Title: Saving Face
Director: Alice Wu
Country: U.S.A.
Year: 2004

Starring/Character:

Michelle Krusiec: Wil
Joan Chen: Hwei-Lan Gao – Ma
Lynn Chen: Vivian Shing
Jin Wang: Wai Gung – Grandpa
Guang Lan Koh: Wai Po – Grandma

Jessica Hecht: Randi – Hospital Co-Worker
Ato Essandoh: Jay – Neighbor
Brian Yang: Little Yu
Mao Zhao: Old Yu
Louyong Wong: Dr. Shing
Qian Luo: Mrs. Shing

Writer(s): Alice Wu
Length: 97 minutes
Language(s): English, Mandarin
Location/Time of Action: New York City (Flushing, Queens), circa 2004

INTRODUCTION:

Saving Face has the auspicious distinction of being the first U.S. theatrical film release featuring an Asian-American lesbian couple. Despite this claim to fame, the film is more a parallel coming of age story about a mother and daughter.

Wil is a doctor in her late-twenties, living and working in New York City. She is a closeted lesbian. To please her family, particularly her mother, she spends her Friday evenings in Flushing, allowing herself to be set up with various gentlemen from the Chinese community there. While her family is clearly proud of her professional accomplishments, it is expected that she will choose a nice Chinese man to marry and settle down with.

Wil’s mother, “Ma,” is a long-time widow who lives at home with her parents. She speaks only Mandarin, though there are some clues in the film suggesting that she probably understands English fairly well. Early in the film we discover that Ma has been having an affair and become pregnant. When she refuses to name the father, Grandpa
throws her out of the house, claiming that she has dishonored the family (and especially him). Having nowhere else to go, Ma moves in with Wil, taking over her apartment.

The third main character to watch out for is Vivian. While Wil and Ma navigate their mother-daughter relationship and coming of age struggles, Vivian acts as both catalyst and observer. Vivian is not without her own set of conflicts. Even in a lesbian relationship, she finds herself drawn to a lover with strong resemblance to her father.

STUDY QUESTIONS:

1. Is the tension between Wil and Ma a result of cultural differences?

2. This is a story about first and second generation immigrants. In the United States, we often use “melting pot” and “salad bowl” analogies in discussing the assimilation of foreign immigrants into American culture. Do you see any evidence of these ideas in this film?

3. What events or changes lead to Wil’s willingness to come out of the closet?

4. Maturity and age are not the same thing. Generally we think of “coming of age” as happening in relation to adolescence. How is Saving Face a coming of age film for the character Ma?

5. Does the “Chinese Film” Ma selects play a role in the plot, or is it just a gag?

6. What can you infer about Ma from the extra large package of Charmin?

7. Close relationships have the power to be both empowering and limiting. In what ways do Vivian and Wil challenge and support each other?

8. We discussed character types in class in relation to the film Parenthood. In that film we found the single mother, the alcoholic father, the rebel, the prodigal son, the prodigy, and others. What character types do you see in this film? Are they the same characters you would expect to see in any American film? Are the character types altered by their Chinese-ness?