctness" does, of course, have some effect on the film director and screenwriter, who appropriate it to foreground the victories of the liberated women. Another critic suggests that this is not necessarily intentional: the miracle of the film is that "it just happens to be politically correct"; it is "not a feminist agenda picture," but it "propagates cultural diversity" (Levy). Intentionally or not, the film is tinged with elements of the American ideology of multiculturalism in various ways. "Political correctness" cannot account for its success without the risk of reductiveness, but the reference to the issue of cultural diversity situates the film as well as the novel within American rather than Chinese culture: the film valorizes American culture through its contrast with Chinese culture. This tendency is even more obvious in *Face* and *Saving Face*, where the emphasis is on the trend of American multiculturalism rather than on American culture in general.

II

Face, which premiered in 2002 at the Sundance film festival in New York, is the first film of the young Chinese American director Bertha Bay-Sa Pan, born in the US and raised in Taiwan. She is also one of the screenwriters and producers. The film tells the story of three generations and their tensions and conflicts: a maternal grandmother, a mother, and a daughter. It is set in the Chinese community in Queens, New York, in the 1990s. But the film begins with a flashback to an event twenty years before. Kim, the mother in the main plot of the film, and her boyfriend are having a good time in a bar where she met a dandy from a rich Chinese family in whose house she used to serve as a tutor. That young man behaves with familiarity and even flirts with Kim, which leads to her boyfriend misunderstanding their relationship. A quarrel ensues. Kim's boyfriend finally leaves her in anger. The dandy takes advantage of this situation and rapes Kim, who is drunk. After some time she discovers that she is pregnant. In order not to let both families lose face, Kim's mother agrees to a marriage arrangement with the dandy's family. Under great pressure from her family, Kim has to accept the marriage, but life afterwards is a disaster. Several months after her daughter, Genie,

is born, Kim leaves New York for Hong Kong where she later becomes a clerk at a bank. Her daughter is left in the care of her mother. When the main action begins, Kim has come to New York on business and wants to see her mother and daughter, who has kept a strong resentment against her mother and refuses to meet her face to face. Kim yearns for her daughter's forgiveness and lets her know the shame and humiliation she had suffered in her marriage.

The clash between the mother and the daughter becomes the thematic core of the film. Another plotline focuses on Genie's own story and her tension with her grandmother. She is about to finish high school and has a boyfriend, Mike, a black youth who works as a DJ in a dance hall. As Genie and her boyfriend appear together in public in Chinatown, the news reaches the grandmother who thinks it makes her lose face and feels even more ashamed than of her daughter's scandal twenty years before. Confronting her grandmother's coldness, Genie is confused but does not give up her relationship with Mike. Eventually, the grandmother seems to forgive her, and by the end of the film Genie also accepts her mother's apology. The film ends in a comforting reconciliation among people of three generations.

Obviously, the grandmother in the film is a representative of Chinese culture, and Chinatown in Queens is to a large extent a continuation of Chinese culture in the US. Twenty years previously, the challenge for Kim was not an assertion of her rights but how to keep the family from losing face. In this traditional Chinese culture, the destiny of the individual gives way to the reputation of the family. The flashback about Kim's unfortunate fate echoes the mothers' recounting of their past life in *The Joy Luck Club*, both revealing oppressive elements in Chinese culture — the patriarchal authority in the latter and the sacrifice of individual happiness for the sake of the family's reputation in the former. The women were not granted individual voices in traditional Chinese society. In this light, Kim's departure from her family (both her mother's and her husband's) can be seen as her rebellion against traditional Chinese culture, which continues even in the United States where they live, and a challenging pursuit of her own identity. Her action proves to be worthwhile as she does find her path in life. Like the mothers in *The Joy Luck Club,* who wished to pass their own life lessons on to their daughters, Kim also attempts to communicate her own perspective to her daughter. At the end of the film, before Kim is about to depart for Hong Kong, she finally gets a chance to talk to her daughter directly. While apologizing to Genie for having abandoned her, she also expresses her approval of her

daughter's making her own choice in love, in striking contrast with her own past submission to family pressure: "what you represent is what I had wished." It is this heart-felt confession that eventually wins Genie's forgiveness of her mother.

Kim's encouragement of her daughter's self-affirmation is similar to that of the mothers' in *The Joy Luck Club*, but in the latter film the mothers are the sources of power for the daughters, whereas in *Face* the daughter sets a powerful example for her mother. In this sense *Face* takes the theme of liberation a step further, enhancing the spirit of American multiculturalism.

In *The Joy Luck Club* two daughters have inter-racial relationships: Rose's husband and Waverly's boyfriend are white men. In *Face*, Genie's boyfriend is an African American; in terms of Chinese culture, this too is a sign of a further move toward the fulfillment of the multiculturalist principle in the Chinese community in the US. The director Bertha Bay-Sa Pan began to plan this film when she was still a student at Columbia University. Later she made a short film as her graduation work, which served as a basis for *Face*. As one film critic notes, the film incorporates much of the theory of identity, gender, and race which Pan learned in graduate courses (Chocano). This does not mean that the film was made to interpret those theories. In fact, during the process of turning the graduation work into a formal film, Bertha Bay-Sa Pan revised the screenplay more than ten times. In response to an interviewer's question whether the inter-racial love affair in *Face* would help to change the racial prejudice in the Chinese community, she said that she was not sure to what degree the film could affect that phenomenon but she thought that no matter what racial, ethnical, religious, educational, and social background one was from, we are not that different from each other and we participate in a common struggle for identity, love, and family (Pan 2015). Clearly, Pan did not want to confine the horizon of the film only to the circle of Chinese immigrants: the love between Genie and Mike goes beyond racial boundaries; their relationship has significance separate from the struggle against racial discrimination. Indeed, Genie and Mike's love exudes pure youthful ethos. There is something almost saintly in Mike's character: he does not care about the racial prejudice of the Chinese community; he is often chivalric in gently protecting Genie; and he strongly encourages her to be self-confident when she is depressed. On the other hand, Genie's love for him also encourages him to break the sensitive racial taboo in the Chinese community. The film's director projects a romantic sentiment onto the love affair between the two young people of differ-

ent skin color, whose dependence on each other has already transcended the simple racial issue and is transformed into a universal goal of self-achievement, indicative of the core assumption of American multiculturalism, a recognition of people's "shared and equal status as American citizens" (Sengstock 245).

And yet the racial issue is one of the strongest concerns of the film. Genie's grandmother is astonished by her relationship with a black man. Their neighbors in Chinatown cast despising glances at the mixed couple; the owner of the fruit shop instinctively takes Mike for a thief. The film exhibits the sort of xenophobia, a habitual resistance to anything foreign, in the Chinese community, expressed in, for instance, the grandmother's claim that she never eats American food. The young couple's action against this habit and their challenge to racial discrimination is reinforced by the detailed and beautiful portrayal of the erotic bodily touch between Genie and Mike in the film. The grandmother finally changes her negative attitude toward Genie's choice, which might be read as a sign of acceptance of or at least openness to the idea of diversity and equality. The film thus has the potential of playing a role in advancing this trend among Chinese immigrants. The very essence of multiculturalism is in fact expressed in the mixed style of music in the film, where one can distinctly hear the music of the Peking Opera that the grandmother favors, the pop songs that many Chinese immigrants like, and the hip-hop that is rooted in black culture. The co-presence of these different types of music, with their different cultural backgrounds reflected in different beats and rhythms, is clearly suggestive of a multicultural atmosphere.

III

Like *Face*, *Saving Face* (2004) was also the maiden work of its director, Alice Wu. Among the cast, the Chinese audience can recognize the famous actress Joan Chen, who used to be one of the most popular film stars in China in the early 1980s before immigrating to the US, in the role of Ma. Like *Face*, this film won several prizes and awards, including best director, at different film festivals. It is a romantic comedy, with the major part of the plot set in the Chinese community in Flushing and Queens in New York. Ma has been a widow for a long time, and her daughter Wil is a doctor in a hospital in Manhattan. Ma's parents are fairly renowned figures among the Chinese immigrants, the father being a retired professor. The major plot of the film revolves around the two scandals involving Ma and her daughter: the former gets pregnant by an unknown

man while the latter turns out to be a lesbian. The astonishing shame that falls on the Chinese family nearly drives the old parents crazy. The film, however, ends with Ma and her daughter understanding and encouraging each other. The film's ending has a comic and happy tone, with the grandfather finally accepting his daughter's and granddaughter's choice.

As in the two films discussed above, the cultural clash is one of the major themes in *Saving Face*. The title is close to that of *Face* and carries similar implications. The audacious behavior of the younger generation in the family brings shame to the elder generation; in *Saving Face* the behavior of the mother and her daughter is more radically deviant from the social norm of the Chinese community than that of the characters in *Face*. However, the comic and happy ending of the film points to the change in the norms in the Chinese community: it is represented not only as opening up to but also as taking action to embrace new social trends, in line with the valorization of multiculturalism in American society.

This is particularly clear in the films' treatment of the middle generation: the character of the mother. Like Kim in *Face*, the mother in *Saving Face* at first seems to be a "neutral" character, an ordinary Chinese woman living in the Chinese community. Compared with her daughter Wil, she is very traditional; she fully adheres to the Chinese way of life. Although she is a second-generation immigrant, she speaks broken English; most of the time in the film she only speaks Chinese. One of the means of showing her Chinese way of living is the film's focus on the scenes of cooking and eating. One day Wil invites her friend, a black man, home to dinner, and his table manners surprise Ma, but what may surprise the viewer is her statement that the reason that this man is so black is that he has eaten too much soy sauce. To part of the members of the Chinese audience, this comic touch strikes a chord: some people in southern China (Ma's family originally came from Shanghai) do believe that eating too much soy sauce can turn one's skin black. In *Face* the grandmother spends most of her time in the kitchen cooking appetizing meals for her granddaughter. In *The Joy Luck Club* the various family gatherings are mostly dinner parties. On one occasion Waverly is embarrassed at such a party because her white boyfriend makes a tactless comment on the dishes her mother has made. The directors of these three films all show a strong interest in Chinese cooking and treat it as the ideal site of showcasing Chinese culture; this seems to be the way some overseas Chinese anchor Chinese culture.

On the other hand, however, Ma, as an ordinary Chinese woman, is strikingly anti-traditional. The film does not tell much about how she fell

in love with the young man who has made her pregnant, but does hint that she well knows how to make her own choices and release her feelings when necessary. To struggle against her sense of loneliness, one day she goes to the DVD store in Chinatown to borrow some pornographic videos, which she watches alone at home though not without embarrassment. The scene goes beyond the comic effect — it suggests that instead of having her sexual drive pent up, she finds an outlet. While this is not acceptable according to the traditional moral standard in the Chinese community, it is a sign of her moral independence. Hence, when she learns that her daughter is a lesbian, she accepts this, and when Wil helps her to escape from her arranged wedding, she encourages her to reunite with her lesbian partner as soon as possible.

It is here that the plotlines of the mother and the daughter converge: they both rebel against the culturally repressive patterns of the traditional Chinese community and assert their right to live their own lives. In *Face* the daughter reconciles with her mother due to the latter's appreciative understanding of her choices, and the mother receives her message of hope for a new life. *Saving Face* takes the story further: mother and daughter become comrades in the fight for the same goal, the daughter saving the "face" of the mother and the mother empowering the daughter.

Compared with the daughter's love for a black man in *Face*, the story of a gay couple in *Saving Face* poses a greater challenge to segments of the Chinese American audience (as well as to parts of the audience in mainland China). The film is partly based on the personal life of the director Alice Wu, who is a lesbian. Wu once said that she was moved when ten lesbians in the audience of a film festival tried to take pictures of her with their cell phones: "At that moment I feel the film is successful" (see Wu, IMDB, *Saving Face*). Homosexuality is out of the "closet" and has entered not only literary works but also the cinema; that Alice Wu deals with this issue in her film signifies her sensitivity to this cultural change. On the other hand, considering that quite a few states in the US had not yet ratified same-sex marriage at the time when the film was shot, Wu's film speaks not only for those who share her sexual orientation but also for the Chinese community, which is opening up to change, appropriating the discourse of American multiculturalism and integrating itself into this perspective. Though comic, the film tackles a serious issue, presenting multiculturalism from the perspective of Chinese immigrants, especially Chinese women immigrants who have, over the past decades, been struggling for their voices and for decisions of their own.

As mentioned above, critics have pointed out that the politics of race, gender, and identity are part of the repertoire of *Face*, captured in its plot. The same is true for *Saving Face*. One example is the portrayal of Jay, a black youth who is Wil's neighbor and, for some time, a close friend. Jay seems to play a double role in the film: on the one hand, his relationship with Wil balances between that of an ordinary friend and that of a boyfriend — at least Wil's mother treats him as her boyfriend at one time; on the other hand, Jay knows about Wil's unusual relation with Vivian, her lesbian partner (at one point Wil even shares her secret with Jay hoping for advice, which Jay actually gives her). Yet Jay appears only a few times in the film; hence a critic in *The New York Times* regards the use of this character as a weaker point in the film: "The movie is at its weakest when it succumbs to sentimental sitcom conventions. Wil has an African-American neighbor and confidant, Jay, who pops in and out of her apartment for comic relief without emerging as more than a friendly symbol of the ethnic diversity and potential romantic freedom New York offers" (Holden). Yet one should not reduce the Jay subplot to mere political correctness. This seemingly irrelevant subplot plays a role in the ideological integration of the Chinese community in the larger context of American multiculturalism, both as a group that demands recognition and as one that is called upon to grant recognition to others. A film that mainly tells a story set within the Chinese American community calls for a representation of another non-hegemonic ethnic group as a test for the open-mindedness of the people in this community. In more general terms, though this is a film about the life of Chinese Americans, it transcends the issues of race and ethnicity in their literal meaning and transforms them into a symbolization of the ideology of multiculturalism. In this sense it tells a story not just about the Chinese in contemporary America but of America itself. This feature, transpiring as early as *The Joy Luck Club*, is enhanced in *Face* and *Saving Face*. Multiculturalism in America cannot be understood completely without embracing the contributions that ethnic groups such as the Chinese community have made to its ongoing development. Reciprocity, therefore, is the force without which the multicultural trend in America will find no place to anchor. It is against this general background that the theme of liberation for the women characters represented in the three films is to be evaluated, which points to a more open, equal, and multiculturalist society, both in the US and, it is to be hoped, in China as well as the rest of the world.

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