Masks, Fans, and Nu Shu in Chinese-American Female Love Relationships

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Abstract:
In this article, I argue that the issue of saving face is experienced differently among Chinese-American Lesbians than it is for Americans as a result of the cultural transmission of Confucian beliefs through first generation immigrants. The fictional texts that will be analyzed in detail are: The film Snow Flower and the Secret Fan (2011) by Wayne Wang and the film Saving Face (2007) by Alice Wu. Fans, masks, and the Nu Shu language indicate how ethnicity, class, and gender intersect in the construction of identity and how, in a fictional context, the above-mentioned historical works of art serve as archives to document the way female love relationships have struggled to exist. I investigate the use of the Nu Shu language, which was created for and used only by women, and show how it really existed in the province of Hunan, its last user dying in 2004. This unusual form of communication created a possible romance between women who shared a secret language.

1 On the basis of a recent library search, few research studies of Chinese-American lesbians appear to exist, and of those that do, most seem confined to the world of fiction, namely films and novels. Two such fictional texts are films and will form the centerpiece of this essay. The first, *Snow Flower and the Secret Fan* (2011) by Wayne Wang, is a free adaptation of Lisa See's best-selling novel by the same name, published in 2005, while the second is *Saving Face* (2004) by Alice Wu. The ambience of respectability and conservatism in which Chinese lesbians find themselves has meant that the issue of saving face is one they consider especially important, and this theme is given due prominence in both films. I consider that the concern with presenting a socially acceptable front to society is experienced differently among Chinese-American Lesbians than it is for Americans as a result of the cultural transmission of Confucian philosophical beliefs that date back to the sixth century B.C. This is a process that has continued despite the westernization and/or modernization of China and undergone modifications within U.S. culture since the first generations of immigrants set foot on American soil. In a fictional context, the above-mentioned historical works of art serve as archives that document the way female love relationships struggle to exist by the use of masks and fans with inscriptions in the *Nu Shu* language (*Nu* = Women, *Shu* = Language). These objects are indicators of ethnicity, class, and gender identity.

2 I believe that this study will serve a culturally relevant purpose by illuminating the ways in which the different representations of lesbian love relationships compare and contrast. I will discuss how the use of a language called *Nu Shu*, supposedly created and used only by women, did really exist in the province of Hunan in the South of China; in fact, there is evidence that Yue-Qing Yang, who died in 2004, was its last user. This unusual form of

communication enabled romances between women who shared a secret language. In the more recent film, two women make use of it within a friendship contract known as *Laotongs*[1] in order to mask their more intimate relationship. In traditional societies this kind of love was typically forced into some form of hiding. Such conditions are immediately evident in both of the above films through the inclusion of objects that cover the faces of women: masks and fans.[2] In more recent times, however, the westernization of China has emboldened and encouraged many Chinese-Americans to shed this veil of secrecy by revealing their stories and experiences and presenting them as part of the nation's cultural history and heritage. These tales have been channeled through various forms of artistic expression that portray the intersectionality of race, class, and gender. In this context, lesbians define themselves as *tongzhi*, which is an identifying label used by the Chinese-American queer community.

Face, Face Work and Family Status

3 To the Chinese, the identity of a person is both relational and personal. In *Facework in Chinese Cross-Cultural Adaptation* (1997), Swi Hong Lee states that according to the Chinese concept of face, this division is represented by two categories: *mianzi* and *lian*. Mianzi relates to social achievement, reputation, prestige, and success, while *lian* relates to individual character, dignity, and moral behavior. Influenced by its origins in Confucianism, Chinese face work[3] considers that every interaction can be a face giving/face gaining act or a face saving/face losing act. Virtue is the key to good social relationships and the backbone of a solid social structure based on hierarchy. In order to achieve social harmony, individuals first have to learn about face work within the family before transferring that knowledge to the public domain, therein to create a similar harmony. The hazards of saving face can become especially acute when people from one environment come into contact with those from another, since misunderstanding and embarrassment may result from a mismatch in social conventions. If a face-saving breakdown should occur in such circumstances, families and

[1] *Laotong* means kindred spirit. Two little girls would sign a contract by which they would be bound in friendship for life.

[2] Masks and fans are not only worn by performers in traditional Chinese opera and theatrical performances, but also by Taoists and Buddhists, who use them to be at peace with the spirits and ensure good luck. Actors continue to wear colorful make-up, and women protect their faces from the sun by using a face-kini or head mask with openings for the eyes, nose, and mouth when going to the beach. Such customs are testimony that masks empower women, as Joan Riviere has argued. Thus, women masquerade femininity to obtain male power and avoid being punished by performing weakness (303-13). Interestingly enough, the US made a highly criticized film in 1932 called *The Mask of Fu Manchu*, which expressed the fear of a Chinese invasion under an evil leader, who made himself powerful and invulnerable by wearing an ancient mask that helped him hold onto his traditions.

[3] This term is used for all the actions that affect the two aspects of face as *miazi* (social) or *lian* (individual). People can give face or honor to others, take it away, improve it, etc.

even entire communities can be adversely affected. This loss of *mianzi* will mean that one has failed to uphold one's honor and will lose the approval and recognition of others, according to Swi Hong Lee. Moreover, while the cause for loss of *mianzi* could be another's insensitivity or ignorance in failing to recognize the subject's value, the blame for this loss and the resulting damage it can do to *lian*, is, however, placed squarely on the shoulders of the subject for committing a socially unacceptable act (Lee 1-6). The most unacceptable conduct for a woman is to refuse to marry and have children because these duties form part of her filial piety (Chou Wah-shan 25). Ordinarily, the marriage gives face to the parents and enables the woman to earn *lian* and receive *mianzi*.

4 It is in the context of face work that arranged Chinese marriages and foot binding can be understood; the purpose of these events, both of which victimized young girls, was to increase a community's store of *mianzi* and enable the girls to earn *lian*, which would grant them as much needed social capital in their future roles as wives within a hierarchical society. Unfortunately, Chinese daughters are at the bottom of the hierarchical social structure. As Gayle Rubin affirms, the origins of their lowly status are partly attributable to norms of kinship, which legitimized the traffic of women among men as a means of generating wealth within the heterosexual family structure. In this way, wife-trafficking became one more item on a list of institutionalized practices: "incest taboos, cross-cousin marriage, terms of descent, relationships of avoidance or forced intimacy, clans and section, taboos on names –the diverse array of items found in descriptions of actual kinship systems" (232).

5 In addition to being exploited as commodities by the family structure, young girls were also subject to its practice of age discrimination in that they were placed below their older sisters and female relatives in the family pecking order. Accordingly, their mothers were in a position to negotiate their futures with marriage-making old women. While such a system may appear abhorrent within our culture and times, a Chinese mother's greatest demonstration of love was, nonetheless, considered to be the binding her daughter's feet between the ages of 5 and 7, an operation guaranteed to transform them into perfect lotus flowers. In such condition, the girl would acquire the necessary pedigree to enter a good marriage and claim for herself the highest status available to a woman: to be a wife, perform her duty of having children, and become a favorite should she produce a boy. Her deformed feet, however, fulfilled a need that went beyond that of mere status. Mary Daly claims the lotus flowers were fetishes of phallic desire. Their passions inflamed, men would squeeze the stumps "to the point of causing acute pain, smelling them, whipping them, stuffing them into their mouths, biting them, having their penises rubbed by them. These men stole tiny shoes in

order to pour semen into them, and drank tea containing the liquid in which the stumps were washed" (143).

6 This patriarchal feudal system lasted until the birth of the Republic in the 1940s when the Chinese Social Revolution Agrarian Law of 1947 decreed that women should no longer be traded as chattel in male kinship deals. Before the Social Revolution, the absence of love and companionship in marriage meant that mothers endeavored to procure a best friend for the daughter. The successful girl candidate, who would need to match the young bride in age and character, was given the title of *laotong*. Lisa See, who travelled to the Province of Hunan to interview Chinese women and recover their stories for her novel *Snow Flower and the Secret Fan* (2005), provides her own definition: "a *laotong* relationship is made by choice for the purpose of emotional companionship and eternal fidelity. A marriage was not made by choice and had only one purpose – to have sons" (43). If there was no other girl available that shared the necessary 8 similarities with the bride-to-be in order that a lifelong *laotong* contract might be signed, she could still have a group of sister friends on the basis of affinity. Homosociality coexisted with arranged marriages to make life more bearable, especially for the wife, who was largely confined to a female room on the second floor of the house since her bound feet meant she was unable to walk around her husband's house. However, as Lisa See shows in her historical novel, a bride with a *laotong* was blessed with a companion that, with her husband's consent, could visit and even sleep with her sometimes. Julia Kristeva, who went to China in 1975 to study the social changes caused by the Social Revolution, states that:

> what we think of as perversion seems to integrate itself easily into their customs: female homosexuality in particular. […] Female sexuality and masturbation are not merely *tolerated*—they are taken for granted and considered to be perfectly *natura*l. Sexual treatises provide detailed descriptions of lesbian and masturbatory techniques. (62)

7 Taken from her publication *About Chinese Women* (1977), this quote shows that Kristeva is aware of western attitudes towards lesbianism, and in our own approach to the topic, we should demonstrate a similar understanding of the data before us and the context that created it. A closer analysis of the situation in which these female love relationships took place reveals that the wife was subjected to considerable suffering, which included confinement, the constant pain of having crippled feet, unfair treatment at the hands of a mother-in-law who regarded her as a servant, the silence or violence she received from a husband who only cared about his sons and his work, and other hardships of daily life. Out of these experiences was born the wife's need for love from someone who understood her pain

from first-hand experience. This need also reflected the near impossibility of loving a man who only communicated with other men and who used her as a mule to produce more sons. Such a relationship offered little else but sexual exchange, whether for procreation or pleasure. There may, of course, have been a few loving heterosexual relationships, but the conditions must have been unfavorable, considering that women were not only illiterate and prohibited from learning about the outside world, but even confined to a separate quarters of the house. Given the extent to which they were alienated from any external reality, it is hardly surprising that the female ghost became an enduring figure in Chinese literature.

8 However much a person is forced into a social role, certain basic needs will typically prevail. Chinese women may have been straitjacketed into an identity that combined wife and mother, but the desire for affection and a way to express emotions and ideas remained. The discovery in 1987 that women had created a way of communicating among themselves before the Social Revolution is thus hardly surprising. When, during the communist paranoia of the 1960s, Ms. Yang was found with some papers that seemed to contain a secret code, she was initially suspected of involvement with international espionage. Eventually, Gong Zhebing, a linguist and anthropologist studying minorities, claimed that it was a language called *Nu Shu*. This language dated back to the Song Dynasty (900-1279) in the Jianyong area in Hunan Province. The story told how a woman from an Imperial palace who had been punished created a new language and taught it to her parents so that she might complain to them about the lack of educational opportunities for women in her location. Since peasant women could not be accredited with creating a language, an educated woman had to assume the role, as this story attests.

9 Whoever the original creator(s) of *Nu Shu* may have been, it was a uniquely constructed language with interesting roots. Carolyn Lau informs us that it "was written in 'mosquito-ant' style on cloth, loose sheets or paper, folded fans, and handmade books" (1). It has only 700 characters and is written left to right in curves as opposed to straight lines, a feature suggesting that its execution required higher-level motor skills, and this rendered it more accessible to women who were proficient in sewing. Visually, it resembles Han script, as well as bone and tortoise shell inscriptions of the Shang Dynasty (16th to 11th century B. C.), suggesting that the language may initially have borrowed from local sources before undergoing transformation at the hands of its female users, who needed a suitable medium for communicating their suffering and find some comfort in understanding their world by creating stories, songs, and poems. These enabled them to survive present hardships, influence the future, and heal past traumas. Lau had to pay for some translations of *Nu Shu*

with funds from her grant. The resulting fragments include stories of envy about how men lived, feelings of inferiority, deaths in the family that cause shame because there is no man left to put a name on a grave, and other sad themes.

10 Once established, *Nu Shu* was variously received. According to Yue-Qing Yang, the Communist feminist movement of 1949 denied the language its blessing on account of its message that the feminist movement in China was male-oriented. For Mao Tse-tung, a language like this, with its links to old traditions, would have seemed one more backward step and a threat to the modernization of China. However, the comments we find in *Nu Shu* about marriage are, in fact, anything but traditional: "'This damn emperor made the wrong custom / why should I have to be married away?' This statement to me is so enlightening. Confucians for thousands of years have been saying, *family under heaven*, [affirming that the family unit is blessed from above]. So if these women are saying Confucian marriage is wrong, then they are also saying the whole patriarchal system is wrong" (Lai and Huang 267). It is interesting to observe that Yue-Qing Yang, the last *Nu Shu* speaker, considered this language as a tool for empowering protest against the Confucian family and for strengthening female unions and community, regardless of whether or not these conformed to the norms of the Western heterosexual family.

11 As Loretta Wing Wah Ho suggests, it is important to recognize that "the formation and imposition of same-sex identities are significantly linked with the imaginary and collective powers of storytelling, heightened by China's opening up to global sexual ideas and practices. These imaginary and collective qualities of storytelling are potent agents for the formation of new identities" (25). Consequently, we will need to observe how these sexualities are represented in mainstream films accepted by the general public. The two films under discussion fall within this category and have received favorable criticism leading to international awards.

Fans and Nu Shu in *Snow Flower and the Secret Fan*

12 *Snow Flower and the Secret Fan*, by Chinese-American writer Lisa See, was published in 2005 and soon became a best-seller. Set in the nineteenth century, it explores the difficulties facing couples that belong to different social classes and the ensuing complications that arise regarding face work. The relationship dynamics of the story are, however, further complicated by the fact that it deals with the erotic desire between two women, Lily and Snow Flower. Their first nude encounter is narrated in the most natural way, as, in *Nu Shu*, their fingers trace the words they dare not put in print:

My feet –those places of so much pain and sorrow, so much pride and beauty –tingled with pleasure. […] I wrote the character, which can mean bending over, kowtowing, or prostrating oneself. On her other ankle I traced the word I. I set her feet down and wrote a character on her calf. After this, I moved to a spot on the inside of her left thigh just above her knee. My last two characters were high up on her thighs. I leaned down to concentrate on writing the most perfect characters possible. I blew on my strokes, knowing the sensation it would cause, and watched as the hair between her legs swayed in response. (Lisa See 87)

13 Even though we are not told what the last two characters are, the context and Lili's reading of a poem communicate the meaning without our knowing the symbols which had special, intimate meanings for them: "Snow Flower was my home and I was hers" (87). Meaning is, therefore, subtle in *Nu Shu*, with characters that can have multiple meanings. For those in need of secrecy, this has the advantage that a text cannot later provide incriminating evidence through precise details. *Nu Shu* even uses fixed phrases from well-known poems, and these function as a mask for female desire, complaints, anger, frustrated dreams, plans to escape, etc.

14 When Chinese-American filmmaker Wayne Wang took Lisa See's novel to the big screen, he decided to make a series of changes. Firstly, he omitted the homoerotic love scene described above. Secondly, he decided to update the misunderstanding the couple experienced in the original story over written *Nu Shu* by substituting instead a more contemporary disagreement between the couple over the permissibility of two lesbians living together. In the film, we also have a visual comparison between the old world and the new. Present-day Shanghai is seen through a symbolic blue filter, while old Shanghai is in seen in a variety of colors. In the nostalgic blue present, he features a couple of female best friends, Sophia and Nina, who become separated through circumstance. Their paths cross once more when Sophia suffers a car accident. At the same moment, Nina is offered a job promotion where her boyfriend lives, but she lets it go in order to take care of her friend Sophia. In Sophia's belongings Nina finds a fan, as well as a man's suit. The mystery of their purpose is solved by the appearance of Sophia's aunt at an art exhibition of nineteenth century fans decorated with *Nu Shu* characters that belonged to the family. The presence of these fans enables Wang to make a second change to the story, which involves the rekindling of Nina and Sophia's relationship. Sophia awakens from the coma caused by the car accident, and, in the next scene, Nina experiences a vision brought on by handling Lily's fan, which belonged to Sophias' family. Looking through the glass window, she imagines or visualizes Lily and Snow Flower on the hospital balcony in a state of harmony. Pleased with the knowledge that

their laotong spirits are still together sewing *Nu Shu* characters on their own clothing, Nina returns the smile they give to her, and we see the two ghosts holding hands before the skyscrapers of modern times, envisioning their lives together. At this moment, the colorful characters of the past, Lily and Snow Flower, introduce new colors into the sad blue present, and the hospital room ceases to be blue.

15 This artistic tableau brings the ghosts of Lily and Snow Flower back to present-day China, a space where their female love relationship can be made flesh. One advantage of film is that a narrator's desire can be crystalized into a tangible image that may create a lasting memory, which, unlike history, can reveal more about the secret love stories that had previously been masked by *Nu Shu*. Tze-Ian D. Sang suggests that "double vision –the ability to see flickering and shadowy ghosts in addition to the literal, surface, and established meanings of things –is desirable" (41); such anachronistic images convey that homoerotic desire has a history that haunts us. Unlike the novel, which can be read in a private space and whose more extreme sections can be eschewed by literary criticism, mainstream films have frequently been obliged to make use of the double vision described by Sang. Operating, as they do, within a genre that is screened in public spaces and which is dependent upon the patronage of satisfied viewers, films have had to tread carefully in order not to outrage the public through explicit eroticism. In this case, what we have instead is a final image in which Nina is lying next to Sophia's bed in the hospital, both women holding the fan that has Lily and Snow Flower's story written in *Nu Shu* between them as signal that they share the same story. Their ending, however, is happier in that Sophia is able to return Nina's grip, there are tears of love and happiness, and all secrets are brought out into the open.

16 Such a harmonious outcome is not enjoyed by Lily and Snow Flower, and among the obstacles they face is their difference in social status. Their bond is initially set in motion when Snow Flower's aunt negotiates with Lily's mother that Snow Flower and Lily should become *laotongs*, a move that will enable them both to survive in the Chinese society in which they live. The honor of having a *laotong* from a respectable upper class family and the chance to gain perfect lotus feet will make Lily a desirably marriageable partner for a rich man. At the same time, Snow Flower needs to hide her family's poverty by dressing up in fancy clothes and being able to have a *laotong*, which will provide her with a stepping stone to the face-lifting benefits of a good marriage. Swi Hong Lee points out that "others assess you by the people you associate with […] Social associates speak of social influences" (123). Successful networking requires that both girls be seen with people who are at least their social equals, or better, their superiors.

17 The overall negative critical reception of sex and sexuality in the film reveals unfulfilled expectations on many levels, namely: that the film comply with either cinema's need for aesthetic distance or pornography's purpose as a masturbatory aid; that the women engage in homosexual activity; and that the women conform to conventional, heterosexual, submissive, "natural" and non-violent femininity. Clearly, the issue of violence in association with women is central to socio-cultural reasons for the film's negative critical reception and the following section considers

Extreme Narrative Violence and the Taboo of the Violent Woman

18 "To be aggressive: virile. To want to fuck loads of people: virile. To respond with brutality to something which threatens you: virile." (Despentes 128)

19 This film is, therefore, a criticism of face-saving behavior taken to the extreme insofar as two women choose paths that they ought to take rather than the ones that they truly desire. However, it is also a eulogy to the love between women. The difficulties they face extend beyond class to embrace the modern taboo of same-sex love, and it is this, which, in large part brings about the ensuing tragedy. Some atonement for this frustration is achieved when Snow Flower and Lily become ghosts and find a possible space for their love in the present through Sophia and Nina.

Masks in *Saving Face*

20 Alice Wu, a Chinese-American filmmaker, relived her experience of coming out as lesbian to her family in her first film, the comedy *Saving Face*. This story shows how the Confucian idea of protecting self-image continues to plague female love relationships. As we have seen, gaining respectability means that the person or actor needs to wear a face or mask that is approved by the family and the community. In Wu's exploration of this theme, the plot goes as follows: Wil is a twenty-eight year old Chinese-American New Yorker who works as a surgeon. She always takes care to wear her surgeon's mask at the hospital and her cream mask at home. Expected by family and friends to acquire a boyfriend and get married, she is in the habit of attending ballroom dances with her single mother. Wil, however, attends these balls in casual young boyish outfits and men's shoes, for which her grandmother congratulates her because she did so herself during the Chinese Social Revolution, which banned foot-binding.

21 Early in the film, the relationship between Wil and her single mother takes on a humorous and ironic twist. Although Wil plays her part in being the dutiful daughter who has

no private life on account of spending long hours busy at the hospital doing extra-work, her mother commits an outlandish act in getting pregnant and refusing to reveal the identity of the father. This outrage causes Wil's grandfather lose face before the community, so he humiliates and rejects his daughter by telling her that she can no longer live in his house until she finds a husband. When Wil responds by providing for her mother and letting her stay in her apartment, she effectively becomes her mother's mom, and this reversal of roles prompts the viewer to consider the extent to which family titles are mere masks that can be switched according to circumstance and which pay little heed to age or gender.

22 Sean Metzger argues that "Alice Wu's debut feature draws on the melodramatic to enact a kind of racialized masquerade, for while the diegesis ultimately repositions principal characters as daughters and mothers, it destabilizes the norms associated with such roles by reconfiguring time in relation to them" (225). This point has special relevance in the film because not only do we find Wil wearing white mascara, partly to show that she can pass for a white American, we also see Wil's friend, who is black, wearing a cream mask. His is green because he cannot pass for a white. Thus, we find that both of them are queer, both wear masks and both talk about Wil's trying to come out and talk to her mother about it. As Metzger observes, the derailing of role norms are highlighted through the numerous changes of masks the characters wear in different situations throughout the film. Wil's friend, who is a stranger to Wil's mom, is not initially welcomed by her because she likes to speak Chinese; however, he is eventually integrated within the family routine by eating Chinese food with Wil and her mother after work and by watching soap operas with them. It is by sharing time together that Wil's mom starts to miss Wil's friend, and, through their willingness and ability to communicate, racial issues are overcome in this alternative family of two Chinese women and a black boy.

23 Wu further pokes fun at the problem of saving face is by using camera angles that obscure Wil's face. For instance, when she and her lover Viv hold hands through a metal barrier at a park (See Fig. 1),[4] Wu alternates the view from both sides and ends the shot with Viv on the left side, so that Wil's face is made less clear by the rhomboid metal barrier, which serves the function of a symbolic mask.

[4] I took all the photos included in this paper.

24 Many instances of the two women together show Wil's back and Viv's face or Viv's face and Wil's body, and our inability to see Wil's face clearly is indicative of her guilt at being a lesbian. She is, both literally and figuratively, saving face, an impulse that prevents her from declaring her love for Viv until the end of the film. Wil loves Viv, and although we hear Wil confessing to her African American friend that she is a lesbian, she does not do so to her mom. She tells the friend that her mother once caught her in the act with a girl and that her mom, perhaps acting on her knowledge of the grave personal consequences that accompany family dishonor, pretended not to have noticed anything. Thus, in her turning a blind eye to Wil's transgression, she may, ironically, have been attempting to protect her daughter from the same fate she herself comes to suffer at the hands of her own father when the news of her illicit pregnancy breaks. Wil, on the other hand, formulates a coping strategy of her own which involves seeking advice outside her family, and in this she mirrors the results of interviews included within Connie S. Chan's social study, in which, "respondents were more likely to come out to non-Asians than to other Asians (reflecting the pressure to maintain privacy within the Asian culture), and many had not disclosed their sexual identity to their parents, even though they had been out an average of 6.2 years" (95). In comparison with the Asian community, many westerners seem to demonstrate a deeper understanding of gender issues, together with a greater inclination to exercise individual freedom by acting on homoerotic desires. Moreover, their moral judgments are of less concern to Asians than those of their own people, which have the power to crush or exalt another Asian's social standing through the institution of gaining, saving or losing face.

25 The image of the social eye, an allusion to the inescapable stare of George Orwell's godlike Big Brother, has become an enduring and all-encompassing symbol for our fears that the social roles we play are being observed and monitored, as well as a warning lest we allow our good citizen mask to slip out of place. In the film, this scrutiny is seen to operate in two ways, and these are described by Foucault in his comments about panopticism in *Discipline and Punish*: "surveillance is based on a system of permanent registration: reports from the syndics to the intendants, from the intendants to the magistrates or mayor" (196). In other words, those under the watchful eye of authority become enlisted to inform on each other,

and this is the exact process to which Wil's mother is subjected when the nurse that worked at the clinic reports the pregnancy to Grandpa, the Professor, who had previously been her teacher. Nothing escapes the patriarchal eye, and everyone is expected to adopt its position of vigilance and censure. Even we, the audience, become part of this surveillance mechanism when, in moral collaboration with the film's Chinese community, we sit in judgment of Ma's performance as a mother. In this capacity, our spectator's eye-view affords us greater disclosure than that allowed to Ma's community. We are present when, on the pretext of needing medicinal herbs, she receives intimate messages from her young lover in concealed "masked" envelopes. We learn that although she is tormented by the weakening of her *lian* and *mianzi*, she is unable to resist looking inside. We experience our Big Brother role once more towards the end of the film when Viv and Wil are being observed and judged by everyone at the party. We, the viewers, put on the mask and proceed to police the lives of the two protagonists (See the eye shape in Figs. 2 and 3).


26 Fortunately for Wil, she is, given a second chance at happiness when she meets Viv again in the same ballroom where they first met. On this second occasion, she summons the courage to ask Viv to dance with her in front of the whole Chinese-American community. Although a number of people are duly outraged and scurry out of the party, clucking in disapproval, Wil does not care, and she and Viv dance and kiss happily.

27 So, by the end of the film, both Ma and Wil, mother and daughter, emerge victorious after having experienced close moral scrutiny. We have joined the Chinese-American community in weighing their choices in the balance and neither has been found wanting, in the sense that they are both ultimately rewarded rather than punished. Granted, some people do pronounce judgment and leave the party, but we, together with a sizeable portion of the revelers, stay and grant the lovers our blessing. In the closing scenes, the camera provides an aerial view, and we see the remaining people on the dance floor group themselves into the shape of an eye, which serves as a gesture of approval for the lesbian couple at the center. Clips are then flashed on the screen of what happens three months later, and the envisioned future is bright: Wil's mom finally marries her younger lover, the secret father of her baby, while the old grandfather, once the standard bearer of oppressive social conformity, snorts his

disapproval unheeded and is forced into a grudging embrace of the new social order. Swept along by the tide of joy, Viv's father also loses track of the inflexible commandments that have ruled his existence as a prominent surgeon, and makes a joke about how proud he is that his daughter, a celebrity ballet dancer, has ended by marrying, Wil, a doctor and the most accomplished surgeon under his supervision. Both share the passion of changing faces instead of saving old faces. Wil's mother, once similarly in thrall to hostile society norms, asks Viv and Wil when they will have a baby. The ending is thus upbeat not only in the spectacle of successful relationship outcomes for the various characters, but also in its optimism for the continuing formation of alternative happy family groupings, ones that are able to face the world without having to save face.

Chinese-American Gender Trouble

28 According to Chou Wah-shan, same-sex relationships were traditionally accommodated within Chinese society rather than demonized by it. Indeed, we observed that the problem between Lily and Snow Flower was caused by class difference and face work. It was, in fact, "through the encounter with the West in the mid-nineteenth century, which sparked a series of indigenous efforts to modernize China, that same-sex eroticism was gradually defined as pathological" (43). Colonized peoples have often been observed to exhibit more extreme or exaggerated versions of the norms owned by their oppressors as means of establishing themselves as truly integrated. Such mimicry of the "traditional" American worldview may explain why the two modern couples in our films get separated by their Chinese-American parents. Nina and Sophia are separated by their families before the accident in *Snow Flower and the Secret Fan*, while in *Saving Face* Wil brings about the separation as a result of her strict traditional upbringing. In the film, both mother and daughter assume the role of second generation Chinese-Americans living with Chinese-speaking families who are consumed by a need to save face and maintain the community rules of saving face. Wil's mom eventually accepts Wil's African American gay friend and Viv as Wil's girlfriend, but only after she realizes that she herself was about to marry without love for a second time just to please her father. In these examples, it would appear that traditional Chinese notions of saving face are being applied according to a perceived rigidity and intolerance of unorthodox relationships within North American society.

29 A similar collision of cultural norms takes place in these films with regard to the use of Chinese vocabulary and ethnicity symbols such as masks, fans and *Nu Shu*. Masks, for instance, evoke the historical tradition of theatrical opera, as do fans. Both are objects that

cover the face and play with the idea of identity. For Norma Claire Moruzzi, "Feminine masquerade is a masquerade of social identity; other social identities can be enacted as well" (27). In these films, we have observed how women first put on the identity of obedient daughters to show Confucian filial piety, and then the roles of wives, mothers, and lovers. However, one departure from the traditional Chinese use of masks in role-playing sometimes occurs when one woman pressures other women to conform to patriarchal roles, and this I consider to be a masculine role. Again, what may be happening here is that a version of western patriarchy has infiltrated the Chinese theatrical tradition of masquerade and, in so doing, introduced a more threatening and oppressive component. One example is that in playing out the socially respectable role of doctor, Wil feels constrained to break up with Viv in order to save her face. The masks we put on and the roles we adopt are significant to the extent that they create the persona that we present to the world. Jung offers the following interpretation of this process: "the persona is nothing real: it is a compromise between individual and society as to what a man should appear to be. He takes a name, earns a title, exercises a function, he is this or that" (Monte 8). This suggests that the persona is a mask and vice-versa, with no intervention from the real self underneath. However, my own understanding coincides more with that of Judith Butler, who argues that there is no real at all, and the self is the sum total of a discourse that includes masks, fans, and the *Nu Shu* language. In this sense, the incorporation of western patriarchy into the Chinese tradition of masquerade goes beyond the mere switching of masks to represent a reconstruction or transformation of social norms within the Chinese American community. I believe that this encounter of Eastern and Western philosophies enables us learn more about our identities and how gender connects to race, class, age, and other givens that form who we are. In the lifelong quest to know ourselves from our interactions with one another, these two films help us to understand better the importance of being aware of what masks we are wearing, why we have chosen them, and of feeling free to change them if necessary.

30 The fluidity of identity that accompanies the wearing and changing of masks is well exemplified by the community of Chinese American queers that call themselves Tongzhi.[5] People within this group use their own Chinese words, together with the covering of the face with masks in their pride parades as a sign of coming out, since this act illustrates how

[5] *Tongzhi* can be broken down in two syllables: *Tong* = Same/Homo, *Zhi* = Goal/Spirit. The term was originally the name of an emperor of the Qing Dynasty (1856-1875). Later on, it was appropriated by the communist nationalists to mean "comrade" in the 1940, and finally it was chosen by a Hong Kong gay activist in 1989 as the title for the first Lesbian and Gay Film Festival, since then it means Chinese-American Queers. However, the specific word of lesbian is *Lala* or *Les*.

identity is a mask that can be changed. However, while some groups remove their masks as a sign of coming out, others keep them on to identify themselves. This variation suggests that actions, together with their attendant meanings, are not fixed to what we are, and this offers an array of possibilities as to who we are, who we were, and who we want to be. For Fran Martin, "the mask tactic thus enables tongzhi to perform a theatrically exaggerated enactment of the position of tongxinglian[6] itself" (194). He suggests that having no mask is like using an invisible mask of the not-out *tongzhi* in some cases. It is possible that in wearing a mask, the *tongzhi* are making themselves visible as queer while at the same time enabling them to observe their observers in an uncanny way that empowers them as subjects.

31 By wearing the same traditional mask, *tongzh*i manage to signal that it is the performance rather than the face which produces both identity and desire. The mask then has two functions. On the one hand, it fosters continuity in summoning the past to share the same space with the present, while, on the other, it creates a platform for possible future change. The ghosts of Snow Flower and Lily, played by the same actresses that represent Sophia and Nina, act as traditional masks for the modern Chinese Americans in the present. However, Sophia and Nina are the ones who, in their nineteenth century masks, look into a future in which they will come. In this way, masks stabilize ethnic tradition while at the same time destabilizing gender identity. *Tongzhi* identity challenges not only the notion of a binary gender system, but also the subjugation of women to heterosexuality as the only kind of love relationship.

32 Alice Wu's film is an example of how we should be able to reconcile a respect for the old minstrel masks of the past with laughter at the masks society wants us to wear in the present. It promotes a more lighthearted approach towards masks in preference to an overly serious attitude embracing a belief that they give us a fixed identity to which we must conform. Upon becoming a doctor, Wil adopts a mask that she cannot remove and ends up a divided self, one that hurts her beloved and destroys her own happiness. Gender reality, says Butler, "is created through sustained social performances" (180), which means it involves the repetition of acts through which we create ourselves with the implication that we can remake ourselves at any time in any way. We might thus conclude that both Eastern and Western theatrical geniuses agree on the principle that the world is a stage and that the human face has been wearing masks and make up since the beginning of times. After all, humans are the only

[6] This is the medical term for homosexual, which is appropriated like the word negro by African-Americans to overcome its negative connotation.

animals capable of self-reflection that think about themselves as another in order to variously entertain and scare themselves with their own ideas.

33 The idea that reason unmasks the true unchangeable essence of everything is now being overcome. Masks have always been empowering objects in ancient civilizations. Masks represented the spirits of the ancestors who were worshiped as guides that interacted with the living. Says Yang Liu, to put on a mask "representing a mythological figure or spiritual force is to become that figure or force. A magico-religious transformation is brought about by wearing a mask" (37). This helps us understand the masking of *tongzhi* as a process of their becoming what they want to be and a demonstration that masks can be changed and are not fixed identities. Not even the past actions are able to define who they are in the present or future since people often repeat certain behaviors to please others, delivering performance they do not enjoy. In this spirit, the concepts of *mianzi* and *lian* are negotiated bi-culturally in both films, and the subjects acknowledge their freedom to perform any gender identity of their choice, providing they have the courage to do it.

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