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

ABSTRACT

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

KEYWORDS

Chinese family
Chinese cinema
homosexuality
identity
Ang Lee
Alice Wu

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

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

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

FAMILY MATTERS IN DIASPORA

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

TOWARDS AN UNDERSTANDING OF TRANSNATIONAL

The concept of transnational cinema arises from the increasingly globalized conditions of film production, distribution and consumption that deviate from the old national cinema model. In the past two decades, three main patterns have been proposed to theorize the term 'transnational', as Will Higbee and Song Hwee Lim (2010) have summarized in the first issue of *Transnational Cinema*. The first approach, exemplified by Higson (2002), uses the dichotomy of national and transnational to address issues such as film production, distribution and exhibition that cannot be fully understood within national boundaries. The second approach concerns Sheldon Lu's understandings of the transnational as a regional phenomenon based on a shared cultural heritage (1997). The final approach sheds light on the diasporic, exilic and post-colonial cinemas that have long been ignored in the history of film studies (Naficy 2001).

The concept of 'transnational', after being used loosely in different disciplines – sometimes without a clear definition – has become almost an academic buzzword. Zhang Yingjin, like many other scholars, has questioned the usefulness of the term. He argues:

> The term 'transnational' remains unsettled primarily because of multiple interpretations of the national in transnationalism. What is emphasized in the term 'transnational'? If it is the national, then what does this 'national' encompass – national culture, language, economy, politics, ethnicity, religion, and/or regionalism? If the emphasis falls on the prefix 'trans' (i.e. on cinema's ability to cross and bring together, if not transcend, different nations, cultures, and languages), then this aspect of transnational film studies is already subsumed by comparative film studies.
>
> (Zhang 2007: 37)

However, while to some extent I agree that the term 'transnational' often brings with it a host of historical, cultural, geographical and political implications, it has certain value for studying issues related to diasporic Chinese families.

First, the transnational family among Chinese diaspora populations is one of the historical patterns coupled with migration (McKeown 1999; Liu 2005). Taking a transnational perspective enables us to explore the ethnic roots and dual heritage of diasporic families, echoing the state-of-the-art debate that diasporic subject positions are becoming less a liability than an asset.

The transnational sense of 'Chineseness' moves beyond the conventional construction of the 'political China', which has been further problematized and complicated by the historically separated territories and polities of Hong Kong, Taiwan and Mainland China. Instead, in the concept of 'cultural China', the transnational ethnicization of Chineseness both encompasses and transcends the ethnically, territorially, linguistically and religiously defined Chineseness. For Tu, the Chinese diaspora as the periphery can constitute a new cultural centre of Chineseness (Tu 1994). The interface between 'Chinese' and the 'Chinese overseas' has produced a transnational Chinese imagination, which is a staging ground for acting rather than an escape. Thus, insights into the concept of 'transnational' allow us to move towards ethnic transnationalism, calling for a shared identity and a sense of mutual belonging. In so doing, migrants are able to mobilize ethnic ties without being confined to ethnic stratification.

Second, the conventional methods of film studies that examined the cinemas of Hong Kong, Taiwan, Mainland China and Chinese exiles separately cannot account for new trends of increased cross-border cooperation. Under the old framework, film productions in these areas are treated as if flows of money and personnel can be ignored. Some co-funded and co-produced movies, because of transnational reality, were confronted with fundamental contradictions in terms of their regional classification. The concept of 'transnational', therefore, can register the complexity of film production and shared markets that move beyond the territory-based division.

Indeed, it is precisely the cross-border reality of Chinese cinema that requires a concept to encompass the sense of sharedness and allow for diversity at the same time. If we go back to the end of the nineteenth century when films first reached China in 1896, we also recognize the transnational nature at the root of Chinese cinema. The film consumption and distribution in China, as Lu notes, has been 'an essentially transnational nature' since the inception of Chinese cinema (1997: 2). Because of the historical context in which political, social and cultural revolutions were taking place, and despite the influence of western culture on Chinese films, Chinese cinema as a modern art form was used to carry out the mission of reflecting twentieth-century revolution, the intense political and cultural confrontation between East and West, and between tradition and modernity. In the case of Chinese cinema, national and transnational practices thus become localized.

Third, a transnational perspective enables us to see the evolving relationship between Chinese films and Hollywood conventions and the interwoven relationship between localized transnationalism and 'transnational locality'. While transnational Chinese cinema is in no sense exclusively counter to or accommodating conventional Hollywood mechanisms, it is noted that transnational Chinese cinema can function as a mode of self-representation.

To further illustrate this point, I bring into view Hamid Naficy's influential delineation of 'transnational films'. According to Naficy, it is a genre of 'cine-writing and self-narrativization with specific generic and thematic conventions', which encompasses 'products of the particular transnational location of filmmakers in time and place and in social life and cultural difference'. He continues,

> by linking genre, authorship, and transnational positioning, the independent transnational genre allows films to be read and reread not only as individual texts produced by authorial vision and generic conventions, but also as sites for intertextual, cross-cultural, and translational struggles over meanings and identities.
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> (Naficy 1996: 121)

Such a strategy has proven to be a successful vehicle through which the traditionally marginalized people are allowed to express themselves in new environments. In the hands of transnational Chinese artists, the film as a platform entails different strategies of representation and self-representation. Cultural self-representation as a principle does not fix the problem entailed by representation and power, but instead shifts the attention from the traditional minority versus majority controversy to the global dimension of ethnic transnationalism, while at the same time allowing cultural insiders to construct and represent their culture freely. It is in this respect that transnational Chinese cinema makes cultural engagement possible. This also moves us beyond on the one hand simply uncritically reproducing an industrial and economic model associated with 'Western cultural hegemony', and on the other attributing too much importance to an element of Chineseness solely associated with Mainland China.

A final point on the importance of a transnational perspective is the structural affinity between the ideas of the transnational and that of homosexuality – the shared and complementary blind spots, and the subversive potential of combining them. The concept of transnational Chinese cinema points to the awareness of the traditionally silenced and marginalized Chinese in western-centric discourses, and the LGBT group who has a double marginal status. Precisely as Marchetti has already pointed out,

> the common experiences of the Chinese diaspora and the global links among various Chinese communities must not be dismissed. Particularly for those who traditionally may be at odds with a conservative Chinese patriarchy, such as many heterosexual women, lesbians, and gay men, the ability to cross borders and to participate in a wider, global sphere transcends ethnic and cultural ties.
>
> (1998: 72)

It is in this respect that we could argue that both *The Wedding Banquet* and *Saving Face* have attempted to address the issue of conflicting cultural identities for the diasporic Chinese and the homosexual people, while trying to reconcile these two. In fact, the analysis of the film could attest the point made by Engebretsen that one of the problems of the influential paradigm underpinning contemporary queer and gender studies is the anti-normative critique that tends to 'oversimplify what is after all complex social processes and experiences, culturally specific adaptations and paradoxes' (2014: 9). The clash, negotiation and fusing of different cultural elements depicted in the transnational context illustrate the complex process of constructing queer, gender and ethnic identity.

THE THREAT POSED BY HOMOSEXUALITY TO THE MODERN CHINESE FAMILY

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Following patriarchal logic, Mrs Gao is assigned the role of promoting a patriarchal agenda, especially in relation to how the younger generation should behave. Until Wai Tung discloses the secret to Mrs Gao that he is gay, he remains the perfect son in his parents' eyes. As a woman who has always placed importance on the patriarchal order, the mother finds it hard to take in the news and she questions her son, 'Did Simon lead you astray?' 'How can you be so confused?' 'Didn't you have girlfriends in college?' The mother's remark from another perspective also reaffirms the point made earlier

that homosexuality is commonly viewed among the Chinese as a cultural phenomenon, as the mother believes that Wai Tung is tricked into homosexual practices by Simon, an American man. In the end, she makes her son promise that it will remain a secret to the father for apparently the news 'will kill him'.

The importance of protecting the family lineage is further exemplified by the mother's dramatic reaction to Wei Wei's decision to have an abortion. It would be logical to assume that the mother lacks education and therefore lacks freedom to make her own decisions, as she refers to Wei Wei as a modern, well-educated and independent woman whom she envies. Yet, on the other hand, she is a firm believer in traditional Chinese family values, which is shown by her persuading Wei Wei to keep the baby, as 'husband and children are most important to a woman'. To a large extent, the mother's notion of family values connects with the conventional social norm as a much bigger frame of reference. Mrs. Gao bears the culturally defined role of 'mother' and 'wife' in accordance with Confucian ideals.

It is instructive to look into Wei Wei's handling of her pregnancy/abortion by taking into account the renqing (translated as human feelings or sentiment) side. Tightly linked to the Confucian norms of social responsibility and appropriate behaviour, renqing is one of the common social rules used to regulate Chinese interpersonal relationships. As a result of the renqing behind Wei Wei's actions, the crisis of the pregnancy/abortion is dealt with in a sentimental way. Even though the marriage was conceived as a trade, the relationship between Wei Wei and the Gao family is based on the 'reality' of family ties.

The sentimental touch added by Ang Lee seems to justify the choice of Wei Wei keeping the baby. To make sure that the audience does not miss it, Lee inserts a scene in which Wei Wei is persuaded by the mother not to abort the baby. The night before the scheduled abortion, Wei Wei decides to return everything she has received from the parents because these belongings carry with them deep emotional meanings. In the mother's refusal to accept them, the familial relation is redefined as the mother asks, 'You can return these materials, but what about the love we have given to you?' This simple question is self-explanatory. At the heart of the question is a plea to keep the baby, so that the Gao family will continue to exist. Such a plea is made on the basis of mutual love and affection. For the parents, the wedding is legitimate and real no matter what, and so the unborn child is not affected by the situation between Wei Wei and Wai Tung. Thus, the deep attachment shown by the parents to the unborn baby constitutes an obstacle in Wei Wei's abortion, which eventually leads her to change her mind.

According to Rey Chow, Wei Wei functions more as 'the reproductive labor of a *surrogate mother*' (2007: 140). In this respect, one may argue that *The Wedding Banquet* after all does not represent a general course of family liberation but rather a set of strategies for coping with different needs. In the spirit of the family, this is designed to satisfy everyone; yet it is sometimes achieved at the expense of the less privileged.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

THE PROGRESS OF SELF-IDENTIFICATION

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

The Wedding Banquet presents the 'clearest and most self-conscious juxtaposition of signifiers from the two systems on which it centrally concentrates: American gayness and Chinese familiality' (Martin 2003: 146). To a certain extent, Wai Tung's sexual identity is conditioned by the flexibility exhibited by Mr Gao and the 'Chineseness' shown by his American lover Simon.

Before the dramatic entrance of Mr and Mrs Gao, Wai Tung and Simon are a happy gay couple living together in the city of New York, which is a more convenient setting for the story to take place and for conflict resolution. Indeed, the act of situating the conflict in New York as a non-Chinese city makes a number of solutions possible. At the end of the film, the homosexual relationship is secretly approved – or at least accepted – by Wai Tung's parents. The problematic ethnic and sexual difference represented by Wai Tung and Simon is thus harmonized. To a large extent, the realization of Wai Tung's sexual identity is achieved under the condition that both Wai Tung and Simon perform their assigned roles.

The Caucasian character Simon is provided with a traditionally 'feminine' role, which leads the family to accept Simon as a good 'daughter-in-law' as the father remarks to Simon at the end of the film, 'Thanks for taking care of our son'. The first virtue that Simon demonstrates throughout the film is his capacity to understand the Chinese family situation. When Wai Tung is troubled by his parents' attempt to find him a bride in Taiwan, Simon comes up with the idea of a marriage of convenience.

Wai Tung's marriage to Wei Wei – be it a fake one – could have been interpreted as a matter of betrayal and denial of his sexual identity and love. Yet Simon appears to be very supportive under these circumstances. He not only offers to invite Wai Tung's family and Wei Wei for dinner on the civil wedding day but also plays the role of best man during the Chinese wedding with conviction.

Unsurprisingly, Simon is very upset later on to learn of Wei Wei's pregnancy. Nevertheless, Simon still accepts the consequences and is ready to be the second father of the baby. Simon's willingness to understand and cooperate defines him as a good foreigner in the context of Chinese culture. Furthermore, the implication of Wei Wei asking Simon to be one of the fathers of her baby is to secure the position of Simon in the family.

Second, Simon follows the code of Chinese family ethics by showing filial piety. His efforts to win the approval of the parents is evidenced at various points: for instance, he acts nervously when first meeting Wai Tung's parents, much like the image of a new and shy daughter-in-law raised according to Chinese customs. Moreover, he buys very considerate gifts for the parents. Clearly his attempt to speak Chinese is also a way to show his respect, and later on it is comforting for the parents to know that Simon can cook Chinese food and perform domestic chores of house maintenance and caring for Wai Tung.

These moments, as Shu-mei Shih reads them, can be viewed as occasions where Simon is vying with Wei Wei 'for the love of Wai Tung in a heterosexual economy of desire' (2007: 49). However, the strategy for coping with ethnic difference and reducing conflict is overlooked in this reading. I should also point out that Lee quite deliberately presents an ideal image of the Chinese daughter-in-law to the traditional Chinese parents and to the audience as well. While Lee clearly sets up the conflict between the cultural and racial difference represented by Simon and the traditional Chinese family structure, norms and customs, he also creates room for resolution by minimizing the differences.

The eventual inclusion of Simon and Wai Tung in the family as the ethnic and sexual other is realized through patriarchal flexibility exhibited by Mr Gao. He secretly approves of Simon as the 'daughter-in-law'. As the film addresses both domestic and international audiences, critics interpret the father figure in very different ways. Ming and Fung interpret the father's reaction as a way to distil otherwise homophobic formulations depicted in the film (1997: 203–06). Kloet has argued that Lee's films can be read as a continuous reworking of Chinese family ideology (2005). Shih argues that patriarchal flexibility shown by the father is to cater to both national and international needs (2000: 96). On the level of ethnic framing, Berry and Farquhar suggest that Mr. Gao's acceptance of Simon is deeply rooted in the Chinese strategy of inclusion so long as homosexuality and family continuity can be reconciled (2001: 179).

Patriarchal flexibility is made possible because of the father's own experience. Clearly Wai Tung is not the only victim of the vicissitudes of Chinese cultural norms about family duties and sexuality – his father once faced a similar fate too. As Mr. Gao confesses to Wai Tung during a father–son conversation, his participation in the military was not out of nationalism but a matter of personal interest. Mr Gao chose to join the army to escape from a marriage arranged by his parents. In an economy of patriarchal succession, he eventually also fulfilled his family role by getting married and having children. The act of sharing a long-kept secret in fact unites the father and son, as both characters have resisted an imposed marriage by their parents. The affective bond is thus formed between two generations with similar experiences. This scene to some extent shares a resemblance with another scene towards the end of the film: when the father discloses a big secret to Simon. The father shows his approval by giving Simon a red envelope filled with money.

The complex father figure reflects Lee's attempt to negotiate traditional Chinese family values in a changing social context. As long as the perpetuation of the family line is realized and the homosexual romance between Wai Tung and Simon remains a secret, family conflict can be resolved. The management of conflict resolution in the film bears similarity to the historical phenomenon of homosexual relationships coexisting with the polygamous heterosexual marriage, as described earlier. As long as a grandson is guaranteed

to continue the Gao family, the homosexual relationship between Wai Tung and Simon could be tolerated by the ultimate patriarch Mr Gao.

The final image of the father raising his arms when being stopped by the security officer is ambiguous. Chow interprets this gesture as 'I am unarmed – I cross borders as an enlightened world citizen' (2007: 142). If we agree that raising both hands can mean full approval and support, then what does Mr Gao agree with – family continuity, rebellious liberation or a world in negotiation?

The acceptance or tolerance of Wai Tung's gay identity in the family is made possible by fulfilling his role as a filial son. Wai Tung was raised in an environment in which traditional values were stressed, but he later lives in a society that embraces the modern values of self-orientation, self-expression and self-determination. The film shows the burden and shame that a gay Chinese man has to bear. Guilt and duty require Wai Tung to hide the secret from his parents and to cooperate with the demands of his parents: meeting the ideal candidate arranged by his parents, entering into a heterosexual marriage with Wei Wei and performing a traditional Chinese wedding. If Simon's sexual and ethnic difference is harmonized by his acceptance of the complexity of Chinese family values and his efforts to be a good 'daughter-in-law', then Wai Tung's compromise is a clever means to smooth over any tensions between his parents and himself.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

A GRADUAL AWAKENING OF FEMALE CONSCIOUSNESS IN *SAVING FACE*

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

CONCLUSION

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

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

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

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

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

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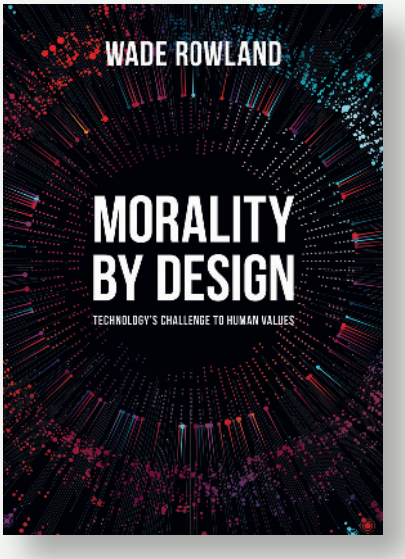

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