

From the Transnational to the Sinophone: Lesbian Representations in Chinese-Language Films

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This article theorizes global lesbian cinema in Chinese-language films through regionalism, diaspora studies, and Sinophone studies. Through an inter-regional analysis of Butterfly (Yan Yan Mak, 2004, Hong Kong) and diasporic and Sinophone readings of Saving Face (Alice Wu, 2005, USA), I argue that Mak's film illustrates a Hong Kong regional retranslation of a Taiwanese lesbian story, which complicates any claim to a stable "Chinese" identity. Finally, Wu's representation of lesbianism also troubles the politics of Chineseness by pointing to the ways diasporic reproduction of "community" works through the disciplining of other non-normative sexualities.

KEYWORDS *lesbian cinema, Chinese-language films, queer theory, diaspora studies, regionalism, Sinophone studies*

Theorizing "global lesbian cinema" in the cinematic productions of the People's Republic of China (PRC), Hong Kong, Taiwan, and the Chinese diasporas presents an exciting opportunity to intervene at the intersection of lesbian studies, studies in globalization and transnationalism, and Chinese film studies. In what follows, I question "what is lesbian" about Chinese-language films, while simultaneously interrogating "what is Chinese" about lesbian cinema. In tracing the formations of lesbianism in Chinese cinema cultural critics are once again confronted with the task of properly defining or *not being able* to define the intersecting dynamics between the "local" and the "global." Some inquiries that drive the present study are: what is local in the moniker of "lesbian Chinese cinemas?" Is the lesbian subject who appears in a Chinese film more "local" than one in a Hollywood production?

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Or should “lesbian” be read as the globalizing factor that can better market Chinese films to global gay and lesbian viewers seeking out films with “exotic” ethnic flavors? In terms of problematizing the global, is it possible that a “Chinese” identity marker will turn out to be the globalizing factor, since many international audiences at film festivals are interested in seeking out “dissident films” from Asia? In short, is lesbianism more local or global than the “Chinese?”

Current theoretical approaches to the local and the global can be summarized by three positions, each with its own limitations. First, world-system theorists argue that globalization ushers in an intensification of the infiltration of capital in the form of neocolonial capitalism from core-states (First and Developed World) to the rest, often the non-Western periphery states (Wallerstein, 2004). Second, the counter debate often resorts to a kind of radical localism that assumes that there are always local traditions and non-capitalist tribal forms of labor that cannot be subsumed under Western capitalism (MacLeod, 1991, 11; Schuerkens, 2004, 21). Last but not least, Robertson (1995) puts forth an alternative aptly termed “glocalization.” Drawing on the Japanese business practice of “global localization,” he contends that “the concept of globalization has involved the simultaneity and the interpenetration of what are conventionally called the global and the local, or—in more abstract vein—the universal and the particular” (30). While this view holds the tension between the local capability of resisting global forces and globalization’s ascendancy through the promise of hybridity, it does not account for *how* the local may transform the global, or better yet, how local-to-local exchanges, cross-pollinations, and mutual transformations may mark yet another emerging dynamism of globalization.

Comparatively, Chinese-American diasporic filmmaker Alice Wu's *Saving Face* (2005, U.S.) presents another opportunity to examine lesbianism and Chineseness in the Chinese diaspora of New York City. The main plot is equally divided between the love story of Wil and Vivian, and Wil's mother Hwei-Lan Gao's community scandal of being divorced and pregnant in her late forties. At the heart of the story lie two intersecting power relations: Gao's hetero-patriarchal father's control over her "improper" female sexuality and her own heteronormative control over her daughter's lesbian romance. As the film hinges on the diasporic reproduction of the heterosexual Chinese nation in the American Chinese diaspora, it also situates non-marital female sexuality and lesbian desire as marginalized points of departure for perverting and re-articulating new identity politics. This marginal politics enables a visualization of what I coin a "Sinophone lesbian" aesthetic that narrates lesbian subjectivity through the very potential of lesbianism to trouble the rigid boundary of an ethnic community and produce alternative ways of being Chinese.

QUEER DIASPORA IN *SAVING FACE*: VISUALIZING
THE SINOPHONE LESBIAN

If *Butterfly* necessitates a reading practice that is attentive to the ways lesbian desire travels from region to region and how in that process queer desire is re-signified for imagining a regional lesbian historiography and

utopic remaking of “home,” Wu’s *Saving Face* is also deeply invested in the project of remaking the hetero-patriarchal home. The plot tells a parallel story of mother–daughter’s pursuits of desire that run against a traditional understanding of Confucian Chinese kinship structure and the organization of diasporic communities in Flushing, New York City. The mother, Hwei-Lan Gao (Joan Chen), attempts to set up her lesbian daughter Wil (Michelle Krusiec), a physician, with men at community ballroom events. Later, Gao, who is divorced, gets pregnant at the age of forty-eight, becoming the subject of a community scandal. Meanwhile, Wil befriends a Chinese-American lesbian, Vivian (Lynn Chen), at the same ballroom dancing event. From this moment, Wil and Vivian are inseparable. Gao is kicked out of her home by her father and will not be allowed to return unless she marries a respectable Chinese man. Gao is being forced to marry Old Cho, a man of considerable wealth, but at the last minute of the vows Wil discovers a letter, which contains a love plea from her mother’s younger boyfriend Little Yu. It is through the daughter’s attempt to save her from an unwanted marriage that Gao finally comes to terms with her daughter’s lesbianism and approves her relationship with Vivian.

Although the attempt to read this film as representative of either a classic Asian-American generational conflict or a lesbian coming out narrative is tempting, I suggest that the film is most fascinating in its mutual exploration of how illicit, inter-generational sexuality (Gao) and lesbianism (Wil and Vivian) disrupt the multiple boundaries of a mythic and essentialized understanding of “China,” “Chinese community,” and the “Chinese-American family.” These ethnic boundaries are often organized around diasporic nationalism linked to a mythic “homeland,” filiality linked to the patriarch figure, and heterosexual monogamy. I will use the lens of diaspora studies, theories of “queer diasporas,” and Sinophone studies to unpack how Wu’s film performs this multi-pronged critique through lesbian and non-heteronormative sexualities.

Diaspora studies provides one direction to think through queer sexuality in the diaspora as well as a more hybrid understanding of the Chinese/Chinese-American community in Wu’s film. Specifically, Hall’s classic theorization of a third mode of diaspora that refuses the backward-looking desire for an original homeland stresses that the concept is not defined by “essence or purity” but “by a conception of ‘identity’ which lives with and through, not despite, difference; by *hybridity*” (2003, 244). Gopinath (2005) excavates the implication of Hall’s theory of diasporic difference by showing how the notions of purity that Hall critiques often depend on the symbolic figure of the woman that secures the reproductive logics of nationalism even in diasporic communities. “Queer diaspora” as a critical framework then works to make intelligible those non-heterosexual desires that nationalist heterosexuality, both at home and in the diaspora, renders invisible. Gopinath writes, “If ‘diaspora’ needs ‘queerness’ in order to rescue it from

its genealogical implications, 'queerness' also needs 'diaspora' in order to make it more supple in relation to question of race, colonialism, migration, and globalization" (2005, 11). "Queer diaspora" in Wu's film can also be deployed to name the subjectivities of Gao and Wil, who embody differences that border at the margin of what it means to be "Chinese." This is precisely the object of Sinophone studies as well.

Sinophone studies is a newly emerging field within Chinese cultural studies that seeks to debunk the often assumed coherence between China as a geopolitical location, the Chinese language (Mandarin) as *the* standard language for nationalism locally and globally, and the question of ethnicity. The reductive equivalence of China = Chinese = ethnicity has serious consequences for those who don't look, speak, and embody Chineseness in expected ways in gendered, racial, and sexual terms. That is to say, because of the various geographical locations that different ethnic subjects inhabit in relation to the geopolitics of "China" (which include Tibet, colonial and post-colonial Hong Kong, Taiwanese who speak the Minnan dialect, etc.), their positions may rupture the purity of Chineseness. Shu-mei Shih theorizes the Sinophone as "a network of places of cultural production outside China and on the margins of China and Chineseness, where a historical process of heterogenizing and localizing of continental Chinese culture has been taking place for several centuries" (2007, 4). To be clear, when thinking about Sinophone identities, we have to theorize in multidirectional ways that inquire how being Chinese or desiring to be a "pure" Chinese (if there is such a thing) in a given community, location, and political culture may exclude other subjectivities. In another article, Shih further clarifies the scope of Sinophone studies: "First and foremost, the scandal of the Sinophone is related to how it fractures the coherence of the constructs called 'China,' the 'Chinese,' or 'Chineseness,' all of which have functioned not only symbolically but also materially" (2010, 474).

In fact, Shih's inauguration of the Sinophone as a category of analysis, while focusing on race and language, proves fruitful for lesbian and sexuality studies as well. One can also trace the genealogy of the Sinophone from previous work by Chow (2000) and Ang (2001), the former suggesting that Chineseness can be "productively put under erasure" in order to examine regimes of sinocentrism (18), while the latter famously proclaims a subjective deviation from China by those who are deemed inauthentic: "In short, if I am inescapably Chinese by *descent*, I am only sometimes Chinese by *consent*" (36). Certainly, Shih's emphasis on situated marginality outside the terrain of China, Chow's call for putting sinocentrism under productive erasure, and Ang's call for defying "Chinese" situationally can be linked to think about how alternative sexuality, in this case lesbian sexuality, can powerfully contest the fiction of Chinese "community." I will demonstrate how this possibility of rupturing, perverting, and creolizing meaning of diasporic Chineseness lies at the heart of *Saving Face*.

In the film, lesbian sexuality frames the larger question of what happens when a first generation immigrant “Chinese” woman and her Chinese-American daughter challenge the boundary of Chineseness. Likewise, the meaning of “home,” as signified by the patriarchal gaze of Gao’s father and by the larger community, functions “as a site from which social organizations can be rendered visible and open to critique” (George, 1998, 3). A close reading of the opening sequence demonstrates the extent to which lesbian desire is both conditioned by and exceeds these multiple registers of diasporic configurations of “home.” The opening shot is a breathtaking view of the harbor and traffic of New York City. The third shot zooms into a conversation taking place between Gao and Mrs. Wong at a hair salon. They are lamenting about how Wil and Wong’s son, Raymond, are still single and decide to pair them up secretly at the Friday community ballroom dance at East, a buffet restaurant. “East” here suggestively symbolizes the homogeneous spirit of ethnic community in the diaspora. During the event, Gao’s father as the community leader gives a traditional Chinese speech about how “it takes ten years to grow a tree but a hundred years to make a respectable person”; meanwhile, through a shot reverse shot, the camera depicts Wil turning her head while, simultaneously, Vivian beckons her with a tempting smile.

These cinematic sequences powerfully illustrate how the Chinese diasporic community depends on the hegemonic remaking of home spaces through gossip in a salon, a community event that heterosexualizes dating and reproduction, and through the patriarchal male voice represented by the grandfather. However, Wil’s lesbian gaze signals a queer diasporic female position that refuses the hegemonic disciplining of her lesbian subjectivity by daring to look beyond the confines of the community space. Interestingly, in this moment of lesbian gaze Wu, the filmmaker, also intentionally mutes the voice of the grandfather, thus pointing to the possibility that the lesbian subject may experience desires that “are deemed ‘impossible’ within hegemonic nationalist and diasporic discourses” (Gopinath, 2005, 22).

While the queer diasporic framing of this early ballroom dance scene foregrounds the centrality of lesbian desire in the cinematic narrative, parallel to this is an equally important narrative of how the Chinese community secures its fictive boundary as a seemingly stable ethnic community in the global city by disciplining non-conjugal, non-Confucian, and non-heteronormative sexuality. As transnational feminist critics point out (Alarcon, Kaplan, and Moallem, 1999; Maira, 2002), the essence of an ethnic community and its reproduction of nationalism outside of the home country often depend on the imagined equivalence and even wedded relationship between the “woman” and the nation. The woman as singular signifier is supposed to uphold the purity of the nation through proper feminine behavior, domestic duty, and reproductive sexuality. It is through this particular wedding of the woman and the nation that a woman’s sexuality within the

community becomes not only a personal issue, but also a community issue, because a community is only imaginable insofar as the woman functions as the bearer of tradition. Through Gao's figure as the divorced but sexually active non-traditional mother, the film simultaneously points to the discursive construction of Chineseness through heterosexuality and the possibility of a Sinophone critique, which, as Shih (2007) points out, disrupts the coherence of China, Chinese, and Chineseness.

A humorous scene when several middle-aged Chinese wives discuss the "dirty laundry" of Gao's perversity points to the discursive construction of the "Chinese" community through its disciplining of the Sinophone "other." This scene is shown right after Gao has left her father's home and avoids his control by temporarily staying at Wil's apartment. The next shot shows a rich upper middle-class Chinese woman announcing very loudly that Gao is "Pregnant!" Another man echoes his disbelief: "At her age!" while another married Chinese man chastises Gao: "It's a scandal!" Gao's close friend Mrs. Wong is less harsh but expresses her curiosity: "It's better than the soaps!" The next scene returns to the grandfather's home in which he unleashes anger at his daughter for making him "lose his face," meaning his respectability in the community. When Wil asks the grandmother how her grandfather learned about his daughter's pregnancy, the grandmother replies that they found out from the receptionist who works at the women's clinic, who is the wife of grandfather's former student. Wil responds with wonderful ethnic humor: "Ten billion Chinese in the world; absolutely no privacy." Through the filmmaker's skillful juxtaposition of the gossip table talk with the disciplining of Gao in the grandfather's house, the narrative exposes the vexing relationship between the individual and the community within the Chinese diaspora. The married women and respectable gentlemen's denigrations of Gao demonstrate that their respectable statuses within the community are contingent upon the excommunication of bodies and desires that do not adhere to heterosexual reproduction as prescribed by Confucian Chinese ethos. In this discursive construction of Chineseness in the immigrant community, both Gao and Wil's bodies figure as the limit of cultural intelligibility.

The film is most intriguing when both the mother and daughter understand each other's unintelligibility within normative conception of the ethnic community through their shared marginality as Sinophone female subjects. Although the mother and daughter face different challenges when "coming out" to the community, it is precisely their shared "perverse" sexuality—untimely late pregnancy by a young man and lesbian sexuality—that fractures normative heterosexuality as expressed by the grandfather's persistent control over both women. I find the last dancing scene where Vivian returns from her Paris ballet training and magically reunites with Wil at last is most suggestive for imagining an alternative articulation of "Chinese" community. Arriving at East again, Gao deliberately

sets up a meeting for Wil and Vivian through Vivian's mother. Gao comfortably dances with Little Yu without ethnic shame. He wants to move in with her, but Gao rebukes his advance by suggesting that she wants her own space. At the same moment, Wil and Vivian dance passionately and kiss. The camera shifts to a conversation between the grandfather and Old Yu, the father of Little Yu. Old Yu laments: "The world is getting too hard to predict." The old patriarch confirms: "Morality keeps getting worse." While the film's ending seems too good to be true, it points to a possible alliance between a feminist viewpoint and Asian-American lesbian subjectivity in their shared potentials to embody Chineseness only by consent, to borrow Ang's suggestive phrase. Consequently, *Saving Face*, through its critical intersecting of diaspora and sexuality, visualizes Sinophone lesbian sexuality and cross-generational sexual perversion; in doing so, it imagines an alternative Chinese diasporic community not based on sameness, but on critical gender and sexual heterogeneity and difference.²

In delineating the regional, the diasporic, and the Sinophone as alternative methodologies for studying "global lesbian cinema" in transnational Chinese cultures, I meant to demonstrate the ultimate elusiveness and impossibility of properly designating a body of films that could be grouped under the monikers "Chinese lesbian cinema" and "lesbian Chinese cinema." If one were to use the ethnic and national marker "Chinese" to qualify lesbian cinema, it would assume that "Chinese" itself is a coherent identity despite the geopolitical differences among the PRC, Hong Kong, Taiwan, and their diasporas. In addition, using "Chinese" to refine the conceptual terrain of lesbian cinema also assumes that there is a universal "lesbian cinema" that needs no qualification, often assumed to mean Hollywood and Anglo-American cinematic productions. On the other hand, if I were to use "lesbian" to qualify "Chinese cinema," this approach will inevitably risk tokenizing a body of films as simply "minority" films within a larger entity called Chinese cinema. Both Mak and Wu's films push beyond the conceptual limitations of the national, local, global, and the lesbian. *Butterfly* highlights the processes of inter-cultural borrowing through a Hong Kong retelling of a Taiwanese story, thus hybridizing both regional locations; furthermore, its implicit political message about Hong Kong lesbian activism against political repressions in the PRC also sustains the hope that a small "region" like Hong Kong can express alternative political and cultural imaginary of Chinese identities. Likewise, *Saving Face* fractures the fantasy of ethnic and sexual homogeneity by situating ethnicity and sexuality outside of the proper geopolitics of the PRC, Taiwan, and Hong Kong—in the global New York City. While diaspora often reproduces ethnic traditions along gender and generational lines, the film shows that Sinophone subjects may embody Chineseness perversely by transgressing the boundary of sexual and gender respectability within the Chinese/Chinese-American communities.

Placing *Butterfly* alongside *Saving Face* provides a fruitful occasion for theorizing different levels of transnationalism at work in lesbian filmmaking in contemporary Chinese-language films. In both films, the question of what is “lesbian” is mutually constituted through a rethinking of what it means to be “Chinese” in the contemporary age, where concepts of nationalism, localism, the global, and ethnic community become ever more porous. Thinking through regional and diasporic critiques moves productively beyond the double bind of the local and the global as diametrically opposed to one another. While *Butterfly* avoids the East–West and North–South trajectory of globalization in which the East and the South are often reduced to the merely “local,” *Saving Face* undermines the assumption that New York City represents a global haven for Chinese-American gay and lesbian subjects. Rather, the film reveals the peculiar and violent ways through which imaginary Chinese nationalism reproduces rigid forms of heteronormativity by excluding improper sexual others as marginal to its conception of community. Therefore, what the Sinophone critique further demonstrates in addition to the concepts of regionalism and queer diaspora is that any homogeneous conception of what it means to be “Chinese” inevitably imposes the violence of othering. Thinking lesbianism in Chinese-language films through regionalism, diaspora studies, and Sinophone studies renames the global as a much more multi-layered category of analysis while multiplying infinitely what it means to read, inhabit, envision, and perform global lesbian identities in the multiple spaces of “China(s).”

NOTES

1. This includes most notably *An Amorous Woman of Tang Dynasty* (Eddie Fong Ling-Ching, 1984, Hong Kong), *Sex and Zen* (Michael Mak Dong-Git, 1991, Hong Kong), and most films produced by Wong Jing in the 1990s.

2. See also Lowe’s classic theorization of Asian-American subjects as embodying horizontal differences in gender, race, and sexuality instead of essentialized positions of “vertical” generational differences (1996, 60–83).

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