

Victoria Mills

Dr. Su-I Chen

CHIN 4990

5 October 2024

### “Saving Face” Reaction Paper

“Saving Face” is a 2004 film written by Alice Wu set in Flushing, New York, that follows its protagonist, Wilhemina, also known as Wil, who is a Chinese American lesbian surgeon who is reluctant to go public with their sexual identity and secret relationship with her lover Vivian as it clashes with the cultural expectations placed upon her. In this film, we, as the audience, see several cultural and social aspects displayed through the characters’ actions, inactions, and interactions, thus allowing us to learn more about each individual’s ingrained principles. Generational differences in the film “Saving Face” emphasize social divisions prevalent within the culture of the Chinese American community by pointing out the disagreements between beliefs, values, and attitudes.

Starting with the generational differences between beliefs, a few significant examples are present in the film, especially among the first and second generations. One representation of a belief held by individuals of the second generation is the phrase quoted when talking about one of the women in the Chinese community of their neighborhood in Queens, where the group of women gossiping about her also live. The quote made by one of the women in their conversation is “嫁鸡随鸡, 嫁狗随狗,” which translates to “Marry a rooster, follow the rooster; Marry a dog, follow the dog” in English. In context, this quote means that a woman should stay with her

husband and not leave him after marriage, which is a very traditional Chinese belief since divorce is frowned upon in Chinese culture and all failures of marriage are the fault of the woman. Given the nature of this film, it is essential to note that a romantic relationship between two individuals of the same sex is not accepted in the Chinese culture traditionally and is seen as a mother's mistake since a child marring and carrying on a family name by giving birth to a son is imperative. A couple that consists of two members of the same gender would not be able to bear children. The choice made for this character communicates that members of this generation still have very traditional Chinese beliefs. These beliefs are deeply integrated into the second generation's belief systems by the first generation enough for them to bring up a quote like this in conversation with other members of their generation.

A representation of a belief held by those belonging to the first generation of Chinese immigrants in America is that enduring the suffering and sacrifice of leaving China and moving to America would give their children the opportunity to have a better life in a new country than in China. Historically, in 1946, an all-out civil war preceded by the on-and-off conflict between the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) and the Nationalist Party, or Kuomintang (KMT) since the 1920s, ensued. On October 1, 1949, Chinese Communist leader Mao Zedong declared the creation of the People's Republic of China (PRC), which ended the costly full-scale civil war (Foreign Service Institute). Given this historical context, the characters who were people of China at that time who later became the first generation of immigrants in this film lived through the war and made an effort to leave China for America in hopes of making way for more for their children than they could have under communist rule in China. When considering the interactions between the first-generation immigrants and those that belong to the generations after them, the traditional values and the impacts of living through a time of war are apparent. One interaction is

when Wilhelmina's grandfather is ashamed when he finds out that his daughter is pregnant out of wedlock and cares about how it will damage his reputation, causing him to lose face. In another interaction, Wilhelmina's grandmother comments on Wil's shoes and states that she had a pair just like the ones Wil was wearing during the revolution, emphasizing that she thinks the shoes are sturdy and practical, unlike Wil's mother's heels. When Wilhelmina's grandmother is in the hospital, she also says that there is no need for anyone to be worried since she has been healthy for so long and that the situation is nothing compared to war. These interactions communicate that the first generation of immigrants is still very traditional by valuing things like faces even after moving to America and that the period of the revolution they experienced impacted their way of thinking.

Lastly, A representation of the belief that the third generation of Chinese immigrants have in this film is saving face for their families. Third-generation immigrants face an internal conflict based on the traditional values of the older members of their families and the modern values they have formed themselves. The third generation's attitudes towards untraditional varieties of attraction and modern occupations are the opposite of the older generations in this film. One example is the context of the scene where Wilhelmina tells her friend Jay when he asks her why she doesn't just tell her mother about her sexuality. Wilhemina tells Jay that her mother already knows, but they do not talk about it; her mother only keeps setting her up with men. Wilhemina accepts that she is a lesbian, but her mother does not since it is seen as a failure on the mother's part, as if they were a bad parent when their child does not marry to have children of their own, as I mentioned before.

Another example is that Vivian has a passion for modern dance but decides to go to Paris to continue her ballet career to save face for her family. Vivian sees modern dance as a valid

profession and desires to pursue her dreams, but the other members of the older Chinese community around her disagree as they prefer ballet. Wilhemina and Vivian's relationship as lovers is the most significant example of this and the driving plot for the entire film. Both characters accept their feelings for each other, but Vivian is more willing to be open about them and wants to go public with their relationship. On the other hand, Wilhemina keeps their relationship behind closed doors for most of the film to help save some face for her family. Their love for each other did not come to fruition due to their initial desires to appease those around them.

In conclusion, the generational differences in the film "Saving Face" emphasize the social divisions prevalent within the culture of the Chinese American community. The film does this by pointing out the disagreements of beliefs, values, and attitudes between the older and younger generations through social and cultural examples. Through analysis and interpretation, I conclude that the older generations' traditional nature and the younger generation's modernity led to the stark divide between them.

### Works Cited

Foreign Service Institute, U.S. "The Chinese Revolution of 1949." *Office of the Historian*, U.S.

Department of State, 2024, [history.state.gov/milestones/1945-1952/chinese-rev](https://history.state.gov/milestones/1945-1952/chinese-rev).