HALFWAY HOME: THE FRACTURED FAMILY IN QUEER CHINESE MEDIA

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Queer Western media often depicts the journey of queer actualisation through the linear stages of coming out, typically centred around the individual's self-assertion and establishment of identity. This perception confines the coming out experience to a singular, highly independent process, building on the assumption that it culminates in the queer individual affirming their selfhood in the 'public' realm. What happens, however, when that conceptualisation is applied to traditional Chinese society,[1] where the boundaries between the 'private individual' and 'public collective' are amorphous and virtually negligible? This essay asserts that queer Chinese identity is produced not *independent* of the socio-familial structure, but rather in *direct contention and collaboration* with the familial construct. Two queer Chinese films, *The Wedding Banquet* (1993) and *Saving Face* (2004), are explored through such a lens, investigating how the tension between the queer individual and the familial structure is portrayed and navigated, with emphasis on the employment of non-confrontational tactics such as reticence (含蓄; hanxu) and tolerance (寬容; kuanrong). This essay consolidates the argument on a new imagining of the dynamic restructuring of the traditional Chinese family and redefines the queer Chinese individual as a distinct, intersectional identity.

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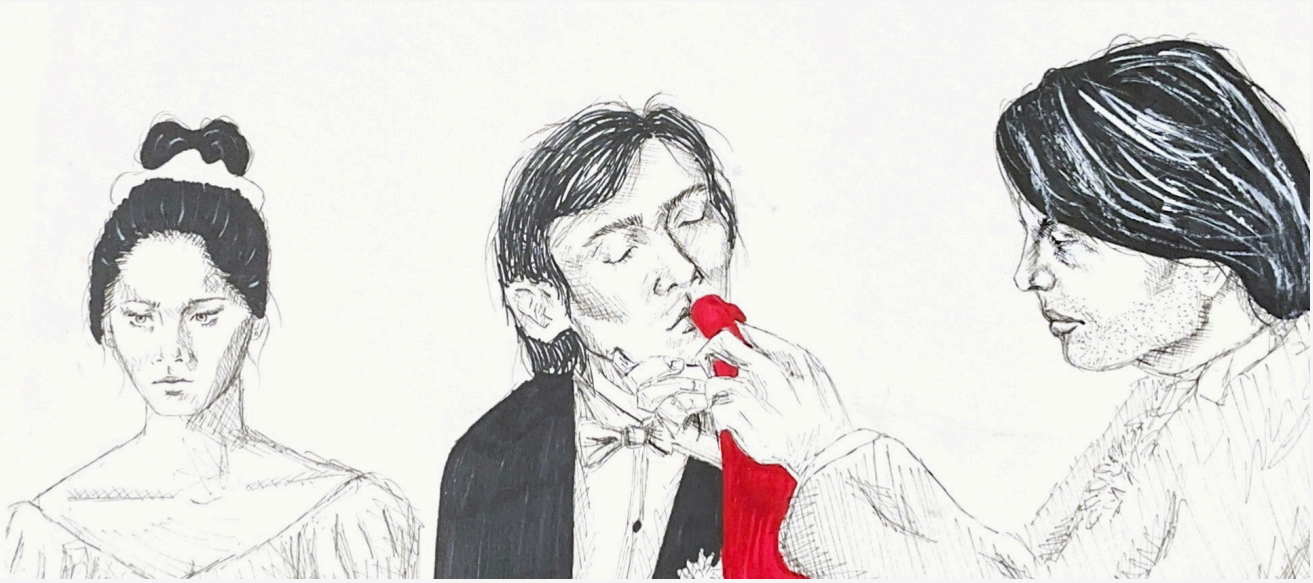
Reframing the queer Chinese (individual)

The Chinese conception of selfhood is built on the basis that the individual identity is relational and dependent on the wider collective. In traditional Chinese societies, "nobody is a discrete, isolated being; rather anyone is a full person only in the context of family and social relationships" (Chou, *Homosexuality*, 20). The family is perceived as the most basic and fundamental social institution; any concept of selfhood is inextricable from the familial construct and the responsibilities that bind one to their roles. The family thus forms the central axis of the individual's life, indispensable and primary to the self. Marriage, for example, is primarily seen as a transaction between two households rather than two individuals; by marriage, one joins a family rather than creating their own, and one is expected to take care of not only their own parents but also their in-laws. It is not uncommon for Chinese individuals to continue living with their parents well into adulthood, even after marriage and having children. As a result, queer Chinese individuals engage with their family in far more long-lasting and intrinsic ways than that of their Euro-American counterparts (Engebretsen, 42), a marked difference from the familial concept of the West due to the influence of deep-rooted Confucian values and the strict hierarchy of roles.

With the individual being so deeply imbedded in the family-kinship system, the inherent notion behind coming out (i.e. the affirmation of selfhood) is antithetical to the very basis of how Chinese society operates, as placing one's identity-based homosexuality at the forefront displaces collective values (Chou, *Tongzhi,* 138). The queer Chinese individual additionally has to navigate their sexuality through a world view shaped by ingrained traditional Confucian values such as filial piety (孝; xiao) and social harmony (和諧; hexie), whilst upholding their role of offspring and the responsibilities inherent to such roles. The tension therefore exists within the conflict between the individualised sexuality and the collective responsibility, and the desire to reconcile the two.

The dynamic of the queer individual within the familial structure however must not be understood simply as an intrinsically antagonistic relationship; rather, the goal is to acknowledge how the tension and conflicts inherent in the dynamic comes to contextualise and define the queer Chinese identity. While Euro-American queer discourse places queerness in the public domain and leaves behind the familial site, in Chinese queer subjects "the family is necessarily a negotiation partner [...] to engage with rather than move away from" (Huang and Brouwer 111). Any further exploration of the queer Chinese identity has to be in tandem with the familial structure due to its fundamental nature; simultaneously, any transformative restructuring of the traditional Chinese family cannot be understood without the politics of queering.



Reticent politics and the penumbric existence

Under the structure of the Chinese family, the coming out process for queer Chinese individuals is complicated by tactics of reticent politics. Traditional Chinese values

insist on the importance of harmony and maintaining equilibrium, with particular focus on how one should attend to socio-familial and personal-political relations (Tsai, *Poetics,* 4). To be the 'proper self' is to maintain the normative order and one's role in this order, carried out through strategies of self-preservation and self-discipline. This is rooted in the disciplinary forces of reticence and tolerance, specific tangible rhetorics that can be traced back to classical Confucian thought and Chinese poetics (Tsai, *Language,* 54). These values are employed through repression and discipline, in favour of maintaining communal harmony. Scholars Liu Jen-Peng and Ding Naifei propose that the politics of reticence is instrumental in the tactics of confronting and abating queerness in the Chinese family (35). Rather than outright confrontation, silent tolerance and reticence is employed, often through forcing the queer Chinese individual to similarly engage in such denial and repression of the self in order to maintain the normative order.

The theory of reticent politics and how they come to affect and define the queer Chinese identity will be explored through the analysis of two films: *The Wedding Banquet* (1993) and *Saving Face* (2004). These two films exhibit the model of the queer Chinese individual, its inseparability with the family, and how the politics of reticence and tolerance come into play. Crucially, both films further exhibit the possibilities in the queer Chinese identity, and how it can come to subvert and evolve the traditional Chinese family.

Repression and the familial struggle in *The Wedding Banquet* (1993)

Wei-Tung is a gay Taiwanese immigrant living in Manhattan with his white boyfriend. Under pressure from his parents to marry and start a family, he seeks to marry one of his tenants, Mainland Chinese immigrant Wei-Wei, who is in need of a green card. However, his plan backfires when his parents arrive in New York to celebrate his marriage. The fraught desire to retain the cohesiveness of a traditional Chinese household competes with his individual identity.

The fulcrum of the film lies in the tension between Wei-Tung's 'authentic' queer self and the 'fabricated' straight son. Wei-Tung actively represses his queerness when his parents come to visit: hiding away all his 'gay' decor and putting up traditional Chinese decorations in its place, and pretending that his white boyfriend is his landlord. In doing so, Wei-Tung engages in the repression that relegates his sexual identity into the "realm of ghosts and shades" (Liu and Ding, 3). By trying to "keep his place" within the familial construct, he simultaneously displaces himself, as part of his identity is kept in the liminal order and made invisible.

Wei-Tung's elaborate scheme of a sham marriage should be understood not only as simply out of appeasement of his parents, but also out of his desire to maintain his role in the socio-familial construct, and the realm of balanced harmony. This is shown through multiple exchanges in the film that showcase how Wei-Tung's layered socio-cultural obligations conflict with his sexuality.

In a scene after Wei-Tung and Wei-Wei's hasty city hall wedding, they encounter his father's old army subordinate Old Chen in a restaurant, who, upon learning that Wei-Tung did not host a wedding banquet, tries to urge him otherwise:

Commander [Gao Baba] really loves 'keeping face'[2], how can you be so careless? [...] Now after so much trouble he finally got his son married, so if you refuse [a wedding banquet], then you are being unfilial! (Lee, my own translation)

There is a clear contrast in this scene: while Gao Baba chuckles heartily at Old Chen's words, Wei-Tung's face is turned away, contorted in discomfort and shame. The positioning of the scene adds to the nuance of the dialogue: Old Chen stands in between where Gao Baba and Wei-Tung are sitting, and Wei-Tung is turned away so that his expression is only visible to the camera and not the two men, concealing his inner conflict. The mentions of 'keeping face' and filial piety put excessive emphasis on the familial responsibilities and social reputation that Wei-Tung is expected to uphold; indeed, after this exchange, Wei-Tung finally concedes to hosting a proper wedding banquet. It is clear that Wei-Tung feels the acute pressure of having to fulfill his role as son and as part of the wider social community centred around his family. The tension between his inner sexuality and the external role gradually becomes far too

much for him to bear as after his father suffers from a mild stroke, Wei-Tung, under increasing pressure, finally comes out to his mother:

It's been almost 20 years that I've been living a big lie. There has been so much pain and joy in my life that I've wanted to share with you, but I couldn't. Sometimes I can't stand it and want to be completely honest with you... but I couldn't bear putting all the burden that I've had to carry on your shoulders. (Lee, my own translation)

Gao Mama's response displays the perception that Wei-Tung's homosexuality is not in accordance with the socio-familial role that he has to uphold:

Did Simon lead you astray? How could you be so feckless! (Lee, my own translation)

Furthermore, employs tactics of reticence in order to keep Wei-Tung's sexuality in the penumbric space:

Don't tell your father... it will kill him. (Lee, my own translation)

Gao Mama's intention is for the queer identity be "made to cooperate in their own invisibility and quiescence' in order to maintain the harmonious space, made liminal in existence at the risk of disturbing the natural social order (Liu and Ding 32). The clash between assumed harmony is part of director Ang Lee's central approach for the film, as he expressed that he "loved stirring things up rather than sticking to the Chinese ideal, which is to appeal for calm" (Pacheco).

Wei-Tung's sexuality is linked to his role as a son: fulfilling the filial responsibility of bearing children and continuing the family line. As "one's sexual deviance is not determined primarily by the sex of one's sexual partner(s) but by the (lack of) adherence to the ascribed filial duty of bearing children" (Huang and Brouwer 104), it is the fact that his sexuality prohibits him from granting heirs that forms the larger part of the conflict. Wei-Tung, however, is able to fulfill the filial duty of bearing children to some degree. This will be expanded on and analysed later in the essay as a possibility in the dynamic changes of the traditional Chinese family.

Reticence and shame in *Saving Face* (2004)

Wil is a second generation Chinese-American living in New York City, working as a successful surgeon. A closeted lesbian, she meets Vivian–a daughter of a family friend–and is drawn to her immediately. Meanwhile, Wil's mother Hwei-Lan is ostracised after she is discovered to be pregnant out of wedlock, and begins living with Wil. The tension between Hwei-Lan's demands for Wil to formulate a family and Wil's repressed sexuality is bolstered by the use of reticent tactics in order to keep surface-level image of harmony, at the risk of 'losing face' (失臉; shilian).

The tension of the queer identity and the traditional family in this film is linked to the preconceived notions of what a normative, acceptable relationship in the context of the Chinese socio-cultural realm is. Both Wil and her mother transgress not only social rules of the collective but also the values in the familial construct; Wil because of her lesbian identity and Hwei-Lan because of her pregnancy out of wedlock. Hwei-Lan's arc forms a model for what Wil would face in the wider social community, and the exchanges between Hwei-Lan and her father parallel the dynamic between Wil and Hwei-Lan. Upon finding out the Hwei-Lan is pregnant, her father erupts in rage:

No family's daughter is more shameful[3] than you! [...] Didn't you think about how other people would see me, laugh at me? [...] Give up on your 'face', fine, but I still want to keep mine! (Wu, my own translation)

Subsequently, Hwei-Lan is disowned, and effectively banished from the respectable realm of the family; a parallel of the threat that many queer individuals face. On the other hand, Wil and Hwei-Lan's relationship is strained similarly due to the banishment of the inappropriate to the liminal and invisible space. Wil reveals to her friend Jay that Hwei-Lan is aware of her homosexuality:

Wil: She knows.
Jay: She does?
Wil: She dropped by my apartment a couple years ago unannounced.
Jay: She caught you. So, what'd she say?
Wil: Nothing. She dropped some dumplings on the table and left. We haven't talked about it since.
Jay: She kept setting you up with guys?
Wil: That's when it started.
(Wu, my own translation)

The deployment of reticence here–the denial and lack of acknowledgement–all ties in the relegating of the forbidden and transgressive into penumbric existence. Reticence "judges and holds responsible [...] with actions and not words" (Liu and Deng, 42), not as an outright confrontation but rather utilised with the tactics of shame, which shadows and outlines the realm of reticence. Wil's comment that her mother's efforts to set her up with men started after her discovery of her lesbian identity further shows how reticence extends and expands from the belief to "make things proper" and attempt to relegate dissident individuality back into the normative order of things (Chou, *Tongzhi,* 253).

The theme of shame, present in both Hwei-Lan and Wil's arc, is additionally rooted not just in individual shame but in the shaming of the collective identity (i.e. the family). As the Chinese individual is inextricably rooted in the family construct, personal transgressions are accounted for in the context of the entire family. This is exhibited in the previous extract regarding Hwei-Lan's pregnancy, and further shown in Wil's coming out scene:

Wil: I love you. And I'm gay.
Hwei-Lan: How can you say these two things in one single breath? You say you love me, then you break my heart like that. I am not a bad mother. My daughter cannot be gay. (Wu, my own translation)

Wil's deviant sexuality is seen as a transgression not just done by herself, but also seen as her mother's fault. The construction of Wil's identity is rooted in her relationship with her mother, and the deviance from the appropriate and propriety that is dictated by socio-familial forces is also considered as a failing of the parent. Wil, by 'coming out' to her mother, forces her to confront what has been pushed into the liminal realm, making the invisible visible – and in doing so, exposing the shame within.

Reconciliation and rebuilding of the Chinese family

Both films confront how the queer Chinese identity struggles to navigate the traditional Chinese familial realm, with its reticence-heavy atmosphere and the burden of upkeep the filial harmony. But, in the crux of both films resides the possibilities of reconciliation and rebuilding, and further pushes the boundaries of the traditional family. Both films similarly embrace the previously invisible things that were kept in the liminal space, and portray the subversion of the traditional home. This section articulates that coming out does not foreclose the possibility of coming home, and outlines the different forms of acceptance and integration between the queer individual and the family.

In *The Wedding Banquet*, Wei-Wei becomes pregnant and decides to raise the child together with Wei-Tung and Simon. This unconventional structure of family, with two queer fathers and one heterosexual mother, actively subverts and queers the very basis of the familial construct. At the same time, the decision to keep the child and formulate a family aligns with the normative household structure – meaning that despite his deviant sexuality, Wei-Tung still fulfills his filial responsibility. It is also revealed that Wei-Tung's father had known that Wei-Tung is gay and in a relationship with Simon, who he acknowledges as his son-in-law in the form of gifting him a red packet. The marital and familial connotations behind the red packet signals a form of acceptance, and brings into light other possibilities that allow for the reconciliation between the family and the individual, possibilities that do not require the relegation of the queer self into liminality.

In *Saving Face*, Hwei-Lan recognises the happiness that Wil derives from her relationship with Vivian whilst acknowledging her own happiness in her 'taboo' love affair with a younger man. Both shame-tinged affairs are finally confronted and accepted by both mother and daughter, and unconventional relationships fit into the family dynamic. Director Alice Wu stated in an interview that the relationship between mother and daughter, based on her own experience, had "everything to do with her willingness to make changes in her own life to be happy" (Bolonik). The closing shot before the credits shows Wil and Vivian swaying and kissing, surrounded by the other members of the Chinese social club, while the mid-credits scene depicts the characters at a family gathering. This signals how the queer Chinese self is embedded in the familial realm, and that integration between the two is not only possible but necessary.

Through analysing these films, we dispense with the idea that coming out is invariably aligned with the Western model of a linear process that neglects the

familial site in exchange for the public, external community. Instead, the queer Chinese individual undergoes a unique, continuously varying path in the assertion of their identity, one that is inextricably twined with the filial structure and treasures the reunion between family and individual.

There are still unanswered questions about whether genuine reconciliation can be achieved; Gao Baba in *The Wedding Banquet* subtly accepts Simon, but that is contingent on him having a grandchild, whilst whether Wil's relationship with Vivian will clash with filial responsibilities is not properly addressed. The goal, however, is acknowledging that there is no 'end point' for queer acceptance in the Chinese family; what is and should be prioritised is the frequent interrogation of the family structure, and opening up spaces for transformation.

Footnotes

1. Among the most popular being Cass and D'Augelli's models, which focus on the queer individual's integration into the wider society, with fleeting mentions of the familial structure's influence on the individual's queer acceptance process.

2. 'Keeping face' (面子; mianzi) as in the Chinese cultural concept of outward-facing reputation, honour and respectability.

3. The exact phrase used is '丢脸' (diulian), literally meaning 'losing face'.

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