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An Analysis of 面子 Within Chinese Culture and Films

Chinese culture is extremely rich and ingrained within it are many complex concepts of honor, filial piety, and respect. Within this paper I will discuss 面子, or face, specifically and how this cultural aspect affects Chinese everyday life and film through the films *Saving Face*, *The Farewell*, and *In the Mood for Love*. I will also discuss how 面子 can be “saved” or “lost” based on the actions of an individual and how this affects one’s family on a broader scale. In order to understand the implications of face being saved or lost, one must also understand how honor is viewed in Chinese culture, especially for one’s family and elders. This directly contrasts Western culture as Americans rarely rely on honor or familial reputation in respect to the individual. This familial reputation can be characterized by another cultural aspect of China, 孝, or filial piety. Americans typically don’t utilize this aspect in their lives as the elderly aren’t as highly regarded and there is an idea of “adulthood” the second one turns eighteen. All of these aspects can be seen within the three aforementioned films and shed light on Chinese culture as a whole.

The first film *Saving Face*, a 2004 film directed by Alice Wu, was the first real look at 面子 as a cultural aspect that was shown in this course. This idea was foreign to my American classmates and I as this aspect doesn’t exist in our culture. To learn that one’s family honor or “face” might be affected by the decisions of the individual was interesting. Within the film, the main character Wil, a lesbian, daughter, and granddaughter within a very traditional Chinese

family, keeps her sexuality a secret with the knowledge it would cause her family to “lose face”. In a similar fashion her mother, Hwei-lan, is pregnant at an older age which her father is furious about. He claims the loss of face is so severe to him and the rest of their family that he kicks her out. Another major loss of face for them is her refusal to tell them who the father of the baby is as it was conceived out of wedlock. Although it is hypocritical for Hwei-lan to be mad at her when their situations, “threatening” the family’s face, are one in the same. Hwei-lan’s secret can be argued as even worse than Wil’s as there is one more layer to it. The father of the Hwei-lan’s baby is very young in comparison to her and this is highly frowned upon, especially in Chinese culture. One would think that the Hwei-lan cannot be mad at her daughter for keeping a secret or causing their family to lose face as her transgressions are even worse, however, this is without taking 孝 into consideration. 孝, or filial piety, is the idea that every generation within a family supports the others at some point within their lives. This usually means grandparents help raise their grandkids so their kids are able to work and in turn support the whole family. Later in life, the youngest generation will support their parents and grandparents and the cycle will continue over generations forever. This is hugely seen in Chinese culture and shuts down the idea of “adulthood” starting at such an early age as you are always living with your family and always supporting one another. 孝 is seen in this film as Wil is basically forced to take her mother in to her own own and support her when the rest of their family have shunned Hwei-lan. Wil is blind to the truth of her mother’s secrets and is expected to take her in anyway. Hwei-lan even mentions many times that she must take care of her own mother and she raised her so it is owed. Although she does not show pleasantries through words she does show it through actions. Wil may not realize it but Hwei-lan makes her food and tries to take care of Wil the best she can while they are living together. 孝 is what holds a family together so closely in Chinese culture

but can also be the very thing that breaks it, as perfectly outlined by Wil's family. Now that Hwei-lan is living with her daughter, Wil is forced to hide her growing relationship with a well known girl in their community, Vivian. Wil is living a double life at this point and sneaking around both Vivian and her mother all to not lose face both within the community and within her family. When Wil finally decides to tell her mother about her sexuality, it is shut down and ignored, as if you can ignore it until it goes away. This is on brand for traditional Chinese culture as marriage and having children are highly favored for families and being gay goes against this. Here we can see the immense impact that 面子 has on decisions within one's life as both Wil and Hwei-lan are constantly altering their path based upon it. We can also see topics such as these get gossiped about and spread through the community, a fear of those who would not like to lose face. Although in the end we see a saving of face and an overall acceptance of the secrets held by both Hwei-lan and Wil within the wedding and Vivian leaving scenes respectively, I don't believe this is realistic for those who are actually experiencing this in their culture today. I believe Hwei-lan's Father would still frown upon her for leaving the good man chosen to be her husband and Wil's mother would never approve of her relationship with Vivian even despite the circumstances. This film does a great job of displaying 面子 and 孝 but I think the ending was made happy for the viewers when in reality this may not have been the case.

The Farewell, a 2019 dramedy directed by Lulu Wang, is a film based around the director's own experiences as a Chinese-American living in America and traveling to China to visit her dying grandmother. The three main focuses within this film, and the reason I have chosen it to be discussed, are once again 孝 and 面子 as well as the cultural significance of lying to one's family in order to support these two ideals. Within this film the main character, Billi Wang, has grown up experiencing both Chinese and American culture including living in America for

the majority of her life and speaking mainly English as well as calling her grandmother back in China and speaking in an accented Chinese. When her grandmother is diagnosed with cancer in China, the Wang family takes it upon themselves to hide this information from her. The family justifies this lie behind the guise of 孝 as they want to look after their elder and she doesn't need to know that she is dying if she is leading such a happy life. In contrast to this, Billi expresses very obvious opposition to the lying and wants to tell her grandmother as she believes it is her right to know of her own illness. This internal struggle within Billi can be related to her Chinese heritage and American upbringing fighting within her. Billi's Chinese side complies with her family's wishes to lie to her grandmother and, after putting up a fight, she finally gives in when they fly to China and keeps the secret. Her American side feels morally obligated to tell her grandmother that she loves so much, but she is told that she is selfish and is only doing that to appease her own guilt. The reason the entire family flies to China to see her is to see her for what they think is their last time. They are able to do this under the guise of a wedding between one of Billi's cousins and his Japanese girlfriend. Although Billi's grandmother is happy to see him getting married she is afraid to lose face due to the short nature of their relationship. They had only been dating for a few weeks at the time and they were concerned that this short amount of time would reflect poorly on Billi's cousin and in turn the entire family. Another lie is told to cover this up and, unbeknownst to everybody at the wedding, the Wang family is able to save face by saying they had been dating for several months already. The entire trip including the wedding, the enjoyable time at Billi's grandmother's house, and the seemingly last moments spent with Billi's grandmother are all falsely happy moments, yet joyous nonetheless. This was the goal of the Wang family the whole time as even though many lies were told throughout the entirety of the movie, these lies helped to serve the purpose of making sure Billi's grandmother

wasn't afraid of a diagnosis she would never learn about. In the end, this cultural aspect helped keep Billi's grandmother unfearful after her initial three months to live diagnosis in 2013 for at least six more years until the filming of the movie in 2019. After some self reflection I was unsure of where I would stand on a matter such as this. Being raised in America I do feel similar to Billi in the way that it is one's right to know about their own illnesses as it seriously affects their life. On the other hand I can completely see the Chinese view on this matter as it relates to the happiness and overall well being of the person involved. The way many Chinese people care for their family and elders is not expressed the same way as many Americans and, even though I am not Chinese, by studying, learning, and immersing myself within Chinese culture I have created my own form of internal conflict similar to that of Billi. I feel as though this the true meaning for the use of 孝 and lying within Chinese culture as it all comes down to how one shows their love for their family, even if not extremely verbal or expressive.

In the Mood for Love, a 2000 film directed by Wong Kar-wai, is an artistic masterpiece that once again integrates the cultural aspect of 面子 and a more subtle form of lying for benefit through the story of Mr. Chow and Mrs. Chan. Their story is one of betrayal, as each of their respective spouses is revealed to have been cheating on them with each other. The main characters slowly discover this and instead of confronting their spouses they decide to keep this secret to themselves and lie to the outside world, including their neighbors and coworkers, in order to both save face for them and their spouse as well as keep a prying eye away from the situation. Wong Kar-wai utilizes certain camera angles to make the viewer feel as though we are prying in on this situation and I feel as though this is meant to be reflected upon and cause the viewer to create this scenario within their own life. When watching, it felt wrong to be prying on this situation and I can see why the main characters would want to keep this to themselves. The

theme of secretism and keeping a private life away from both those closest to them and the world around them is present in all previously mentioned films as well. I think it is safe to say that this theme is also heavily ingrained in Chinese culture and the entire being of Chinese people. It can't be said for every Chinese person in the world, but many seem to be reserved with their emotions and their personal lives at work, when socializing, and even within their own family. If we contrast this to that of an American person, once again not generalizing the whole but stating the typical, we would see a more individualistic approach to the situation where one is more open and ready to talk about what is occurring. Within American culture it has been normalized to make these sort of scenes over a situation such as Mr. Chow's and Mrs. Chan's and an outburst or exposure pertaining to the cheating would be completely accepted. I think this mainly comes down to the 面子 aspect of Chinese culture and lack thereof within American culture as an outburst or exposure of their situation within *In the Mood for Love* would definitely lose face for the main characters whereas in an American film this kind of behavior would be awarded in a critique or analysis. It isn't to say the main characters aren't upset as within many scenes we see Mrs. Chan is visibly upset and oftentimes their reenactments of the situation are disturbing for her. The difference here is that she is visibly upset in private rather than visibly upset in public or in front of others such as her neighbors. Matters like these, if handled at all, will most definitely be handled privately. When trying to relate this back to my own personal opinion I found an internal struggle developing once again. If I put myself into one of their situations with my spouse cheating on me, the environment I was raised in tells me to confront and make a big deal out of it. However, when I think about the benefits of handling it the way Mr. Chow and Mrs. Chan did, utilizing aspects seen in handling for one raised in a Chinese setting, I can understand why they did what they did. I think this film is a great example of reservation within Chinese

culture, both of emotions and impulse, and teaches one to look at situations from the perspective of someone with different cultural ideals in order to obtain the best outcome.

While analyzing Chinese cultural aspects within these films it is also important to compare these ideals to our own and decipher whether or not we still agree with what was agreed upon originally. Many Chinese ideals directly contrast that of American culture as the former focuses on a more communal perspective and the latter a more individualistic one. The communal way of looking at things is what produces ideas of 面子 and 孝 as they focus on honor gained or lost by one's own family or community. American culture consists of rising to adulthood much earlier and abandoning help from parents and family members except for in extreme cases. Kids are sent to college or join the workforce and thrown into life with little to no help from those around them. When these people grow up and have kids they are forced to seek daycare options or other means of watching their kids as they lack the connection with their family to seek aid. Many who would like this help move too far away from their family and cannot seek it as there is a "leaving the nest" mentality in America. In China the implementation of 孝 deeply rooted in their culture leads to generational aid as previously mentioned above. I think if America would adopt some of these more communal ideals than our country and community as a whole would be a much better place. Cultural adoption for the betterment of a whole supersedes the idea of self cultural supremacy. Many in America are extremely deep rooted in their ways, especially culturally, and typically look down upon those in China. They typically think Chinese people are too rooted in family and community as well as wanting to blend in with the whole rather than stick out as an individual. Chinese people are expected to assimilate seamlessly with American culture when they immigrate, however I think it is Americans who should adopt those of the foreigners in order to better their own country. When

one shuts themselves off to the views of the world they simplify themselves to one ideal and thus treat situations one singular way. Similarly, many of the characters in the films mentioned previously could have benefited from the integration of American ideals. Mr. Chow and Mrs. Chan could have actually approached their spouses without fear of judgment. On the other hand many in American films could benefit by looking at situations and conflicts from a Chinese point of view. I think a combination of cultures is the best way to raise children as well, as they will get the best mix of freedom and family support. When and if I choose to have kids I will try to use as many positive cultural aspects from any and all cultures I learn about or become a part of, including American and Chinese culture, as it is the best way to create a better societal environment for the future.

After analyzing several Chinese films, *Saving Face*, *The Farewell*, and *In the Mood for Love*, and the aspects that make them culturally Chinese including 面子, 孝, and lying for the benefit of others, I have learned much about Chinese culture and the reasons these characters did what they did. I think everybody should watch foreign movies as much knowledge can be gained from even cartoons, short films, and serious dramas as the takeaway will be immense. The ability to adopt one's cultural aspects is one we often take for granted and if more Americans researched and enjoyed Chinese culture our country would surely benefit. The most important of these cultural ideals, in my opinion, is the idea of 孝 as it leaves a family in tact for much longer than one's childhood and creates structure for the entire family's lives no matter what generation forever and always. There are aspects within these films that could be left out of adoption but the same can be said for American culture, the beauty of adoption being we are able to sift through the positive aspects of cultural ideals and adopt those that are beneficial. I think the true "end goal" when exploring foreign films and culture, and of this course, is cultural adoption.

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