

The Cinematic
Representation
of the Chinese
American Family

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By

Qijun Han

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PREFACE

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Q.H. Nanjing, 2016

INTRODUCTION

Over the years, there has been an increasing recognition of the fluidity and ambiguity of ethnic identities within the context of global mobility. That being so, popular culture – especially movies and television shows – can provide a fertile area for studying and debating the subject of transnational immigration and identity. Within the field of Asian American Studies, an abundance of research has been performed on the cinematic representation of Asian Americans in association with identity. These works have generally situated the issue of Asian American identity within the framework of politics of race, ethnicity, and gender in the United States, through a close and critical examination of popular culture that has historically blended Asian American images and immigrant experiences. Typically two approaches have been dominant.

One type of study primarily focuses on the Orientalist discourse and racial politics in Hollywood films and American television shows. Several examples of such studies are Eugene Franklin Wong *On Visual Media Racism: Asians in the American Motion Pictures* (1978), James Moys *Marginal sights: staging the Chinese in America* (1993), Darrell Hamamoto *Monitored Peril: Asian Americans and the Politics of TV Representation* (1994), Gina Marchetti *Romance and the "Yellow Peril": Race, Sex, and Discursive Strategies in Hollywood Fiction* (1994), Matthew Bernstein and Gaylyn Studlar *Visions of the East: Orientalism in Film* (1997), Robert Lee *Orientalists: Asian Americans in Popular Culture* (1999), and Stephanie Greco Larson *Media & Minorities: the Politics of Race in News and Entertainment* (2006). These books can be considered to be illuminating examples in the exploration into the relatively neglected history and politics of Asian American representation, and significantly each employing a range of innovative gender-based or socio-historical perspectives. As American media functions worldwide as a significant cultural force in determining and reinforcing the representation of racial and ethnic minorities, the study of Asian Americans in popular culture, according to Gramsci's theory of hegemony, is critical to the understanding of how systems and structures operate to oppress or privilege certain groups of people in society (Gramsci, quoted in Jones, 2007: 41-56).

Another approach is to highlight the production and distribution of Asian American independent media, which not only brings to the foreground central issues for the Asian communities, but also serves to criticize racist and sexist practices in Hollywood and in American society at large. As such, Asian American productions are commonly viewed as the embodiment of a counter approach to Hollywood practices by providing alternative Asian images. This type of argument can be found in Russell Leong's anthology *Moving the Image: Independent Asian Pacific American Media Arts*. In this book, Renee Tajima offered an important article "Moving the Image: Asian American Independent Filmmaking, 1970-1990" to pinpoint the strategies Asian American filmmakers have used to expose Eurocentric ideas both on the screen and behind the camera. Other typical examples include Darrell Y. Hamamoto and Sandra Liu's edited volume *Countervisions: Asian American film criticism* (2000), and Peter Feng's *Identities in Motion: Asian American Film and Video* (2002), and his edited book *Screening Asian Americans* (2002). While the former book by Feng reveals the challenges and struggles of Asian American filmmakers, the latter book is dedicated to the examination of the cinematic treatment of Asian Americans, revealing the discourse, depiction and experience of racism. In *Asian America Through the Lens: History, Representations, and Identity*, Jun Xing reads Asian American films neither from the perspective of creating authentic or affirmative images, nor simply as reactive responses to Hollywood stereotyping. Instead, he focused on the historical and cultural contexts of Asian American cultural productions.

In providing different perspectives that are central to the understanding of ethnic identity, the above-mentioned studies undoubtedly are useful starting points for re-examining the representation and identity of Asian Americans, which at the same time has shed light on relevant issues such as gender, race, and ethnicity. The arguments and observations made in these books are innovative and thought-provoking, being the pinnacle of scholarship on the subject, but inevitably there are still some important questions left unresolved.

To begin with, Asian Americans in these books, with very few exceptions, are treated as a collective group: in effect a 'homogenous whole'. Historically, the term 'Asian American identity' has been conveniently used and has become the subject of academic discourse in the fields of history, literature, social sciences, culture studies and film studies. However, the umbrella term 'Asian-American' is a very loose label for people of Asian descent who do not share a common cultural or linguistic heritage. The formation of pan-Asian identity can be seen as a

response to a shared experience of racial, economic, political and social discrimination confronted by Asian American immigrants in the United States (or immigrant people of color in general). According to Espiritu, “ethnic groups find it both convenient and necessary to act collectively”, when the mainstream culture “uses the ethnic label as a unit in economic allocations and political representations” (Espiritu 1992, 10). Likewise, Lowe views the term ‘Asian American’ as “strategic essentialism”, which is meant to build a collective voice “for the purpose of contesting and disrupting the discourses that exclude Asian Americans while simultaneously revealing the internal contradictions and slippages of ‘Asian American’ so as to insure that such essentialisms will not be reproduced and proliferated by the very apparatuses we seek to disempower” (Lowe 1996, 82).

The problem with the general term ‘Asian American’ is that it not only reinforces the ideological dimension of Asian American racial formation, blurring the complexity of the different Asian groups, but also poses a problem for the study of ethnic cultures. As diasporic subject positions are becoming less a liability than an asset, ethnicity should be studied in light of dual ethnic heritage. More importantly, even though Asian immigrant groups indeed share many common experiences and ways of making sense of their migration experiences, group-specific historical experiences must not be overlooked in the process of constructing Asian American identity. To take just one example, both the Chinese and Japanese have undoubtedly occupied the position of the “other” in the Western imagination, but they experienced exclusion from American mainstream society on different levels, in accordance with the socio-historical context. While Angel Island in San Francisco serves as the most evocative reminder of Chinese exclusion and institutionalized discrimination, the internment experience during the Second World War remains the cornerstone of Japanese American history. Studies on respective ethnic groups within the Asian American community would, therefore, allow us to comprehend the historical and cultural specificity that characterizes each group differently.

Therefore, for the main purpose of studying representation and identity in popular culture, informed by historically, culturally and politically specific contexts, the subject of research in this book is limited by concentrating on the cinematic representation of Chinese Americans. This choice is informed by a number of significant facts. First, Chinese Americans are by far the oldest and largest ethnic group of Asian ancestry in the United States, with a long history of migration that can be dated back to the late 1840s. Yet they belong to one of the historically most

excluded groups within American society. Besides being deprived of the legal entry into the country for more than 60 years, Chinese Americans were rejected citizenship and there was a significantly unbalanced sex ratio for many decades as well. Second, there is a chasm of differences in ideology, institutional structures, values, and national interests between China and the United States. Through migration, such differences became more distinct, and have had a strong and lasting impact on individual Chinese immigrants' personal and family life.

With this focus on the Chinese American in the book, it is important to keep in mind that the term 'Chinese American' does not in any sense imply that Chinese Americans are a monolithic group, however, since the Chinese American community consists of people from various backgrounds, sharing very different experiences. It also makes a difference whether the individual or household under study has already been settled as the second or third generation. Thus, the application of the term 'Chinese American' should not deny the extent to which individual Chinese Americans identify with their ethnic group. Ling-chi Wang (1991) in his seminal article "Roots and Changing Identity of the Chinese in the United States" defined five major types of Chinese American identity: *yeluo guigen* (fallen leaves return to the roots, or immigrants' desire to return to China but may only be buried there), *zanco chugen* (total assimilation), *luodi shenggen* (accommodation), *xungen wenzu* (ethnic pride, or the search for one's roots), and *shigen lizu* (uprooted, or losing contact with one's roots). The Chinese word "gen", central to these phrases, refers to one's ancestry and origins. The identification of five different types of Chinese Americans reminds us about the complexities in ethnic identity and the interactions that Chinese Americans have with other ethnic groups. In other words, the suitability of a term probably is not separable from its context, and the application of a term inevitably makes some concerns 'central' while at the same time leaving others more peripheral.

Because the construction of Asian Americanness has become to some extent a one-dimensional conceptualization of identity, an overemphasis on a shared experience of oppressive sociopolitical structures is fraught with problems. As Elaine Kim summarizes: "So much writing by Asian Americans is focused on the theme of claiming an American, as opposed to Asian identity that we may begin to wonder if this constitutes accommodation, a collective colonized spirit – the fervent wish to hide our ancestry, which is impossible for us anyway, to relinquish our marginality, and to lose ourselves in an intense identification with the hegemonic culture" (Kim 2008, 196-7). On the basis of binary oppositions, the identity of Chinese Americans is often defined in opposition to Chinese.

Moreover, guided by binary logic, Chinese American film productions are not only seen as resistant to Hollywood cinema, but are also viewed as quite different from Chinese cinema. The most serious problem with such a starting point is that it leads to two theoretical positions that may be counterproductive to a study of ethnic identity and ethnic culture in the contemporary world.

One of the overarching issues addressed in this book then is the separation of Chinese American studies from Chinese studies. Chinese American studies is either seen as part of Asian American studies or part of American studies. Chinese American studies and Chinese studies have conventionally defined themselves in opposition to one another. While the former draws mainly on the history and experience of Chinese in the United States, with a focus towards issues such as ethnicity, race, diaspora, and gender, the latter pays more attention to area studies, centering on local issues including politics, the economy and the arts.

Linked to this clear-cut separation is that Chinese cinema is conventionally treated separately, determined largely by geopolitical factors. Undeniably, the cinema of Mainland China and diasporic Chinese cinema are marked by different characteristics, but to exaggerate such differences would be to ignore context and common ground that these two have shared. From this perspective, we can claim that Chinese cinemas – despite different locations in which they are based – are informed by a shared cultural tradition of ideological and aesthetical form. So by bringing the perspective of cultural origins to the experience of Chinese Americans, it may be possible to challenge to some degree the US-centric concepts that often govern the Chinese diaspora. Moreover, cinematically speaking, it is almost impossible to separate the images of Chinese Americans from those of the Chinese. Thus, the importance of connecting these two subjects – the Chinese American subject and the Chinese subject – is that research on both sides enriches each other.

The construction of Asian American identity inevitably creates another problem, which is to over-interpret the political implications carried by each Chinese American film. As Chinese American (Asian American) film productions are commonly viewed as countervisions, “a reaction against representations created by white people that were blatantly stereotypical” (Hooks 1992, 146), Chinese American films are often researched in terms of their political function. Undeniably, the political stance marked the early development of Asian American cinema, which is in accordance with the ethnic revival and identity consciousness provoked by the civil rights movement taking place in the 1960s. From the 1970s to the early 1980s, Asian American cinema, according to Stephen Gong, was “fundamentally

a political (rather than a cultural or ethnic-based) movement” (Gong 2002, 109). Focusing on issues such as “identity politics, historical injustice, and contemporary racism” (Xing 1998, 41), Chinese American filmmaking indeed helps the recognition of the Chinese American community, and carries with it political importance. However, as a consequence of overemphasizing the political orientation, the aesthetic dimension is largely overlooked. As Xing has pointed out, “The politically charged terms of “oppositional”, “resistant”, and “subversive” are often freely employed by Asian American film critics without giving sufficient attention to the other dimensions of the films under discussion” (*Ibid.*, 41).

Confronted with these contradictory views on Chinese American films, it is understandable to be hesitant in choosing one of these dominant approaches used to study the cinematic representation of Chinese Americans. As a result, in this book we opt for a perspective that focuses on the complexity of transnational flows of people, goods, cultural and artistic forms. It is obvious that the transnational nature of this process has a profound impact not only on ways of immigrant life, but also on the ways in which this life is represented. It is a process that shapes cultural representations of who we are, and directly interferes with the shaping of identity.

A bird’s eye view perspective is crucial to research on the cinematic representation of Chinese Americans. And by calling it a bird’s-eye view, this suggests studying the object from an aerial viewpoint that is outside of the environment, which put differently, means that research on films about Chinese Americans should also engage both Chinese cinemas and Hollywood cinema in a historical sense. In this way, we can move from “countervision” to what this book calls ‘intervision’. Intervisionist observation allows us to see the dialectical relationship between Chinese American cinema, Chinese cinema, and Hollywood cinema. On the one hand, through developments connected to colonialism, migration, media and cultural flows, they have developed comparable filmmaking practices. On the other hand, due to historical contingency and cinematic variations that are tied to culture, they are distinguished by cultural and ideological differences, sometimes sharp and other times subtle. Only by shifting from “countervision” to ‘intervision’ can we understand a global cultural flow that runs in many directions between these locales, in an era that witnesses the coexistence of the global domination of American popular culture, pioneered by Hollywood, and the increased participation of non-Western cultural production that provides important insights into transnational cultural flows and dynamic local-global encounters.

Many of the problems of contemporary ethnic studies arise from the

context that has defined ethnic theory. Only if we fully understand this context will we be in a position to understand how to cope with the dilemmas posed by this context. Therefore, in view of the ongoing research interest in the representation of Asian Americans in Western media as well as the Asian American film movement, it is important to call for a multidisciplinary engagement – a dialogue that does not erase disciplinary differences, nor deny issues of the politics of representation, but to reshape the ways we think about the present, the past and the future. A changing perspective of examining the representation and identity of Chinese Americans in popular culture will evoke cultural as well as historical and political connections between the Chinese American community and their cultural and aesthetic origins. To do so, there are various questions we need to bear in mind. In short, how are images of Chinese/Chinese Americans in transnational Chinese cinema different from those in Hollywood movies? To what extent does Chinese American cinema historically connect with Hollywood cinema? What is the lineage of Chinese aesthetics when we look at Chinese cinemas from a perspective that is cross-national and diachronic? What does the study of films centering on Chinese Americans contribute to the understanding of ethnic culture and ethnic identity?

To understand the constitution of past/present and local/global that are tangibly revealed in the cinematic product, we need an approach that allows us to analyze the cinematic representation of the Chinese American from both synchronic and diachronic perspectives. A historical and theoretical integration taken from different fields thus becomes important and necessary. In this book we embark on an in-depth analysis of the representation of Chinese Americans from two dimensions – content and form.¹ Content refers to the stories of Chinese Americans that have been told, while form is related to the structures of narratives and devices used for the narrative construction. Content in fact consists of two parts: the ‘what’ part and the ‘why’ part. More specifically, what is the major thematic concern of individual Chinese American films (made about or by Chinese Americans) and why do they draw attention to certain themes and motives? Form concerns the ways in which Chinese American experiences are represented. An initial step in theorizing representations of Chinese Americans in films is to recognize the predominant representation pattern. In light of this, it is useful to focus upon the dominant themes and form used by Chinese filmmakers to present the experience of Chinese

¹ I am aware of the problematic separation between form and content. Hence, in this book they are used as shorthand to address the thematic and stylistic device in the narrative.

Americans. The concepts of 'family' and 'melodrama' are two important ones of explicit focus in this book, with the former being the content of narratives, and the latter being a narrative form itself. In doing so, over the course of the book we are able to advance an argument for the importance of historical and cultural contexts that have influenced both content and form.

The Scope of the Book

Why, in this study, is the family put at the center stage then? This choice mainly has to do with the fact that Chinese immigrant family life has been increasingly represented in cinema, either directly and consciously or indirectly and sub-consciously. And it is not too far-fetched to say that the rapid increase in people's transnational mobility has had a great effect on family life. This is, of course, also true of diasporic Chinese families. The act of transnational migration has often induced profound changes in individual Chinese immigrants and their families. Through migration, a process in which the displacement of cultural identity has greatly influenced the family structure and destabilized family values, the gender and generational relations within the family and the function of the transplanted family in the larger society have been reshaped and redefined. Kinship is an issue of universal relevance and families in many different countries share common elements. Yet family structures, values, and beliefs concerning marriage and family life are always culturally specific. In the context of transnational migration, families in general are transformed in a more complex and unpredictable way. To a certain extent, the diasporic Chinese family has become a dilemma: both the cultural symbol and solution, and the oppression and liberation, all together. It is in this way that transnational Chinese family melodramas have come to play an important role in depicting in cinematic form the conflicts, contradictions, and tensions that take place within the immigrant Chinese family context.

In using the cinematic form of family melodrama, the complexity of the family domain is brought back into focus, comprising of diverse forms of conflict between generations, gender roles, classes, cultures, and nations. Thus, as a logical starting point and the main object of research in the book, the immigrant family is used as a window to study the dimension of culture, society, tradition, and recent history; the family melodrama in transnational Chinese cinema functions as a bridge to speak the unspeakable, to explain the unexplainable, as well as to shed light on the hidden anger, grief, and the need to be understood, which are often masked

by the “model minority” thesis dominated in more sociological approaches.

In spite of the great variety of immigration patterns and experiences, the family remains at the center of the analysis in most immigration studies. The immigrant family is frequently studied in relation to the politics of race, ethnicity, and gender. However, thus far in the field of film and cultural studies, the representation of diasporic families has not been given as much attention in scholarly research. To my knowledge, *Shooting the Family: Transnational Media and Intercultural Values* (2005) and *Far-Flung Families in Film: The Diasporic Family in Contemporary European Cinema* (2013) are the only two books dedicated to this subject.

In more specific terms, the cinematic representation of diasporic (transnational) Chinese families has aroused research interest. However, until now there has been no book-length study of the Chinese American family in films. Among others, a number of individual diasporic Chinese family-melodrama films such as Wayne Wang’s *Eat a Bowl of Tea* (1989), Ang Lee’s *The Wedding Banquet* (1993), and Wayne Wang’s *The Joy Luck Club* (1993) have been selected and studied in relation to the historical past of the nation, the preservation of cultural heritage, and the national integration of ethnic groups (Ma 1996; Marchetti 2000; Xing 1998; Xing & Hirabayashi 2003; Chow 2007). A more detailed account of Chinese American families on screen can be found in Jun Xing’s *Asian America through the Lens: History, Representation and Identity*, where Xing has dedicated a chapter to the discussion of the family dramas produced by Asian American filmmakers. He addresses briefly the cinematic construction of the women’s odyssey in Chinese “bachelor society” in the United States (due to the exclusion laws), as well as the green card issues which are interwoven with issues of interracial romance. Moreover, he also argues that the interpretation of Chinese American family dramas are deeply embedded in the historical specificity of the Chinese experience in the United States.

To narrow down the scope of the discussion, this book focuses on the cinematic representation of the Chinese American family from the mid-1980s to the present. The time period is not arbitrarily selected. It was not until the mid-1980s that a large number of filmmakers from Mainland China, Hong Kong, Taiwan, and the United States came to the fore, expanding the visibility of Chinese Americans. One should be aware though that the earliest attempt made by a Chinese American to depict the life of Chinese people in the United States can be traced back to the 1910s and 1920s. For instance in 1916, Marion Wong, a female Chinese American filmmaker and also the first Chinese American director on record, made the film *The Curse of Quon Gwon: When the Far East*

Mingles with the West. Later in 1917, she started a Chinese American production company called Mandarin Films (Seger 2003, 3). Another early example is *Lotus Blossom* (1921) made by James B. Leong, who established the Wah Ming Motion Picture Company, financed by Chinese businessmen (Gevinson 1997, 213).

The conflict in immigrant Chinese families is vividly captured in Chinese films. *Dim Sum: A little Bit of Heart* (1985), *Eat a Bowl of Tea* (1989), *The Joy Luck Club* (1993) and *A Thousand Years of Good Prayers* (2007) brought Wayne Wang high acclaim. Ang Lee's "Father Knows Best" trilogy, *Pushing Hands* (1992), *The Wedding Banquet* (1993), and *Eat Drink Man Woman* (1994) – a blend of the ethnic and the exotic – earned him a considerable position in the global market. Other less well-known but no less important movies about Chinese American families include Peter Wang's *A Great Wall* (1986), Pam Tom's *Two Lies* (1989), Jue Sharon's *My Mother Thought She Was Audrey Hepburn* (1992), Hsu V.V. Dachin's *My American Vacation* (1999), Lee Georgia's *Red Doors* (2005), Alice Wu's *Saving Face* (2005), Frank Lin's *American Fusion* (2005), Jessica Yu's *Ping Pong Playa* (2007) and Chun Tze's *Children of Invention* (2009).

While diasporic Chinese film directors (including Chinese American ones) have addressed the transition of the Chinese family in the United States, filmmakers from Mainland China, Hong Kong and Taiwan have also used family melodramas to shed light on certain issues of Chinese American families. Examples of this kind of film include Mabel Cheung's the "Migration Trilogy" – *The Illegal Immigrant* (1985), *An Autumn's Tale* (1987) and *Eight Taels of Gold* (1989), Allen Fong's *Just Like the Weather* (1986), Stanley Kwan's *Full Moon in New York* (1990), Clara Law's *Farewell China* (1990), Ann Hui's *My American Grandson* (1991), Sylvia Chang's *Siao Yu* (1995), Peter Chan's *Comrades: Almost a Love Story* (1996) Feng Xiaogang's *Be there or be square* (1998), and Zheng Xiaolong's *The Guasha Treatment* (2001), to name just a few.

Through the transnational Chinese filmmakers' lens, the family stories usually reveal the history and life experience of the Chinese in the United States, including life-long identity crisis, memories of traumatic life events, long-time exclusion, and repressive and revitalizing forces of Chinese traditions. As "home is where the heart is" (Gledhill 1987), the family is closely related to emotional ties, which transcend one's place of residence. Therefore, being the most significant social unit, the fictional families in the films open a window for us to study ethnicity, culture, and identity. What becomes clear then is that while on the one hand ethnic Chinese representation is characterized by boundaries that establish and define the

Chinese American community against other communities, and thus are almost prescribed, on the other hand the representation of family life and structure of Chinese immigrants is multiple and fluid, as the nature of culture is unfixed and uncertain. It is interesting that a process of fixation and a process of fluidity – in terms of the form and content of the representation – seem to take place at the same time.

What this does is allow us to speak of the construction, deconstruction, and reconstruction of individual members' identity within the domestic space of the family, by means of scrutinizing different types of conflicts and tensions. So in short, this book focuses on a number of family-themed films in post-1980s Chinese cinema. However, since Chinese family melodrama has a rather long history in film production, it is important to extend the spatial and temporal range as a reference point. Two significant perspectives are therefore proposed in this book; namely, an historical perspective that links past with the present, and a perspective that connects the national with the transnational.

Central Argument

In accordance with the core basic issue of this book, that is how Chinese Americans are represented in films, three key questions are addressed. First of all, why is the family narrative so characteristic of films about Chinese Americans in transnational Chinese cinema? Second, how does transnational Chinese cinema define and negotiate the aesthetic conventions of melodrama that is commonly used to depict Chinese American families? Third, what aspects do narrative treatments of Chinese American families in transnational Chinese cinema contribute to the ongoing representation of Chinese culture and construction of ethnic Chinese identities in Western societies? These three questions, which can be summarized in three keywords – family, melodrama, and identity – not only set out the overarching research framework, but also guides the structure of argumentation that runs through the book. Organized around these three themes as the threads running through each of the chapters, we attempt to make sense of transnational Chinese cinema's way of presenting the Chinese experience in the United States.

The chapters of the book are arranged as follows. Overall, the first task of the research presented here is to explain the representation of the family as the most recurrent narrative theme in transnational Chinese cinema. Therefore in Chapter 1 an elucidation is offered of the historical and conceptual overview of traditional Chinese family values and how these have come under pressure in the context of the Asia-Pacific migration,

leading in turn to significant changes in family structure. Having been greatly affected by the migration experience, the Chinese American family is commonly confronted with structural changes in the family system, which can be traced to several relevant aspects, including the breakdown of extended kinship relations, parent-child relationships no longer following the Confucian Way, and the changing role of Chinese American women signified by their economic independence.

These changes often cause conflicts, which become particularly evident in films and novels. The second chapter, therefore, turns to the form of melodrama that comes to depict the tensions that take place within the immigrant family context. The specifically Chinese family melodrama, in addition to highlighting the cultural conflict embedded in the hierarchical structure of gender and generation, also brings attention to the importance of the general form of melodrama in our appreciation of the filmic representation of the Chinese.

In Chapter 3, we reveal how Chinese/Chinese Americans have been historically represented in the American media. In essence, the Chinese American family has been either reduced to a social-cultural cliché, or simply deprived of existence in view of the paradoxes arising from the “model minority” discourse and Hollywood’s filmic discourse on the Chinese. Accordingly, this chapter then goes on to ask why the Chinese American family is nothing but a mystified form in the American media discourse, by bringing together two different discourses pertaining to the representation of ethnic Chinese, which have generally been studied in isolation from one another. As a result, it sheds light on the function of transnational Chinese cinema from another perspective.

Chapter 4 explores from a historical perspective the emergence and popularity of melodrama films in Chinese cinema in the 1920s and 1930s. By focusing on the reception and production of melodrama films in early Chinese film history, we point out the ways in which melodrama films not only contributed to the development of vernacular modernism, but also functioned as a reflective and reactive discourse on the experience of modernity. The intertwined relationship between Western cultural and ideological influences and Chinese cultural construction are reflected in the reception and appropriation of D. W. Griffith’s melodramatic films of the 1920s, and moreover, in the form and content of early Chinese melodrama films. Many melodramatic films were produced to tackle problems of the traditional Chinese family structure when coming into contact with ‘Western civilization’, and the China-West conflict has been constantly shown in Chinese family melodramas through an almost binary city-countryside opposition.

With the first four chapters serving as historical background and theoretical foundation, Chapters 5 and 6 discuss how Chinese American families are depicted in transnational Chinese melodrama films in the contemporary era. The six films selected focus on families caught in different types of conflicts: *My American Grandson* (Ann Hui 1991), *Pushing Hands* (Ang Lee 1992), *The Wedding Banquet* (Ang Lee 1993), *The Guasha Treatment* (Zheng Xiaolong 2001), *Saving Face* (Alice Wu 2004), and *A Thousand Years of Good Prayers* (Wayne Wang 2007). Family conflicts are dramatically represented in the melodramatic mode, which elicits the developmental narrative of generation and gender relations. Chapter 5 analyzes how melodramatic imagination – in which an “excess of events and intensity of emotion are inextricably intertwined” (Ang 1996, 89) – informs the construction of the film narrative and the fictional character, by means of drawing upon cultural resources. In effect, it demonstrates how traditional Chinese culture continues to affect and conflict with the experiences of modern Chinese American families and how each film presents and resolves the tensions arising from a culture in transition from different angles. Chapter 6 proposes the analytical perspective in which the identities of ethnic Chinese can be reconceived after close reading of these six films. These two chapters taken together demonstrate that Chinese family melodrama is not only a specific film concept but a valuable tool. Being a “cultural form”, Chinese family melodrama helps us to rethink the re-negotiated Chinese culture – embodied in family values and structure – in global cultural economies. It can serve to complicate the historical construction and maintenance of representation of the ethnic minority in the United States.

With the argument developed across these six chapters in their entirety, we offer here an alternative lens through which to study the representation of the ethnic-Chinese minority in films. In other words, this is the lens of cultural awareness and transnational historical sensibility, which allows an examination of the cinematic representation of ethnic Chinese to be grounded in three interconnected dimensions – family, melodrama, and identity. This approach enables us to study the intercultural flow but goes beyond thinking in dichotomous categories and includes historical analysis.

To my knowledge, this is the first book-length study dedicated to the examination of the Chinese American family in transnational Chinese cinema. It is also the first book-length attempt to analyze the cinematic representation of Chinese family in general. As a modest goal, efforts such as this can hopefully at least help integrate research into images of Chinese Americans with international academic discourses related to the discussion of diasporic family, melodrama and ethnic identity – a valuable goal in itself.

CHAPTER ONE

CHINESE IMMIGRANT FAMILIES IN THE UNITED STATES

On 23 September 2011, an article was published by the *New York Times* with the title “One Roof, Three Generations – Portrait of a Chinese-American Family” (Kramer 2011). The article was illustrative of the way in which news about Chinese immigrant family life frequently draws significant attention from the public. Substantial parts of this report were dedicated to describing the family members and their way of living under the same roof. It was reported that the Lee family paid \$700,000 to secure a building from a Jewish family who had previously owned it for generations, and turned it into their home. Three generations were then found living together – sharing chores, parenting, and caring for the elderly. Traditional Chinese values and ritual were, perhaps unsurprisingly, blended with modern roles and responsibilities in this family. Such an example was by no means unusual either: the statistics show a rising trend of multigenerational co-habitation in the United States.¹ According to the article, the percentage of extended households has almost tripled in the past 30 years, from 2.4% in 1980 to 7% in 2009. This trend can be explained in part by some economic factors, which are also separate from the traditional cultural and family norms.

It is quite well established that one of the distinctive features of the ethnic Chinese family is the high value placed on the extended family (Li, Feldman & Jin 2003, 95; also with long historical roots; Ebrey 2003). As early as 1943, Hsu published his seminal work on “The Myth of Chinese Family Size” with the following opening sentence: “To the West, China has been known as a land of large families, each with several generations living under the same roof” (Hsu 1943, 555). He continues the article by pointing out that actually “the average size of the Chinese family is about five” (*Ibid.*, 555). The extended family is a significant characteristic

¹ The article by Kramer shows that multigenerational co-residence has become increasingly popular not only among Chinese immigrants, but also among the general public, largely because of the financial situation.

feature of Chinese families, but certainly is not the only point of distinction.

In public discourse in the United States and in Europe as well, a common image of the Chinese family is that all families are extended, children obey their parents and women live in the shadow of men. The extended family usually has three generations – mostly direct lineal consanguinity and sometimes including other non-lineal relatives – living together or in close contact. To a certain degree few would disagree with the notion that the traditional Chinese family can be identified by a close bond, filial piety, and respect for the elders, in addition to general male and senior dominance. It is important to bear in mind that tradition plays a crucial role in understanding those Chinese families living within and outside China.

1.1 An Overview of Traditional Chinese Family Ethics

Clearly there are several characteristic features of the traditional Chinese family that stand in contrast to many Western ideas and practices such as the wide prevalence of the extended family, the rituals of ancestor worship, and the legal concubine system. Since it is not necessary in this short section to thoroughly explore the richness of Chinese family concepts and the familial phenomenon, this section of the book merely focuses on two types of relationships that may help us to shed some further light on the nature of Chinese family; that is firstly the relationship between the individual and the family, and secondly, the relationship between the family and the state. These two relationships, as is shown through the course of this chapter, not only become the points of distinction between values and ideas of the Chinese family and the Western family, but also provide the basis for which those aforementioned unique features rest upon. Along the same line, the specific gender relations and intergenerational obligations within the domestic sphere are further touched upon, as one cannot fully understand the Chinese-themed family melodrama without understanding the concept of family in the Chinese context. At the end of this section, an analysis of women's status in the family is also included because by uncovering women's traditional role, we find more direct evidence of a kinship system that privileged and to some extent still privileges the male line.

Attention to different dimensions – the individual and the family, the state and the family, and the woman in the family – forms the basic approach to the whole family concept discussed in the book. We must be aware of the fact that kinship systems include both theories and practices.

In no sense are we trying to suggest that all members in a given society perceive kinship from the same perspective. The diversity of family life is acknowledged here, even under the umbrella of a pan-Chinese cultural sphere. In line with these thoughts, we only present here an ideal-type analysis to address the unique characteristics of Chinese family ethics – a mixture of various philosophical ideas and practices advocated by ruling authorities from different historical periods. Linked logically to this, the dimensions of time and place certainly should be recognized, and the importance of historical context, but space and scope of the book necessitate only a restricted discussion.

The Relationship between the Individual and the Family

The first relationship described here is that between the individual and the family. The basic foundation of family is its individual members. However, what does this mean in a Chinese context, where the family function was traditionally associated with reproduction, love, care, assistance, protection, sustenance, and meeting individual needs? We have to take this question seriously – as part of our definition of Confucian family structure and family ethics – and it requires a rethinking of the relationship between the individual and the family.

Before we continue to specify the Chinese family ethics provisions, we first need to understand the meaning of family in Chinese culture. The meaning of family, and Chinese family in particular, is approached here from three different angles; namely, the original meaning of the term ‘family’, the basic structure of the family, and the function of the family.

The first and basic question one might ask is what is the original meaning of family? The English word “family” comes from the Latin “*familia*”. The most common definition of “*familia*” is the property or the dependent that belongs to the head of the household. Only later the term began to connote blood relations. Similarly, the Chinese character *jia* (family) also suggests a deep relationship between property and family life. As shown by oracle bone inscriptions (the oldest form of Chinese characters), the word ‘family’ is composed of the signs for roof and pig – indicating quite literally a place to house the family pig. It also is indicative of the prominence of the pig in household life.

My second concern is more with the basic structure of the family. For to understand family in all its wide implications, we need from the very beginning to understand its structure. Upon the establishment of patriarchal clan society, livestock became private property, and the ownership of livestock was a measure of wealth which affected one’s

social status and decision-making power. The father as the head of the family “owned” the family resources. We could justifiably say that Chinese family life was an patriarchal and hierarchal system based around an economic rationale.

The family is commonly associated with marital and parent-child relationships within the given domain. The familial terms mostly come from the structural definition of family relationships, such as parents, grandparents, children, and couples. Different types of family structure are determined by various combinations of individuals. With regard to the family structure, it is vital to ascertain the dual directionality in the flow of influence exhibited by family structure and family ethics: the former is apparently influenced and shaped by private and professional ethics; and conversely, it preserves and enhances the family ethics.

In practice, three kinds of family commonly exist in Chinese society. The simple or nuclear family, by definition consists of a husband, a wife, and their children. This type of family not only constitutes the majority of Western European families,² but also is the first basic pattern of Chinese family. The salient features of the Chinese family begin to show, once the children grow old and get married. While daughters leave their parental home when they are married, sons often stay with their parents after marriage. Sooner or later, the young couple starts to have their own children. The second model, the stem family, then comes into being. It refers to three generations living together. The difference between the stem family and the extended family, the third pattern, is its duration and size. The stem family is more of a temporary pattern, as it has the tendency to become again the simple family after the grandparents pass away. Essentially it is a familial solution to the problem of caring for the elderly. The extended family on the other hand, also sometimes called the joint family, consists of several sons and their families. As the family size grows, three generations can sometimes be extended to four or five generations.³ Four or five generations living under one roof is an ideal Confucius model, and it did and still does exist in Chinese society. One of the most important Chinese writers, Ba Jin, once wrote a famous drama titled *Si Shi Tong Tang* (which can be directly translated as “Four Generations under One Roof”). The extended family has become less common in modern times,

² Extended families are found frequently in Southern and Eastern Europe; classic work on this topic (Hajnal 1982; Wall, Robin & Laslett 1983). Naturally there is also much regional variation in household structures in Western Europe, both historically and in the present (Curtis 2015).

³ For more detailed information on different Chinese family models see (Baker 1979).

however, especially after several radical social changes have occurred in Chinese society during the last century including the consequences of modernization, urbanization and state-sponsored birth control policy.

Third, how might we think of family in order to understand the way it functions? Marxists view the family as the reproduction of the capitalist system, since the development of family is the result of property privatization and the issues of inheritance (Kirby 1997, 48). The historical emergence and development of the family in Chinese society can also be seen as the product of privatizing property and patriarchal needs. However, there is a conceptually significant difference when we attempt to compare the function of kinship in Caucasian and Chinese families.

In *Chinese Family and Kinship*, Hugh Baker observes, “In the West we see the family as an institution which exists in large part to provide an environment in which the individual can be conveniently raised and trained [...] But the emphasis in the traditional Chinese situation was reversed – it was not the family which existed in order to support the individual, but rather the individual who existed in order to continue the family” (Baker 1979, 26). Put differently, the family in the West has functioned to support family members, whereas the existence of the Chinese individual was to ensure the primary goal of family – “continuity and prosperity” (Atsumi 1995, 51).⁴ The Western family thus can be seen as a means instead of an end, and the Chinese family represents the other way around.

The Chinese individual was subordinate to the family. The yearning for the continuity and prosperity of the family is bound up with the desire to have more children; in this case, only male children matter. Furthermore, once the children grew up, they needed to marry and produce more children as well, as a means of ancestral honor. As Mencius, a close follower of Confucius, put it – *bu xiao you san, wu hou wei da* (Of the three unfilial acts, the worst is having no heir). In the pre-industrial period, it was even written into law. During the Ming and Qing dynasties, if a man had no male offspring he was urged to adopt a male heir of the same surname. According to law, adoption of an heir with a different surname was not allowed.

This suggests that while in Western society the focus of the family is more placed on the individual’s satisfaction, the Chinese view family not from the same perspective. Perhaps we can draw the first conclusion here,

⁴ Atsumi observes that the primary goals of a Chinese family are continuity and prosperity. Only male children can continue the family line, and transmit family property to succeeding generations.

that Chinese family is more of a collective-oriented type. Likewise, it is not surprising to see how much emphasis the Chinese give to family obligations and responsibilities, in order to ensure family harmony and continuity. The practice of filial piety – devotion to parents and elders, is widely known, and it is widely known in part because it conforms so well to the familiar images of the Chinese. One shall not forget though, the responsibility or duty is mutual, as Chinese parents also exhibit high levels of selflessness and devotion to their children. Following this line, we may begin to ask, what are the consequences of such subordination of the individual to family interests? One consequence that we can hardly ignore is, as already noted in the introduction, the high value placed on the extended family in Chinese culture.

It is suggested that the nuclear family was an important explanatory component behind the rise of commercialization in Northwestern Europe (Foreman-Peck 2011). However, in feudal Chinese society and even contemporary China, 60 percent of the population still relies on farming their land. Therefore, one can still recognize the multigenerational co-habitation pattern in Chinese society, including members of three generations and sometimes more. The primary goal of the Chinese family, as mentioned earlier, was continuity and prosperity. For this reason, the larger the household size, the greater prosperity it indicated. Under Confucian ethics, traditional family values were transmitted through successive generations. The extended family system certainly helped to preserve and reinforce the familial ideology. Moreover, it was able to fit better into the context of Chinese peasant production, as opposed to more commercialized forms of agriculture or urban contexts, which were more fertile environments for the proliferation of nuclear families.

We can also find the explanation for another consequence that a son was (and still is in some areas) considered more important than a daughter. The persistence and prevalence of this preference for sons, mostly in the rural countryside, was manifested in the fact that people wanted sons to continue the family lineage. Sons were given a special status, as they were the ones who carried the family name, not the daughters. They were granted access to the senior generation's resources, and were entitled to inherit the family property. The family property in rural areas was usually land; and in cities it may have been a business. In return, the sons were expected to provide support to the elderly parents and to perform the ancestral worship ritual. But of course, a sense of obligation for the older generation, as a key element of filial piety, is not motivated by financial or social benefits, but rather should be regarded as an inseparable part of the parent-child bond.

Historically, the coupled relationship between inheritance of belongings and care of one's parents were associated with sons in most cases. Daughters were not restricted to it, for they had relatively short-term responsibilities towards their parents, as long as they stayed unmarried. Thus, a male child held in general a more favorable position compared to a female one. This particular manifestation of gender inequality is less dominant today, but some economically underdeveloped regions in China still preserve this long-term tradition.

A third observation – derived from previous arguments – can be summed up as follows: since male roles were more emphasized in Chinese family, the father, instead of the mother, received most of the attention. This tendency suggests yet another difference between Western and Chinese family. In the Western image of family, gender roles and females have been given more weight – and perhaps even increasingly so – with the development of feminist consciousness. The role of the mother, as a consequence, is rather central in the family, and the husband-wife relationship is seen as the fundamental relationship, and from the early modern period in Northwest Europe at least, based around consensus and dual decision-making. The mother in the Chinese groups is an important figure but the social attention lies more with the father. The father-son relationship and not the husband-wife relationship play a more crucial role in forming the norms and views of collective members. For the Chinese, as Hsu argues, the definition of family is based on the intergenerational relations, especially the relationship between father and son (Hsu 1943, 556). In this respect, it must also be stressed that linked to the social suppression of the husband-wife relationship, the outward expression of a sexual relationship in the family not only became a taboo, but also the wife acquired a much lower status than her husband.

The subordination of the husband-wife relationship, in consequence, reduced woman to an inferior position. The man had little choice in selecting his wife. An arranged marriage was more habitual and customary, as people commonly believed that it was the man's family that married the bride. Hsu concludes that “a man in China does not marry so much for his own benefit as for that of the family: to continue the family name; to provide descendants to keep up the ancestral worship, and to give a daughter-in-law to his mother to wait on her and be, in general, a daughter to her” (Baker 1979, 42). In the end, the marital relationship was bound more by a practical “love”, filled only with duties and obligations rather than by a more romantic form of love.

In this glimpse into a relationship between the individual and the family, we have established an understanding of some questions central to

the interpretations of traditional Chinese family ethics and structure. To summarize, therefore, we can conclude that the individual was dominated by the family in a strong sense. The happiness and satisfaction of individuals was less important than the family's prosperity. The male was seen as the very embodiment of the family, and he received his body from his parents, which required him to have children in return. The notion of "Continuum of Descent" (*Ibid.*, 26) held a predominant position: the man had to marry a woman, in most cases, picked out by his family, to continue his family lineage; the woman was married into the family to produce children, and a second wife or more wives were allowed, to ensure the prosperity of the family; the male children were cherished in the family as they were the manifestations of the whole Continuum of Descent.

Furthermore, special attention is usually given to gender roles and differences, when it comes to studying the Western family, whereas studies of the traditional Chinese family generally highlight intergenerational relations, and in particular, the father-son relationship. The elaborate clan or lineage organization had its basis in the male line. Thus, the structure of hierarchy and patriarchy in the Chinese family was in evidence.

The Relationship between the Family and the State

The second crucial relationship to illuminate the concept of family is that between the family and the state. It is, in fact, difficult to describe this relationship, as the notions of family and state in general are socially and ideologically constructed, and therefore are both essentially contingent concepts. State, from both Western and Chinese viewpoints, is usually perceived as a political community: state is a political phenomenon that serves to allocate public resources and to maintain public order. Using a famous statement made by Max Weber (1919), the state refers to a centralized institution characterized by the monopoly of the legitimate use of physical force within a given territory (quoted in Warner, 1991: 19).

On the face of it, family ethics and politics seem to be two separate spheres, concerning very different aspects of human life. Family is maintained by the emotional order such as love and care, whereas the notion of state is more associated with the political values preserved mainly through political force and strength. Nevertheless, one should not forget the fact that state creates the capacities for moral practices and modes for familial existence: marriage and family life are, in the first place shaped, and to some extent determined by state policy. Indeed, law regulates the conditions and requirements for inheritance, men and women form their relationships in accordance with the state's expectations,