

Family Authority, Intergenerational Relationships, and Cultural Belonging: Negotiating Diasporic Identities in Double Happiness and The Wedding Banquet

Chuqi Xu

University of Toronto, Mississauga, Canada
xcqblanche@gmail.com

Abstract. During the 1990s, the expanding Chinese diaspora in North America brought family relationships, cultural identity, and belonging to the fore in Chinese diaspora cinema. This study compares Mina Shum's *Double Happiness* and Ang Lee's *The Wedding Banquet*, drawing on Stuart Hall's cultural identity theory and Homi Bhabha's third space theory. Through textual analysis, it examines how the two films construct diasporic identities in immigrant families, focusing on family authority, intergenerational relationships, and cultural belonging. Both films transcend the binary between Chinese tradition and Western modernity, portraying identity as an ongoing process of negotiation and reconstruction. However, their modes differ: *Double Happiness* highlights subjectivity built through everyday resistance and autonomous choices, while *The Wedding Banquet* reconciles familial obligations and personal desire via compromise, identity performance, and role transitions. These differences are shaped by gender, family structure, and immigration background. The findings suggest that Chinese diasporic identities are neither complete assimilation nor mere cultural preservation, but a continuous process formed through family, cultural, and social interactions. The article deepens understanding of identity construction in North American Chinese diaspora films and offers a comparative lens for future research.

Keywords: Chinese diaspora cinema, Cultural identity, Identity negotiation, *Double Happiness*, *The Wedding Banquet*

1. Introduction

Mina Shum's *Double Happiness* and Ang Lee's *The Wedding Banquet* both explore how young Chinese immigrants negotiate between family expectations and personal desires. Together, the two films reflect a recurring theme in North American Chinese diaspora cinema of the 1990s.

Double Happiness tells the story of Jade Li, a second-generation Hong Kong immigrant living in Vancouver, Canada, who constantly faces her parents' expectations for career, marriage, and traditional family responsibilities while pursuing her acting dreams and romantic freedom. *The Wedding Banquet* focuses on Wai-tung Gao, a Taiwanese immigrant in New York. To meet his parents' expectations for marriage and inheritance, he fakes a marriage with a woman from mainland China, which triggers a series of conflicts over family, cultural values, and personal

identity. These two films both reveal that cultural identity is the result of continuous negotiation and reconstruction within family relationships, intergenerational interactions, and cross-cultural environments [1].

Research on diasporic identities has long maintained that identity is not a fixed essence, but a continuous process of becoming. Stuart Hall believes that cultural identity should be understood as a constantly evolving process, rather than a fixed essence [2]. Homi K. Bhabha proposed that cultural identity is formed through continuous negotiation and interaction between different cultures [3]. For Chinese immigrants and their descendants living in North America, identity cannot fully return to the so-called pure Chinese culture, nor can it be fully assimilated into mainstream society. Instead, it forms a mixed cultural position between the two.

This type of identity negotiation often occurs first within the family. David Hanley points out that diasporic films often portray families as a microcosm of the entire diasporic community, and explore issues of identity formation through conflicts between traditional parents and the younger generation [1]. In *Double Happiness*, Jade constantly challenges her parents' expectations for career, marriage, and life path, and attempts to define herself through personal choices. In *The Wedding Banquet*, Wai-Tung maintains family relationships and cultural responsibilities through compromise, concealment, and identity performances. Although both protagonists face similar cultural pressures, their ways of responding to these pressures are clearly different.

This paper takes *Double Happiness* and *The Wedding Banquet* as case studies to explore how the two films present the construction of diasporic identities in North American Chinese immigrant families. The article argues that both films present cultural identity as a process of continuous negotiation and reconstruction within immigrant families, rather than a simple opposition between traditional culture and Western culture. Therefore, this article will analyze three aspects: family authority, intergenerational relationships, and cultural belonging, and explore how Chinese diasporic identities is constantly shaped and defined in family interactions and cross-cultural contexts.

2. Theoretical framework and literature review

2.1. Theoretical framework

The study of diasporic identities has long emphasized that cultural identity is not a fixed essence, but a process of continuous formation and reconstruction in history, culture, and social practice. Stuart Hall further argues that cultural identity encompasses shared historical experiences and memories while remaining in a state of constant becoming rather than static existence; identity must therefore be understood as an ongoing construction and transformation [2]. This perspective challenges the traditional view of cultural identity as a stable essence and provides a crucial theoretical basis for explaining how diasporic groups form identities across different cultural contexts.

On this basis, Homi K. Bhabha's Third Space theory contends that cultural meaning arises not from isolated cultural systems but from ongoing contact, negotiation, and interaction between cultures. The Third Space emphasizes the hybridity of cultural identity: immigrant identities are neither a simple preservation of original culture nor total assimilation, but are constantly negotiated and reconstructed through cross-cultural practice [3]. The above research provides a theoretical basis for this article to understand cultural identity as a continuous process of negotiation and construction. Based on this, this article analyzes the identity presented by North American Chinese immigrant families in *Double Happiness* and *The Wedding Banquet*.

2.2. Existing research

Studies on Chinese diaspora films consistently address themes of cultural identity, family relationships, intergenerational interaction, and cultural belonging. Previous studies suggest that the family is not only an important space for immigrant life, but also an important field for cultural value transmission and identity formation. Immigrants' identities are thus continually constructed through interactions within family relationships and cross-cultural environments.

The research on *Double Happiness* mainly focuses on the identity construction of Chinese Canadians and the significance of family space. David Hanley believes that the film is not only about personal growth, but also a typical diasporic film, as it centers on the tension between assimilation and cultural retention [1]. He notes that Jade's identity is not a simple choice between "Chinese culture" and "Canadian culture", but is formed through ongoing negotiation within the family space, mainstream society, and the intersection between the two. Furthermore, Hanley contends that while the family provides Jade with emotional belonging, it simultaneously constrains her career development, intimate relationships, and personal freedom [4]. Director Mina Shum also observes in an interview that the family functions as the "mirror" through which individuals first come to understand themselves, and that one's sense of identity originates in family relationships. This further illustrates that the family is not only a place where conflicts occur, but also an important foundation for identity formation [5].

In contrast, research on *The Wedding Banquet* focuses more on cultural responsibilities, intergenerational relationships, and identity negotiation within immigrant families. Qijun Han believes that Chinese immigrant families are an important field for the formation of diasporic identities, and family conflicts reflect the ongoing tension between cultural traditions and new social environments. In his view, the family in the film is not only a private living space, but also carries cultural traditions and collective values. Therefore, the protagonist faces not only personal choices, but also the need to fulfill family responsibilities and cultural expectations [6]. Jiefei Yu further emphasizes that immigration status is always in a state of flux and change, and the characters in the film do not truly resolve cultural conflicts, but instead seek a new balance between different cultures by constantly adjusting their own positions [7].

Existing research generally suggests that both films have broken through the binary opposition between traditional Chinese culture and Western culture in understanding identity, and instead focus more on the dynamic construction of identity in family relationships, cross-cultural environments, and diasporic experiences.

2.3. Research gap

Although existing studies have offered extensive discussions of cultural identity, family relationships, and diasporic experiences in *Double Happiness* and *The Wedding Banquet*, several gaps remain. First, most studies examine each film in isolation and rarely compare the two within a shared theoretical framework. Second, previous research tends to focus on a single dimension, cultural identity, family relationships, or immigration experience, rather than comprehensively analyzing the construction of diasporic identities through multiple lenses such as family authority, intergenerational relationships, and cultural belonging. Finally, while Hall's cultural identity theory and Bhabha's Third Space theory have each been widely applied in diasporic film research, a comparative analysis that combines both to examine identity negotiation in North American Chinese immigrant families remains insufficient [2, 3]. Drawing on these two theories, this article compares how *Double Happiness* and *The Wedding Banquet* negotiate and reconstruct diasporic identities in

family interaction and cross-cultural contexts, focusing on three aspects: family authority, intergenerational relationships, and cultural belonging.

3. Comparative analysis of diasporic identity negotiation

3.1. Family authority: different forms of negotiation and conflict

Although both *Double Happiness* and *The Wedding Banquet* use the family as the primary site for cultural identity negotiation, there are significant differences in the presentation of family authority between the two films. The family authority in *Double Happiness* mainly manifests in the form of open conflict, while that in *The Wedding Banquet* operates more through emotional obligations and cultural responsibilities.

In *Double Happiness*, family authority has strong visibility. Jade's parents are directly involved in her life planning, making clear demands for her career, love, and future life, hoping that she will have a stable job, marry a suitable Chinese male, and take on traditional family responsibilities. The conflicts in the film mainly unfold through family dinners, family gatherings, and face-to-face conversations with parents. Family members constantly inquire about her work, relationships, and future plans, and evaluate her choices based on traditional values. This public expression of family expectations gives authority clear normativity and enables Jade to be aware of the objects she needs to respond to and challenge. Therefore, the identity negotiation in the film is mainly based on public family conflicts.

In contrast, the family authority in *The Wedding Banquet* is more concealed. Wai-Tung's parents rarely issue direct orders about how their son should live, but instead influence his choices through cultural expectations such as marriage, continuing the family line, and family responsibilities. Although they are far away in Taiwan, their phone calls, letters, and insistence on holding traditional weddings continue to exert family authority across geographical distances. This authority relies more on family affection and filial piety rather than direct control. For Wai-Tung, what is truly difficult to refuse is not the commands of his parents, but the cultural responsibility and emotional connection they represent. Therefore, family conflicts in *The Wedding Banquet* are often hidden in the silence, concealment, and tacit understanding between characters, rather than intense direct confrontations.

Thus, both films acknowledge the important role of family in the construction of diasporic identities, but *Double Happiness* portrays family authority as clear norms and conflicts, while *The Wedding Banquet* shapes family authority as an intangible force maintained by emotional and cultural obligations.

3.2. Identity negotiation: divergent strategies of the protagonists

Faced with family authority, the protagonists in the two films adopt different identity negotiation strategies. *Double Happiness* emphasizes the pursuit of subjectivity through continuous personal resistance, while *The Wedding Banquet* relies more on compromise, identity performance, and role transitions to maintain a balance between different cultural values.

In *Double Happiness*, Jade does not fully accept her parents' plans for her future life, but constantly maintains her choices through daily actions. She persisted in pursuing a career as an actress, even though her parents believed the profession lacked stability; She continued to date Mark instead of searching for a Chinese partner according to her parents' expectations; Faced with her parents' doubts, she expressed her thoughts through arguments, rejection, and persistence. These

rebellions are not intense revolutionary acts, but rather a process of negotiation that accumulates in daily life. Jade did not attempt to break away from the family, but gradually established her own subjectivity through continuous interaction with the family. She persisted in her decisions time and time again, gradually striving for the right to define herself, making identity recognition a continuous process of practice and construction.

In contrast, Wai-Tung adopts a completely different strategy. He does not directly challenge his parents' expectations, but maintains family stability by constantly adjusting the relationships between different social roles. In response to his parents' expectations for marriage, he agrees to a fake marriage with Wei Wei and cooperates with the traditional wedding ceremony; When facing his parents, he plays the role of an ideal son and husband; When interacting with Simon, he maintains a genuine emotional relationship. The identity in the film therefore presents a clear performative nature, with different identities constantly switching with different social relationships. For Wai-Tung, identity negotiation is not about finding the only true self, but about constantly adjusting one's position between different cultural norms. He tries to fulfill family responsibilities while also striving to preserve personal living space, so compromise does not mean giving up subjectivity, but becomes an important way to maintain coexistence of multiple identities. Therefore, although both protagonists attempt to seek personal choices, they take completely different paths. Jade seeks sovereignty through public expression and sustained resistance, while Wai-Tung coordinates the relationship between different cultural values through role transitions, identity performances, and moderate compromise.

3.3. Negotiation outcomes: individual autonomy and ongoing negotiation

In addition to differences in identity negotiation methods, the presentation of negotiation results in the two films also differs. *Double Happiness* focuses more on the gradual establishment of individual subjectivity, while *The Wedding Banquet* emphasizes that identity negotiation remains open and unfinished.

The ending of *Double Happiness* does not portray Jade to completely break away from her family or traditional culture. On the contrary, she still maintains contact with her parents, but has been able to more firmly adhere to her career choices and lifestyle. The film indicates that cultural identity is not acquired through negating the family, but is formed through the process of constantly challenging family expectations and renegotiating family relationships. Jade ultimately gains not complete independence, but more autonomy in family relationships to make decisions about her life.

The Wedding Banquet does not provide a clear solution for cultural conflicts. After the wedding, family relationships are maintained, the conflicts among Wai-Tung's sexual identity, fake marriage, and family expectations do not truly disappear. The film does not achieve complete victory for either party, nor does it require the characters to fully integrate into a certain culture, but instead maintains an open state of continuous negotiation. For Wai-Tung, identity always needs to be constantly adjusted with different social relationships, and cultural responsibilities and personal desires also maintain a dynamic balance.

4. Discussion

4.1. Two modes of identity negotiation

Although both *Double Happiness* and *The Wedding Banquet* revolve around North American Chinese immigrant families and present cultural identity as a continuous process of negotiation,

there are significant differences in the specific ways the two films approach identity negotiation. *Double Happiness* emphasizes that individuals strive for subjectivity through public expression, daily resistance, and adherence to personal choices. The identity construction in the film is more manifested as individuals constantly breaking through family norms and redefining themselves in family interactions. In contrast, *The Wedding Banquet* does not consider public conflict as the primary way of identity negotiation, but emphasizes maintaining a balance between family responsibilities and personal desires through compromise, identity performances, and role transitions. The protagonist does not attempt to break away from the family, but constantly adjusts his position in response to family expectations. Therefore, the two films present two different modes of identity negotiation, rather than two opposing identity outcomes.

4.2. Sources of difference in identity negotiation

The different negotiation strategies in the two films reflect not just character traits, but also broader factors, gender, family structure, and immigration background. Gender shapes the way the two protagonists respond to family norms. As a Chinese American woman, Jade not only needs to respond to her parents' expectations for marriage and career, but also has to face societal stereotypes of Asian women. Therefore, her rebellion serves as both a response to family authority and a challenge to gender norms. In contrast, Wai-Tung's main pressure comes from expectations within Chinese families regarding men's responsibility for family continuity. Marriage and childbirth are not only related to personal life, but also to family responsibilities, so his identity negotiation revolves more around how to fulfill family obligations.

Family structures also differ between the two films. In *Double Happiness*, family members live together for a long time, and parents can directly intervene in Jade's daily life, so conflicts often unfold face-to-face. In contrast, the parents in *The Wedding Banquet* have been living in Taiwan for a long time, and their family relationships are maintained more through cross-border connections. Although the spatial distance has reduced daily contact between family members, cultural responsibility has not weakened as a result. Instead, it has strengthened family authority through emotional connections and moral responsibility.

The two films also reflect different immigrant backgrounds. *Double Happiness* focuses on the second generation of Chinese Canadians born or raised in Canada, whose core issue is how to establish their own cultural identity in mainstream society; *The Wedding Banquet* focuses on the first generation of Taiwanese immigrants who migrated to the United States as adults. Their identity negotiations not only involve cultural differences, but are also influenced by transnational family relationships and immigration experiences.

4.3. Beyond assimilation and cultural preservation

Both *Double Happiness* and *The Wedding Banquet* address the question of how individuals establish a sense of belonging when pulled between their native culture and mainstream society.

Traditional discussions about immigration often understand cultural adaptation as a choice between assimilation and cultural preservation. However, neither film accepts this binary framework. Although Jade in *Double Happiness* constantly challenges family expectations, she does not completely deny her own Chinese cultural background; Wai-Tung in *The Wedding Banquet* strives to respond to family responsibilities but also does not give up his personal life and identity. Both protagonists do not completely choose one side, but constantly adjust their positions between different cultural values. The two films provide different modes of identity negotiation, but they

both reflect that diasporic identity is neither a simple continuation of traditional culture nor a result of complete assimilation, but a dynamic process constantly constructed in family relationships, cultural practices, and social interactions. They challenge the conventional assimilation-preservation divide, offering a more grounded account of how Chinese diasporic identities take shape across generations and social contexts.

5. Conclusion

This study focuses on Mina Shum's *Double Happiness* and Ang Lee's *The Wedding Banquet* as research objects, exploring how diasporic identities in North American Chinese immigrant families are negotiated and reconstructed through family interactions, based on Stuart Hall's cultural identity theory and Homi Bhabha's Third Space theory. Through comparative analysis, this study finds that although both films present family as an important space for cultural identity formation and challenge a simple binary opposition between Chinese and North American cultures, they adopt different approaches to identity negotiation. *Double Happiness* emphasizes the pursuit of individual subjectivity through daily resistance, personal choices, and the renegotiation of family relationships, whereas *The Wedding Banquet* highlights how individuals maintain a balance between family responsibilities and personal desires through compromise, identity performance, and role transition. These differences suggest that cultural identity is not fixed, but continuously shaped through family relationships, cultural practices, and cross-cultural experiences. The different negotiation patterns are also influenced by factors such as gender, family structure, and immigration background. Therefore, although the two films address similar cultural themes, they reveal different forms of Chinese diasporic identity formation in diverse social and cultural contexts, reflecting Hall's view of dynamic cultural identity and Bhabha's concept of the Third Space.

However, this study is limited to two North American Chinese films from the 1990s. The conclusions may not apply to Chinese diaspora films from other regions or historical periods. The analysis also does not fully address how gender, class, ethnicity, and cross-border mobility interact with identity construction. Including more films from different countries and regions in future research would help reveal variations in identity negotiation across different socio-cultural contexts, and provide a broader understanding of cultural identity in Chinese diaspora cinema.

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