***Appropriate Behavior* (2014)**

**Film Background:** *Appropriate Behavior* was the directorial debut of Desiree Akhavan, who wrote, directed, and starred in the film. She went on to direct the 2018 film *The Miseducation of Cameron Post*, based on the novel of the same name by Emily Danforth. Akhavan wrote *Appropriate Behavior* for her graduate thesis at New York University. While there are elements of Shirin's character that mirror some of her experiences, such as her Iranian-American background and her bisexuality, she has stated that the film is not autobiographical.

**Plot summary:** *Appropriate Behavior* takes place in Brooklyn, NY, and follows Shirin (Desiree Akhavan), as she processes a recent break-up with her ex-girlfriend, Maxine (Rebecca Henderson). The film has many flashbacks that examine the trajectory of Shirin and Maxine's relationship.

The film begins with Shirin moving out of Maxine's apartment and commiserrating with her friend Crystal (Halley Feiffer), who offers to help her get a job, which she ends up accepting. The job turns out to be not what Shirin expected; she was told it was a film production course for adolescents, but it turns out to be a program for five-year olds. Shirin hopes to get Maxine back by appearing in the places Maxine spends time, but her prospects appear limited. She moves into a new apartment and faces the criticism of her Iranian parents, who cannot understand her decision to move, since she told them that Maxine was her roommate. Shirin attempts to start dating again, and has several awkward dating experiences, but ultimately ends up missing Maxine more. As she recalls the connection she and Maxine shared in the early part of their relationship, she also remembers their challenges; particularly their conflict over Shirin's sense that she could not come out to her parents. Shirin recalls their break-up, in which Maxine tells her, among other things, that she need not come out to her parents because her bisexuality is likely "just a phase." In the present moment, Shirin meets up with Maxine at a party and is horrified to discover that Maxine is dating Tibet, her co-worker in the documentary film program. Shirin comes out to her mother, and while her mother does not accept her statement, Shirin tells Crystal she plans to bring it up again soon. In the final scene, Shirin spots Maxine on a subway platform, and the two wave to each other.

**Content warnings:** *Appropriate Behavior* contains brief nudity, two sex scenes, sexual humor, and marijuana use.

**Running time:** 1 hr 26 min

**Materials for this week:**

* Lesson plans
* Screening quiz
* Secondary texts:
  + Day 2: Benson, Chloe. "Film Review: \*Appropriate Behavior.\* " \*Journal of Bisexuality\* Vol. 17, no. 2, 2017, pp. 251-256.
  + Day 3: [Music Video: Katy Perry, "I Kissed a Girl"](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tAp9BKosZXs) (Watch in class)
  + Day 3: San Filippo, Maria. "The Politics of Fluidity: Representing Bisexuality in 21st Century Screen Media" in *The Routledge Companion to Media, Sex, and Sexuality,* edited by Clarissa Smith and Feona Attwood with Brian McNair, Routledge, 2018, pp. 70-79.

**Lesson 1 – Close Reading Key Scenes and Student-Led Scene Analysis:**

1. (7 min) Screening quiz.
2. (15 min) Student-led scene analysis.
3. (5 min) Discussion prep.
4. (20 min) Whole class discussion.
5. What themes did you notice in this scene?
   * 1. **Additional questions, if needed:** It’s clear that Wil has been to events like these before. What seems to be familiar to her about these dances? What seems to be part of her routine? In contrast, what appears to be unique about this particular event?

b. How do the formal elements of this scene illustrate its themes?

* + 1. Consider the dialogue and blocking as Wil and Ma enter the dance. What do you notice?
    2. Consider the framing during Wil and Norman’s dance? Why are they framed this way? Why not just show their faces in close up? What does this framing allow us to see?
    3. Consider the sound and editing when Wil first sees Vivian. How do these elements underscore the power of this moment?
    4. Consider the sound and framing as Wil and Raymond dance and then as Wil and Norman resume their dance. What seems significant here?

**Lesson 2: Examining *Saving Face* Alongside “From The Transnational to the Sinophone”**

1.(5 min) Personal reflection. Jot down notes.

1. Did you enjoy watching *Saving Face?* Why or why not?
2. Did you relate to any of the characters? Why or why not?
3. (5 min) Discuss personal reflections.
4. (4 min) Screen today’s clip – final dance scene: (1:27:01-1:31:15).
5. (15 min) Study groups (Because both readings this week are fairly complex, I’ve structured both whole-class discussion preps as group work. You could also have this be independent or in partners.)

a. What is Wong’s argument? What key passages helped you identify that argument?

* *Sinophone lesbian aesthetic: Wong identifies the concept of a “Sinophone lesbian aesthetic” and argues that the parallel experiences of Gao and Wil’s failure to conform to accepted norms of female sexuality “trouble[s] the rigid boundary of an ethnic community and produce[s] alternative ways of being Chinese” (309).* 
  + *“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’ (315). These ethnic boundaries are often organized around diasporic nationalism linked to a mythic ‘homeland,’ filiality linked to the patriarch figure, and heterosexual monogamy” (315).*
  + *Wong examines how the last scene at the dance, (in which Gao tells Little Yu she wants her own space, and Wil and Vivian kiss in front of their community) “imagines an alternative Chinese diasporic community not based on sameness, but on critical gender and sexual heterogeneity and difference” (319).*
* *Sinophone studies: Wong examines how Sinophone studies seeks to destabilize the hegemony of “China = Chinese = ethnicity” because that “reductive equivalence…has serieso consequences for those who don’t look, speak and embody Chineseness in expected ways in gendered, racial and sexual terms” (316). Sinophone studies focuses on ‘cultural production outside China and on the margins of China and Chineseness” (316). This is relevant to Wong’s examination of* Saving Face *as he examines how “alternative sexuality, in this case lesbian sexuality, can powerfully contest the fiction of Chinese ‘community’” (316).*
* *Remaking, disrupting “home” and heteronormativity: By close-reading the first scene, Wong argues that the film suggests that the “hegemonic remaking of home spaces” is visible in the film through the salon and community events at the buffet restaurant in Flushing (317), as well as in the “patriarchal male voice represented by the grandfather” (317). Wong points out that this scene shows “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” (317). However, by refusing to ignore Vivian’s gaze when the two exchange a look at the dance, Wil “refuses the hegemonic disciplining of her lesbian subjectivity” (317).*
* *Disciplining women’s bodies: Wong highlights that ethnic communities often articulate women’s sexuality as heteronormative and reproductive because women are “supposed to uphold the purity of the nation through proper feminine behavior, domestic duty, and reproductive sexuality…a woman’s sexuality within the community becomes not only a personal issue, but also a community issue” (318). Wong examines this through Wu’s juxtaposition of the community’s gossip about Gao’s pregnancy with Gao’s exile from her father’s home: “The narrative exposes the vexing relationship between the individual and the community…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…both Gao and Wil’s bodies figure as the limit of cultural intelligibility” (318).*
* *Wong points out that* Saving Face *destabilizes what a “Chinese” and “lesbian” film are, noting that it “undermines the assumption that New York City represents a global haven for Chiense-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” (320).*

1. Wong discusses the opening and closing scenes of the film. How do those two scenes of the film reflect Wong’s argument? You can reference evidence he cited as well as other details you noticed. How do the formal elements of these scenes underscore his claims?

* *Wong argues that “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” (318). Wong examines how the last scene at the dance, (in which Gao tells Little Yu she wants her own space, and Wil and Vivian kiss in front of their community) “imagines an alternative Chinese diasporic community not based on sameness, but on critical gender and sexual heterogeneity and difference” (319). This is particularly apparent when one contrasts the first and last scene, as Wu includes several details that point to continuity between the two dance scenes. This continuity emphasizes the change and development that has taken place over the course of the film, as both Wil and Gao have become more comfortable with publicly “refusing the hegemonic disciplining” (317) of their non-normative sexualities. This is significant because their public claiming of their sexualities occurs in in the dance hall, a space that “suggestively symbolizes the homogenous spirit of ethnic community in the diaspora” (317) that represents “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” (317). By closing the film with Gao and Wil’s public claiming of their sexualities in a hegemonic space, Wong argues that the film’s “Sinophone lesbian aesthetic” suggests the potential to “trouble the rigid boundary of an ethnic community and produce alternative ways of being Chinese” (309).*
* *Establishing shot/dialogue: Wu creates the expectation of continuity with the opening shot of this scene, an establishing shot of the restaurant’s sign, with a voiceover of Gao saying, “You’re late,” to Wil, just as she did in the first scene. Just as the first scene suggested that Wil’s experience of the dance was a familiar script, this opening shot sets the audience’s expectation that the same heterosexual matchmaking will be the focus of this dance.*
* *Dialogue: However, unlike the first scene, Gao does not criticizes Wil’s clothes, and instead warmly puts her hand on her cheek in a gesture that recalls their hug at the airport in the previous scene. The dynamic between the two is altered.*
* *Framing/editing/blocking: Similarly to the first scene, a full 45 seconds of this scene are devoted to medium shots of Wil and Vivian spotting each other at this dance. The medium shots remind us of their presence within heteronormative space, but also of the emotional intensity between the two. However, the emotions are more complex than the first scene. They seem shocked to see one another and Vivian appears dismayed. However, unlike the first scene, Wil does not look away, but instead crosses the dance floor and approaches Vivian.*
* *Cinematography: A tracking shot, primarily from Wil’s point of view, shows the heterosexual couples that Wil must move past in order to approach Vivian. This highlights the heteronormativity of the dance floor, and Wil’s developing willingness to publicly express her desires.*
* *Editing: A shot-reverse shot shows Vivian and Wil’s mothers giving each other a thumbs up for their matchmaking skills. This is an example of continuity and change; while the mothers continue to see part of their role as finding good partners for their children, they have adapted their focus to suit the desires and needs of their children, despite the risks to family “face.”*
* *Framing: A long shot and then an aerial shot depict Vivian and Wil sharing a kiss on the dance floor in the midst of many straight couples, unbothered by the kiss. While some people choose to leave the dance and refer to them as “revolting,” this final pair of shots highlights their comfort in publicly expressing their desire and “troubling the rigid boundary” (309) of the community.*

c. What other scenes in the film support his argument? How do the formal elements of those scenes underscore his claims?

*Answers may vary.*

1. (15 min) Whole class discussion.

a. What is Wong’s argument? What key passages helped you identify that argument?

i. Review pages. 309 and 316. What terms does Wong use throughout this piece and define here? Why are those terms significant to his argument?

ii. Review p. 317-319. What significant points are brought up on those pages?

b. Wong discusses the opening and closing scenes of the film. How do those two scenes of the film reflect Wong’s argument? You can reference evidence he cited as well as other details you noticed. How do the formal elements of these scenes underscore his claims?

i. Consider the opening shot of this scene. What’s similar about this moment to the first dance scene? What’s different?

ii. Consider the tracking shot of Wil approaching Vivian on the dance floor. What do you notice about it? How does this shot contrast with the first scene? How does it reflect Wong’s argument?

iii. Consider the exchange between Wil and Vivian’s mothers. How is this similar to or different from the first scene? How does it highlight Wu’s ultimate themes in this film?

iv. Consider the two final shots in the film, depicting Wil and Vivian’s kiss. What do you notice about the framing of these shots? How do they illustrate Wong’s claim?

c. What other scenes in the film support his argument? How do the formal elements of those scenes underscore his claims?

**Lesson 3: Examining *Saving Face* Alongside “Diasporic Family Dramas”**

1. (5 min) Compare and contrast. Jot down notes.

A. Compare and contrast *Saving Face* to *But I’m A Cheerleader* or *Boy Meets Girl.* What did you notice was similar or different about the two films’ narratives, themes, characters, settings, tone, style, etc.?

2. (5 min) Discuss reflections.

3. (3 min) Re-watch today’s clips: Wil comes out to Ma; Will and Ma hug after Vivian leaves (1:12:07-1:13:27; 1:25:30-1:26:30).

4. (15 min) Study groups.

* 1. What is Han’s argument? What evidence was most significant here? What questions did you have about this article?
* *Summary of traditional Chinese cultural norms and relationship to queerness:*
  + *“The ideal traditional Chinese family has been essentially patriarchal, patrilineal, and patrilocal…It focuses primarily on the indebtedness to parents and elders and the demands of filial obligations” (329)*
  + *Reproduction: “The children of any family bear filial responsibility for maintaining the family by producing more children…of the three unfilial acts, the worst is having no heir” (329)*
  + *Film title – meaning of “face”: “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” (329)*
  + *Homosexuality is seen as posing a threat to both family lineage and family reputation, and is therefore seen as undesirable (329)*
  + *However, there is “extensive Chinese vocabulary describing male same-sex relations in China, suggestive of a long history” (329)*
  + *Homosexuality is seen as a product of Western values being imported into China, despite a long history of same-sex relationships in ancient Chinese history; seen as containing “elements of contagion that should be eradicated” (330)*
  + *Transnational Chinese films often engage with queerness as a discourse related to marriage and reproduction, as well as preserving traditional culture in immigrant families (330)*
* *Role of Ma in Saving Face*
  + *She is both “victim and victimizer, and both liberal and traditional” (331)*
  + *When Wil comes out to her, Ma disputes Wil’s claim to queerness and to being a “good daughter:” “Ma’s logic indicates that homosexuality aligns more with bad ideology, which discards her ethnic background and family education…[she] attributes homosexuality to the effect of Americanization” (332)*
  + *While Ma critiques Wil for her rejection of tradition, she is also critiqued by her own parents for similar failures: “Just as Ma’s sorrow seems to result from heterosexual patriarchal culture, Wil too is victimized by a similar domination within Chinese family life” (332)*
  + *Ma’s mother’s death is a catalyst for change in the film; it drives her to marry a man her father approves of, but also drives Wil to speak out at the wedding in support of her mother’s own agency (332)*
  + *Ma’s growth throughout the film: “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 other in a real sense. Thus, Saving Face places narrative emphasis on a journey from maternal loss to regaining maternal presence” (333)*
  + *The film’s happy ending is made possible through the shift in Ma: “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” (336)*
* *The film’s depiction of gradual empowerment of women and changing social norms:*
  + *The film highlights Ma and Wil’s parallel explorations of transgressive sexuality through the juxtaposition of Wil and Vivian on a date and Ma watching pornography at Wil’s apartment (337)*
  + *Han examines the opening and closing scenes, arguing that a comparison of the 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” (337)*
  + *The film explores “the gradual awakening of female consciousness…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…sexual liberation and female empowerment even have changed the Chinese American community” (340)*
  1. How is Han’s argument reflected in the scenes we just re-watched? How do formal elements of these scenes underscore Han’s claims?

*Coming Out Scene:*

* *This scene underscores the significance of Ma’s reaction to Wil, and how important her acceptance/rejection is to Wil’s ability to be open about her sexuality and develop a healthy relationship with Vivian. As Han argues, “the triangular relations among Wil, Ma and Vivian play a crucial role in the achievement of personhood and the empowerment of the female characters” (336). This scene illustrates the distance between Wil and Ma and in terms of their perspectives, and also helps explain Wil’s difficulty in being as open as Vivian expects her to be. While Vivian’s mother is accepting of her (perhaps because she has struggled with community gossip about her divorce for years and feels aligned to Vivian because of this), Ma is not, and those dynamics shape the two women’s ability to be open about their sexualities in general. As Han argues about the later scene at the airport, “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 public and private identities. Being subject to the public gaze, Wil’s reaction has reinforced the closet” (336). This scene helps illustrate how her mother’s surveillance helps construct the closet for Wil, and her inability to integrate the public and the private.*
* *Dialogue: This is one of the only scenes where Wil speaks exclusively in Mandarin (except for the word “gay”). This signals a shift in their relationship, as she attempts to connect with her mother through language, particularly because she knows this will be a difficult conversation that could drive them further apart. Also, as Han mentions in his article, in this scene Ma asks Wil, “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.” This line underscores the significance of “family face” as Han explores in her article (329). As Han argues, Wil’s coming out poses a threat to the family’s reputation and lineage, and therefore Ma repudiates Wil’s comment. Wu used this language to reference the title of her film and the significance of this concept as a central challenge that Wil faces in her relationship with her mother.*
* *Lighting: When Wil first enters the room, there is light behind her in the dining area, but her face is cast in shadow. This could suggest that she does not fully feel seen, or it could suggest that part of her identity is still not visible to her mother. As she sits on the couch, both characters are lit by the television, showing their disconnection from each other and emphasizing the fact that they are not making any eye contact.*
* *Framing: The framing in this scene is very unusual. While dialogue scenes often give the audience a strong sense of the characters’ spatial relationship to one another through two-shots or shot-reaction shots that show how close or far two characters are, in this scene, Ma and Wil never share the frame. In fact, there is one moment where Wil crosses in front of Ma, but the only time they would share the frame in that moment, Wil’s body blocks Ma’s face from the camera. For the remainder of the scene, the camera cuts back and forth between close ups of the characters’ faces as they sit beside each other on the couch, but never shows both characters together. This choice underscores the chasm between them and the fact that they cannot connect in this moment.*

*Airport scene:*

* *This scene emphasizes the shift in Wil and Ma’s relationship from the coming out scene, and underscores the “gradual awakening of female consciousness” (336) that Han examines throughout her article and suggests is critical to the narrative and thematic development of the film. The costume choices and framing in this scene emphasize this development.*
* *Framing: While the scene begins with Wil and Ma visually separated, and shot-reaction shots show their anticipation of each other’s reaction, Ma gestures to Wil and invites her into an embrace. We observe Wil crying and embracing her mother, fully able to express her emotions with Ma for the first time in the film. By showing two different angles of this hug, and remaining on it for a full minute, we are able to see the shift in this relationship and watch as Ma’s face changes as she observes how distraught Wil is over the end of this relationship. At the end of the hug, Ma take Wil’s face in her hands and the two are very close together, with their faces almost touching. This is a strong contrast to the coming-out scene, and highlights how Ma’s shift in perspective (perhaps caused partly by Wil’s help in ensuring she not marry Cho) has shifted their relationship and Wil’s ability to express her emotions.*
* *Costumes: Both women’s costumes suggest their “outsider” status and their alignment outside of traditionally expected heteronormative positions. Ma is still wearing her wedding dress, but bundles herself tightly in Wil’s coat, which is more masculine and more casual than something she would typically wear. And while she frequently criticizes Wil’s clothing throughout the film, she does not seem to mind wearing her coat, given the unique nature of this day. Similarly, Wil’s outfit combines a V-neck sweater and track pants, reminding us that she rushed out of the house to save her mother from marrying the wrong person. Their mismatched clothing connects them and suggests the evolution of their relationship away from a focus on reputation. This reflects Han’s claim that “the reputation and face of a 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” (340).*
* *Setting: While the coming out scene took place in a private setting, this scene is a public space. Wil is often very guarded and reserved in public throughout the film, but Ma’s open embrace of her, and her ability to be emotionally unrestrained in this moment, suggests a gradual shift in both characters’ ability to be expressive in public space. This setting foreshadows the public display of affection that occurs in the final scene at the dance. As Han explains, Vivian leaves because Wil is unable to integrate the public and the private (336), but this moment shows a step towards that integration.*
* *Lighting: While the coming out scene took place in dark shadows, this scene takes place in the bright light of day, further underscoring the characters’ growing comfort with openness.* 
  1. What other scenes reflect Han’s claims?

*Answers may vary.*

5. (20 min) Whole class discussion.

a. What is Han’s argument? What evidence was most significant here? What questions did you have about this article?

i. Review p. 329-330. What elements of traditional Chinese culture does Han highlight in this section of the article? What evidence is most important here? Why are these elements important when considering *Saving Face?*

ii. Review p. 331-333. What does Han argue about Ma’s role in *Saving Face?*

iii. Han most clearly synthesizes her argument on p. 337 and 340. What evidence seems most important on those pages?

b. How is Han’s argument reflected in the scenes we just re-watched? How do formal elements of these two scenes underscore Han’s claims?

i. First, consider the coming out scene. What did you notice about the lighting, framing, and dialogue in this scene? How do those elements relate to Han’s claims?

ii. Consider the scene at the airport. What formal elements seem important here? Consider the setting, costumes, lighting, and framing. What contrasts do you notice between this scene and the coming out scene? How does this relate to Han’s claim throughout her article?

c. What other scenes reflect Han’s claims?

d. **Extension question:** This is the first of several scenes you will see in this course in which someone comes out to their parent, and it might be helpful to keep track of how this trope is depicted. You’ve probably seen others in film and television shows. What do you notice about this scene? What makes it unique? What makes it similar to others you’ve seen?