“We Don’t Talk About This”:
Reticence, Cultural Identity, and Queerness in Alice Wu’s Saving Face and Kim Fu’s For Today I Am A Boy

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Abstract

This thesis outlines the ways in which reticent homophobia in diasporic Chinese families and communities contribute to the filial distress experienced by queer diasporic subjects. The analysis in this thesis can be located at the intersections of reticence, filial piety, and coercive mimeticism. This project was conceived with the intent to delineate reticence as defined by Ding Naifei and Liu Jen-peng in the context of queer Chinese diasporic identity. It argues that the power of reticence is not confined to its violence against expressions of queerness and non-heteronormative behaviour, but that it is an expression of power as social and linguistic aesthetic that paradoxically exerts itself as a form of powerlessness. Ultimately, this thesis is an attempt to use reticence as a critical lens through which to gain a deeper understanding of the “family’s structure of feeling” that erin Khuế Ninh imagines in analyses of the intergenerational conflict in immigrant families.
Lay Summary

It is often difficult for queer Chinese diasporic subjects to come out to their families because homosexuality is seen as a form of deviance, and such declaration is seen as a betrayal of “traditional family values” due to having been corrupted by “Western thought”. This type of inter-familial homophobia pits homosexuality against cultural authenticity, as result of which queer Chinese diaspora are forced to choose between being Chinese or being LGBTQ+. This binary of Chineseness and queerness is enforced by reticence, which is a mode of speech where the words that are spoken often do not align with their intended meaning, and that which reconfigures homophobia as silent tolerance. This thesis examines how reticence and the ideals of filial piety create inter-familial trauma that queer Chinese diaspora suffer at the hands of their own families and communities.
Preface

This thesis is original, unpublished, and the independent work by the author, Y. Xiang.
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Dedication

Dedicated to my parents,

whose continued reticence underscore the necessity of this project.
Chapter 1: Introduction

On May 24, 2017, the Constitutional Court Republic of China, Taiwan, struck down a Civil Code which decreed marriage to be only between a woman and a man (Horton). The Court ruled that because the existing provisions do not allow same-sex couples to create “permanent union…for the committed purpose of managing a life together,” it is therefore “in violation of both the people’s freedom of marriage…and the people’s right to equality as guaranteed by…the Constitution” (Press Release on the Same-Sex Marriage Case). Despite the recent ruling, advocates for queer rights have faced literal and figurative trials and tribulations for over a decade. As early as 2003, for instance, the executive branch of the Taiwanese government proposed legislation that would grant marriage to same-sex couples. This proposition was subsequently rejected in 2006.

In 2005, and at the height of earlier debates about same-sex marriage, Ding Naifei and Liu Jen-peng, Taiwanese academics who specialize in sexuality studies and Chinese literature respectively, published an article in which they argue that homophobia in culturally Chinese communities is reconfigured as “silent words and reticent words” and passes for “the most ‘traditional’ of virtues in modern ‘demographic’ guise” (30). Ding and Liu also argue that the “rhetoric and politics of tolerance of reticence” is “inextricably entangled with paternalist familial relations” (30). Writing around the same time, Timothy Hildebrandt argues that in the context of mainland China, “Confucian tradition can be examined as a proxy for religion”, where those who oppose same-sex marriage in China often cite Confucian ideology and its “traditional conceptions of family” as reason to reject state-sanctioned queer rights (1320). Ding and Liu’s work is grounded in the cultural geography of Taiwan and speaks to the ways in which reticence as the language of tolerance is used to police homosexuality, while Hildebrandt’s work
highlights arguments for and against same-sex marriage in mainland China. Despite the
difference in both geography and political climate, it is apparent that homophobic populations
described in both texts weaponize “Chinese cultural identity as derived from Confucian
tradition” as a way of suppressing queerness and resisting government-sanctions on queer rights.
This particular juxtaposition of “Chinese culture” against homosexuality turns Chinese cultural
identity and queer identity into binary terms, as result of which homosexuality is viewed as “a
western construct…[that] entered the Chinese cultural worlds along with western colonial
forces” (Ding and Liu 31). Following such logic, “homophobia and its more virulent or violent
manifestations” also become entirely Western and therefore colonial, and thus have no relation at
all to a “‘Chinese traditional cultural’ [sic] that emphasizes harmony and tolerance” (Ding and
Liu 31). The designation of homosexuality as “Western” conveniently erases the existence of
queer Chinese subjects, who as result, are made to choose between their cultural identity and
their queerness. That is, a queer Chinese subject must choose to be authentically Chinese or
queer, but not both.

Ding and Liu define reticence as an “indirect expression of subjective affect and mood…
[that comes] to acquire ethico-political weight” (34). Ding and Liu contemplate, among other
things, how reticence comes to be understood as Confucian ideals of filial and societal
obligation, and how its guise as silent tolerance obscures queer visibility by eliminating the need
for “coming out” altogether. Tracing its roots to Chinese literary tradition, Ding and Liu
historicize reticence as a mode of writing where “the real message tends to go beyond the actual
words of the text” (34). In other words, reticence is a mode of speech in which the meaning of
the message is actively obscured by the language through which it is conveyed. Reticent
communication cultivates difference by nature of its discretion; that is, the use of reticent speech
actively creates a social in-group whose power comes from the understanding and observance of its subtleties. As such, in the context of one’s interaction with both family and community, reticence becomes not only a means for self-preservation, but a tool for actively policing how others attend to socio-familial and personal-political relations. Reticence is paradoxical in that it is both non-confrontational and an assertion of power. The paradox here is not that power functions by preventing confrontations that would threaten its grasp, but rather that reticence, as a display of power, simultaneously disguises itself as tolerance and powerlessness. Put simply, the power of reticence comes precisely from its purported powerlessness.

Ding and Liu argue that white 20th century critics such as Robert Van Gulik, Charlotte Furth, and Michel Foucault have all authored orientalist texts that largely contribute to the false equivalencies between Chineseness, tolerance, and reticence. The conflation of the three places reticence on a moral and cultural pedestal as it simultaneously ignores the fact that reticent homophobia inherently and actively contributes to the marginalization of queer subjects in culturally Chinese communities. In these texts, nostalgic imaginings of the tolerance with which ancient Chinese societies treated deviant sexual acts are juxtaposed against the violent and outward expressions of homophobia in western worlds. Similar arguments that polarize East and West are produced by writers like Chinese critics like Chou Wah Shan and Pan Guangdan, who work and reside in Chinese-speaking societies. Writing on sexual practices throughout Chinese history, Pan (qtd. in Ding and Liu) notes that the Shang and Zhou dynasties had “tolerant and generous” attitudes towards homosexuals and homosexual practices. The use of “tolerant” and “generous” here demonstrates a nostalgia for an imagined acceptance of non-heteronormative sex acts throughout Chinese history that avoids addressing present-day homophobia by suggesting that the imagined tolerance “extends from the past into the present” (Ding and Liu
39). In other words, by ahistoricizing “Chinese traditional tolerance” through the invocation of its timelessness, the nostalgia for imagined tolerance not only obscures homophobia in contemporary Chinese societies but further refigures reticent homophobia as the generosity and tolerance that doubtfully existed in the first place.

Chou (qtd. in Ding and Liu) champions a similarly nostalgic narrative of Chinese ahistorical tolerance. On the premise that Chinese society has always been accepting of homosexuality, Chou questions whether there is need to make a scene by “coming out” in the same way that queer subjects do in the west. Ding and Liu describe the pressure on queer subjects to contently live inside a glass closet as a demand for “allegiance and debt-return” to one’s family (39). Erin Khuê Ninh details a similar dynamic in the intergenerational conflicts of fictional Asian immigrant families, where filial indebtedness forms the “circuits of power and subjectification running beneath the narratives, [which are] structural rather than inflictive violences” (3). Ninh’s work makes clear that reticence and demands for filial obligation are often effective tools in managing deviant behaviour in relationships of power, irrespective of sexuality. Put in context, then, queer diasporic subjects not only carry the weight of sexual deviance but also that of filial and cultural obligations, both of which are used to coerce them into maintaining a performance of heteronormativity without complaint.

This performance of cultural authenticity in the face of “western” corruption relies on the precarious polarization of East and West, and is often unsettled by negotiations of queerness. In the context of South Asian public cultures, Gayatri Gopinath writes that a framework of queer South Asian diaspora “provides a conceptual space from which to level a powerful critique at the discourses of purity and ‘tradition’ that undergird dominant nationalist and diasporic ideologies” (27). In other words, a negotiation of queerness in any cultural context has the potential to undo
the binaries upon which cultural nationalism and identity are constructed. Read in this light, queerness becomes a threat to larger narratives of national identity and cultural authenticity, where expressions of queerness must “continuously be guarded against with containment and preventive measures in the guise of appeasement” (Ding and Liu 32). Ironically, the very need to guard against infringement and retaliation marks the power of queerness in its negotiation with cultural authenticity.

Though Ding and Liu give a vague nod to other “Chinese speaking worlds” with regards to negotiations of queerness, their work is largely confined to the geographic and cultural context of Taiwan. How, then, might cultural identity and queerness be negotiated in a diasporic context, where “the West” might literally live next door? Rey Chow’s work on racialization and mimeticism is useful in thinking through negotiations of race and sexuality in the context of Chinese diasporic communities, where ethnic subjects are constantly under contradictory pressures to both assimilate and to maintain and perform their ethnic authenticity. In a predicament that she terms coercive mimeticism, Chow argues that the ethnic subject is required to become an imitation of what is stereotypically expected of them – they become complicit in “a process in which they are expected to objectify themselves in accordance with the already seen and…to authenticate the familiar imagings of them[selves] as ethnics” (107). In other words, under the pressure of the colonizing gaze, ethnic subjects are coerced into performing their cultural authenticity by mimicking preexisting stereotypes of their otherness that are constructed by and for the white colonizer. Chow further points out that while the demand for the performance of authenticity is often placed on ethnic subjects by institutionalized racism, the same attacks are “frequently issued by ethnics themselves against fellow ethnics…who are most like them in this fraught trajectory of coercive mimeticism” (124, emphasis in original). Put
differently, though coercive mimeticism is a direct result of interactions between the ethnic subject and the forces of colonialism, ethnic subjects themselves often perform their authenticity by marginalizing those among them who are perceived as not ethnic enough.

In consideration of the theoretical preoccupations discussed above, the analysis in this thesis can be located at the intersections of reticence, filial piety, and coercive mimeticism. In the chapters that follow, I discuss how homophobia informs Chinese diasporic identity under the guise of reticence, tolerance, and filial piety. I delineate how such homophobia manifests in Alice Wu’s film Saving Face (2004) and in Kim Fu’s novel For Today I Am A Boy (2014). The choice to write on popular texts that have not earned critical accolade is haphazardly deliberate. While often lacking in critical depth or self-awareness, Saving Face and For Today are popular by standards of their respective genres and, as such, by virtue of their popularity, provide a useful lens through which to consider how texts with female queer diasporic protagonists register with larger audiences. The issue of representation is also relevant to the selection process. Though many academics such as Helen Hok-Sze Leung, Jen-Hao Hsu, Malissa Phung, and Jeremy Tambling have produced convincing criticism on texts arguably rendered with more maturity – take, for example, Ang Lee’s The Wedding Banquet (1993), Wong Kar-wai’s Happy Together (1997), Larissa Lai’s When Fox is a Thousand (1996), or Chen Kaige’s Farewell My Concubine (1993) – the fact remains that there are few films and novels that centre the experience of queer subjects who are also Chinese diasporic women inextricably entangled within the web of filial piety.

Chapter one analyzes Saving Face and performs a reading of the dynamic intersections between cultural identity, patriarchal heteronormativity, queerness, and coercive mimeticism as they are portrayed in the film. In the first section, I borrow from Gayatri Gopinath’s theoretical
frameworks in Impossible Desires: Queer Diasporas and South Asian Public Cultures to critique the ways in which heteronormative cultural identity in Saving Face is used to police the bodies of queer women. The second section deals with queerness and coercive mimeticism, where, building on Rey Chow’s work, I argue that coercive mimeticism is used by diasporic communities to further oppress their queer and already marginalized subjects. In this section I highlight how diasporic communities in the film use reticent homophobia to keep those who are sexually deviant in the margins, while simultaneously using the heteronormative power of reticence to reinforce an existing patriarchal order. This chapter also addresses the violence of reticence as it is applied to anti-Black racism in the Chinese community, where the reticence that keeps queer subjects in the peripheries is used to perpetuate Blackness as deviance. Ding and Liu’s work focuses on the relationship between queerness and reticence. However, because reticence is, at its core, an assertion of power, it provides an important and nuanced lens through which to read the interracial and intergenerational dynamics between Ma, a first-generation Chinese immigrant, Wil, a second-generation queer Chinese American, and Wil’s Black friend Jay. Ultimately, this chapter strives to demonstrate the importance of reading reticence and Chineseness in a larger racial context to better understand its relationship to hetero-patriarchy and coercive mimeticism.

Building on erin Khuê Ninh’s discussion of filial distress in Asian American literature, chapter two thinks through how reticence intersects with race, gender, and sexuality in Kim Fu’s For Today I Am A Boy. Broadly speaking, this chapter is preoccupied with the following questions: How does reticence apply to the racialization experienced by fictional Chinese-Canadians? How does the novel’s patriarch internalize the systemic oppression he experiences as a racialized Chinese man in small town Ontario, and how does he in turn weaponize it against the
protagonist’s queerness/transness? In other words, how is the racialized trauma experienced by a first-generation diasporic subject transformed into homophobia and transphobia against queer second-generation children? Additionally, how does reticence work as punishment and parental discipline? Finally, this chapter is preoccupied with how reticence, as a mode of communication, not only manifests differently in Chinese languages and in English, but turns language itself into a form of reticence. The power of reticent homophobia lies in the way it nebulously “circulates in everyday practices along pathways that maintain the ‘normal order’ of persons and things as well as of actions and behaviour” (Ding and Liu 33), but often cannot be cleanly named. Ultimately, this thesis does not seek to propose a solution to the “problem” of reticence. Rather, it is an attempt to shed light on the ways in which reticent homophobia prevents queer diasporic subjects from embodying both their cultural and queer identities without the erasure of either.
Chapter 2: Queer Mask on a Straight Face: Race, Filial Piety, and the Coercion of Reticent Homophobia in Alice Wu’s Saving Face

2.1 Introduction and Preamble

_Saving Face_ (2004) explores narratives of cultural nationalism, patriarchal heteronormativity, and racism in a fictional Chinese diasporic community in Flushing, New York. Wil, the film’s protagonist, is a closeted lesbian who is also a talented facial reconstruction surgeon. At the insistence of her mother, Wil attends weekly social dance parties held in the Chinese community in Flushing, where Ma has been setting her up with male suitors ever since she found Wil in bed with a woman. At one of these dances, Wil meets Vivian, a New York City Ballet dancer. The two begin to date, but despite the increasing seriousness of the relationship, Wil is unable to publicly acknowledge her queer sexuality or her feelings for Vivian. Parallel to the developing romance between Wil and Vivian is Ma’s recent pregnancy despite her long-time widowhood. To punish her for her scandalous pregnancy, Waigong, Wil’s maternal grandfather, exiles Ma from the household and forbids her from returning until she finds and marries the child’s father. Ma moves in with Wil, and the mother-daughter roles are reversed as Wil goes to comical lengths to find her mother a husband. At the insistence of Vivian’s father, Wil breaks up with Vivian. Heart-broken, Wil comes out to Ma, who refuses to accept her daughter’s queerness. Wil then crashes Ma’s arranged marriage, and mother and daughter run away together via public transit. The film ends with a return to the Chinese dance party, where Wil and Vivian are seen dancing together, having been set up by their respective mothers.

According to film and cultural critic Helen Hok-Sze Leung, the two identifying attributes of new queer Chinese cinema are that it refuses to move towards the centre of the normative
gaze, and that it actively widens the margins which it occupies (519). In other words, rather than asking to be included in mainstream narrative depictions, new queer Chinese cinema instead demands a shift of focus to the peripheries. As a commercially produced romantic comedy about Chinese diaspora in Flushing, the queerness of *Saving Face* and its resistance to the normative gaze is undoubtedly different from that of new queer Chinese cinema as per Leung’s definitions. At first glance, *Saving Face* appears to make no effort to move away from the normative gaze; unlike the films Leung reads in her article, *Saving Face* seems too grateful for having a seat at the table and too eager to deliver as the model minority. However, though the film’s portrayal of queerness often lacks self-reflexivity, it unsettles the kinship structure of heterosexuality in subtle and reticent ways. *Saving Face* depicts the complex intersection between queerness, cultural identity, and race. Its resistance to normative reticence relies on a quiet subversion that re-weaponizes the same reticence that is often used to keep queer Chinese diasporic subjects in the margins, to carve out a space for queer diasporic representation.

This chapter reads the ways in which cultural identity, patriarchal heteronormativity, queerness, and coercive mimeticism intersect in Alice Wu’s *Saving Face* (2004). Borrowing from the work of Gayatri Gopinath, I critique the ways in which a hetero-patriarchal interpretation of cultural identity is used to police the bodies of queer women as it is depicted in the film. I argue that diasporic communities use coercive mimeticism as a means to maintain reticent homophobia, to further oppress queer and already marginalized subjects, and to simultaneously reinforce the existing patriarchal order that such reticence upholds. Finally, I argue that anti-Black racism in the film’s Chinese community is both strengthened and obscured by the violence of reticence, where the deferring power of reticence perpetuates the equivalence of blackness and deviance. At its core, reticence is an assertion of power, and as such, it provides
an important and nuanced lens through which to read the interracial and intergenerational negotiations between depictions of deviance and Chineseness.

2.2 Heteronormativity, Cultural Chineseness, and the Familial Relational Implications of Face

Hetero-patriarchy critically informs the cultural narrative of the Flushing Chinese community in *Saving Face*. The audience learns early on that Wil’s grandfather is the patriarchal backbone of his immediate family as well as the community. By his own telling, Waigong is a Humanities professor whose teachings about propriety are informed by ancient Chinese philosophy (00:19:00). Waigong’s speech at the dance party immediately makes clear both his stature in the community and how heteronormativity informs the community’s cultural Chineseness:

又到了一年中最美的秋天。望着那些五彩缤纷的树叶，使我想起十年树木百年树人这句老话。不可否认，西方的物质文明已经发展到了应有极致。然而，中国的孔孟之道，儒家的伦理道德观念，却是解救西方物质充裕而精神空虚的最佳良方。教育的基础首先是家庭教育，特别是母亲的教育, 来生对子女日后的成长起着关键性的作用。这其中身教有重于言教。在这里，我要向她致以最高的谢意。

It is once again autumn, the most beautiful season. Watching the colourful falling leaves, I am reminded of the idiom that it takes ten years to nurse a tree, yet a hundred years to nurse a person. Undeniably, Western material culture has grown into its upper limit. However, Chinese knowledge and Confucian philosophy are the antidote to rescuing Western culture from its current condition of material surplus and spiritual barrenness.
The foundation of education is family education, especially education from the mother, which is critical to children’s growth. Teaching by action is more important than teaching by words. Here, I dedicate to her [raises glass to Wil’s grandmother] my highest gratitude. (00:05:32 – 00:06:29; transcription and translation mine)

Waigong’s speech aligns Western culture with technological advancement and moral decay while it equates the moral and spiritual superiority of the East with familial values taught by women. This juxtaposition feminizes the East as it places the responsibility of cultural authenticity on the bodies of diasporic women. In the context of diasporic identity formation, the “chastity and sexual purity” of diasporic women are often “emblematic of not just the family’s reputation but also…of the purity of tradition and ethnic identity, a defense against the promiscuity of ‘American influences’” (Maira 49). Purity, in this context, signifies a cultural authenticity as determined by a woman’s perceived embodiment of ethnic tradition and resistance to the corruptions of western ideology. The framing of a woman’s role as the protector of cultural authenticity lends itself to a binary logic that is ultimately used to police the bodies of queer diasporic women: if only “chaste” and pure women can be proper ethnic women, then “unchaste” and “impure” women with deviant sexual desires, having been corrupted by the west, cannot also be authentic ethnic women. Further, as Zoila Clark points out, the “most unacceptable conduct for a woman is to refuse to marry and have children because these duties form part of her filial piety” (5). That is, for culturally Chinese subjects, participation in marriage and other aspects of heteronormative reproduction is a mandatory duty to one’s family. As a lesbian who has no interest in taking part in a heterosexually reproductive relationship, Wil’s homosexuality is a refusal to perform her filial obligations and an active disruption of the family line.
Significantly, the film first conveys Wil’s queerness in this scene through a juxtaposition of sight and sound. As Waigong’s speech meanders from Western corruptness to a woman’s filial duties, the sound of his voice is dimmed and blurred as the camera follows Wil’s gaze to Vivian, who is standing with her mother on the centre balcony (00:06:22). The change in volume mimics Wil’s focus as she quite literally turns her back on the heteronormative family in pursuit of queer romantic interest. The juxtaposition of sight and sound highlights Wil’s struggle with her queerness; as a closeted lesbian, while she wants to look at Vivian, to do so is to declare an abandonment of her filial duties. In contrast, Vivian and her mother’s position at the edge of the crowd reflect their peripheral status in the community. Vivian’s mother had been ostracized by the film’s Chinese community ever since she divorced her husband two decades prior (00:36:18). Indeed, as one of the gossiping Aunties declares between mouthfuls of food and insults hurled at her husband,

女人吗，就得嫁鸡随鸡嫁狗随狗。干嘛学人家老美，闹什么离婚啊。 

Women just have to accept their fate: marry a rooster, follow a rooster, marry a dog, follow a dog. Why be like the Americans, why mess with divorce? (00:08:05; translation mine)

Vivian’s parents’ divorce is interpreted as a betrayal of cultural authenticity and as the results of American corruption. As such, Vivian’s mother, and by extension, Vivian, are both figuratively and literally relegated to the liminal space at the peripheries of the community and in this scene. Unlike Wil, who is part of a close-knit family at the centre of the community, Vivian is free to come out without the burdens of filial obligation to the extended familial or community network.

In a reading of Chou Wah-shan’s *Post-Colonial Tongzhi*, Liu Jen-peng and Ding Naifei argue that like everyone else, queer Chinese subjects must “live out their lives inextricably
entangled within a network of primarily familial relational associations” that prevent them from declaring their queerness. As result, Chou laments that perhaps “only orphans can (afford to) come out” (31) in culturally Chinese communities. The close bond between Vivian and her mother in Saving Face suggests that it is not orphans who can afford to come out, but rather those who are not strictly bound by community and clan associations. Interestingly, Ma is only able to accept Wil’s queerness after falling out of favour with the Chinese community herself. The parallels between the mother-daughter pairings in the film suggests that to be accepting of deviance in another, one must be deviant; that is, the mothers’ acceptance of their children’s queerness come as result of personal suffering from social degradation. Though this premise of it-takes-one-to-know-one appeals to the audience’s pathos, it continues to align queerness with dysfunction while homogenizing the oppression experienced by queer diasporic subjects and their heteronormative counterparts. As such, by romanticizing and oversimplifying the ways in which mothers relate to their non-heteronormative children, the film perpetuates the same patriarchal logic which equates queerness with deviance that it attempts to critique.

The significance of face is represented both figuratively and literally in the film through the use of masks and shots that obscure characters’ faces. Within the first two minutes of the film, Wil is seen wearing a beauty mask and a surgical mask, while a panoramic shot of the subway train delivers her from one to the other. The opening scene is shot from above and shows Wil behind a white beauty mask as she leans against the sink with her arms spread along the counter’s edge, as if crucified. In the scene that follows, Wil is pictured behind a white surgical mask as she completes a facial reconstruction surgery. The unsubtle visual emphasis on Wil’s face behind white masks emerges as “a category of both economic and social capital that one might ‘put on’” (Metzger 226). However, beyond a relationship with whiteness, Wil’s visible
discomfort behind the beauty mask and her composure behind the surgical one more aptly demonstrates an unease with a performance of heteronormative femininity. Wil’s aversion to heteronormative femininity is a consistent vexation for Ma. When Wil shows up to the Chinese dance party wearing loose-fitting gender-neutral clothing and masculine shoes, Ma complains that “men’s clothing is in style again” and mutters to herself about “what others are going to think of [her]” (00:03:50). This scene reveals that the cause of Ma’s complaint is not Wil’s poor fashion sense, but rather Ma’s preoccupation with community judgement. Ma’s complaint is reflective of the demands of filial piety as articulated by Waigong, where her child’s deviance is ultimately her failure as a mother. As such, Wil’s abidance by heteronormative femininity critically informs Ma’s fulfillment of her filial duties as a mother. The connection between heteronormativity, social acceptance, and face is again highlighted when Ma discovers that Wil had not been using the masks Ma had given her (00:21:05). Wil’s negligence of Ma’s masks symbolizes a refusal to put on a heteronormative performance for Ma, and by extension, the community. The film’s emphasis on masks is a cheeky representation of Ma’s literal and figurative obsession with community judgement, which in turn reveals the influence of filial piety on social hierarchy.

2.3 The Virtuous Power of Mimeticism, or the Power of Virtuous Mimeticism

In The Protestant Ethnic and the Spirit of Capitalism, Rey Chow identifies three levels of mimeticism that shape the power dynamics between diasporic subjects and white oppressors, and that work in “overlapping, over determined manner at all times” (104). On the first level, the ethnic subject is doomed to imperfectly imitate the white man as original without ever being able to reproduce a convincing copy (104). On the second level, where “the colonized is now seen in terms of a desire to be white, which exists concurrently with the shame accompanying the
inferior position to which she has been socially assigned”, rather than “simply lacking” (Chow 105, emphasis in original). Finally, Chow identifies coercive mimeticism, which she uses to describe the ways in which diasporic subjects become an imitation of what is stereotypically expected of them as ethnic subjects. Additionally, Chow points out that while ethnicity is used by whiteness as a means of attacking the other and rendering it inauthentic, the same attacks are often used by ethnic subjects as a way of performing their cultural authenticity through the further marginalization of other ethnic subjects (124). In other words, while coercive mimeticism is a direct result of interactions between the ethnic subject and the forces of colonialism, ethnic subjects often perform their own authenticity by further ostracizing those among them who are “not ethnic enough”.

This performance of authenticity through the marginalization of others is demonstrated in the film when members of the Chinese community find out about Ma’s pregnancy. After Ma’s pregnancy is revealed to the audience through a phone call between Wil and her grandmother, the scene immediately cuts from Wil’s well-lit apartment to a dark and quiet Chinese restaurant where, around a table, members of the Chinese community revel in Ma’s scandal. The jarring transition from the warmth and privacy of Wil’s apartment to the darkened public space of the restaurant mimics the way the scandal traverses the private sphere and the public. In the restaurant scene, the camera is placed directly on the dining table, giving the audience the illusion of having to look up at the characters from below as they speak. In her reading of the film, Juliette Ledru helpfully describes the scene as one where “[the] Chinese ‘biddies’\(^1\) are gathered over dinner, mixing culinary appreciations with comments upon Ma’s predicament”

\(^1\) Vivian uses this term to describe the gossiping Chinese ladies in the film.
It’s better than the soaps!”, one auntie exclaims; “but juicier and more exciting!”, chimes in another; “And more intrigue!”; “more eel!”, says an uncle (00:17:19). Ledru remarks that this mix of comments turns those around the table into a “revisited version of the Greek chorus” (101). Though Ledru’s observation speaks to the scene’s theatricality, the focal point here is the conflation of gossip and food. The way that news of Ma’s pregnancy is served up alongside dinner is particularly significant as a storytelling device because it demonstrates how the power dynamic in the community is determined by the fluidity of one’s adherence to, and transgressions of propriety.

The communal feast on Ma’s transgression simultaneously designates Ma as the outsider and reinforces the bond between the consumers who share both the gossip and the food on the table. Alvin Ka Hin Wong points out that the “married women and respectable gentlemen’s denigrations of [Ma] demonstrates 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” (318). Wong’s reading critically observes how members of the diasporic community use coercive mimeticism to secure their own authenticity and respectability within the community by further alienating Ma, one of the community’s already-marginalized members. The gossip of Ma’s transgression is offered up alongside the food on the table to symbolize the parallel dynamics between those who judge and those who are judged, and the dynamics between those who eat and that which is eaten. As such, the characters around the table reinforce their own bonds through a shared sense of virtuousness as they ostracize Ma for her transgressions. The scene then cuts to Ma sitting on the couch in Waigong’s house as he reprimands his daughter for her immodesty and lack of filial piety. The juxtaposition of the two scenes “exposes the vexing relationship between the individual and
community within the Chinese diaspora” (Wong 318). They also highlight the different ways in which Ma is exiled from her community. Unlike those sitting together around the dining table who each have a bowl full of food, Ma sits alone on the couch with nothing in front of her but an empty decorative tray on top of an otherwise empty coffee table (00:17:38). The scene is shot from an adjacent room and through half open double doors in a way that frames Ma in the narrow space between them, thus giving the scene a further sense of entrapment and isolation. The barrenness of the coffee table reiterates Ma’s loss of reputation and power within the community and emphasizes the ambiguous but punishing difference between those who are part of the community and those who are not as result of coercive mimeticism.

The film’s depiction of the Chinese diasporic community in Flushing demonstrates how the power that comes with one’s adherence to filial piety must constantly be exercised through the active marginalization of those that do not. It also demonstrates how one’s power in the community is always relational to that of others, which means that one’s status in the community must be under constant management, negotiation, and self-surveillance. Ding Naifei and Liu Jen-peng theorize reticence as an “ever-refigured socio-familial force and power” (33), where the reimagination of reticence as dynamic socio-familial power beyond silent tolerance provides an opening into the power dynamics that actively inform reticence and its effects on social cohesion. Ma’s banishment from the Flushing community and her following disownment of Wil because of her queerness demonstrates how adherence to filial codes, like one’s adherence to reticent conduct, directly influences one’s position in a community. It equally demonstrates how such power is maintained through the active denigration and rejection of those who do not hold the power of such judgement.
2.4 Communicating Reticence using Reticent Communication

While reticence is often presented and translated as silent tolerance, in practice it is achieved through deferment and ambiguous communication. Chou Wah-shan (qtd. in Ding and Liu) observes that in Hong Kong, bosses will be understanding enough of reticence to “fire the [gay] employee for [“unsatisfactory work”, so] as to ‘keep the latter’s homosexuality invisible’”. This method of deferment demonstrates how “a threatened homophobic firing is forestalled by way of a preventive dismissal that then becomes…an act of generous, gentle tolerance on the part of the employer” (Ding and Liu 48). In Chou’s example, reticence is achieved by deferring any discussion of homosexuality so that while it is “understood” by all parties involved, it is never openly acknowledged by those in power. In other words, reticence establishes an order of acceptable topics of discussion, where some things are less unspeakable than others. The same reticent deferment that reinforces the hierarchy of unspeakableness is practiced in diasporic familial contexts in Wu’s film:

Jay: Seriously, why don’t you just tell her?

Wil: She knows.

Jay: She does?

Wil: She dropped by my apartment a couple of 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: And she kept setting you up with guys.

Wil: That’s when it started. (00:57:21 – 00:57:50)
This exchange between Wil and Jay demonstrates that Ma’s matchmaking for Wil with men is a direct result of the discovery of her queerness. That is, Ma defers speaking about Wil’s sexual deviance by (passive) aggressively setting her up with men: in this instance, setting up heteronormative dates is more actionable than speaking about homosexuality. Interestingly, then, actions rather than words become another tool of reticence, where Ma does everything within her power to avoid *speaking* about Wil’s deviance. As such, though Ma does not openly attack Wil because of her queerness, the active matchmaking becomes a form of reticent homophobia.

The same methods of deferment that Ma uses offensively against Wil is used defensively when Wil badgers her about the identity of her lover. The following conversation occurs as Ma rummages through Wil’s fridge:

**Ma:** 没有蚝油啊?

Is there no oyster sauce?

**Wil:** 我不吃蚝油。

I don’t eat oyster sauce.

**Ma:** 你什么时候开始喝啤酒了?

When did you start drinking beer?

**Wil:** Ma, can we just…I need to…[takes beer away from Ma and places back in the fridge]

Who is the um, the um [gestures around her abdomen]? How long do you plan on –

**Ma:** 你用不到的动就不要留在那儿。

If you don’t have use for something, then don’t keep it around.
Wil:  你是不是准备留下那个…? [folds her hands over her abdomen]

Do you plan on keeping the…?

Ma:  [lifts a moldy gourd on a plate from the fridge shelf, visibly flustered]

这个是什么东西，这个?

This – what is this? (00:20:30 – 00:21:02)

Though the scene is accompanied by cheery, playful music, the reticence at play here is tense and subtly complex. Instead of answering Wil’s questions, Ma redirects the conversation by chastising Wil’s living habits and the contents of her fridge. Comically executed, Ma’s answers – or lack thereof – in response to Wil’s questions demonstrates both deferment and an attempt to re-negotiate her moral superiority through the virtue signaling of cleanliness. Significantly, when asked about the identity of the father of her child, Ma instead criticizes Wil for keeping expired food in the fridge. This allows Ma to both defensively maintain reticence about her pregnancy and to offensively restore her moral superiority over Wil through criticism of Wil’s sloppiness. As such, this subtle interaction between Ma and Wil demonstrates how reticence is achieved through deferment, and that such reticence can be used both offensively and defensively. Read thus, this subtle scene demonstrates how reticence is often used in negotiations of power.

The dialogue in Ma’s Chinese soap operas often fill the reticent gaps of what is left unsaid between Ma and Wil; they tell a parallel version of the events in Wil’s life and humorously draw attention to the way that reticence stems communications between mother and daughter. As she first considers breaking up with Vivian so the latter can go to Paris, Wil comes home during a scene in the drama where the love interest leaves for another country. “You came back just in time,” says Ma, “[the character] is watching her lover take off for America” (01:09:07, translation mine). The humour of the scene comes from dramatic irony, where Ma’s
obliviousness to having narrated Wil’s life relieves the otherwise melancholic atmosphere and simultaneously draws attention to the lack of communication between her and her daughter. Dramatic irony and framed narration through dialogue from the TV drama are similarly used when Wil comes out to Ma:

TV: 谁知道是觉得她心里压力真大—
Nobody knows how much pressure she really feels in her heart—

Will: 妈—
Ma—

Ma: 傻孩子，他跟你天生一对啊。
Silly child, you two are meant to be together.

TV: 小红，我对不起你—
[character’s name], I’m sorry—

Wil: 妈，我有话跟你说。
Ma, I have to talk to you.

Ma: 这集马上就要完了。
This episode is almost over.

Wil: 我真的有话要说。
I really need to talk to you.

TV: 妈！开门呐!
Mother! Please open the door!

Wil: 妈，我爱你。我也是 gay。
Ma, I love you. I’m also gay.
Ma: 怎么可以一口气说这两件事？一面说你爱我，一面这样伤我的心。我不是个坏母亲。我的女儿不可能是 gay。

How can you say these two things in one breath? You tell me you love me, yet you break my heart. I’m not a bad mother. My daughter can’t possibly be gay.

Wil: 那我可能不该是你女儿。

Then maybe I shouldn’t be your daughter. (01:12:07-01:12:45)

In this scene, the TV character’s unanswered plea for her mother to open the door both puns on Wil’s “coming out” of the closet and foreshadows Ma’s resolute rejection of Wil’s confession. When Wil attempts to open the conversation on her queerness, Ma defers conversation yet again, this time temporally, by citing the minutes left in the drama’s narrative time. This time, however, Wil refuses to follow the social cues Ma lays out through reticent deferment, which forces them both to speak directly about Wil’s queerness.

Significantly, Wil begins in Mandarin but names her homosexuality in English. Her code-switching in this scene speaks to the limitations of language and her unwillingness to perform a translation of her queerness; it also further cements the mutual exclusiveness between her queerness and Chineseness, which in turn broaches reticence and breaks mimeticism. Wil’s choice to use “gay” modifies ways of understanding homosexuality by further perpetuating the mutual exclusiveness between her Chineseness and her queerness. As such, English becomes the only way to understand and express queerness and signifies Wil’s refusal to conform to the expectations of heteronormativity which she associates with Chineseness. The switch further marks a break in mimeticism, where Wil refuses to play at a straight version of herself. In terms of how the film interacts with its audience, Wil’s word choice also has the effect of a “universal”
appeal. In “Always in Translation: Trans Cinema Across Languages”, Helen Leung remarks that English, as the dominant and imperialist language, becomes “the ‘correct’ or nonoffensive way to understand and express gender nonconformity”, which creates “a hierarchy of experiences and subjectivities” (434-435). For Leung, the use of English in ethnicized queer contexts is a way of whitewashing queer ethnicity. However, the film’s use of English here signifies a break in reticence and is meant to be inherently incorrect and offensive. That is, Wil’s use of English in expressing her queerness is contrasted against the correct and inoffensive way to speak about queerness in the context of the film’s diasporic community, which is to not speak at all.

The way the film’s dialogue pits English against Mandarin in this critical moment seems to reinstate the binary between enlightened Western superiority and backwards Chinese repression and familial oppression. This juxtaposition is made even more obvious when the audience considers that at the end of their conversation, Wil is literally made to choose between filial piety and her homosexuality. Ma’s insistence that good mothers cannot possibly produce queer children also reveals her own investment in the rhetoric of cultural authenticity and filial obligation, where children’s deviance is a direct result of the mother’s inadequate home education. In its replication of the binary that English is the language of queerness and Chinese that of reticence, Saving Face demonstrates the complexities of understanding sexuality through a racialized cultural lens. That is, Wu puts the audience in the shoes of a protagonist who is stuck between being queer and being Chinese, and thus exposes the reticent cultural nationalist forces that transform the identity of queer Chinese diaspora into a paradox.

2.5 Reticence and Race

In a New York Times article about the making of Saving Face, Alice Wu revealed that she had refused to cast a white actor for the role of Vivian Shing, despite the producers’ insistence
that doing so would allow them to “cast a star” (Leibowitz 2005). Wu firmly stood behind her reasoning that “the moment you make the love interest white, [the film] becomes about race” (Leibowitz 2005). But even though the producers ultimately stuck with Wu’s decision to cast Lynn Chen, a little known Chinese American actor, the film was never not about race. Indeed, the non-Chinese character with the biggest role in Saving Face is Wil’s neighbour and best friend Jay, whose dark skin and stereotypical love of fried chicken is often the butt of racially charged jokes. Susan Gubar writes that constructions of whiteness “evolved through a series of oppositional identities predicated on black Others… [who operate] as a generic commodity constructed by the white imagination for white people” (xv). The idea of Blackness as commodity acutely speaks to the necessity of othering and the production of others in the creation of capital. It also serves as direct commentary on the tremendous wealth generated by slave labour throughout the history of American capitalism. Though Gubar’s observations are poignant, her work leaves little room for the relationship between East Asian and Black diaspora as it is mediated by whiteness. If the psychological evolution of whiteness is predicated on the oppositional identities of Black Others, how does Blackness influence the psychological evolution of Chinese diaspora? Claire Jean Kim points out that Asian Americans are often sandwiched between Black and White as “an intermediate group on America’s bipolar racial scale” (106). Kim also describes how the relative valorization of Asianness produces the post-World War II model minority myth, which pits Asian and Black populations against each other and in turn, upholds white supremacy (123). How, then, does race and reticence about race change the interactions between Wil, Ma, and Jay in Saving Face? More importantly, what does the film’s treatment of race say about the function of Blackness in the formation of Chinese American identity?
Writing on Asian American communities’ appropriation of Black culture, Nia Tucker argues that Blackness is often commodified and used as Asian counterculture, which “allows [non-Black people of colour, specifically Asians] to defy whatever constrictions [they] feel [is imposed] by [their] own personal ethnic identity” (Tucker). In Saving Face, the audience knows nothing about Jay, besides his preference for soy sauce, fried chicken, and the occasional beauty facial in the stairwell. Indeed, Jay exists solely to console Wil on her relationships with Ma and Vivian. As such, beyond appropriation, Blackness also serves as a blank (though coloured) screen to stage questions about Chinese American identity in relation to queerness and filial piety. Thus, while Asians occupy the space between Blackness and Whiteness in the American social fabric, when it comes to their own perceptions of Blackness, Asian Americans repeat the same problematic representations of Blackness. In other words, Asian Americans appropriate Black culture as a form of rebellion against the racial and social expectations that they themselves face as model minority, a process through which Black culture is configured as the inappropriate and obscene.2

Asian American diaspora and literature have a long history of appropriating Black culture. For instance, Frank Chin, one of the more important figures in the formation of mid-20th century Asian American literary identity, has produced pivotal texts that simultaneously benefit from models of Black nationalism and rely on stereotypes of Black hypermasculinity. One of the

2 A similar appropriation of black culture by diasporic Asian subjects is seen in Red Doors (2005), another popular film that portrays queer Chinese diaspora, directed and produced by Georgia Lee. In the film, Katie, the rebellious youngest daughter of the Wong household, is always seen listening to hip-hop. Katie is also passionate about being a part of her school’s breakdancing crew. Though Katie is immersed in Black culture via music and dance, the film does not feature a single speaking black character. Further, the juxtaposition of hip-hop soundtracks against the film’s depiction of Katie’s rebellious acts, such as putting a dead rat in her neighbour’s mailbox, makes a clear connection between blackness and deviance.
lamentations that frequents Chin’s writings concerns “the absence in U.S. racial discourse of an image of the Asian man that projects a threatening masculinity comparable to that projected by stereotypical depictions of black, red, or brown men” (Kim 129-130). For Chin, the emulation of a threatening stereotypical Black masculinity is the only way to escape the feminizing stereotype of East Asian men as weak, docile, and “completely devoid of manhood” (Chin, “Racist Love”). The perpetuation of the stereotype of Black men as physically and sexually threatening is a form of appropriation that reinforces the hierarchical inter-race social order as it simultaneously erases Blackness from representation.

In Saving Face, Wu leverages stereotypical Black food to negate the expectations of heteronormativity and Chineseness that are placed on Wil by Ma and the Chinese community. When Wil arrives late to the dance party, Ma complains about her tardiness and laments that “all the crab is gone”; Wil responds with, “Okay, great! Let’s get KFC” (00:03:40), as she attempts to leave the dance hall. Knowing that Ma is trying to set her up with yet another man, fried chicken represents for Wil the possibility of escape from heteronormativity. What is more, coupled with her attempt to literally distance herself from prescribed Chineseness, Wil’s snarky retort leverages stereotypically Black food as rebellion against her mother’s matchmaking, and by extension, heteronormative expectations. What would have been an offhand comment is thematized when, as the film progresses and as Ma becomes more comfortable with Jay, the three are seen eating take-out fried chicken in front of the TV (01:09:54). This food scene gestures back to an earlier one where, recently banished from her parents’ home, Ma makes traditional Chinese dishes, such as pea shoots and stinky tofu, in Wil’s otherwise barren kitchen. The difference between the two scenes around food demonstrates Ma’s indoctrination into mainstream American culture through its consumption.
Ma’s assimilation into “Americanness”, however, is literally and figuratively mediated by Black stereotypes: panning left, the camera first shows Jay eating fried chicken with both hands, then shows Ma doing the same. Psyche A. Williams-Forson points out that the significance of fried chicken in African American history is complex, and the history of fried chicken as stereotypical “Black food” even more so. She notes that while African American women were able to make a living by becoming fried chicken entrepreneurs after Emancipation (William-Forson 35), “Colonel” Harland Sanders was able to build his Kentucky Fried Chicken empire by capitalizing on the nostalgia for the history of slavery and plantations of the American south (5). Williams-Forson also notes that the stereotypes about Blackness and fried chicken still have a deep-rooted impact on African-Americans today, some of who refuse to eat fried chicken in public in fear of reproducing a stereotype of Blackness (222). With all of this in mind, then, the film’s choice to use fried chicken to symbolize Ma’s assimilation, however well-intended, uses Blackness and Black stereotypes as a cheap punchline. It is unclear whether Wu as writer and director had thought through the complex implications of using an image of a Black person eating fried chicken in a comical context. In either case, however, the film’s lack of self-awareness in its perpetuation of Black stereotypes recapitulates the very anti-Black racism in Chinese communities that it depicts.

Like queerness, racism and colorism are not openly addressed or criticized in Saving Face but are rather met with reticence. The first time Ma learns Jay is coming over for dinner, she immediately proceeds to take out disposable plates from the cupboard. The conversation between mother and daughter follows thus:

Wil: Ma, you can’t give him a paper plate.

Ma: 这样比较卫生，吃了就扔。
It’s more hygienic this way, just toss it after.

Wil: It’s rude [emphasis in original].

Ma: 好了，我给他双份。

Fine, I’ll give him two servings. (00:23:06; translation mine)

The scene then cuts to Wil and Ma already eating as Jay walks into the living room; his place at the table is already set up with the same dinnerware as the women. Ma then makes the assumption that Jay’s love of soy sauce makes him Black:

Ma: 你的朋友又黑又吵，还猛吃酱油。

Your friend is dark and loud and eats too much soy sauce.

Wil: Americans 就爱吃酱油。

Americans like soy sauce.

Ma: 我得少吃点儿，免得把我 baby 染黑了。

I should eat less so I don’t stain my baby black.

Wil: Ma, that’s ridiculous [emphasis in original].

Ma: 你也少吃点儿。脸上会长斑。他反正来不及了。

You should eat less too; you’ll grow spots on your face. It’s too late for him anyway. (00:24:14)

In the transcription above, Wil does not call out Ma’s blatantly racist comments, choosing rather to focus on her lack of decorum and unscientific assumptions. Instead, her exaggerated enunciation of “rude” and “ridiculous” speak to what Wil cannot: both are words that begin with the same sound as “racist” but fall short in their ability to address the issue at hand.
What is intriguing is that Wil does not address Ma’s racist and colorist assumptions when the latter equates Jay’s dark skin to his love of soy sauce, but instead defers to Jay’s Americanness to justify his preference. It is also intriguing that for Ma, the Black stereotypes to which she grows accustomed need to be justified as American to be deemed acceptable, which further demonstrates Ma’s perception of Blackness as deviance. In this negotiation about Black racial identity between two ethnically Chinese characters, Jay is allowed to be a Black man or an American, but not both: Ma’s illogical connection between Jay’s dark skin and soy sauce demonstrates that she only sees him as a Black man, while in an attempt to counter Ma’s views, Wil reticently defers solely to Jay’s Americanness to justify his preferences and actions. While Ma’s perception of Jay is clearly topical, Wil’s refusal to address Ma’s racism is more complex. By insisting on Jay’s Americanness without acknowledging his Blackness, Wil erases the possibility for negotiations of racial perceptions in this critical scene. Instead, Wil’s response to Ma’s racist comments is an affirmation that Jay’s Americanness and Blackness are mutually exclusive, that rather than being recognized as Black and American, he must choose one or the other.

Interestingly, the negotiation between Ma and Wil on whether to give Jay proper dinnerware takes place off screen; all that the audience is privy to is Wil’s reticence and visible discomfort with her mother’s racist statements, first in the kitchen, then around the dinner table where all three eat with real plates. Rather than showing the audience how Wil convinces Ma to give Jay proper dinnerware, the film leaves the audience to read between the scenes as to how that conversation might have taken place. In this context, then, reticence is found in Wil’s indirect response to Ma’s racist comments, but it is also embedded in the formal and stylistic choices of the film’s narrative as a whole. That is, the process by which Wil coerces Ma into
withholding her racist thoughts and actions is in turn withheld from the audience. This suggests Wil’s reticence towards race and racism is not unique just to Wu’s story world, but that Wu as writer and director is equally reluctant in identifying and addressing anti-Black racism in the film’s Chinese community. Further, this double withholding demonstrates that reticence does not only operate as a mode of communication but as an aesthetic power.

Wu’s film is not invested in avoiding depictions of racial tension; rather, it avoids the exploration of these tensions. Read in this light, then, Wu’s comment on the film’s relationship with race only works between narrow blinders. If what it takes to make the film “about race” is a white love interest (Leibowitz 2005), then Wu’s logic implies that the only racialized relationship the film considers as such is one between Chineseness and whiteness. In other words, both Wil’s reticence about naming anti-Black racism as protagonist and Wu’s reticence as director contribute to a deracialization of Blackness. Further, Wu’s depictions of racialized interactions in the film replicates a colonizing hierarchy that is predicated on skin colour in proximity to whiteness. Read in conjunction with her claims in the New York Times, it is clear that for Wu, the film only becomes about race when the Chinese American characters themselves are racialized, but not when the same characters racialize darker-skinned others.

To give credit where it is due, Wu is at least somewhat aware of the dynamics between reticence, language, and race. When she is asked about the racialized interactions between Ma and Jay, Wu is quoted in an AfterEllen interview as saying, “[Ma is] going to say whatever she wants. What’s great is that they’re speaking in this other language so she feels like she can. Why I think so many people think it’s funny and real is because they’ve experienced it in their lives, they just don’t usually talk about it” (Wu and Chen). Wu’s comments here are important not only because it recognizes the lack of conversation around race and colorism in diasporic Chinese
communities, but because it further highlights the way in which language itself becomes a form of reticence. For Ding and Liu, reticence deploys its force as “rhetoric, narrative…and aesthetic ideal, as well as model behaviour and as a mode of speech” (33). In the bilingual setting of Wu’s Flushing, reticence is not only deployed as mode of speech, but as language itself, where language both contains reticence and is that which is contained. That is, while Ma’s racism is contained in Mandarin, Wil’s unwillingness in naming Ma’s racism is the reticent mode of speech and that which contains. As such, reticence is not only deployed as aesthetic ideal, but becomes its own form of narrative aesthetic.

Wu’s depiction of the relationship between language and reticence in the film is clever, but it fails to utilize this nuanced observation to produce meaningful criticism. In her deferment of meaningful discussions with regards to anti-Black racism in the Chinese community depicted in the film, Wu ironically employs the same reticent power that the film attempts to subvert. By erasing Jay’s Blackness through the deferment to his Americanness, Wil, and by extension the film, reproduces the same logic that makes it impossible to imagine the “queer female diasporic subject within dominant diasporic and nationalist logics” (Gopinath 16) in a racialized context. That is, Wil’s insistence on Jay’s Americanness is simultaneously an erasure of his Blackness, which is a reproduction of the erasure of her own queerness at the cost of her Chineseness. Additionally, the film’s unwillingness to unpack anti-Blackness racism in Chinese diasporic communities despite using it as comedic relief further aligns Blackness with deviance.

The paradox of reticence is that it is a display of power that simultaneously disguises itself as tolerance and powerlessness. When reconfigured as silent tolerance, reticence becomes a powerful form of homophobia that keeps queer subjects invisible by refusing to speak about them. Similarly, Wil’s subtle erasure of Jay’s Blackness is a form of racism that easily escapes
detection. When juxtaposed against Ma’s overt racism, Wil’s comments appear, and are meant to appear, to be a beacon of multicultural tolerance. However, by reducing Blackness to a punchline and by maintaining reticence over anti-Black racism in the Chinese community, *Saving Face* perpetuates and employs the same silencing logic that it struggles against for queer representation.

The film’s inability to recognize its own racializing gaze and reinforcement of racial stereotypes as such suggests that there is a limit to the film’s self-reflexivity, perhaps due to its constraints as a romantic comedy. After all, while the critic may be invested in the film’s responsible and complex representation of and as queer diaspora, the film’s comedic register may be invested in something else. Though any critical conversations about racism in the film either take place off screen or are obscured by reticence, perhaps there needs to be more credit given to the fact that the film breaks reticence by including depictions of anti-Black racism in the Chinese community at all, however severe its lack of self-awareness. The film occupies a strange place; it vaguely gestures towards the very same reticent rhetoric of anti-Black racism that its narrative style embodies and deploys. The film’s reticence and depictions of reticence around race and racism, then, is emblematic of the larger problem of silence around race in East Asian diasporic communities, and its depictions of anti-Black racism forces the audience to think beyond the reach and magnitude of reticence and what else it might have swept under its rug.

### 2.6 Conclusion

Though *Saving Face* leaves much to be desired in its critique of cultural identity, hetero-patriarchy, coercive mimeticism, and the violence of reticence as it is applied to anti-Black racism in the Chinese community, it at least gives queer viewers a sense of closure; neither Wil nor Vivian die a terrible death, and the film’s final scene suggests a happy ending where Wil and
Vivian are in a stable long-term relationship with blessings from both of their families. When the two meet again at another social dance party three months after Vivian moves to Paris, Wil asks Vivian for a dance in the crowded ballroom (01:28:50). When homophobic members of the community leave the party having seen the reunited couple, Wil and Vivian turn to each other and simultaneously speak the film’s last line: “fuck ’em” (01:30:40). This scene is significant because it is Wil’s second chance at being with Vivian, but also because it is her second attempt at accepting both her Chineseness and her homosexuality. Most importantly, this scene allows Wil to directly break reticence by queering a Chinese social space created for and by hetero-patriarchy.

For Leung, the subversiveness of new queer Chinese cinema lies both in its refusal to move toward the centre of the normative gaze, as well as its demand for a shift of focus to the margins. *Saving Face* resists conforming to normative reticence by subverting and re-weaponizing the same reticence that erases the existence of queer Chinese diasporic subjects, and by using it to carve out a space for queer diasporic representation. In the final scene, Wil moves across the room towards Vivian, who stands at the edge of the dance floor. Rather than moving back towards the centre of the room, the two begin dancing on the edge of the dance floor, between the buffet tables near the wall, and before the next song begins. Wil’s movement across the room is significant; in a reversal of the first time she makes eye contact with Vivian, Wil moves away from the centre, and decisively joins Vivian in the periphery. In the final aerial shot, Wil and Vivian become surrounded by other dancing couples, and effectively become the new centre of the room. Thus, the triumph of *Saving Face* is not a loud demand for focalization on homosexuality, but rather a quiet shift in perspective that is done with few words.
Chapter 3: One Day I’ll Grow Up, I’ll Be Capitalized Upon: Reticent Violence, Filial Distress, and the Ethnicization of Labour in *For Today I Am A Boy*

3.1 Introduction

Kim Fu’s 2004 novel, *For Today I Am A Boy*, portrays a reticent form of racialized homophobic violence that is difficult to name. Fu’s text narrates the lives of the Huangs, the only Chinese family in small town Ontario. The novel spans almost 40 years and follows four siblings from childhood in the 1980s to present day, as they each experience racialized and gendered trauma. Peter Huang is the only son of the four siblings and has known since she was a child that she did not want to be a boy. The Huang family patriarch is an immigrant from China. He has planned out the lives of his four children, who “expressed no resistance”: Adele is to be an “invisible doctor”, Helen an “invisible lawyer”, Bonnie to simply “be a little girl forever”, and Peter “a boy” (Fu 45). To create a perfectly assimilated Canadian family untainted by otherness, Father forbids Mother from speaking to the children in Cantonese and from cooking anything other than bland foods of European origin. Much of the violence Father asserts on his family is intertwined with his desire to fit into, and to reflect his own perception of, normative Canadian society that is fundamentally define by whiteness.

*For Today* is a complex and ambitious novel that attempts to depict anxieties around racial and cultural formation as a result of immigration and the alienation and discrimination experienced by diasporic subjects. The text also grapples with the formation and representation of gendered and sexualized identities; in particular, how they are influenced by the inherent power structures of race as dictated by colonialism and whiteness. As a novel about a Chinese
diasporic family, *For Today* also falls in line with Asian North American texts that come before it, in and through which “intergenerational conflict – its forms of power, its discourses of subject formation…have become recognizable commodities” (Ninh 3). To further complicate these already difficult negotiations, Peter, the novel’s protagonist, must navigate the ambiguous intersecting identities of race, gender, and filialness that are thrust upon her as she comes to terms with her desire for trans-femininity. *For Today* is reticent and overwrought with a quiet, overwhelming despair that leaves the reader ill-prepared to disentangle its multitude of tightly wound layers. More than anything else, Fu’s subtle and matter-of-fact narrative style obscures the severity of the violences depicted in the story, forcing the reader to look for shadows of bruising rather than open bleeding wounds.

Danielle Seid proposes the term “trans-generational” as a way of sorting through the novel’s many nuances; she argues that such a reading offers a way to reconceptualize the relationship between transness and immigrant identity that highlights the “many affinities between Asian immigrant, femme, and trans experience” (149). Taking heed from Lisa Lowe and Erin Khuê Ninh, who both caution against essentializing and reductive readings of Asian North American literature, Seid’s article emphasizes the importance of reading Fu’s text through an intersectional lens in recognition of the overlapping patterns of oppression based on race, gender, and sexuality. However, despite Seid’s efforts to “offer a trans-generational reading…that deploys trans as another way of making sense of generational dynamics” (143, emphasis in original), a reading that is centered on the affinities between different experiences of oppression has the potential of negating the violence that is exerted by immigrant families and communities on queer and trans people of colour. In other words, Seid’s emphasis on
intersectionality in her reading is counterproductive to a much-needed analysis that takes into account the nuanced differences between trans and immigrant experiences.

Critiquing the Huang family dynamics, Seid writes that “Father’s suffocating and frequently desperate disciplinary tactics – exacerbated by the racist and heteropatriarchal forces in the novel’s world – threaten to undo the Huang family” (156). Seid’s depiction of Father as a “desperate” diasporic parent, whose actions are “exacerbated” by racism and heteropatriarchal forces external to himself, make it appear as if Father had little choice in being the homophobic tyrant in the novel that he is; what seems to be missing in Seid’s characterization is Father’s own agency in the violence he exerts on his family. While it is critical to give space to the discussion of the affinities between trans and Asian immigrant experiences as they face racist and heteropatriarchal forces as diasporic subjects, writers such as erin Khuê Ninh and Wendy Motooka warn against dealing in “exclusively externalizing explanations” that “project the locus of power (and oppression) outward – and leave the ethnic communities’ social institutions looking impossibly innocent of accountability” (Ninh 4, emphasis in original). In other words, as important as it is to reconceptualize the affinities between Asian immigrant, femme, and trans experiences, doing so must not diminish the recognition of the harm queer and trans diaspora are subjected to at the hands of their families and diasporic communities.

Ninh recognizes that “power in the most intimate, vulnerable, and formative of social contexts” (5) critically shapes the lives of second-generation diasporic subjects. She also notes that the “structural rather than inflictive violences” caused by filial distress are “a challenge to articulate in literary form” (3). Pointedly, Ninh observes that there has been “precious little language even in [the] stories to explain exactly what drives [daughters of first-generation immigrants] to the desperate things they do” (3, emphasis in original). How is it, Ninh asks, that
“young women…may come to madness or suicide without being able to point to any legitimating personal histories of abuse or trauma in the home” (2)? In many ways, *For Today I Am A Boy* grapples with the same problem of the unspeakableness of the structural violences Ninh identifies. Later in life, when Peter tries to narrate her experience with trauma and suicide, she struggles to articulate how “there could be misery [in her family] …where there was nothing so recognizable and lurid as murder or incest” (Fu 115). The unspeakable structural violences both Ninh and Fu recognize and describe is what Ding Naifei and Liu Jen-peng theorize as reticence, which has been discussed at length in the previous chapter. Reticence is a useful lens through which to understand the relationships between race, gender, and sexuality in the diasporic context of *For Today*; it also opens space in which to explore the unspeakable filial distress central to both Ninh’s and Fu’s texts.

Building on erin Khuê Ninh’s discussion of filial distress in Asian American literature, this chapter intends to think through how reticence intersects with race, gender, and sexuality in Kim Fu’s *For Today I Am A Boy*. Specifically, I argue that a reading through reticence allows us to acknowledge not only the affinities, but more importantly, the differences between immigrant, femme, and trans experiences as depicted in Fu’s novel. Broadly speaking, this chapter is preoccupied with the following questions: How does reticence apply to the racialization experienced by fictional Chinese-Canadians? How does Father internalize the systemic oppression he experiences as a racialized Chinese man in small town Ontario, and how does he in turn weaponize it against Peter’s queerness/transness? In other words, how is the racialized trauma experienced by a first-generation diasporic subject transformed into homophobia and transphobia against their queer second-generation children? How does reticence work as punishment and parental discipline? What this chapter is interested in doing is not just outlining
the affinities between the Asian immigrant and trans experience, but rather how one informs the other. Finally, how does reticence interact with language, and how does reticence differ in Chinese languages and in English? Given all these areas for exploration, this chapter is also interested in better understanding the limits of reticence as it is applied to different cultural and racial contexts.

3.2 Reticent Violence and Filial Distress

In her analysis of the political-economic structures of power between parents and daughters in the immigrant family, Erin Khuê Ninh argues that “intergenerational conflict is at bottom a conflict of interest” (6); “read through the family’s economic aspirations, or a parent’s class and national investments,” writes Ninh, “Asian American intimate relations reveal themselves to be profoundly ordered by a capitalist logic and ethos, their violence arranged around the production of the disciplined and profitable docile body” (6). Ninh’s model of subjection and immigrant family violence is not queer per se, but works well as a way of reading trans-femininity in relation to immigrant family dynamics in For Today. To be sure, the production of disciplined, profitable, and docile bodies here is not only about the creation of monetary and economic prosperity, but also the production of bodies that adhere to the heterosexual and heteronormative logic that upholds capitalism. Peter’s desire for trans-femininity is antithetical to Father’s demand for her to be a boy, and thus has no place in the latter’s investment in, and vision of, Canadian normalcy. The conflict between Father and Peter serves to illuminate how reticence is used as a weapon to protect Father’s interest in the heteronormative logic of capitalism.

When asked to draw her future self for a career assignment in first grade, Peter “drew [herself] as a Mommy”:

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I thought of the mommies in magazine ads and picture books, always bending at the waist over their tied aprons with their breasts on display – serving pancakes, wrapping presents, patting the heads of puppies, vacuuming sparkling-clean floors. I drew myself with a stiff halo of hair, swaddled babies around my feed. A satisfied smile from ear to ear. “I want to be a Mommy.”

Two days later, I found my notebook lying open on my bed. That page was ripped out. I asked Bonnie, my younger sister, if she’d done it. The evidence didn’t point to Bonnie: she could hardly have ripped so neatly, right from the staples, making it seem as though the page had never been there to begin with. There was no one else in the family I was willing to confront. (Fu 3)

This scene depicts a lesson Peter learns as a young child about the intolerability of her queer and non-normative desires. Significantly, there is no verbal instruction in this lesson; instead, the wordlessness with which the notebook is left on the bed foregrounds the importance of reticent coercion as a method of discipline in the Huang household. The description of the notebook – ripped so neatly that it seemed “as though the page had never been there to begin with” – succinctly describes how reticence is often achieved through the covert creation of ambiguity and doubt, rather than an open confrontation. That there was “no one else in the family I was willing to confront” seems oddly cryptic; its ambiguity suggests that it is precisely Peter’s hazy recognition that she has done something wrong that prevents her from pursuing the matter of the missing pages.

Peter’s transgression and its resulting reticent punishment also demonstrate what Ninh calls “designated failure” (45). Though Peter only vaguely understands that the removal of her drawing indicates some form of wrongdoing, she seems to instinctively know that it is safer to
keep her silence than to confront other members of her family. In a story world that “regulates the child-subject’s every turn,” writes Ninh, “the child is punished if she does not know before she learns, and only learns piecemeal by failure and punishment” (45). In other words, the removal of Peter’s queer drawing without explanation suggests that Peter should already know what she did wrong, and thus would not need to confront other members of the family. As such, Peter is being punished for both leaving evidence of her queer fantasy, and for not knowing it is wrong. The incident of the notebook is also reminiscent of Ninh’s observation that “suffering that cannot be instantiated with material injury, privation, or palpable trauma is ill-addressed not only within the family but within the legal and social apparatuses of the state” (114). In other words, because it leaves no physical evidence, reticence makes it difficult to establish abuse happened at all. Beyond physical violence, emotional violence in immigrant families is obscured by obligation and parental concern, where filiality becomes its alibi. The altered notebook sheds light on the ambiguous and reticent space of there/not there: when the page had been removed as if it was never existed, it becomes difficult to name the act that had removed it to begin with.

When she is asked to complete the same assignment three years later, Peter draws her future self as a hyper-masculine “fireman…[with] muscles…bulbous as snow peas” who has a woman in one arm (Fu 3). She purposely leaves the drawing on the coffee table so it would be seen. This time, Father “came into the room [she] shared with Bonnie after we were supposed to be asleep…he stopped near my bed and saw the whites of my eyes. He patted me on the foot through the blanket. The door clicked shut. I stayed awake for a long time afterward, wiggling my warmed toes” (3-4). Father’s physical affection in response to Peter’s second, and much more gender- and hetero-normative drawing suggests that he is the one who ripped out the first drawing three years prior. Much like his method of discipline, Father’s approval for Peter’s
feigned interest in masculinity is meant to be unseen and reticent. The visibility of “the whites of [Peter’s] eyes” is intriguing, as it suggests that Peter’s eyes are half open. This image recalls an earlier scene in the story’s prologue, where Mother supposedly gives birth to her first child on the floors of a butcher shop: moments before she goes into labour, Mother imagines herself as the quartered sow carcass on the butcher’s block, with its “eyes clouded yellow and rolled upward” (Fu ix). The imagery of the eyes links Peter’s performance of masculinity to the brutality of slaughter, while the image of the butcher standing over the pig carcass, as Father now stands over Peter, foreshadows the power Father wields over his son.

Peter’s performance of heteronormative masculinity is not a choice, but a necessity to her survival both at home and among her peers. She quickly learns that in Fort Michel, Ontario, a fictional town with a population that “couldn’t have filled a football stadium” (Fu x), a convincing performance of masculinity is achieved through the exertion of power over others. When she was nine, Peter and three other boys from school sexually assault Shauna, a girl in their class:

The space under the Big Steps was closed off on one side…We herded [Shauna] toward the back of the hollow, blocking the entrance with our bodies.

“Lift up your skirt,” Roger said.

…She raised the hem of her skirt by the corners, not quickly, not slowly. With a knowing I hadn’t expected. Like she’d done this before.

Roger’s eyes fixed to the spot. “Peter, pull down her underwear.”

I looked into Shauna’s eyes. My hands on her small hip-bones. I tried to tell her that I was sorry. That we were both victims. I wanted her to see who I really was…In her eyes,
I could see only the reflections of four attackers, four boys in that dead, marble blue, like you could see the sky right through her.

Shauna’s legs trembled and then buckled…Better to be one of us, better to be standing on this side than kneeling and weeping in the gravel while they leer, that was all my father wanted from me, to be one of them, to be a king.

But I belonged in her place, holding something so stunning they’d steal for it, they’d stare into its hot center even as it blinded them. (Fu 14-18)

Peter is made to confront her own masculinity through Shauna’s gendered victimhood. Though Peter is desperate for Shauna to see who she “really was” – a girl, and a victim just like Shauna, she struggles with her new-found recognition that the power which harms Shauna in this instance cannot be separated from her own assertion of masculinity. Peter feels guilty for participating in the assault and “tried to tell [Shauna] that [she] was sorry”, but she also comes to the realization that it is “better to be standing on this side than kneeling and weeping in the gravel while they leer”. The image of the playground gravel recalls an earlier “game” where Peter is made to lie face down in gravel “in a sexually passive position” (Seid 150) as other boys drop large stones on her back (Fu 5-6). With Shauna here, however, Peter no longer occupies the bottom. This scene pits Peter’s need to pass as “one of the boys” against her desire for femininity. It also forces her to choose between two inadequate options: either be a boy and exert violence unto others or be a girl and receive and internalize such violence.

The plot of the sexual assault is heavy-handed, but it is the point at which Peter recognizes the power she must be willing to give up for femininity; as such, though brutal, this scene is critical both to the story and to Peter’s character development. Father’s reaction to the
sexual assault, however, is more puzzling. By the time Peter arrives home, Shauna’s parents have already called to relay Peter’s wrongdoing:

Mother picked me up by my armpits…she held me at arm’s length like a bag of garbage. She carried me into their bedroom and dropped me hard into a chair.

Father came in behind us. He leaned on the wall by the door. Mother opened her mouth and a long stream of invective came out in a language I barely recognized, a language of hard, short sounds, a language of pain. My father put his hand on her shoulder to stop her. She wasn’t supposed to speak to us in Cantonese. Our English would come out wrong, he’d insisted. Like theirs.

Deprived of that weapon, she used the only other one she had: she slapped me in the face…Mother walked out. The door hung open.

I met my father’s gaze. He stayed leaning on the wall across from me, his expression inscrutable. Slowly, deliberately, he straightened up. He was smiling. He didn’t speak for a long time, just smiled. I felt his approval like a warm glow.

He said, “Bonnie is moving into Helen’s room. You get your own room, son.”

My father loved me. (Fu 19)

Though its function in the story thus far remains unclear, Father’s positive and disturbing reaction to Peter’s perpetration of sexual assault doubly underscores the importance of a performance of masculinity if Peter is to continue to earn his love. In other words, Peter’s performance of violent masculinity fulfills not only Father’s investment in heteronormativity but also her filial obedience, where her participation in sexualized violence critically informs her being a good son.
Throughout the text, Father’s characterization seems unnecessarily cruel: even after taking into account the historical difference in societal perceptions of violence and sexual assault in 1970s small town Ontario, Father’s encouragement of and even enjoyment in learning about sexual assault – especially between children – seems extreme. Father’s positive reaction to sexual assault as a performance of masculinity borders the immoral and seems to lack any emotional realness or depth that would otherwise complicate his character. In another instance, Peter and Father watch as high school football players vomit in the parking lot from over-exertion after being chased by the coach in his car as a part of their morning drills. Father and son then witness Peter’s childhood friend Ollie punch the coach in the stomach for mocking him using “effeminate” hand gestures. While Peter “wanted to run from it” (Fu 74), Father “nodded thoughtfully, as though the whole thing were a show for his consideration” (75). As with his quiet approval of the sexual assault, though Father is not an active participant in the violence he witnesses in the parking lot, the thoughtful interest with which he observes the confrontation is somehow more terrifying than the violent confrontation itself.

In contrast against his keen interest in overtly violent displays of masculinity, Father’s own exertions of dominance seem almost peaceful: they are silent, persistent, and always “so god-damned reasonable, never raising his voice or his hand” (184, emphasis in original). Father maintains reticence even, and especially, in moments of confrontation over Peter’s sexual deviance. On Thursday afternoons, Peter likes to clean the house “naked [wearing nothing] except for a…full-length apron that [her] father had bought for [her] mother and that she had never used” (Fu 44). When Father catches Peter in her queer routine, he sets the apron on fire in the driveway and forces Peter to watch:

A flick of the flint and our pupils reflected orange…
The ashes were hard and heavy, unmoved by the wind. My father picked a chip, about the size of a small pebble, out of the pile. He pressed it into my hands.

“Swallow it,” he said.

It was warm, like a dark rock in the sun (54-5).

Father does not verbally convey his displeasure or embarrassment at Peter’s deviance; the whole ordeal, “Peter”, “follow me”, and “swallow it”, takes no more than five words. Instead, Father literally and figuratively makes Peter consume her own expression of queerness, along with Father’s rage and displeasure. The act of swallowing here is reminiscent of the literal Chinese meaning of reticence, which is to hold something in one’s mouth. It is equally significant that the apron Peter wears as a second skin, and that which was “starting to get the rubbery smell of [her] own body” (Fu 45), ends up inside of it. Consuming the burnt apron is another lesson which teaches Peter that her queerness must be reticent – contained, internalized, and kept hidden from all aspects of her life. By destroying the only item that could give Peter relief from gender dysphoria, Father effectively eliminates queerness and queer space from his home – all of which is achieved without the use of physical or verbal violence.

_For Today_ demonstrates the difference between the overt violence that Father watches and admires and the reticent violence he exerts on his family. It also demonstrates how reticence and filial obligation is used to coerce Peter into the closet and to keep her there for the upkeep of Father’s invisible middle-class Canadian family. Throughout her text, erin Khuê Ninh continuously reminds the reader that familial violence does not have to leave a physical mark to have a traumatizing effect. Despite the briefness of the interaction and Father’s few words, the ritualistic consumption of the burnt apron is the memory that brings Peter the most pain and confusion later in her adult life: “I [tried] to explain how I’d felt…I could tell them about the
burned apron, about swallowing that hot shard of a thing I had loved. It often made people laugh” (Fu 115). Peter’s inability to articulate the trauma of her childhood and the listener’s inability to comprehend the magnitude of the trauma further emphasize that despite its seeming quietness, reticent violence is just as traumatizing as open violence, if not more so because of its resistance to neat labels. Father’s weaponization of reticence against Peter’s queerness further demonstrates the damage that can be done to queer diasporic subjects at the hands of their families under the guise of parental expectation and affection. As such, Fu’s text illustrates that reticence is just as effective as physical discipline in the production of immigrant children who conform to the heteronormative and patriarchal logic of capitalism.

3.3 Mimeticism, Ethnicizing Labour, and Filial Whiteness

Ninh’s writing helps to explain the distinctions between overt and reticent violences in *For Today*, but it does not make Father’s perplexing admiration for open violence any more understandable or acceptable. Rey Chow’s theorization of different levels of mimeticism as experienced by the ethnic subject is useful in thinking through Father’s relationship to both violence and to his children. In *The Protestant Ethnic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, Rey Chow identifies mimeticism as the “central problematic in cross-ethnic representation in the postcolonial world” (103). As loosely outlined in the previous chapter, Chow observes three intertwined levels of mimeticism that are distinct in theory but cannot be cleanly separated in practice. The first level has to do with “the imperative” created by colonialism that designates the white man as the original, while the colonized is “relegated to the position of the inferior, improper copy” (Chow 104). In other words, on the first level of mimeticism, the ethnic subject is destined to perpetually mimic and aspire to whiteness while knowing its impossibility; as such, “she [will] always [be] a bad copy” (Chow 104) and has no choice but to continue to mimic.
The colonized subject’s imitation of whiteness on the second level of mimeticism is just as inadequate as on the first, but the colonized gains a self-awareness of both the imitation and its failure, which creates space that is necessary for the formation of a complex psychological interior. Here, the ethnic subject is seen in terms of a desire to be white: whereas the feelings of inferiority on the first level of mimeticism would “relegate the colonized to the position of the irrevocably subaltern”, the same feelings on the second level stand as “elements of a resilient…framework for conceptualizing dominated selfhood” (Chow 105). In other words, instead of perpetually trying and failing to reproduce a convincing copy of whiteness, the ethnic subject becomes an “indeterminate, internally divided subject” (Chow 105) who gains a new layer of self-awareness as an ethnic subject. On the second level of mimeticism, “whiteness” and “otherness” are no longer rigidly polarized as on the first, but “can now be considered as mutually constituted” (Chow 106). Thus, while the ethnic subject is still destined to perpetually fail at producing an adequate image of whiteness, she begins to assume a complexity that is now “deemed equally worthy of critical attention” (Chow 106).

The third level of mimeticism, or coercive mimeticism, is one of the central preoccupations of Chow’s book. Here, the ethnic subject is “expected to come to resemble what is recognizably ethnic”, where the original is “no longer the white man or his culture but rather an image, a stereotyped view of the ethnic” (Chow 107). In coercive mimeticism, ethnic subjects are expected to “objectify themselves in accordance with the already seen and thus to authenticate the familiar imagings of them as ethnics” (Chow 107). Coercive mimeticism differs from previous levels of mimeticism in that here the ethnic subject is expected to reproduce the stereotypical image of herself as the ethnic subject. Put differently, in coercive mimeticism, rather than mimicking the white man as original, the ethnic subject is expected to portray a
version of her otherness that is constructed and seen by larger white society. Despite there being three distinct levels and different demands placed on their performance, mimeticism is always an imperative for the ethnic subject, and never a choice. Regardless of whether the ethnic subject chooses to mimic whiteness or a perception of herself as the ethnic other, authenticity will never be within reach.

In *For Today*, Fu caricaturizes Father as the ethnicized subject who worships “the white man as original”, and who is “expected to imitate, to become like her master, while knowing full well that her efforts at imitation will forever remain unsatisfactory” (Chow 104). The account of Peter’s sexual assault is given to the reader in two segments, in between which is sandwiched an earlier memory of Father teaching a six-year-old Peter to shave:

I heard the light switch snap. In the flood of light, my father’s face was momentarily washed out, drained of its tawny color, his burnished tan. My own face was softened, blurred at the edges where I couldn’t focus my eyes. In the mirror, a white man and a girl.

Then – pupils contracted – just us again.

“Today’s special, for father and son. You learn to shave,” my father said. He winced at the sound of his own voice, mouthed the words a second time. Nobody heard his accent more acutely than he did (Fu 15).

The reflection Peter sees of a white man and a girl in the flash of light is a cliched metaphor that illuminates the fact that both Peter and Father aspire to be versions of themselves they are not. Father winces at the sound of his own voice because his accent is a reminder of his visibility. Like Chow’s ethnic subject on the first and second levels of mimeticism, though Father is hyperaware of his ethnicity, he continues his imitation of whiteness, hoping the next time he speaks, the words will come out right. Despite his perseverance, Father’s performance of
whiteness is never quite convincing enough; the out of focus reflection in the mirror, a rare, transient moment in which Father appears as a white man, further emphasizes his ethnic subjectivity and the unattainability of the whiteness he admires. Set up as the stereotypical diasporic subject who cannot break through the mirror to become a white man, but who nevertheless tries to without fail, Father becomes a caricature trapped in the first level of mimeticism. As an imperfect imitation of whiteness, Father cannot exert the same open violence that he so admires at the hands of white men. Instead, Father’s racial visibility automatically deems him as a bad copy who can only observe that which is unattainable from the outside.

Read through mimeticism, Father’s obsession with cultivating a perfectly assimilated family reveals itself to be driven by his inability to control or negotiate his own sense of racial inferiority. For the latter half of his work life, Father builds a career for himself at the local passport office, where he is hired because of a visible-minorities program:

Nothing could be more antithetical to the way my father saw himself. Under the Language Spoken sign, they added a slate: Cantonese. The rare Chinese customer always ended up at his window. Father forced them to speak English. He was patient but unrelenting…

…Being a civil servant fit his white-collar idea of prosperity. Everyone dressed the way he always had – jackets, ties, shined shoes…But their pale faces in the fluorescence reminded him how he’d gotten there, by being visible. He comforted himself with pictures of his two eldest daughters…Adele would be an invisible doctor and Helen would be an invisible lawyer. He’d laid it out for them, and they had expressed no resistance. (Fu 45-6)
Though they all dress and act similarly, Father’s white colleagues are a constant reminder of the racialized identity he cannot escape. Aware of his racial inadequacy and the impossibility of a perfect imitation, Father continues his pursuit of whiteness by investing in the invisibility of his children. Unlike him, Father imagines, his children will not speak English with an accent tainted by Cantonese, nor will they have any other markers of visibility. Father’s preoccupation with cultivating children who are unlike him, and who are oblivious to their racial identity and therefore mimetic inferiority is understandable, but the reader cannot help but question the simplicity of its logic. What Father seems to fail to recognize in his singular pursuit of whiteness is that the absence of ethnic markers is in itself a form of ethnic marking. That is, as per Chow’s first level of mimeticism, ethnic subjects who do not act like ethnicized subjects are just as visible as those who do. Ironically, then, Peter’s filial obligation is not just to perform heteronormativity as previously discussed, but also to perform her invisibility and therefore proximity to whiteness.

Father’s refusal to provide service to Chinese customers in Cantonese directly contradicts what he is hired to do and seems like an odd dereliction of duty for someone who so adamantly tries to integrate into Canadian society. Father’s position at the passport office is contingent on his ability to speak Cantonese, or in other words, to perform his ethnicity in a way that language becomes a form of ethnicized labour. For Rey Chow, “a laborer becomes ethnicized because she is commodified in specific ways, because she has to pay for her living by performing certain kinds of work, while these kinds of work, despite being generated from within that society, continue to reduce the one who performs them to the position of the outsider, the ethnic” (34). The kind of ethnicization Chow theorizes stems from the reality that visible minorities often work in service and labour industries that are physically intensive, underpaid, and that follow
divisions that align with those based on class. While Father’s position at the passport office does not appear to be the ethnicized labor Chow describes, his occupation demands a different kind of ethnicized labor, one where he must perform his ethnicity through language as part of the requirement of his job.

Father’s refusal to speak Cantonese is a refusal to perform his ethnicity, which then translates into a resistance to coercive mimeticism. Chow specifies that coercive mimeticism is made possible by a process of interpellation, where the ethnic subject is hailed from the outside by those “who are altruistically intent on conferring on her and her culture a radical meaning, one that is different from the norm of their own society” (108). In other words, those who perform the hailing also control the power that prescribes the ethnic subject her otherness. By refusing to speak Cantonese, Father is declining to answer the hail that deems him an ethnic subject. This refusal to perform his ethnicity does not indicate Father’s inability to recognize his visibility, but rather that he is all too aware of it. Father is not only reminded of his otherness every time he sees his white coworkers, but also whenever a Chinese customer is sent to his window. Father cannot escape ethnicization when compared to his white coworkers because of his appearance and accent. In contrast, the difference in power between Father and his Chinese customers, by virtue of their relative positions behind and in front of the counter, allows him some room to negotiate the perceptions of himself as an ethnic subject.

Forcing his customers to speak English is Father’s attempt to simultaneously distance himself from stereotypical perceptions of Chineseness and to demonstrate his proximity to the colonizer through language. By choosing to speak English, Father elevates himself above the Chinese customers who otherwise remind him of his own inferiority. As such, Father’s insistence on speaking English is an assertion of dominance over other ethnicized subjects, which
demonstrates his proximity to power. It is also a way for Father to reassure himself that while he is inevitably ethnicized by the colonial gaze, at least he is less so when compared to others like him. Father does not seem to see the irony in the fact that to be distinguished from other ethnic subjects, he must first be like them; this seeming paradox illustrates a fundamental contradiction between coercive mimeticism and assimilation, the former of which is about keeping the ethnic as an ethnic, and the latter about eradicating ethnic difference. What Father also does not seem to realize, and which Chow emphasizes in her text, is that regardless of whether Father speaks Cantonese with the Chinese customers or not, they are being sent to him anyway. In other words, regardless of whether the ethnic subject responds to a hail, they are being ethnicized by it just the same. To borrow again from Rey Chow’s work on mimeticism, the ethnic subject is “damned if she tries, damned if she doesn’t” (104). That is, regardless of whether Father chooses to perform whiteness by forcing ethnic others to speak English, neither choice helps him escape the racialization and systemic oppression administered by his visibility. In other words, Father is ethnicized by the very labour he refuses to perform.

3.4 Gender, Characterization, and the Limits of Representation

Discounting its mostly weak characterization and heavy reliance on the shock value of violence, For Today’s biggest shortcoming is how the narrative ends. Much like the earlier unsubtle juxtaposition of Father’s and Peter’s reflections in the bathroom mirror as a white man and a girl (Fu 15), the novel’s ending again juxtaposes an imagined flashback of Father as a young man against an image of the four Huang sisters in Germany, presumably after Peter’s transition:

Guangzhou and Beijing. Father in an airport, after his father bribed a doctor and a bureaucrat and a friend in Hong Kong who pretended to be a relative. The waiting plane
gleams on the tarmac, propellers roaring, louder than God. Go, his father says. Go and be reborn.

Four grown women sit in a pub, raising their tourist steins to the camera. The waiter who holds the camera comments on how much they look alike. “We’re sisters,” Bonnie says. “Wir sind Schwestern. This is Adele, Helen, and Audrey”³ (Fu 238-9).

Reading this passage, Danielle Seid argues that the two scenes are presented together to stress “the forward movement of immigrant life, the insistent hope to be ‘reborn’ in a new place”; when read as a trans-generational story, argues Seid, “the Asian immigrant family members in For Today are both born in a new place and reinvented as subjects who confront being (on the) bottom” (155-6). Seid sees a parallel between Father’s bottomhood as result of his ethnicized subjectivity, and Peter’s, as result of her transness. While such a reading that attempts to make sense of both trans and immigrant experiences is interesting and seems very much in line with Fu’s endeavours, to do so would erase the power dynamics between immigrant parents and children that is often managed by filial obligation and reticence.

One can understand how Seid reached her conclusion based on Fu’s persistent prompts that place immigrant and trans experiences alongside one another. However, despite Fu’s admirable aspirations to do justice to both immigrant and trans experiences, the novel does neither well. The text seems to hurriedly do away with Father’s persistent violence and abuse in a few short sentences, which stands in stark contrast against the varied and vivid accounts of his cruelty and tyranny. What is worse, the juxtaposition of Father’s imagined “rebirth” against

³ Peter’s chosen name, after Audrey Hepburn. Hepburn’s title character in the 1954 film Sabrina is what gives Peter the inspiration; in the film, a chauffeur’s young daughter attends culinary school in Paris as an inexperienced girl and returns to Long Island a beautiful and worldly woman. Aspects of For Today loosely parallel Sabrina’s plotline, in that Peter chooses to go to Montreal, a French-speaking city, to further her culinary skills.
Peter’s seems to suggest that Peter’s rebirth as a trans woman and journey to self-acceptance must somehow be traced through Father’s ordeals, and not her own. This comparison cheapens Peter’s final realization and attainment of femininity. It also frames her decision to transition as a reaction to the knowledge of Father’s transformation through immigration. This rushed depiction of Father in the second last paragraph of the narrative is inconsistent with his characterization throughout the novel and seems to suggest that without this depiction of Father’s “rebirth”, Peter would not be able to have hers. That is, Peter is only able to accept her transness through a metaphor of Father’s plane leaving from the tarmac, and not on her own terms. It is additionally jarring that “Go and be reborn” is an imperative, which seems to divert from the significance of Peter’s choice on a syntactic level. One can even go as far as to say that the narrative suggests that had Father not moved across the Pacific for the chance to be “reborn”, Peter would not have had hers, and that such causal relations reinforce the narratives of filial obligation and parental sacrifice. Read in this light, Fu’s book, which is often lauded as a refreshing take on transness, is actually about the Huang family patriarch. To borrow again from Ninh’s text, Fu’s novel is entirely invested in the logic of filiality despite its struggle to move away from it.

The question here is not about Fu’s ability to write, but about her limits as a cis writer in writing a trans story. In a piece titled “Rise of the Gender Novel”, Casey Plett criticizes the way that Peter’s all-consuming desire to be a woman, which eclipses and flattens all other aspects of her life, makes the character unbelievable and problematic. “It’s hard not to ache for people like Audrey”, writes Plett, “I can ache for these characters, too, but only by disconnecting from what I know about transgender life as it is actually lived, and by avoiding the questions that knowledge invites. Questions such as: What if Audrey did have energy for other fantasies? Or what if she transitioned, only to find that it didn’t solve all her problems? The world of the book
would open up; the easy, romantic tragedy of it might not remain. I understand why cis people
love these characters, but the Gender Novel does not represent the truths of trans lives” (“Rise of
the Gender Novel”, 2017). Plett observes that Fu’s treatment of Peter’s transness falls in line
with those of several other cis-gender authors who are seemingly incapable of, or unwilling to
write trans characters who are complex, and whose identities otherwise are not eclipsed by their
transness. Such call out of cis authors who write about devoutly tragic trans characters is valid,
though it is worth noting that none of the Huang sisters get a happy ending: Adele, the eldest
who elopes to Germany, resents her work as a nanny after a sham marriage; Helen becomes a
successful but guilt-ridden lawyer and a high-functioning depressive who self-medicates with
alcohol; Bonnie ends up in sex work by choice, and though it is unclear whether she dislikes the
work, there are certainly no clues that she is satisfied with her life.

The seemingly endless expanse of flatness that is Father’s character is exasperating, but it
serves the purpose of opening space for the women of the Huang family to renegotiate the
trauma caused by years of quiet abuse on their own terms. Interestingly, the only character who
seems to grow through Father’s death, and who is able to attain a happiness that is untainted by a
pervasive sense of melancholy, is Mother, whom critics and book reviewers pass over in favour
of the easy parallels between Peter’s and Father’s desires to be reborn. When Peter was young,
Mother was a meek character who Father could stop from speaking with a hand on the shoulder
(Fu 18). As the children grow, however, Mother begins to hedge Father’s tyrannical authority in
her own ways. When the last of the children move out of the house, Mother asks to learn to
drive; Father “flinched each time she spoke, unaccustomed to the sound of her voice” (Fu 107).
After Father becomes too ill to leave the house, Mother places Chinese household gods that
Father has forbidden in the main doorway (Fu 141); she then moves them to display prominently

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at the dining room table immediately following his death (Fu 154). Contrary to Western tradition, Mother wears a “white long-sleeved dress” to Father’s burial – “there was no funeral” (Fu 154); she also pins black ribbons on her children’s clothes and “tuck[s] white chrysanthemum blossoms into Helen’s hair” (154). All of these, of course, are culturally Chinese gestures of mourning in clear defiance of Father’s aspiration to whiteness, and which directly contradict his wishes to die like “a Western man” (Fu 141).

There is a comical spitefulness to the urgency with which Mother transforms and reclaims her cultural heritage after her husband’s death. Immediately following the burial, Mother pulls out never-before seen portraits of ancestors from storage: among them is a photo of Father, “a recent picture in a cheaper frame than the others” (Fu 155). Contrary to in Peter’s imagination, where she sits alone in mourning of her dead husband, Mother has instead “blossomed at the mouth” and, to Peter’s surprise, tells and enjoys her own jokes (Fu 172-3). Mother also forges a new relationship with a woman she meets at the Chinese Association who, she tells Peter with a steady gaze, “is like the daughter [she] never had” (Fu 174). The reader is even offered a peek into Mother’s interiority and how she works through and grows from trauma:

[Mother] had loved my father once. Loved his quiet authority, his impeccably shined shoes, the way he would order for her at restaurants and guide her by the small of her back. She had pitied other women her own age…she’d married a leader, a king. When he died, she’d felt abandoned, overwhelmed by the smallest choices.

One morning, she found herself staring at the carpet in the living room. How she hated it. The white that had turned to sooty gray almost immediately, stained by four drooling children and four careless teenagers, how much of her life had been spent vacuuming and
scrubbing this ugly, impractical thing. She saw it gone. She touched her hair, still kept girlishly long, as Father had liked it, even though it was too thin and brittle to wind into a bun anymore. She saw it gone. An exposed neck, exposed floors, everything lean and light. She could eat whatever she wanted, go wherever she wanted, call old friends. She didn’t need to ask permission and try to work out his web of leading, trapping questions.

(Fu 184-5)

Despite the fact that Mother has been relegated to the side as a minor character, the way that she is written is dynamic and relatable, unlike with the other members of the Huang family. This is perhaps due to the fact that Mother is allowed to feel happiness in a way the rest of the Huang women have been denied. Unlike her daughters, Mother is also given the space in the text to explore and overturn her victimhood independent of Father’s control, which frustratingly cannot be said for Peter, whose transition and freedom the reader is really rooting for. It seems, then, 

*For Today* as a text is more comfortable with a conventional feminist subtext than it is with resolving its treatment of queerness and transness. As such, while the novel is invested in a certain kind of happiness with strong feminist subtexts, such happiness is mutually exclusive with its depictions of transness.
Chapter 4: Conclusion

In the last lines of her book on the filial trauma experienced by daughters at the hands of well-meaning immigrant parents, Ninh hopes that her work “may allow for greater latitude in later analyses of intergenerational conflict, such that future scholarship may theorize the family’s structure of feeling as fully as its structures of power” (162). For culturally Chinese immigrant parents who are invested in molding the “professional-managerial model child” (Ninh 163), the imminence of marriage equality around the world and in their countries of ethnic origin poses significant threat to the governance they have over their children as prescribed by the ideals of filial piety. That is, while the progression towards queer rights and marriage equality in East Asia and other parts of the world will inevitably influence the familial structures of power Ninh outlines, the influence of government-sanctioned queer rights will have limited influence on the “family’s structure of feeling”. Indeed, homophobia is not the cause that necessitates reticence as it is weaponized in immigrant family power dynamics, but it is rather a symptom that represents a threat to parents’ control over their children’s lives.

This thesis has outlined the ways in which reticent homophobia in diasporic Chinese families and communities contribute to the filial distress experienced by queer diasporic subjects. The analysis in this thesis can be located at the intersections of reticence, filial piety, and coercive mimeticism. This project was conceived with the intent of delineating reticence in the context of queer Chinese diasporic identity. However, as the project progressed, it has become apparent that the power of reticence is not confined to its violence against expressions of queerness and non-heteronormative behaviour; rather, as chapter two and three have demonstrated, reticence is a paradoxical expression of power that is deeply woven into the experience of the children of first- and second-generation Chinese diasporic subjects. As such,
this thesis is an attempt to use reticence as a critical aesthetic lens through which to gain a deeper understanding of the “family’s structure of feeling” that Ninh imagines in future analyses of the intergenerational conflict in immigrant families. On a more personal level, it is also an attempt to articulate and assuage the recurrent feelings of guilt caused by filial disobedience in being a queer diasporic Chinese subject who has broken reticence by following through with this thesis project at all.
Works Cited


*Saving Face*. Directed by Alice Wu, screenplay by Alice Wu, Sony Pictures Classics, 2004.


