FIGURE 6.1 A picture of the happy family reunion in California at the end of *Eat a Bowl of Tea* (Copyright Columbia Pictures, 1988)

FIGURE 6.2 The three young people arriving at a solution to their problems, *Xiyan / The Wedding Banquet* (Copyright Central Motion Pictures / Good Machine, 1993)

6 All Chinese Families Are Alike

Biopolitics in *Eat a Bowl of Tea* and *The Wedding Banquet*

In his classic *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality*, Freud made what was then a novel but has since become a well-known argument that human sexuality is traceable to infancy and childhood and that it is manifest in the numerous forms of what are considered sexual aberrations: "A disposition to perversions is an original and universal disposition of the human sexual instinct," he writes.[1] By displacing human sexuality onto the realm of the perverse, Freud's point was to distinguish it from the straightforward animal instinct of procreation and thus, epistemically, from the telos of a practical end (in this case, continued biological survival). For Freud, this characteristic of being at once polymorphous and purposeless was what made human sexuality fascinating as an object of study. He went on to give this object a specialized name—the unconscious—on which he founded the institution of psychoanalysis.

Freud's bold and imaginative conceptualization may be considered an act of aestheticizing human sexuality. By "aestheticizing," I do not, of course, mean that he made sexuality pretty to look at but rather that his work has methodically carved out a space in which an entire (counter)logic—replete with plots, characters, obstacles, tragedies, and partial resolutions—can be elaborated in distinction from the reproductive purposefulness of nonhuman animals. Central to Freud's aestheticization was a groundbreaking, and to many readers sympathetic, rendering of human sexuality as a fugi-

tive and fragile figure: being, as he asserts, "the weak spot" in the process of human cultural development,[2] sexuality can never be fully compliant with the constraints of civilization and must thus be regularly repressed in order for individual persons to attain social acceptance.

Insofar as it is presented as an intractable arrangement in which sexuality always gets punished, restrained, diverted, and sublimated, sociality appears in Freud's work as a source of oppression. Human sexuality and human society are permanently in conflict, so much so that even when human beings seem to conform to the rules of nature and seek biologically to reproduce themselves, it is already the result of social adaptation. Biological reproduction as it manifests itself among humans is anything but a natural phenomenon. Jean Laplanche summarizes Freud's insights into human sexuality in a remarkable phrase—as "'instincts lost' and 'instincts regained'":

> The whole theme of *The Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality* (Freud, 1905) could be summarized as "instincts lost" and "instincts regained". The whole point is to show that human beings have lost their instincts, especially their sexual instinct and, more specifically still, their instinct to reproduce. The thesis of the first two sections of the *Three Essays* at least is that human instincts have no fixed or definite object, and no goal, and that they follow no one, stereotypical path. . . . The "instincts regained" aspect of the *Three Essays* can be seen in its account of the transformations of puberty [*die Umgestaltungen der Pubetät*]. This theme might be termed "instincts mimicked" or "instincts replaced". . . . Although it is apparently natural, the genesis of a wish to have a baby is, in Freud's description, far from simple. A woman has to struggle through a veritable labyrinth before she learns to *wish* for something that any living creative instinctively *wants*.[3]

Nonetheless, despite its understanding of (even) biological reproduction as a mimicked—that is, socially acquired—instinct, Freudian psychoanalysis tends by and large to focus on the so-called aberrations and perversions as the proper realm of human sexuality and as a result has left the problematic of human procreation conceptually oversimplified and, relatively speaking, unexplored. In Freud's terms, when it does happen, human procreation can only be the result of social coercion: women can only "wish" to have a baby after they have learned and internalized the painful reality of what is expected of "normal" womanhood. By pitting the individual and his/her sexuality against the social collective in a more or less opposed fashion, his aestheticized and segregated notion of human sexuality, though illuminating in many respects, seems increasingly inadequate in dealing with the evolving complications of human reproduction, especially as reproduction is enmeshed in cultural and intercultural contexts in which meanings are conferred on it in ways that go well beyond a simple biological end.

THE ENTRY OF LIFE INTO HISTORY

This is the juncture at which Freud's framework needs to be read against Michel Foucault's critique of the widespread, post-Freudian attitude toward sexuality. As is well known, Foucault gave this attitude a name—the repressive hypothesis. Whereas Freud specialized in arguing the vicissitudes of a human sexuality struggling against the forces of repression, Foucault's aim was rather to ask a definitively different type of question: how did we come to believe that we are repressed in the first place? Foucault's oft-cited remarks are worth quoting again if only because they relativize, rather than essentialize, repression by foregrounding the discursive process involved: "The question I would like to pose is not, Why are we repressed? But rather, Why do we say, with so much passion and so much resentment against our most recent past, against our present, and against ourselves, that we are repressed? By what spiral did we come to affirm that sex is negated? What led us to show, ostentatiously, that sex is something we hide, to say it is something we silence?"[4]

For Foucault, accordingly, sexuality could no longer be thought of, as it was in Freud, as "a stubborn drive, by nature alien and of necessity disobedient to a power which exhausts itself trying to subdue it and often fails to control it entirely." Instead, he argued that sexuality needs to be theorized as "an especially dense transfer point for relations of power"—one, moreover, that is "endowed with the greatest instrumentality."[5] If it succeeded in challenging the paradigm of lack and castration that is lodged firmly in the narrative of sexual repression, Foucault's critique of Freudian psychoanalysis at the same time acknowledged that it is an extraordinarily effective mode of discourse. Indeed, Foucault's own notion of discursive power was based in part on his understanding of how *talk* about sexual repression (as instigated by Freudian psychoanalysis) had activated an unprecedented proliferation of practices and discourses, leading henceforth to more obsessions with the topic, ad infinitum. Foucault's own engagement with the

Freudian legacy, however, introduced an important difference: it explored sexuality on explicitly social and historical grounds.

Unlike Freud, Foucault argued that sexuality is not the opposite but rather a vehicle and an effect of power. The aberrations and perversions Freud discussed as variants of a polymorphous and purposeless sexuality, Foucault rewrote as part of a totalized outcome of Western society's control of populations, since the eighteenth century, through the implementation of specific mechanisms of power-as-knowledge.[6] Foucault's interest in the social regimentations and penalizations of sexual behaviors meant that, while his work proceeded fully in accordance with Freud's basic argument that the sexual instinct is nonessentialist in character, he had chosen to sidestep that argument per se in order to focus, instead, on the complex rationalizations of human sexuality in modern times through steady institutional surveillance. Rather than a matter of "instincts and their vicissitudes," which require ever more efforts of differentiation and categorization (as they did for Freud), sexuality in Foucault's work is a vast, heterogeneous apparatus that includes legal, moral, scientific, architectural, philosophical, and administrative discourses, all of which are linked to the production of knowledge with ever-shifting boundaries and effects of inclusion and exclusion.

Between Freud's and Foucault's analyses, one can discern two methods of conceptualizing human sexuality as an object of inquiry: one treats human sexuality as an oppressed figure and attempts to chart its paths of attempted rebellion and escape—the infinite mutations, variations, and transformations—*within itself*; the other treats human sexuality as a historical phenomenon and seeks to investigate the numerous sociological linkages that lead to its discursive prominence, its being taken for granted as our insuppressible "nature." Between the two types of analyses, there is, one might add, also a crucial shift in epistemic emphases: if Freud's is an aestheticization of sexuality (which is portrayed as being always marginalized by and in conflict with social forces), Foucault drew attention instead to sexuality as a nexus of governmental monitoring and control, whereby even the most mundane, private, or culturally specific sexual minutiae may be traceable to an entire power apparatus at work.

Foucault's analyses of the various institutional practices devised and implemented in European society since the Enlightenment for handling human sexuality lead, in the final part of *The History of Sexuality*, volume 1, to the argument that such practices are part of a biopolitics—a calculated

management of life through the administration of bodies and the systematic perpetuation of the rationale for continued human reproduction. Reconsidered from the vantage point of this latter part of Foucault's book, sexuality would perhaps need to be seen as just a component—albeit an indispensable one—in the much larger world picture of biopolitics, which Foucault also named by a remarkable phrase, "the entry of life into history."[7]

In the following, I would like to read Wayne Wang's *Eat a Bowl of Tea* (1988) and Ang Lee's *Xiyan* (*The Wedding Banquet*, 1993) as two entertaining performances of this "entry of life into history." The two films have many elements in common. Each tells the story of a Chinese family with a beloved son; each family has members on both sides of the Pacific and is preoccupied with the question of the son's marriage and reproduction. Each story involves a powerful father figure and an intelligent young female who eventually bears an offspring for the family. Both stories end on a relatively happy note with some form of geographical relocation. In the terms of the present discussion, what makes the two film texts especially interesting to contemplate together is that, in them, the problems of sexuality assume center stage against a background of diasporic life in North America, so that the biopolitical imperative to reproduce—an imperative that constitutes the real dramatic action in each case—makes its appearance, as it were, under the guise of an ethnic culture's efforts to survive domination by modern or Western (in these cases, North American) values. Apart from the actual sexual issues faced by the characters in the stories, in other words, it is now ethnicity itself, in the form of Chinese culture (together with its values), that is imagined in the "repressed" manner human sexuality was presented by Freud—as a figure that is primitive, besieged, minoritized, and/or threatened with scarcity or extinction. Be that as it may, such logics of the repressive hypothesis provide only the beginning of the tragicomic family enterprises involved.

THE MAGIC BOWL OF TEA

Based on the 1961 novel of the same name by Louis Chu and made after independent film classics of his own such as *Chan Is Missing* (1982) and *Dim Sum* (1984),[8] Wayne Wang's film (with a screenplay by Judith Rascoe) uses the background of New York's Chinatown to tell the story of a father, Wong Wah Gay, and son, Wong Ben Loy, whom we meet in 1949. When he came to work in the restaurant business, Wah Gay left behind his wife,

whom he had married in 1923, in south China. (This was the period when the Chinese Exclusion Act, passed in 1882 and not amended until 1943, prohibited immigration except for a few exempted groups, and Chinese wives and daughters were not allowed to join their husbands and fathers who had come to the United States to work.) Although Wah Gay has no plans to return to China, he sends Ben Loy, a U.S. war veteran, "home" to his mother so she can arrange for him to meet Lee Mei Oi, the daughter of his Chinatown friend Lee Gong. The two young people instantly take to each other, their horoscopes are found by the matchmakers to match (auspiciously), and Mei Oi accompanies Ben Loy on his return to New York as his new bride.

The early marital bliss is dampened by an embarrassing problem: Ben Loy has become impotent. As a restaurant manager, he is immersed in his daily work and often returns home after midnight, leaving Mei Oi to spend most days by herself. In her loneliness, Mei Oi starts having an affair with Ah Song, a notorious, good-for-nothing womanizer, until her secret is exposed by word-of-mouth to the entire Chinatown community. Enraged and ashamed by the scandal, Wah Gay follows Ah Song one night and hacks off one of his ears with a cleaver. Sensing that they can no longer stay in Chinatown, Wah Gay departs for the Caribbean, and Lee Gong departs for Chicago. As Ben Loy himself is getting ready to leave town, Mei Oi and he become reconciled. She offers him a big packet of "some very special tea all the way from China" that is guaranteed to cure impotence. The two of them finally settle down in San Francisco. The film ends with a scene of them having a barbecue in their yard, with the two grandpas and a crying toddler having his first haircut—and Mei Oi is heavily pregnant again. With Caribbean music in the background, the whole family poses for a happy picture (fig. 6.1).

Conceptually speaking, *Eat A Bowl of Tea* can certainly be described as popular-Freudian—and perhaps specifically post–Second World War American—in that individual sexual gratification and fulfillment are given focalization as the secret to social cohesion. In terms of narrative design, Wang's film makes use of the repressive hypothesis in several senses. Contentwise, at the center of the story is the mystery of a sexual lack/dysfunction, Ben Loy's impotence; structurally, this lack/dysfunction is what propels the narrative and enables it to develop; finally, the viewers, in being drawn into the hermeneutics of the story, have to ask themselves *why* Ben Loy is in such an afflicted condition. This last question turns the story into a kind of interpretative puzzle and demands that details be read allegorically, in terms that go beyond the literal or purely physical.

David L. Eng, for instance, has responded thoughtfully to this last question by drawing on Freud's and other scholars' studies of hysteria. Decoupling hysteria from the female body and from a strictly anatomical classification, Eng argues that Ben Loy, the Asian American male from Chinatown, inhabits a similarly resistive position to the dominant culture as Freud's female hysteric: "What . . . does Asian American male hysteria symptomatize socially and politically?" Eng asks.[9] After giving the pathology of male impotence ample theoretical resonance in this manner—that is, by translating it into the already-known sexual perversion or aberration of hysteria—Eng proceeds to diagnose it as a symptom of the repression (or what he calls racial castration) that ethnic subjects suffer in mainstream white America. In this context, Eng writes, "hysteria not only testifies to a failed social interpellation but it also speaks to the production of subjects marked by particular deprivileged social positions. In other words, it speaks to the production of a class of male subjects who are excluded by and large from symbolic privileges."[10] By adhering to a certain logic of the repressive hypothesis, then, Eng provides an answer to the question of why Ben Loy is impotent. The ethnic male's penile-cum-existential struggle is, Eng implies, a kind of U.S. national allegory:

> Ben Loy's impotence cannot be characterized as the result of an organic ailment. On the contrary, it must be described as an unconscious effect of his limited social role within the segregated borders of Chinatown as well as his limited access to the larger space of the U.S. nation-state. . . . His hysterical impotence marks an unconscious protest against past exclusions and economic exploitations suffered by Chinese male immigrants in America. That is, his hysterical symptoms reprise a long-repressed history of institutionalized racism and disenfranchisement that subordinated the Chinese male immigrant as alien and thus excludable, while configuring him as socially emasculated and powerless.[11]

Without a doubt, Eng's reading sheds important light on a parallel relationship between masculinity and race, though I believe he may have been overhasty in matching one type of lack (male impotence) with another (racial degradation or castration), thus producing an analysis that seems a little too neat and predictable. Wang's film, on the other hand, offers a much less conclusive approach to Ben Loy's predicament.

Rather than resisting mainstream white America, Ben Loy is, to all appearances, actively invested in becoming as American as everyone else. Before being sent to China, he dates and presumably has sex with an American girl; while in China, he tells his mother that his dream wife should look like Rita Hayworth; after getting married, at his doctor's advice, he takes Mei Oi on a trip, and they visit Washington, D.C., the nation's capital, where he becomes temporarily potent again; as they relocate briefly to New Jersey, he clearly disdains his job of making Chinese fortune cookies; finally, as he gets ready to leave New York, he eagerly looks forward to a new job broadcasting a radio sports program in San Francisco, a job that, though still a Chinatown operation, will, he says, "lead someplace." If these incidents of Ben Loy's aspirations to assimilate to mainstream American culture are indications of any kind of tension, it would be tension in resistance to the Chinatown community, its assumptions and expectations, and, most of all, its practices of surveillance, as personified by his own father. In an early scene, long before Ben Loy gets married, Wah Gay is shown telling Lee Gong about his worry that he won't see his grandchildren. After Ben Loy is married, Wah Gay quickly grows impatient that his daughter-in-law is not yet pregnant. One day, while grabbing his own crotch, he admonishes his son: "This is for making babies," he declares, "not just to have fun with." As Ben Loy remarks to Mei Oi after a failed attempt at having intercourse: "I just feel like everyone is watching us." He feels so intimidated by this paternalistic communal gaze that he must turn Wah Gay's picture on the nightstand face down as he tries to resume sex with his wife.

So, instead of mainstream white America, isn't the cause of Ben Loy's problem quite simply his own old man and the Chinatown community? And wouldn't this reading be equally dependent on the repressive hypothesis, involving as it does the literal presence of a demanding father and a tightly knit social network? The answer here would definitely be "yes"—though I contend that it is the beginning rather than the conclusion to the film's mode of dramatization. Indeed, with the emphasis placed on Wah Gay and the Chinatown community, it becomes clear that Ben Loy's story is not simply that of a minority individual's struggle for sexual success in white America but also—and more pointedly—that of an ethnic male faced with the responsibility and obligation, imposed by the group, to produce heirs. Ben Loy's problem is not exactly the impotence of a private man; it is that he, as a male descendent of the Chinese community, cannot get it up with his legally married Chinese wife within the confines of

New York's Chinatown. It is with this realization—of multivalent cultural forces working concurrently, alongside and/or against one another, with a father figure who is as manipulative as he is nurturing—that the repressive hypothesis reading, which tends to focus on sexuality (together with the unconscious) as a personal or individuated event, needs to give way to a different method of conceptualizing the problems at hand.

Eng, being rightly mindful of the realpolitical stakes of anti-immigration and antimiscegenation laws, which remained in force in the United States until the mid-twentieth century, repeatedly describes the bachelor community in Chinatown as being "on the verge of biological extinction."[12] This claim is also made by Wah Gay in his brief voice-over narration at the beginning of the film, when he refers to how "Chinatown was dying" as Chinese men were, for some sixty years, not allowed to bring their wives or daughters to America. Rather than accepting this impending crisis at its face value, I'd suggest that it would be more productive to think of it as predominantly an *anxiety* about extinction. How so?

Again, Wang's film offers interesting clues. To begin with, there is no dearth of sexual potency and activity on the part of the men in Chinatown: an early scene shows Wah Gay visiting a Chinese prostitute while a long line of men waits outside the door as he finishes his transactions, and Ben Loy, as a young bachelor, dances with and presumably has sex with an American girl (who, not knowing about his marriage, shows up later at his apartment to try to resume relations). Given that these youthful women are readily available, can't the Chinese males—in theory at least—produce heirs with their likes and thus avert the grave danger of biological extinction? The fact that this is so obviously outside the realm of possibility as to be unthinkable indicates that biological reproduction is in this case imagined to be (a) exclusively reproduction with/by pure Chinese women (prostitutes and non-Chinese females are thus disqualified) and (b) exclusively the reproduction of Chinese in America (otherwise, with the staggering numbers of Chinese people on this planet, what is the problem?). Furthermore, (a) and (b) are mutually contradictory preoccupations: if it is inconceivable for the Chinese lineage to be tainted (that is, to be made impure) in the first place, why should the possible biological extinction of Chinese Americans—by definition already a suspect, because impure, category—be such a concern?

Therefore, even though it is, to all appearances, the obstacle to overcome and the enigma to resolve, male impotence is not the ultimately

determinant issue in the purported crisis of biological extinction. The ultimately determinant issue is that, for the production and continuation of a community, only certain types of women—not whores, not non-Chinese females—can bring Chinese male potency to fruition: someone like Mei Oi, who is a virgin and from the real China. Rather than a Chinese male's penis (which, in the film as well as in the novel, has already found its way into other types of women's bodies), it is the chaste Chinese woman's womb—"clean," accessible, and healthily functioning—that is absolutely essential for the continuation of the family line and the ethnic heritage, that will put an end to the imagined horror of biological extinction. This womb will serve as the supreme, sentimental boundary marker between "us" and "them."

To return to Wah Gay's admonition that the penis is for "making babies," what articulates itself as an obsession with procreation is thus, when examined closely, a form of homosocial male bonding over the female body. Consider some of the small details the film offers in passing. First, Wah Gay and his male friends, as they meet at the Wang Family Association, at the barber's, and at mah-jongg gatherings, regularly gossip about other people's, especially women's, sex lives. Despite their own not exactly pristine sexual behaviors (which may, arguably, be justified by the Chinese Exclusion Act), these men morally disapprove of female infidelity (even when it is merely a rumor) as a kind of pandemonium. (For this reason, one can surmise that, although most of them, like Wah Gay, have not been back to China for decades, they expect their wives to remain sexually faithful to them. The question of these elderly women's sexual unfulfillment in China—that is, outside the United States—is clearly inadmissible into the epistemic frame of this story.)[13] With their male chauvinistic double standards regarding male and female sexuality, these gossipy exchanges amount to a form of positive social bonding, uniting the men with a sense of shared values. Second, as Mei Oi's affair becomes known, Ah Song's status changes from that of a (disliked) member of the community to that of an explicit enemy, even though this hostility directed at a male, too, must be understood as a form of social bonding, albeit a negative one. The male who violates the cardinal rule of the community—the rule that one does not touch another male's property, including his wife—must be punished and ostracized, but such punishment and ostracism need to be understood as sacrificial, and thus sanctimonious, rituals, performed for the sake of reinforcing the foundations of tribal integrity.

What comes across as a rather banal preoccupation with biological reproduction—the aspect of human sexuality that Freud considers not terribly interesting because it is merely animal-like and purpose-oriented—turns out therefore to be the force field of a particular form of biopolitics, a biopolitics that fantasizes the indispensability of the penis as an instrument for reproduction even as the men, Wah Gay himself included, direct their wishes, anxieties, furies, and vengeances exclusively at a demand for female chastity. The way these men actually talk and interact among one another implies—fantastically—that without such female chastity, "making babies" would be out of the question. The ostensible narrative suspense surrounding male impotence, in other words, functions really as a veil for something far more disturbing and beyond control. Behind the obsession with biological reproduction—with the continuation of the family line, the ethnic heritage, and so forth—is ultimately an obsession with the containment of female sexuality, a task whose near impossibility must remain disguised and disavowed.

Contrary to Freud's attempt to distinguish human sexuality definitively from the teleological end of reproduction, the film *Eat A Bowl of Tea* demonstrates that the management and manipulation of reproductive potentiality belong squarely within the realm of human sexuality as mediated by a type of collective cultural fantasy centered on women's bodies. Freud's dichotomization of human sexuality and animal reproduction does not exactly work in this instance because, although sexual disturbance (such as Ben Loy's impotence) is inextricable from the imperative of procreation as imposed by the ethnic community, what is far more thought-provoking than this sexual disturbance is the scene of its dramatization (that is, the way it is played out collectively), which points to a larger biopolitical strife in which the rise and fall of the penis is not necessarily the exclusive critical event.

Not surprisingly, then, the solution to Ben Loy's problem has to come from sources other than the father and his male cohorts. With Wah Gay temporarily out of the picture, it is Mei Oi, the adulterous wife, who delivers the "very special tea" that miraculously cures Ben Loy's impotence.[14] As in all acts of gift giving, however, what is being delivered and reciprocated—that is, exchanged—is far from straightforward.

Her silly affair with Ah Song notwithstanding, toward the end of the story, Mei Oi seems to have returned to her proper role as a good wife who helps resolve her husband's predicament. From this perspective, the ending is indeed a happy one: past conflicts have subsided, difficulties are over-

come, the family is reunited, and everyone can live happily ever after. At the same time, the fact that the gift is "all the way from China"—rather than Chinatown—raises the question of where exactly "home, sweet home" is for Chinese Americans such as Ben Loy. Toward the beginning of the film, as Ben Loy visits his mother and extended family in south China, we are shown an idyllic picture of this "home" accompanied with sentimental music: albeit quaint and backward, China and the Chinese people seem to possess an alluring charm. That the cure for Ben Loy's genealogical blockage in the end comes from this distant homeland suggests a profundity and intimacy of connection that the United States simply cannot provide. In keeping with some popular trends in present-day Asian American identity politics, whose identification with the culture and power of the United States tends paradoxically to be mediated by the fantasy of a linguistically and culturally alien Asia as the authentic and original home, the bowl of tea that heals is nothing short of a magic potion.

Yet clearly few Chinese Americans ever return home to China. Like Ben Loy and his family, they are much more likely to move from one place to another within the bounds of the United States. If America is indeed the desired home (even for someone such as Wah Gay), what about the dream of the pure Chinese lineage?[15] How are these two libidinal trajectories to be reconciled? Can they ever be reconciled?

As the miraculous gift that enables the family to live happily thereafter, therefore, the bowl of tea—that secret formula of potency, that authentic Chinese fix—simultaneously raises a new set of unsettling questions. As the bearer of the vital gift, Mei Oi also bears a child in the process, but who is the biological father of the child? Whereas, in Louis Chu's novel, the father is clearly indicated to be Ah Song, in Wang's film this remains ambiguous: it is possible that Ben Loy has fathered the child during the trip to Washington, D.C. (as Ben Loy himself believes, after double-checking the dates on the stubs of the train tickets), but it is equally possible that Mei Oi is pregnant by Ah Song. In the film, there is no indication that Mei Oi herself knows for sure, either, though it is entirely plausible that being pregnant is what, in the end, prompts her to seek reconciliation with her husband.

From a liberalist perspective, the uncertainty of fatherhood can be taken to suggest a potentiality of reformed kinship rules, of a new kind of social contract by which a married pregnant woman does not have to be punished, excommunicated, or slaughtered simply because she has committed adultery. Instead, whoever the biological father may be, there is no

uncertainty about motherhood, and the woman, as mother, can be fully accepted by the community on the basis of her own sexual agency, while the impurity or illegitimacy she embodies (both in the sense of her adultery and of her bastard offspring) need not be deemed a violation or lead inevitably to a tragic ending.[16]

But as Wah Gay, Lee Gong, Ben Loy, Mei Oi, and the first grandchild pose for the family picture, with the second grandchild clearly on his/her way, this jolly ending may also be glossed in a radically different way. For isn't female adultery (together with its biological consequence) simply patched over by the same old patriarchal ideology with its resilient power to neutralize and normalize everything, including a fundamentally subversive gift borne by the unfaithful woman? After all, the most important preoccupation of this patriarchy is with making babies—Chinese babies in America, to be precise—so that the community will not become biologically extinct. Whoever the biological father may be, Mei Oi's child is still Chinese and male—and that, perhaps, is the most important consideration. Is that why everyone can smile happily at the end—because even Mei Oi's sexual transgression and its outcome have been safely recontained within the bounds of the sanctity of Chineseness; because after all, all Chinese belong together in one big family?

Accordingly, the most challenging issue that emerges from the ending of *Eat a Bowl of Tea*, replete with the lively tunes and rhythms of Caribbean music, is not "Whose baby is it?" but "Does it really matter?" And, if it does not matter, is it because of a triumph of American liberalism, which can accommodate murky beginnings and corrupt origins as long as they lead to material success and accomplishment—noticeably, in locations that pride themselves on cultural pluralism and diversity such as the San Francisco Bay Area, California—or is it rather because of the time-proven endurance of Chinese patriarchy, with its great assimilating powers, its magic potions for turning even aggressors and invaders into part of the continuous Chinese heritage?

THE BRAVE NEW WORLD ORDER OF *THE WEDDING BANQUET*

In Ang Lee's *The Wedding Banquet*, the Chinese heritage is personified by Mr. and Mrs. Gao, an elderly couple of considerable social standing in contemporary Taiwan, whose son, Wai-Tung, is a successful slumlord in New

York City. Like many Chinese parents, the Gaos are preoccupied with Wai Tung's marriage and procreative prospects. Although Wai Tung is gay and has a live-in partner, Simon, he has never informed his parents of his sexual orientation. In an attempt to put an end to their incessant pestering, he (at Simon's suggestion) persuades Wei Wei, a poor young artist from Shanghai, the People's Republic of China, who owes him rent, to marry him and move temporarily into the basement of their house. In exchange for her willingness to play this role, the two men will help Wei Wei get her green card.

Being firm believers in honoring traditional rituals and ceremonies, however, Mr. and Mrs. Gao decide that they must come for a visit to meet their new daughter-in-law. Much of the film's comedy, then, arises from the hilarious situations caused by the young people's efforts to create a fake domestic situation and by the Gaos' erroneous but insistent presumptions, which culminate in an elaborate wedding banquet for Wai Tung and Wei Wei, with Simon as the best man. By the end of the wedding day, Wai Tung and Wei Wei have become so drunk and exhausted that she ends up seducing him into having intercourse, which results in her getting pregnant. This crisis, together with Mr. Gao's ill health, finally obligates the disclosure of Wei Wei's and Simon's actual identities to Mrs. Gao, who wants to keep the news from her husband, even though Mr. Gao reveals in a private conversation with Simon that he has understood the situation all along.

If parents are stand-ins for one's original home, in this film, the rather traumatic experience of homecoming takes a reverse direction from what usually happens: instead of the son returning home to Taiwan (as Ben Loy returns to China in *Eat a Bowl of Tea*), the parents are arriving in metropolitan New York, bringing with them the classic conflicts over value that are characteristic of many homecomings. But the trans-Pacific trip Mr. and Mrs. Gao have taken signifies the difference between them and Chinatown elders of a previous generation such as Wah Gay in a more immediate and economic sense of value. Being Chinese mainlanders of a pro-Nationalist Party, high-ranked military background in Taiwan, the Gaos belong to the well-respected and materially comfortable echelons of a hierarchically stratified society. In contrast to the low-class and decrepit-looking Chinatown inhabited by the folks in *Eat a Bowl of Tea*, they come from a wealthy environment in which they are used to being pampered by the loyal, indeed obsequious, attentions of inferiors. (A male domestic, Old Chang, has been serving them for forty years in Taiwan; a former army driver, Old Chen,

now the owner of a fancy Chinese restaurant in Manhattan, continues to address Mr. Gao as "*shizhang*" [commander], considers himself unworthy of sitting down [as an equal] in Mr. Gao's presence, and tells Wai Tung he must show filial piety to his parents by having a formal wedding banquet.) And, in contrast to the often vulgar subject matters and vocabularies that constitute the daily exchanges of Wah Gay and his friends, Mr. Gao is a cultivated man with sophisticated tastes in Chinese art and calligraphy. (Such tastes are part of a sense of loss—Westernized Chinese like his son no longer cultivate them—though Mr. Gao is pleasantly surprised to discover them in Wei Wei, his daughter-in-law from the mainland.)

These obvious class differences aside, the ultimate question at the center of the Gaos' reverse homecoming is, as in *Eat a Bowl of Tea*, that of biological reproduction. Ang Lee's approach to this question is quite distinct from, though no less provocative than, Wayne Wang's.

The setting of New York City enables the introduction of a supplementary issue, homosexuality, something that is much more openly accepted (by the educated and professional classes) in contemporary North America than in contemporary Chinese society. Wai Tung and Simon's relationship as a couple remains relatively unproblematic—it is recognized by their friends; they are definitely not living in isolation—until Wai Tung's parents enter the picture. Indeed, in the two young men's relationship, the stereotypes of Asian men as effeminate and American men as macho are, arguably, utopically transcended in the way they divide their labor: while Wai Tung is the manly business professional, Simon, a physical therapist, is the sensitive caretaker both at work and at home. Nor do the two fit the mainstream gay male stereotype of the young Asian "Rice Queen" in an economically dependent relationship with an ordinary-looking and much older white man.[17] Ironically, Wei Wei, despite being female, is much less adept at performing domestic chores (she cannot even fry eggs for breakfast) and much less conventionally feminine in the manner she carries herself. But the significance of these inversions of Asian and American, gay male, and heterosexual male and female stereotypes—inversions that few critics have failed to notice but that, it is important to note, are already in place before the parents' arrival—gives way to a rather different type of drama once the young people's lives are brought face to face with the elders.

The parents' arrival therefore constitutes the key to Ang Lee's narrative/dramatic design: it is the (kind of) narrative turn or dramatic entrance that animates the plot and sets the terms of what the story is all about.[18]

The seemingly liberal—one might say, contemporary "American" or "Western"—situation of two gay men of different races living together and a single, illegal, minority female immigrant fending for herself in a foreign country,[19] in other words, simply becomes the mise-en-scène for the unfolding of another kind of event—namely, the updating of a specific biopolitical script or what might be called, in the spirit of today's hegemonic financial-management-centered culture, the redesign of a specific biopolitical investment portfolio. Mr. Gao alerts us to this when he meets Wei Wei for the first time at the airport. Telling his wife, "Wo de touzi meiyou baifei!"—"My investment has not been wasted!"—he proceeds to size Wei Wei's pelvis up from behind and concludes with confidence that she will be able to bear many children.

Mrs. Gao is just the supporting cast here. In her obtuse and rather absurd reactions to the truth about her son's sexual orientation, the elderly lady is portrayed as someone who has bought into the values of patriarchal culture, period. While often a source of comedy, her character offers no real surprises. Mr. Gao, on the other hand, is given a much more sympathetic portrayal as a patriarch (as is consistent with Lee's other films *Pushing Hands* [1992] and *Eat Drink Man Woman* [1994], with which *The Wedding Banquet* is regarded to form the "Father Knows Best" trilogy).[20] Like many Chinese mainlanders of his generation who migrated to Taiwan under the leadership of Chiang Kai-shek, this quiet old man, too, has wounds from the past: he recalls to his son how he rebelled against an arranged marriage by joining the army, leaving behind his own family on the mainland.[21] He has a heart attack shortly before their trip and then a mild stroke while in New York,[22] causing a delay in their return to Taipei. Finally, in a conversation with Simon, he reveals that he has tacitly accepted his relationship with Wai Tung all along. How are we supposed to understand this startling flexibility on the part of the old man? Of all the questions raised by this film and Lee's work in general, this has been, perhaps not surprisingly, the most controversial.

Wei Ming Dariotis and Eileen Fung, reading Lee's film work positively as a series of attempts to negotiate a place for the Chinese tradition in Westernized modernity, suggest that the father's response could be read as a possible sign of a disruption of the otherwise homophobic formulation of that relationship within the film.[23] For them, Lee's work stands as a transnational, boundary-crossing cinema that offers "new methods" of coming to terms with what is Chinese in Chinese culture so as "to meet the changes and challenges" presented by contemporary global cultural economies.[24] In contrast, Shu-mei Shih sees such patriarchal flexibility as symptomatic of a suspect twin desire on the part of Lee's "Father Knows Best" trilogy, which "embodies the nationalist appeal to a Taiwan audience through resuscitated patriarchy and its craving for international fame, while embracing the exoticist requirements necessary for the approval of the American audience." Shih's analysis implies that flexibility is a clever means of smoothing over the tensions between nationalist and minoritized subjectivities (with their loyalties respectively to Taiwan and the United States) and that it is nonetheless a futile defense against Western racism.[25] For Chris Berry, the father's flexibility may be read as part and parcel of *The Wedding Banquet*'s ambivalence, an ambivalence that "is itself an ideological move appropriate to the sustenance of globalised liberal capitalism."[26]

Although I do not disagree at all with the criticism of patriarchal flexibility as being complicit with globalist capitalist forces, I believe that it tends to overlook an important element, namely, the ethnically specific dimensions of Mr. Gao's open-minded attitude. His handling of the crisis at hand is nothing short of complex. It bespeaks a seasoned capacity for accommodating what seem to be incompatible prerogatives—notably, *by reconfiguring them as nonconflictual*. Chris Berry and Mary Farquhar have referred to this capacity in terms of a deep-rooted Chinese strategy of inclusion that can be traced to the ancient tribute system and is typically deployed for the purposes of minimizing or harmonizing differences presented by foreigners. In *The Wedding Banquet*, they argue, this strategy of inclusion ensures that no one character's perspective predominates and that all the characters receive some degree of empathy from the audience.[27] Still, what exactly is the rationale that enables Mr. Gao to be inclusionary in such a mellow manner? Among the well-educated upper classes in premodern China, as is historically known, homosexual practices were not necessarily understood as mutually exclusive to heterosexual practices such as marriage or concubinage.[28] From the perspective of the Chinese patriarchy, as long as the goal of perpetuating the family line is not forgotten, there is no practical reason to perceive the "perversion" and "aberration" (that is, the purposeless pleasures) of homosexuality as a threat. As Cynthia W. Liu comments, "This capaciousness suggests . . . that Chinese patriarchal lineation and male homosexuality are . . . readily compatible."[29] The father's function (at least as it is performed by Mr. Gao) is hence not to overreact to homosexuality—there is no need to—but rather to oversee the much more urgent

task of procreation (even if it means acting a bit duplicitously) by ensuring that it can take place under stable and harmonious circumstances.[30]

Accordingly, as critics have noted, Simon's position is akin to that of a beloved first wife and daughter-in-law whose problem is simply that she cannot bear children.[31] As tradition would have it, however, the problem can be easily solved by having the son take more wives.[32] As long as heirs are forthcoming, everyone can continue to live together as one united family. For this reason, Mr. Gao treats Wei Wei and Simon with equal affection and beneficence. He gives them both red packets filled with cash and expresses gratitude to both. To Simon, he says: "Thanks for taking care of our son"; to Wei Wei, he says: "The Gao family will always be grateful to you."

Meanwhile, much as this patriarchal flexibility toward sexual orientation is rooted in the Chinese tradition, patriarchy cannot simply be reinstated as though it were timeless but must also be brought up-to-date, as is evident in the manner in which it goes about enforcing the mandate of procreation. And it is at this particular juncture (of the enforcement of procreation), I contend, that it would be viable to speak of collusion between Chinese patriarchy and global capitalism. In his perceptive analysis of the film, Mark Chiang draws attention to the exploitation of undocumented, transnational migrants such as Wei Wei: "The film's resolution . . . depends most intently upon disciplining Wei Wei as the figure of resistance. . . . The consolidation of a transnational patriarchy of capital is fundamentally dependent upon the subordination of women and labor, and women and labor are conflated in the film, so that woman becomes the very sign of labor." Reading in a neo-Marxist frame, however, Chiang has brought up "labor" only to leave it in a generalized category even as he alludes to labor's "sexual division."[33] Lee's film, on the other hand, is more explicit and literal as to the exact kind of labor Wei Wei can provide.

Like Li Qiao in *Comrades, Almost a Love Story*, Wei Wei is a smart, assertive immigrant from a less privileged origin (the People's Republic of China) who sees being able to reside and work in a capitalist locale as a means of upward social mobility. Indeed, insofar as the Chinese idiom "comrade" (*tongzhi*) refers both to the way people (used to) address one another in the PRC and, in popular usage, to gays, *The Wedding Banquet* could itself be named *Comrades, Almost a Love Story*. Like Li Qiao, too, Wei Wei succeeds in getting a foothold in the world she desires through partnership with a man of means, but she has gone much further in her transactions by deciding to bear a child. With this decision, what Wei Wei contributes is the reproductive labor of a surrogate mother in the contemporary global network of commodified procreation, in which, oftentimes, scientific technologies and market economics collaborate to liberate certain classes from the cumbersome and risky animalistic chore of childbearing and childbirth, while impoverished women sell their fertility and/or their offspring to those who can afford to pay. As Fran Martin comments: "The symbolic updating of Taiwanese patriarchal authority for participation in the global (American) cultural order hinges on the availability of the undervalued labour of a poor working woman from the People's Republic of China."[34] And, as Chiang points out, Wei Wei's dependence on global capital is "vividly dramatized," at the moment she decides not to abort the baby, "in the act of consuming that quintessential transnational food commodity and symbol of Americanization, the hamburger."[35] To return to Jean Laplanche's memorable phrase, what the impoverished woman in *The Wedding Banquet* "mimics" is no longer the instinct to reproduce *tout court* but rather the role assigned, around the globe, to materially underprivileged females in what Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak has called "uterine social organization"—"the arrangement of the world in terms of the reproduction of future generations, where the uterus is the chief agent and means of production."[36]

Thus, although from Mr. Gao's perspective the crisis of genealogical extension can be resolved sentimentally, through the capacious flexibility and strategic inclusionism of the Chinese family, the actual solution being collectively adopted by the characters in fact far exceeds purely ethnic bounds to become the reality of what, combining two well-known phrases, I'd call a brave new world order. As a result of the elderly Gaos' arrival and meddling, Wai Tung and Simon align themselves anew with the moneyed cosmopolitan classes under globalization—be they gay, heterosexual, transgender, single, married, or cohabiting—who can enjoy parenthood as a consumerist choice and right by selecting, appropriating, and/or adopting the product(s) of someone else's, usually a poor female's, reproductive labor. To this extent, the obsession of Chinese patriarchy with procreation, an obsession dating back to ancient times, feeds elegantly into the trends of contemporary transnational capitalism: even when one's son is gay, it turns out, continuing the family line need not be a problem because procreative possibilities (a cross-generational family investment interest) can now be accessed, made available, and fruitfully reinvested through a worldwide web of commodified sites. As Chiang suggests, "insofar as it

ultimately charts the Chinese diaspora's coalescence into the global system of capital," *The Wedding Banquet* is "a transnational allegory."[37]

As in *Eat a Bowl of Tea*, the seemingly happy ending of *The Wedding Banquet* raises hitherto unasked questions about biopolitics. These questions emerge, in large part, amid the historical transition undergone by the Chinese diaspora in America from the mid- to late twentieth century, a transition that the two films together signify.[38] As the earlier moment of a depressingly ghettoized existence, shaped by nostalgia for the motherland and longing for recognition in the adoptive country, gives way to the turn-of-the-century moment of an affluent, professionalized, and jet-setting upper middle class's ascendancy on both sides of the Pacific, biopolitical urgency is met with new and creative tactics. In both films, the younger generations have shown themselves woefully incompetent in managing the family business. As the mess they have made escalates out of control, the fathers, custodians of the families' long-term trusts, literally take matters in their own hands.[39] But whereas, in Wah Gay's case, the daughter-in-law's adultery still demands a primitive resort to violence and bloodshed, in Mr. Gao's case, the son's sexual pathology is handled peacefully with civilized tact and entrepreneurial cunning (as he explains to Simon, "If I didn't pretend ignorance and let them fool me, how would I get my grandchild?"). One father raises his hand to chop off the enemy's ear to avenge his tribal honor; the other father raises his hands to signal to the airport security guard: "I am unarmed—I cross borders as an enlightened world citizen."[40]

In both cases, however, despite the temporary derailing by female adultery or male homosexuality, the endings are about implicitly or explicitly accepted alternative reproductive arrangements. In both cases, some kind of new deal has been made with parental acquiescence.

Are the updating, reconfiguration, and diversification of reproductive arrangements, historical phenomena so well analyzed by Foucault, an optimal advancement made on human sexuality's fundamental purposelessness? Or are they further proof of Freud's notion of the ever-expanding reach of human civilization—now manifesting itself through new-age kinships across sexual orientations and racial boundaries, as well as through transnational medical, technological, commercial, and legal institutions—to direct sexuality toward a socially practicable—that is, infinitely reproducible—end? Is this end—appearing in *The Wedding Banquet* in the form of a multicultural, queer ménage à trois (fig. 6.2)—an irreversible displacement of compulsory (and patriarchal) heterosexuality, with its vested interests in property ownership and social privilege as much as in biological reproduction—or is it compulsory (and patriarchal) heterosexuality's latest, coolest version? As Spivak writes, in a society still bound to the (nuclear) family and its forms of material possession, "The uterine norm of womanhood supports the phallic norm of capitalism."[41]

Like Mei Oi's return to her proper role as wife and mother, the significance of Wei Wei's decision to go through with her pregnancy remains ambiguous, indeed epistemically indeterminate: as much as it is a sign of her being actively in charge of her own destiny (by using her femininity to procure not only legal immigrant status but also a significant emotional connection and shelter and long-term financial assistance), it can also be taken as evidence of her domestication by and submission to a world still governed by patriarchal anxiety about reproductive prospects.[42] In the latter instance, the fact that Wai Tung was the sperm donor to the fetus she is carrying is what finally appeases the elders.[43] In the former instance, the fact that Wei Wei, a minority female in the United States, seems to have a modicum of personal autonomy could perhaps help validate the reasoning of an optimistically liberalist interpretation—even though such an interpretation would, precisely because of its liberalism, have to come to grips with the implications of material unevenness that so glaringly underpin "the entry of life into history," now administered ever more efficaciously, under the aegis of a progressive cultural pluralism, across all conceivable borders.