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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 challenge at the intersection of lesbian studies, studies in transnationalism, regionalism, and Chinese film studies. In what follows, I ask what is "lesbian" about Chinese-language films, while simultaneously asking "what is Chinese" about lesbian cinema. In tracing the emergence 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 ascendency 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.

This article takes up precisely these challenges and offers the regional and the diasporic as alternative methodologies for tracking and theorizing lesbian representations in transnational Chinese cinemas in the early twenty-first century. After providing a brief genealogy of the diverse modes of lesbian cinematic representation, I examine two recent feature films that complicate the concepts of regionalism, lesbian sexuality, diasporic identity, and the boundary of Chinese community. Specifically, I illustrate how *Butterfly* (Yan Yan Mak, 2004, Hong Kong), a moving cinematic re-writing of a short story called "The Mark of the Butterfly" by Taiwan lesbian author Chen Xue, marks a particular retranslation of lesbian desire between Taiwan and Hong Kong that enables the creative re-localizing of the Taiwanese story to its Hong Kong filming location. Significantly, while the cinematic version retains the main love story between the female protagonist Flavia and her lover Yip, it problematically cuts out the queerer lesbian coming out story of Flavia's mother. This creative "mistranslation" also inserts the subplot of Hong Kong activism against the bloody 1989 Tiananmen Square Massacre in China, thus politicizing the lesbian subjects in a critical historiography. Such an act of inter-regional borrowing, adaptation, and retranslation questions any easy claim to a specific "Chinese," "Taiwanese," or "local" Hong Kong identity.

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.

LESBIAN IMAGES IN CHINESE CINEMA

In order to understand how Mak and Wu's films situate lesbianism through regional and diasporic cultural formations, it is helpful to study how, historically, female homoeroticism and lesbian butch self-fashioning emerged in filmmaking studios under political turmoil during the 1930s–1950s. For clarification purpose, I generally understand earlier "lesbian" images in mainland and Hong Kong cinema as scattered attempts by studios to experiment with themes of gender, urbanity, and modernism even if they might not have intended lesbian viewership. In contradistinction, I frame the emergence of more self-conscious modes of lesbian filmmaking since the late 1990s as cinematic forms that initiate the transnational discourse of lesbianism in Chinese-language films.

Depending on the film critic's preferred method of periodization, "the first Chinese lesbian film" emerges at different times and places of the Chinese-speaking worlds. One of the earliest films to express a modern lesbian self-fashioning is Fang Peilin's *Huashen Guniang*, advertised in English as *Tomboy*, or *Girl in Disguise* (1936). *Tomboy* follows the story of a pretty 18-year-old girl, Liying, who disguises herself as a boy when she returns to Shanghai after growing up in Singapore. The family lies to the grandfather about Liying's gender identity to satisfy the patriarch's desire for a male heir. The gender disguise also provides moments of female-to-male cross-dressing in the film as comic relief. The film, produced by Yihua Film Studio in Shanghai, is generally understood in Chinese film history as belonging to comic bourgeois urban films in 1930s Shanghai, during which the city was also semi-colonized by Western powers. As Japanese colonization of different parts of China threatened the nation in the late 1930s, films

such as *Tomboy* were heavily denounced by left-wing filmmakers and critics who regarded these "decadent" films as glamorizing a bourgeois lifestyle and ignoring the political urgency of Japanese imperialism during the Second Sino-Japanese War (Zhang Zhen, 2005). Yet, as Yingjin Zhang points out, the film was a commercial success and saved the film studio from debt and bankruptcy (2004, 76). The film was popular enough that it generated a Hong Kong remake *Girl in Disguise* (1956) after World War II, with famous Hong Kong star Jeanette Lin Tsui in the role of Liying. The successes of the original Shanghai film and its Hong Kong remake illustrate an early example of the transnational circulation of female masculinity in Chinese cinema. This demonstrates some continuity between 1930s Shanghai studios and 1950s Hong Kong cinema.

Another genealogy of lesbianism is observable in the 1970s Hong Kong Mandarin period dramas. Many film critics (Darren, 2000; Chan, 2009) note the highly eroticized lesbian desire in the Shaw Brothers' classic 1972 film *Ainu*, translated and marketed as *Intimate Confessions of a Chinese Courtesan* (1972). The film portrays sexuality between women in a visible manner for the first time on the Chinese screen. The film sets the trend of visualizing female homoeroticism for the pleasure of a mass audience that will be followed by the flood of category III (the highest level of censorship used for films in Hong Kong) films in the 1990s that explicitly reference the visible presence of female same-sex erotics in cinema.[1]

Specifically, *Intimate* begins in the midst of a crime scene through which the viewer learns that the female protagonist Ainu (whose name in Chinese literally translates as love's slave) (Lily Ho) is the last person to see the recently murdered nobleman. Through a flashback narrative, it is revealed that Ainu is a victim of patriarchal society as she was kidnapped and forced into prostitution at a brothel owned by a Sapphic madam, Lady Chun (Betty Pei Ti). One explicit scene shows Chun licking one of Ainu's wounds, after she was tortured by Chun's brothel keeper in an attempt to tame the strong-willed virgin. Seeing no possibility of fighting against the powerful Chun, she works for her as a high class prostitute while secretly plotting the murders of Chun and all the male clients who violated her. Chun is most famous for her deadly chest-puncturing "ghost hands," which, during the final battle scene with Ainu, were chopped off by Ainu's sword. Chun, nearing death, asks Ainu to kiss her one more time. Ainu becomes sympathetic and gives in. Surprisingly, Chun has hidden deadly poison in her mouth, and as a result Ainu dies shortly after Chun's death.

Given the cinematic economy in which the heterosexually driven plot *makes* the so-called "lesbian" plot appear, only to deny a fully lesbian narrative, it makes sense to define this form of female same-sex desire as female homoeroticism without lesbian subjectivity, or as de Lauretis (1988) more aptly terms "sexual (in)difference." She writes, "The psychoanalytical discourse on female sexuality, wrote Luce Irigaray in 1975, outlining the terms

of what here I call sexual (in)difference, tells 'that *the feminine occurs only within models and laws devised by male subjects*. Which implies that there are not really two sexes, but only one. A single practice and representation of the sexual'" (1988, 156). Through this concept of sexual (in)difference, we can understand the heteronormative cinematic space in which female homoeroticism becomes visible: the sexual only appears within a narrative strongly saturated by heterosexuality as the deterministic viewpoint of the sexual.

Working against the sexual (in)difference in which lesbianism only occurs as "significant" in comic relief (as in *Tomboy*) and as a form of hypersexuality (as in *Intimate*), more recent scholarship on lesbianism in transnational Chinese contexts initiates the crucial task of critiquing the heteronormative logics inherent in the sexploitation films of 1970s Hong Kong cinema (Yau, 2005). Building on this growing body of scholarship, I argue that since the 1990s there emerges a distinctively transnational lesbian filmmaking trend in mainland China, Taiwan, Hong Kong, and the Chinese diasporas. These films emphasize the everyday dimensions of lesbian experiences. They move beyond the narrative structure through which female homoeroticism can only appear apparitional. Furthermore, they often concern the traumatic experiences of lesbian girlhood (Martin, 2010), the possibility of forming a lesbian partnership despite the confines of heterosexual marriage, and the taboo of non-heterosexual relationships within the overseas Chinese community. The sizable list of lesbian-centered films that explode onto the transnational Chinese screens include: *Intimates* (1997), *Tempting Heart* (1999), *Incidental Journey* (2001), the first mainland lesbian independent film *Fish and Elephant* (2001), *Blue Gate Crossing* (2002), *Let's Love Hong Kong* (2002), *Butterfly* (2004), *Saving Face* (2005), and the recent teen flick *Spider Lilies* (2007), to name some of the most notable. I now turn to Mak and Wu's films to examine how lesbian desire is re-narrated in inter-regional and diasporic sites in the early twenty-first century.

TRANSNATIONALISM THROUGH REGIONALISM: LESBIAN REWRITING OF "HOME" IN *BUTTERFLY*

Yan Yan Mak's *Butterfly* partakes of a regional route to transnationalism through the re-localizing of cultures. This regional cinematic approach marks a specificity that requires a double reading of the "source" and its adaptation. While dominant theorists of transnationalism resort to languages of global disjuncture in the various scapes of modernity (Appadurai, 1996), flexible migration and citizenship across nation-states (Ong, 1999), and the center-periphery dynamics of the capitalist world system (Wallerstein, 2004), they tend to focus attentions on large-scale phenomena across East–West and

North–South divides and overlook the inter-regional dynamics within multiple sites of Asia. Therefore, more recently scholars turn to the possibility of studying Asian regional connections via East–East and South–South cultural flows in as early as the sixteenth-century China-centric tributary system in silver trade (Hamashita, 2008; Wang, 2007). Likewise, Prasenjit Duara also calls for the task of studying contemporary forms of Asian regionalism accelerated by flows in media and technology across Asian global cities. Duara writes, "In this sense, region formation in Asia is a multipath, uneven, and pluralistic development that is significantly different from European regionalism" (2010, 981). Certainly, gay and lesbian culture is actively participating in the inter-regionalization of culture that is happening in twenty-first-century Asian connections across border of the nation-state. This regional route of Asian transnationalism also means that a Hong Kong cultural producer may find inspiration for making a film from other Chinese sources in the mainland and Taiwan. One well-known example of this inter-regional queer cultural production is Stanley Kwan's film *Lan Yu* (2001), which is based on a 1997 mainland story published anonymously online. This kind of inter-regional reshaping of Chinese gay and lesbian culture is also evident in Mak's *Butterfly*.

While the film is mainly funded by Hong Kong sources, including the Hong Kong Arts Development Council and Filmko Entertainment, its content is based on a 1996 novella by Taiwan lesbian writer Chen Xue. Mak's film title is adapted from Chen's "The Mark of the Butterfly" (*Hudie de jihao*). It tells the story of Flavia (also called Xiao Die; "die" means butterfly in Chinese), who is a young housewife living a mundane bourgeois married life. She happens to see a girl, Yip (Tian Yuan), eating cookies without paying for them at a local supermarket. It turns out that she was kicked out of her home by Rosa, her ex-girlfriend. In the film she is a musician based in Wuhan, a city in central China, while in Chen's novella she is described simply as an 18-year-old girl. They fall in love while Flavia juggles her identities as a young married mother and a lesbian. Yip reminds her of her unrequited high school romance with Jin, a tomboy who is also a political dissident, and the film constantly shuffles between the past through Super-8 film and the present through 35-mm film. Meanwhile, Flavia's marital troubles with her husband Ming run parallel to the long-term marital problem of her own parents. Her father was having an affair when she was young during the time when she dated Jin, and now years later her mother is asking for a divorce. At the end of the film, Flavia decides to pursue her own happiness with Yip. The film ends on a hopeful note with both women sitting on the balcony under a bright afternoon sun.

While adaptation always runs the risk of being "unfaithful" to the original text, in Mak's case she creatively balances the task of sticking to Chen's Taiwanese story on the one hand and inserting the "local" Hong Kong flavor of lesbian historiography on the other. Specifically, Mak's adaptation retains

the story of the father's extramarital affair during Flavia's childhood. However, the filmic version does not portray the parallel lesbian plot of Flavia's mother. In Chen's novella, a scene occurs where Flavia and Yip meet with Flavia's mother, who brings along an older woman. Chen narrates, "A very interesting scene. Mother brings a woman who looks like forty something years old. . . . Yip is staying with me, and all of us seem to know each other for a long time, even though this is our first meeting. I suddenly realize; my mother is facing the same situation as me" (Chen, 2007, 78). However, the most radical scene that comes close to challenging patriarchal meaning of home in the film is when Flavia's mother asks for a divorce in front of her children. She confesses: "Yes, I am with somebody else. I want to get out of here." Flavia's father as a patriarch challenges her: "Aren't you ashamed talking like that in front of your children?" The mother logically responds: "Aren't you ashamed of fooling around with women in front of Flavia in the past?"

In Mak's rendition, the viewers never learn that the mother has a lesbian lover. In fact, the lesbian mother quite literally disappears in the film altogether in re-localizing the film to transnational audiences. One possible interpretation is that portraying a lesbian mother with a lesbian daughter may provoke discomfort among older generations of Chinese viewers who may be sympathetic with a lesbian coming out story, but not necessarily a lesbian-mother coming out story. And if my reading about the pitfalls of adaptation makes any sense, the film indeed reconciles Flavia with the father figure because she never severs ties with her father. Indeed, one scene lovingly shows Flavia and her father sharing "tea time," a local Hong Kong tradition. The father offers her the pineapple bun, a favorite local sweet, which Flavia enjoys as she did as a child.

While the politics of re-localizing the film and catering to transnational audiences necessarily compromises the more radical potential of queering the patriarchal core of the family, Mak's creative localization of Chen's novella does offer some critical possibilities for narrating a Hong Kong lesbian past and a utopian future as alternatives to the confines of heterosexuality. As both Leung (2008) and Martin (2010) point out, while the Super-8 stock traditionally used for depicting nostalgic scenes, predominates the beginning of the film, emphasizing Flavia's past traumatic romance with Jin, the film also begins to portray her past memory in 35-mm stock and the present love affair with Yip in Super-8. This cinematic technique of infusing the present with the past thus blurs the very temporal distinction between a lesbian adolescence past and the present. Leung's convincing analysis emphasizes that what Mak's film and Chen's novella force us to think about is not so much a lesbian "coming out story" but more the story of a lesbian *coming back* to herself (Leung, 2008).

However, it would be a mistake to simply reduce Mak's film to producing a native, purely "local" Hong Kong version of Chen's Taiwanese story

because part of Flavia's memory also connects her "personal" lesbian past to the larger collectivity of Hong Kong citizens protesting against the mainland's suppression of the students' movement. Her vivid memory of her former lover Jin recurs over and over again, especially Jin's active participation in Hong Kong activism against the mainland Communist government after the bloody crackdown in the Tiananmen Square Protest on June 4, 1989. This part of the film is purely Mak's insertion of a local narrative that was not part of Chen's original story. By inventing Jin as a lesbian activist figure in the film and through Flavia's recurring memory of her political identity, Mak's film infuses politics with lesbian identity and suggests that there are still more "stories" to be told beyond conventional political historiography that often places masculinist leadership (e.g., Mao Zedong in Communist China) at the heart of a political movement. Mak's invention of a political lesbian past suggests that it is precisely by remembering a critical lesbian "history" that Flavia can claim her own present and future identity as a lesbian subject. The fact that a lesbian reinterpretation of mainland politics becomes a central narrative thread in Mak's film also renders impossible a merely local Hong Kong reading of the film. Consequently, the film can be read as containing Taiwanese "roots," exhibiting Hong Kong flavor while functioning as a political critique of authoritarian forms of Chinese nationalism all at once.

Indeed, the location of the film seems to shift from site to site, from its narrative origin in Taiwan, to its filming of streets in Hong Kong, and finally to a more imaginary and utopian elsewhere in the end. In a passionate scene with Yip, Flavia lies on the bed with her and picks up a black marker. She uses the marker to draw the shape of a butterfly on her lover's chest, indicating that her love is forever marked on Yip's body. The next scene is the last in the film where both of them sit at the edge of the balcony, toss their slippers down, and let them fall to the ground below. In the original text by Chen, Yip tells Flavia about the quintessential meaning of Flavia's Chinese name *hudie*, which means "butterfly." Yip reveals: "Butterfly cannot be butterfly if it doesn't fly" (Chen, 2007, 83). The film does not end with this revelation; however, in its localization of two women enjoying each other's presence in the midst of the crowded Hong Kong landscape, it seems that both have already flown away from the confines of heterosexuality to a utopian lesbian "home" elsewhere.

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 postcolonial 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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Fish and Elephant. (Li Yu, 2001, China)
Girl in Disguise. (Chan Woon-Man, 1956, Hong Kong)
Incidental Journey. (Chen Jofei, 2001, Taiwan)
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Intimate Confessions of a Chinese Courtesan. (Chor Yuen, 1972, Hong Kong)

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