***Saving Face* (2004)**

**Film Background:** *Saving Face* was the directorial debut of Alice Wu. Her second feature film was *The Half of It* (2020). The film was inspired partly by Wu's coming-out experiences with her mother. The film was not a box office success, and only opened at 56 theaters, but it has been cited as a significant and influential queer and Asian-American film in the years since its release. Wu recently spoke to [The New York Times](https://www.nytimes.com/2020/04/29/movies/the-half-of-it-alice-wu.html) about the challenges of making *Saving Face,* explaining: “I was trying to make the biggest romantic comedy I could on a tiny budget, with all Asian-American actors, and half of it in Mandarin Chinese." Wu also explained to *The New York Times* that in initial meetings with producers and studio executives, pressure was placed on her to make the protagonist white, make the characters straight, and reduce the amount of Mandarin Chinese spoken in the film. It was nominated for awards at events such as the GLAAD Media Awards in the US and the Golden Horse Film Festival in China.

**Plot summary:** The film centers on Wil (Michelle Krusiec), who is a Chinese American surgeon living in New York. Wil attends a banquet at a dance hall in Flushing, Queens, where her mother's family and friends typically gather each Friday. While her mother, "Ma" (Joan Chen), attempts to set her up with men at the banquet, Wil is drawn to Vivian (Lynn Chen), a ballet dancer, who also happens to be her boss's daughter. Soon after, Ma is kicked out of her parents' apartment when they learn that she is pregnant and will not identify who the baby's father is. Ma moves in with Wil, and they attempt to function together in harmony, despite the secrets they keep from one another about their sexualities. Ma begins going on dates with potential suitors, and begins a relationship with Cho (Nathaniel Geng). Wil and Vivian begin to develop a relationship, but Vivian is frustrated by Wil's obsession with work and her fear of moving their relationship outside the privacy of Vivian's apartment. In contrast to Wil, Vivian is open with her mother about her sexuality. Vivian gets an opportunity to move to Paris to dance, and Wil is reluctant to stop her, especially after Vivian's father discovers their relationship and criticizes Wil for foreclosing Vivian's dreams of ballet. Wil comes out to Ma and is initially shut down by her mother, who feels her coming-out brings disrespect on the family. Following her own father's wishes, Ma prepares to marry Cho; however, Wil discovers a letter from Yu (Brian Yang), who is the baby's father and hopes to stop the wedding. Wil rushes to the wedding and convinces her mother to avoid marring Cho because she does not love him. Ma then convinces Wil to go to the airport to try to stop Vivian from leaving, but when Vivian asks her to kiss her in the airport to prove her willingness to live openly, Wil refuses. Vivian leaves for Paris. Three months later, Wil and Vivian arrive at a banquet in Flushing together; their mothers have concocted a plan to ensure their reunion at the event. Wil and Vivian reconcile and kiss on the dance floor. Some guests leave the party, horrified by their actions, but Wil and Vivian ignore them and continue the celebration with their community.

**Content warnings:** *Saving Face* contains one scene of sexuality, including brief nudity.

**Running time:** 1 hr 37 min

**Notes:**

* This week, we are examining two film studies texts on *Saving Face,* rather than a film studies and queer theory text, since much has been written about this film specifically.
* You may want to have students watch the trailer for *The Wedding Banquet* before they complete the reading for Day 3, since there are some references to that film throughout Han's text.
* I have redacted sections of both essays to reduce the reading load this week.

**Materials for this week:**

* Lesson plans
* Screening quiz (day 1)
* Secondary texts:

**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) Begin teacher-led scene analysis by screening today’s clip – the dance scene (3:28-8:00).
4. Discussion prep.

a.

**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).*

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?

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

1. (15 min) Whole class discussion.

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

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?

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.

1. Screen today’s clips.