

Libby Schade

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Dr. Asha Jeffers

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Public Closet, Private Life: An Exploration of Gender Identity and Relationships in Kim Fu's

*For Today I Am a Boy*

Kim Fu's novel *For Today I Am a Boy* follows the life of Peter<sup>1</sup>, a transwoman, as she explores her gender identity as a second-generation Chinese Canadian. Set primarily in rural Ontario and Montreal, Peter's journey towards femininity is coloured by her father, Mr. Huang. The greatest obstacle is Mr. Huang's desire for assimilation and how this interacts with his wife's pride in her heritage. Danielle Seid proposes a transgenerational reading of *For Today I Am a Boy*, in which she "explores how tropes of transgender and transsexuality assume new meaning in the context of the racialized immigrant family" (143). I will be taking this a step further, exploring how Peter's status as a second-generation immigrant and, in extension, how the nuanced way her family is structured, impacts her journey to transitioning. In this paper, I will argue that Peter's father and his desire to assimilate affect Peter's relationships, privately and publicly, while focusing on how this impacts the boundaries within which Peter explores her gender identity. In order to overcome the limitations put in place by her father, Peter needs her relationships with her sisters, Adele, Helen, and Bonnie, to fully accept her own identity as a transwoman.

erin Khuê Ninh argues that the structure of a Chinese immigrant family can be highly patriarchal, stating that, "the prerogatives of power exercised in the father's verdict point to a law

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<sup>1</sup> While the novel refers to Peter using masculine pronouns until the final page, I will use primarily feminine pronouns for her to better represent her identity as a transwoman.

that is answerable to no higher authority than itself” (43). Ninh places the father as the sovereign and all important ruler of the family; the man of the house who expects his every word to be followed. The sovereign has ultimate power over his subordinates, and is able to make decisions for and about them. Using Ninh’s reading of the father as the sovereign, the father figure of the family controls the family and expects every member to live up to his expectations of their future. Mr Huang acts not only as the sovereign in terms of what he expects his children to achieve, but also in the way their relationships to each other are affected. Mr. Huang forces his family to assimilate: when his wife makes her mother’s recipe for white-fungus soup, he takes the pot out of the kitchen and “dump[s] it on the lawn” (Fu 6). His rejection of anything relating to his Chinese culture acts as a way to control his family and embrace the toxic masculinity that comes with this patriarchal power. Mr. Huang expects his power over his family to be respected in all aspects of their lives, whether privately or publicly. Peter’s femininity threatens this power due to the weakness Mr. Huang perceives in it. Danielle Seid claims that “Peter’s trans-femme subjectivity threatens to bring shame to the immigrant Huangs, who already face material and psychic difficulties as low-wage Asian immigrants in North America. Father attempts to deny Peter’s ‘weakness’ and guide him toward masculinity” (151). When Peter’s father attempts to teach her how to shave, despite her young age, Peter is able to see both her father and her own desired form in the bright light of the bathroom. She sees, “in the mirror, a white man and a girl” (Fu 15). At this moment, Peter is preoccupied with the vision of her father’s weakness, his desire to be seen as a white man, at the same time that her father attempts to steer her away from what he believes is Peter’s weakness, her femininity, and toward masculinity. Peter is able to see the ideal forms that she and her father wish they could have been born as, and is captivated by the image of herself as a girl rather than the teachings of masculinity that her father attempts to force

onto her. By ignoring the lesson Mr. Huang is trying to give her, Peter's femininity undermines her father's role as the sovereign of the family. For Mr. Huang, there is no private or public acceptance of Peter's gender identity, there is only a private knowledge that she is different. As Mr. Huang is dying later in the novel, he tells Peter "I've known men like you. Men with...weaknesses." Mr. Huang also says, "I want to thank you...for not shaming me" (Fu 142). Mr. Huang publicly acknowledges Peter's identity as a woman but is not able to accept it. Instead, Mr. Huang thanks Peter for keeping her identity private and out of anyone's scrutiny. Peter's father therefore maintains the idea that even after his death anything that is out of the norm cannot be associated with his family, at least not publicly. The Huangs must be able to fit in with the white people around them, and Peter's identity as a transwoman does not adhere to Mr. Huang's desire to assimilate, so therefore it must remain private. Mr. Huang's wish to stay invisible forces Peter to continue searching for her gender identity in the privacy of her own locked apartment before she can make any public announcement about who she truly is.

In addition, Mr. Huang's desire to fit into the white neighbourhood he lives in goes beyond the reach of his family, and causes him to have an affair with the white woman who lives next door, Mrs. Becker. Danielle Seid claims that this desire to be in this sexual relationship with Mrs. Becker is because Mr. Huang's "masculinity is threatened by the persistent feminization of Asian men" (148). The fear of this feminization is a part of Mr. Huang's character that is later perverted by Peter's relationship with her sexually abusive partner, Margie, and the willing feminisation that Peter undergoes in their sexual relations. However, the affair with Mrs. Becker also acts as a way to show the true sovereignty that Mr. Huang expects, because none of his own decisions can be questioned, even as he punishes his family for the actions he believes will bring shame to his family name. Mrs. Huang does not punish her husband when she finds out about his

affair. Peter listens in when Mrs. Huang first finds out and talks to her husband about the affair, but “neither of them spoke loudly enough to be heard” (Fu 47). Despite the anger Mrs. Huang feels towards her husband for this offence against their marriage, she is unable to berate him because of his place at the head of the family. When describing the affair, Peter says her father “stole all our secrets and kept his own” (56). The affair is a secret from the rest of the Huang family, whereas Mr. Huang finds a way to learn about all of the secrets of the other family members, forcing shame upon them for their transgressions against his dream of assimilation. When his affair is made known to the rest of the family, Mr. Huang uses it to further his role as head of the household and lean into the white patriarchal ideals that he holds dear, shaming the rest of his family for their sins against him instead of punishing himself for his affair.

Another instance of this is when Peter attempts to use the privacy of the empty house on Thursdays to engage with her femininity, but once her father finds out through the lens of his mistress, he reminds Peter of the masculinity she is meant to embody. On these days, Peter wears only “a full-length apron,” a gift for her mother from Mr. Huang, that mother “never used” (Fu 44). It is Mrs. Becker who finds Peter, staring at the TV, watching a cooking show by Giovetta. While Peter’s father disapproves of her engaging in anything that he deems to be a woman’s role, this is the very reason why stereotypically feminine house chores are attractive to Peter, who would rather follow her mother’s role in the home than her father’s. Lily Cho claims that this is a moment “of the doubly disciplining gaze of whiteness – Giovetta through the cathode ray tube, and Mrs. Becker through the glass of the back window – Peter illuminates Mrs. Becker’s trespasses even as she catches” (83) Peter in hers. Mrs. Becker comes to surveil the family that she believes she has some role in as the mistress of Mr. Huang, breaking the boundary of the extramarital affair. In doing so, she watches as Peter breaks the boundaries of masculinity that

Mr. Haung forces on her. Mr. Huang uses this as an excuse to punish Peter rather than to argue with his mistress over peaking into his family home.

When her father finds out about Peter cleaning and wearing the apron he clearly views to be a feminine item of clothing, he burns it and gives Peter a piece of the charred remains, telling her to “swallow it” (55). The piece of clothing that once represented Peter’s private act of embracing womanhood becomes a piece of shame according to her father’s views. The act of forcing Peter to swallow such an important object ensures that she ingests the shame that her femininity brings her family. Moreover, Peter is told to literally swallow down, or push down, the woman she really is by this command. As the largest symbol of her femininity thus far, the apron has been the main way that Peter can connect to her womanhood. The destruction of this apron and forcing Peter to eat a piece of this destroyed symbol is a direct refusal to accept Peter’s identity as a woman. What was once a symbol of Peter’s freedom to explore her femininity becomes a symbol of her father’s disapproval and the shame Peter causes in Mr. Huang. Due to this, Mr. Huang forces Peter to take part in the destruction of this affirmative symbol. Despite embracing this femininity within the privacy and safety of her own home, her father’s presence and his ability to find out Peter’s actions takes away this protection and causes it to become a source of shame.

Even after leaving the immediate influence of her father and moving to Montreal, Peter’s exploration of femininity is still dictated by the boundaries that Mr. Huang set for her. The eldest Huang daughter, Adele, offers Peter silent approval after Adele moves to Germany and escapes from the reach of their father. After receiving a wig as a token of this approval from Adele, Peter puts it on and finds the family resemblance between her and her other sisters. Initially, Peter sees that she has the “same eyes as Adele” before seeing herself through the eyes of her father, a man

she resembles, seeing herself as “the grotesque image in the mirror, the halvesie freak” (Fu 158-9). Despite her distance from him, Mr. Huang still has a firm grip on her and the boundaries that he expects her to live in. Peter’s focus changes from the beautiful connection to her sisters, to the shame her father instils in her. Peter focuses on her eyes in the mirror and how her different family members see her femininity. The shift from seeing Adele to her father shows that Peter is battling with her own acceptance of her femininity. Peter tries to show the acceptance in her womanhood that Adele offers her, but is unable to escape the watchful gaze of her father’s eyes. Lily Cho claims that in this moment, “the liberatory captivation of seeing his grandmothers in Adele, and then himself in Adele, slips again into the captivity of the patrilineal gaze” (82). The patriarchal power structure that Mr. Huang adheres to seems to be inescapable to Peter, even as she searches for a way to explore her femininity and womanhood. The eyes of Mr. Huang seem to watch her eternally, forcing Peter’s private moments of self-acceptance to be entered into a more public sphere, one where her father’s attention is always focused her way, his expectations for masculinity and invisibility always prevalent. Peter remains trapped in this sphere where her shame is as constant as Mr. Huang’s disapproval is in public, despite the intimate setting of Peter’s own subconscious.

As the most connected to her cultural identity, Mrs. Huang is expected to remain in the private confines of their family home to continue to do the woman’s work. However, Mrs. Huang is also not meant to influence her children in any way with her Chinese heritage or, in the case of Peter, her femininity. As Rey Cho claims, “the Chinese domestic realm was hence anything but a private zone of unspeakable desires; it was precisely here that the public codes of morality were most heavily inscribed, down to a person’s — especially a woman’s — physical expressions” (59). Despite their home being a private space, the Huang family is still unable to show their true

emotions ; instead they must bow to the authority of Mr. Huang. Due to this, Mrs. Huang's role as a mother is often undermined by her husband, who does not allow her to make final choices in regards to their children's upbringing because of his role as head of the house. When Peter and her childhood friends sexually harass a young girl named Shauna from their class and their parents are told, Peter's mother scolds her in Cantonese. Peter describes it as sounding like "a language of pain" (Fu 18). Mr. Huang keeps his wife from speaking in her mother tongue to keep the accent that permeates his own voice from altering the accents of their children. Mrs. Huang scolding Peter is directly contrasted by Mr. Huang's approval of Peter's actions, an approval Peter feels so fiercely that for the first time she believes: "my father loved me" (19). Mrs. Huang's empathy towards Shauna is only able to be communicated through speaking Cantonese, which reiterates the femininity that Mr. Huang associates with the language. Lisa Lowe argues that a racialized subject "becomes a citizen when he identifies with the paternal state and accepts the terms of this identification by subordinating his racial difference and denying his ties with the feminised and racialized 'motherland'" (56). As a racialized subject in the novel, Mr. Huang clearly desires to be accepted into their small Canadian town by rejecting their heritage. Cantonese is associated with the femininity of the Huangs' Chinese heritage and Mr. Huang believes that they will only be able to fully assimilate and become invisible when they reject every aspect of their Chinese identity.

Mr. Huang's rejection of his family's Chinese identity highlights the toxic masculinity that Mr. Huang presents in his approval of Peter entering a more masculine sphere by becoming more aggressive. Mr. Huang takes away his wife's right to act as Peter's mother in this situation by denying her wish to punish Peter. Instead, he encourages Peter to show more aggression and perceived masculinity in an attempt to dissuade any public display of the feminine weakness he

perceives in Peter and Mrs. Huang. Peter's father is evidently frightened of the racist stereotypes that feminise Chinese men and how these stereotypes will affect his own power and masculinity, choosing to treat his family's Chinese culture as a shameful part of their identity. Mr. Huang keeps his children from learning much about their Chinese heritage in the hopes that it will keep them from appearing Chinese to their rural Ontario community and keep Peter's femininity an unspoken family matter. Olwen Bedford and Kwang-Kuo Hwang argue that in Eastern shame cultures, "one is liable to lose group status when judged by the group as having failed to fulfill a group requirement" (133-4). Peter is expected to stay in the role Mr. Huang has prepared for her, being the prodigal son. When she is unable to do so, Peter is punished and made to feel ashamed of her femininity. The intersection of Peter's Chinese culture and femininity causes Mr. Huang to silently enforce shame upon Peter; Mr. Huang wants his expectations to be fulfilled without having to put voice to his fears regarding Peter's gender. However, Peter's identity as a transwoman is one that she continues to explore without the acceptance of her father and, at times, she finds herself leaning into the femininity of Chinese stereotypes. Peter continues to explore this femininity in her own private spaces as well as private relationships, which proves to be dangerous for her.

Mr. Huang pits his children against one another in order to create the patriarchal family he desires. Helen and Peter suffer similar forms of rejection from their father. Although Helen is the successful child that Mr. Huang desires, her success is not enough because she is not a boy. The masculine success that Helen earns is not enough because she is feminine. In the same visit where she tells Peter not to pursue gender affirming surgery, Helen asks Peter if she thinks "Father's proud" (Fu 193) of what Helen has become and achieved. Helen's desire for her father's approval is steeped in the values that he instils in the family from the white community



they are surrounded in. erin Khuê Ninh states that the familial goal is “to produce in [the daughter] not only the correct mind-set and courses of action, but a specifically female docile body” (128). Peter’s femininity separates her from boyhood, whereas Helen’s girlhood separates her from the masculine, specifically, the masculine pride Helen believes she deserves from her father.

While Helen embodies the role of the perfect child by becoming a successful lawyer, her father’s lack of pride in her accomplishments proves to twist her relationship with her other siblings. Due to this, Helen is unable to publicly accept Peter’s identity as a transwoman. When Peter visits Helen in DC, Helen walks in on Peter in the shower and notices that Peter has not had bottom surgery, saying, ““you haven’t done anything”” and ““I don’t think you should”” (Fu 197). Peter undergoing surgery to continue her exploration of her gender would be a public declaration that she is a transwoman, one that their father would not agree with. Helen’s lack of public approval for Peter’s identity as a transwoman is because of the values their father instilled in her in his search for acceptance by a white community. As Lily Cho claims, “in the case of the Huangs, invisibility is not a choice made by the family, but one that is made for the family by its patriarch” (75). While the idea of invisibility and blending into their white community is a decision made solely by Mr. Huang, in the moment where Helen advises Peter not to pursue transitioning, it becomes clear that she too is looking to remain invisible and to assimilate to some degree. At least at this point in their relationship, Helen is not able to publicly accept Peter’s gender identity, as she is still too preoccupied with the idea of being successful for her dead father.

While Bonnie’s position as the rebellious youngest sister allows Peter to explore her femininity at a young age, Bonnie uses Peter’s womanhood against her when they are adults.

When Bonnie decides to leave for Europe, she asks Peter if she would like to come with and tell people that Peter is Bonnie's "sister" (Fu 207). The promise of a public acceptance of Peter's womanhood is only conceivable for Bonnie after their father has passed away, and in the promise of the anonymity of being in another country. It is clear that Bonnie has known the truth of Peter's femininity for the majority of their lives, yet the fear of their father and her focus on her own burgeoning sexuality keeps her quiet. Bonnie attempts to manipulate Peter into following her to Europe because of her own wish for familial love. Peter and Bonnie are tasked with remaining young forever: their father's command for Bonnie and Peter is to "be a little girl forever, be a boy" (46) respectively. By growing up and leaving Canada, Bonnie shows that she is no longer the little girl her father wants her to be. Bonnie's acknowledgement that Peter is not the boy her father wants her to be offers a shared rebellion against their father's desires. When searching for Peter's love and acceptance of her adulthood, Bonnie offers Peter the label of being her sister. It is clear that Peter wishes Bonnie would have said the words, "*sister, my sister, I've always known*" (208) rather than attempting to persuade Peter to go to Europe with her. However, the continued presence of their father's influence on them has silenced Bonnie's acceptance. erin Khuê Ninh claims that for young women in Chinese immigrant families, "the idea of the game is to keep the roving searchlight focused elsewhere, away from one's own body and business" (133) in order to keep their parents uninterested in the ways they break expectations. While Peter attempts to hide much of her femininity, it is still noticed by her family. As it is unacceptable that she acts on this, Peter's womanhood acts as a way for her sisters to deflect attention off of the ways that they themselves explore their sexuality. Keeping Peter's womanhood a secret, rather than accepting it publicly, is how Bonnie is able to continue her own rebellion without Mr. Huang focused on her. As such, Bonnie is only able to broach the

idea of announcing that Peter is her sister if they are in another continent, away from the imagined influence of Mr. Huang's non-corporeal spirit.

The femininity that Adele represents is the driving force for Peter's search to express her womanhood. She believes that the acceptance she receives from Adele as a young boy will continue into adulthood, despite the way Adele hides Peter's dream to be a beautiful girl from their father. When Mr. Huang heads into the room where Peter is indulging in a feminine ritual of brushing her hair with her sisters and reinstates Peter's boyhood, Adele pulls Peter "into the closet," and tells her she "can be pretty" (Fu 12). By pulling Peter into the closet, Adele continues to hide Peter's identity and literally quiets Peter's transgender voice as she attempts to communicate that she does not want to be in the body she was born into. The threat of their father walking in and hearing Peter reject her masculinity is what causes Adele to hide Peter's true femininity and voice, both to protect and quiet Peter. While her protection is necessary in ensuring Peter is safe from their father's ever present gaze, Adele pulling Peter into a literal closet is a thinly veiled metaphor for how Peter's identity as a transwoman is accepted by the rest of the family; it must stay hidden and private. Adele's understands her position as the oldest Huang sister to mean that she must keep the rest of her sisters out of Mr. Huang's scrutiny. Adele must act as a secondary mother and enforce her father's rules; this forces her to keep Peter's womanhood, and Adele's acceptance of it, a secret. Despite this, Adele's beauty, combined with the film *Sabrina*, becomes Peter's idealised version of womanhood. When they are watching the movie, Peter thinks that Adele looks "just like Audrey Hepburn—the gamine smile, the swan-necked beauty" (27) and begins to use this image as the woman that she aspires to be. According to Lily Cho, Peter sees her "Chinese Canadian sister in the figure of a white movie star" (80). The combination of the Hollywood beauty that Audrey Hepburn represents with the

familiar Chinese beauty of her sister allows Peter to find representation of the woman she is trying to be. In this moment, reality and fiction come together to offer Peter a private place where she is able to push past her father's boundaries of the masculine and imagine herself in a feminine body. Adele becomes the feminine ideal for Peter, and is a role model that marries womanhood and her identity as Chinese Canadian with a sense of sisterly approval.

Peter's idealised version of womanhood involves being a mother and is a dream that drives her even as a child. When she is young, Peter is asked to draw a picture of what she would like to be when she grows up and chooses to draw herself "as a Mommy... with a stiff halo of hair, swaddled babies around my feet" (Fu 3). Peter's ultimate level of femininity is one based on maternal instincts and being the primary caregiver. However, physically birthing a child is not a part of Peter's dream of being a mother. It is not the biological aspect of having a child that is the ultimate form of femininity for Peter, but the maternal instincts that come with motherhood. Her dream of being a mother complies with her father's wish to assimilate, imagining herself as the type of mother she sees in the community around her. The way Peter imagines her hair coincides with old Hollywood glamour, a primarily white image. Peter's ideal femininity is still steeped in the beliefs of her father even as it rejects the masculinity Mr. Huang enforces. However, Peter's dream of being placed in the role of Mommy when she grows up is promptly ruined when she enters her room and finds: "my notebook lying open on my bed. That page was ripped out" (3). Peter's father takes away her dream of motherhood without a word. Mr. Huang uses only a silent enforcement of the shame that Peter should feel for her femininity by destroying her drawing. Mr. Huang associates maternity with an inherently weak femininity that separates his only son, Peter, from the masculinity he wants Peter to embody. Knowing that Peter views motherhood as

her dream role in life over the leadership positions Mr. Huang believes he should want causes him to destroy the visible reminder of Peter's wish—hoping that it will destroy the dream itself.

The relationship that Peter has with her much older lover, Margie, acts as a failed private rebellion against her father to test the boundaries of where she can explore her gender. After moving to Montreal shortly after high school, Peter begins a sexual relationship with Margie, who uses racial fetishisation to control and harm Peter. Despite the physically and sexually abusive aspects of this relationship, Peter clings to the acceptance that she wants Margie to have for her cultural and gender identity. Margie continually demeans Peter, making her “wear a brocade hat with a braid built into it from a novelty store” and having Peter, in her own words, “fake an accent, a cruel mimicry of my father. I spoke in random, halting, losing sentences, swapping *l*'s and *r*'s” (Fu 127). Peter hides this relationship from her family and continues to perform as this racist stereotype because of the way Margie feminises her in their sexual relationship. When Margie forces Peter to “wear her panties and stockings,” Peter refers to it as “the best thing, though it happened only once” (127). What should be a source of shame for Peter, the forced feminisation, acts as the most exciting space to explore her gender — even when it is tied with sexual and physical violence. It is clear that Peter hopes Margie will continue this feminisation in their roleplaying and continues to embody the stereotypes that so terrify her father.

By mimicking the accent that Mr. Huang attempted to keep from his children's vernacular, Peter leans into the role of the stereotyped Chinese immigrant that Mr. Huang is afraid of being seen as. Peter attempts to make herself visible in a place of invisibility: her own secret relationship. This private rebellion aligns with the Kozlowskas' findings that “children with gender dysphoria [are] mostly classified into the at-risk attachment strategies” because Peter

remains in a relationship where there is an unhealthy attachment to Margie and what she represents. Peter's childhood is primarily controlled by her father, so her relationship with Margie acts as a rebellion against him and a way to stay in a position where she is controlled, this time by a sexual partner. She is so used to being in a submissive role that Peter attaches herself to people who will continue to treat her as such. Peter embraces the femininity and, by extension, the racism that Margie enforces on her and continually takes part in this sexual roleplay to rebel against her father and his ideals of white masculinity. It is only when Margie takes Peter's submissiveness too far and rapes Peter while she is sleeping that she is able to see that her femininity is not accepted by Margie, but ridiculed and ultimately rejected.

When Peter attempts to learn more about LGBTQ+ people, she finds that because the people she is introduced to do not have the same family dynamics as she does, they are not able to understand the boundaries that her father has forced her to remain within. This confusion is clear when Peter first meets the friends of her transgender coworker, John, and finds that they have been offered much more freedom than she has ever thought possible. Peter is astounded that these young people have been able "to ask themselves, and not be told, whether they were boys or girls" (Fu 218). Because of her father, Peter constantly battles the boundaries that have been placed around her, the expectation that she embody the masculinity that her father idealises. The idea that there are people who have not had to constantly explore their gender in private and often dangerous spheres is not feasible for Peter due to her own experience with her father's complete sovereignty in the family. Peter is unable to fathom that there could be parents who would approve of their children being anything other than cisgender because of how different that is from her own experience. The queer people Peter meets do not have to suffer the same shame that she has: a shame inflicted upon her by her family. After watching John interact with

his partner Eileen, Peter finds herself angry over the fact that “they never had to invent anything. Not who they were, not even how their bodies fit together in the dark” (220). Peter has been forced to continuously invent her own safe spaces where she can explore her womanhood; the man she presents to the rest of the world is an invention to appease her father. The necessity of hiding herself from the shame that follows Peter is one that John and his friends are not able to understand. Despite the threat of transphobic violence that follows John and the queer community that he has built, he is unable to understand the shame Peter’s father instilled in her because he was not raised in an environment where assimilation and invisibility are the main objectives. Paul Baker and Giuseppe Balirano claim that this interaction “shows how it is impossible for Peter to fit seamlessly into the new family John, Eileen, and their friends have created. What separates them, in a way that the novel does not try to resolve, is Peter’s experience as a Canadian of Chinese descent who lacks the cultural privilege of whiteness” (140). This emphasises how Peter is deeply influenced by the culture she was raised in. Despite wanting to leave her father’s masculinity, Peter cannot completely ignore the impact that her family has made upon the woman she becomes. It is this impact that separates Peter from John and his friends, who do not have the same familial dynamics.

It is only in her sisters that Peter is able to finally find public acceptance and fulfil her need to transition. At the end of the novel, “four grown women sit in a pub,” (Fu 239 – the Huang sisters. When Bonnie introduces the other three, she calls them “Adele, Helen, and Audrey” (239), most notably using the name Audrey to present Peter. As Danielle Seid claims, the “sisterly femme love provides the possibility of a queer future and kinship without the hierarchizing endemic to patriarchy” (156). It is only when Peter is confirmed to be another sister that the Huang daughters are finally able to meet once again, to put an end to the rivalry that was

forced upon them by their father. Still, as Paul Baker and Giuseppe Balirano claim, Peter “does not join a new family but returns to her own, as she migrates to Berlin to join with her sisters, ironically following her father’s footsteps” (141). The public acceptance presented by Peter’s sisters is what allows her to break the boundaries of boyhood that Mr. Huang expects from her, and allows her to reject the last remaining hold he has on Peter: her name. Although Peter’s choice of name is ultimately a dismissal of Mr. Huang’s patriarchal ideals, the name itself is based on a white Hollywood name and therefore leans into the white values that Mr. Huang worships. Even in her final act of embracing her womanhood, Peter is unable to fully shed her father’s influence, choosing a white name rather than embracing her Chinese heritage.

Peter’s journey to accepting her identity as a transwoman is coloured by her experiences as a Chinese Canadian, especially in her father’s dream of assimilating and living an invisible life. This forces her to explore her gender in private, due to the lack of approval from her family. Mr. Huang is very vocal about his disapproval of anything that will bring shame to his family, despite the fact that his own search for assimilation leads him to have an affair with their married neighbour. Mr. Huang also detests anything that calls attention to their Chinese heritage, choosing to keep his wife in the home where she is unable to truly act on her role as the mother of their children; instead it is Mr. Huang’s rule that must be obeyed. The interaction between Mr. and Mrs. Huang shapes the familial structure that the Huang sisters grow up in, and creates the dynamics of the sisters themselves. Peter’s attempt to find support during her transitioning journey is fraught with a deep sense of shame that is thrust upon her by her father, and her family as a whole. However, Peter is still unable to accept the queer community she meets through John because she finds their privilege makes it impossible for them to understand her. While Peter’s experiences as a Chinese Canadian cause her to be susceptible to violence, both physical and



sexual, these experiences are what allow her to become the woman she dreams of being. Because of her father's influence, Peter is unable to move forwards in her journey towards womanhood until much later in her life; she is unable to push past the shame her father forces on her and the femininity she so desires. Even in Peter's relationship with her own gender identity, she is only able to explore in private for much of her life. The acceptance that Peter searches for most frequently, and the approval that is most necessary, is her own. It is only when Peter is able to reckon with her identity as a transgender woman and reunite with her sisters that she is able to accept her identity publicly and become Audrey, the woman she is meant to be.

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