



Alice Wu discusses *Saving Face* in a video broadcast on YouTube.

Wu, Alice (b. 1970)

by Ruth M. Pettis

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Filmmaker Alice Wu broke ground with her first feature-length motion picture, *Saving Face* (2004), a multi-generational portrait of Chinese-American women who transgress traditional sexual taboos. Wu describes the film as a "lesbian romantic comedy of manners that's half in Mandarin Chinese," and then adds, "What are the chances?"

Wu was born in San Jose, California on April 21, 1970, the only child of Mandarin-speaking parents who had immigrated from Taiwan. A reader of science fiction and fantasy from an early age, Wu told one interviewer, "When I grew up, I never thought a Chinese kid could be a writer. That was before Amy Tan." She graduated from Los Altos High School at age 16.

Though drawn to writing, Wu heeded her community's conventional wisdom to prepare for a practical career. She earned a B.A. in Computer Science from Stanford in 1990, followed by an M.A. in 1992. She moved to Seattle and became a program manager for Microsoft's Cinemania and Music Central CD-ROMs.

Wu began working on *Saving Face* as a novel during company downtime. When she realized it would work better as a movie, she took a 12-week screenwriting class at the University of Washington and generated the first draft of the script.

At age 28, with encouragement from her instructor, Wu quit her programming job and moved to Brooklyn to learn how independent films are made. She enrolled in Alan Oxman's film editing program and set a five-year deadline for herself to turn her script into a movie.

In 2001 her script won a screenwriting award from the Coalition of Asian Pacifics in Entertainment. This award garnered the attention of Hollywood executives who urged Wu to change key elements (such as the ethnicity and sexual orientation of the characters) to make the script more marketable. She refused.

The script acquired a champion in Teddy Zee, president of Will Smith's Overbrook Entertainment company. Zee admired Wu's determination to remain true to the film's origins, but also recognized its universality regarding family dynamics and lined up Overbrook's support for the project. Wu insisted on directing her own script.

Meanwhile, Wu directed *Trick or Treat* (2002), a surreal short film about the acculturation of a Chinese immigrant couple, and served as editor of S. Casper Wong's short film *Shirts and Skins* (2002), about the interactions of a Chinese man and a Chinese-American woman at a corporate Diversity Day meeting.

But *Saving Face* provided Wu the first opportunity to tell the story that had preoccupied her for so long. The film debuted to an enthusiastic response at the Sundance and Toronto Film Festivals in 2005.

Set in the Flushing district of Queens ("Planet China" to its younger residents), the film's milieu is the late twentieth-century wave of Chinese immigration. Wu carefully scripted its blend of Mandarin and English

dialogue to reflect authentic discourse between the generations of Chinese in America, and enlisted her mother as a language consultant.

Wu's protagonist Wil (Michelle Krusiec), a surgeon, attends weekly Chinese socials to placate the matchmaking attempts of her widowed mother, "Ma" (Joan Chen), but instead falls in love with Vivian (Lynn Chen), a ballet dancer. Wil is an overachiever whose self-imposed perfectionism is challenged by the awkwardness of love. To complicate things further, Vivian is the daughter of Wil's boss.

Meanwhile, the mother's out-of-wedlock midlife pregnancy results in banishment from her father's home. Ma moves in with Wil and sublimates her hopes in soap operas and Chinese erotic videos. The film's role reversal is both comic and poignant as Wil sets up a series of ill-fated dates for her mother with what eligible Chinese bachelors she can find. As Ma gradually grows into her own self-confidence, she must further adjust her expectations as the true nature of Wil's friendship with Vivian becomes evident.

"Saving Face" is a double entendre, since the face provides vocations for both daughter and mother, Wil as a reconstructive surgeon and Ma as a beautician. Says Wu, "The film was a love letter to my mother after I saw her being ostracized by her Chinese immigrant community. . . . I wrote *Saving Face* to say no matter what your sexuality, love can start at any point in life you want it to."

Wu, who acknowledged her own lesbianism at 19, drew episodes such as the mother's initial reaction to the daughter's coming out and their eventual reconciliation from her own life. (Actress Krusiec says that she learned her character by studying Wu's mannerisms.)

Wu employs a skillful mix of visual metaphors and story elements. The young lovers eye one another through clothing store shelves, their glimpses fragmented and tentative. Vivian--the dancer--teaches Wil how to fall safely. The elder spectators at the Chinese socials provide an engaging Greek chorus who reiterate the community's expected protocols. As an in-joke for Mandarin speakers, when Wil comes out to her mom the characters in the background soap opera are yelling, "Ma, let me in!"

A bus ride following a climactic wedding scene is a playful nod to Mike Nichols' *The Graduate* (1967). The mother-daughter reconciliation takes place under a masterful framing by a 1960s-vintage archway. Wu acknowledges Pedro Almodovar's influence in her use of color, especially noticeable in the lighting of the hospital and playground encounters.

Wu's satire is knife-edged but nevertheless encompasses a loving respect for customary Chinese-American relationships. She characterizes *Saving Face* as "the journey that this woman goes through to better understand her mother's heart, and that ultimately allows her to understand her own."

The success of *Saving Face* has established Wu as a darling of the independent film scene. Her distinctive voice and vision in that film promises a distinguished career.

Wu's second major project, a feature-length film, *Foreign Babes in Beijing*, based on a memoir by actress Rachel DeWoskin, was announced, but never actually went into production.

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