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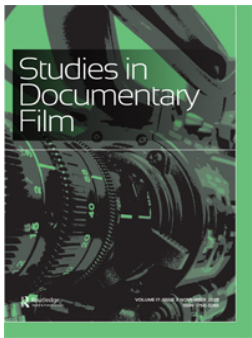
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## Queer sensation and non-representational queer reading: a case study of Wu Hao's *All in My Family*

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# Queer sensation and non-representational queer reading: a case study of Wu Hao's *All in My Family*

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## ABSTRACT

This article develops a non-representational queer approach to the analysis of first-person queer documentary. I suggest that a change of the view from investigating queer representations to exploring queer sensation may release the desire and repression that are both hidden and maintained with images of queerness. Queer sensation in this article refers to the existence of a complex relationship between queer and familial kinship, which affectively infiltrates the queer documentary. To chart queer sensation, I propose the notion of non-representational queer reading that foregrounds the approach of charting queer sensation rather than defining it. Non-representational queer reading comprises affect-based non-representational theory and the idea of queer reading. Non-representational queer reading queers the way of analysing queer documentary that follows the idea of mobility and flexibility as the essence of queerness. Utilising Wu Hao's *All in My Family* (2019) as an example, I argue that Wu's documentary sheds light on a complex queer sensation which not only overflows from the film but also pervades within the heterosexual-dominated Chinese society outside the screen.

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## Introduction

*All in My Family* is a 40-minute queer documentary directed by Chinese-American filmmaker Wu Hao, released on Netflix in 2019. It is a first-person documentary which presents how Wu showcases his gay identity in front of his Chinese family and examines the attitudes of his parents towards his surrogate children and queer life. Although Wu is settled in the U.S. and his transnational identity gives him the freedom to bring up children within a nuclear American queer family<sup>1</sup>, he continues to return to his homeland China driven by a son's duty towards his Chinese familial kinship. Thus, the documentary re-locates an 'outdoor' queer kinship back to a traditional Chinese family, showcasing the complexity of queer kinship within a transnational process. Moreover, queer kinship is more than just where the people geographically are, rather those relationships which always contain emotional factors, should not be ignored, as 'the feeling of kinship belongs to everyone' (Eng 2010, 198).

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I claim that, within his extended family, his kinship is intertwined with complex affective connections across four generations. In the documentary, Wu must suppress his gay identity and the fact that his children have two fathers and no mother in front of his grandfather. While Wu's parents hold strong opinions about his queer life and surrogacy, they openly express their happiness at having grandchildren.

Through analysing Wu's *All in My Family* (hereafter called *Family*), this article aims to identify the nuances of affective expression between queer and familial kinship. As a first-person queer documentary, Wu's *Family* can be viewed as an autobiography that presents an ethnographic view of queer life in China. Catherine Russell notes that 'autobiography becomes ethnographic at the point where the film or video-maker understands his or her personal history to be implicated in larger social formations and historical processes' (1999, 276). Rather than generalising any queer issues through one personal story, an autobiography shows how people react to and participate in a historical process. Analysing a first-person queer documentary, therefore, can help promote the discussion of queer China. This article focuses on queer kinship and interrogate queer actions, queer experiences and queer desires which sit alongside it. I argue that Wu's documentary sheds light on a complex queer sensation, subtly suspended within the negotiation between queer and familial kinship. Queer sensation, as discussed next herein, refers to the sense of queer issues that affectively infiltrate the queer documentary. *Family* permeates a sort of queer sensation that pervades within heterosexual-dominated Chinese society outside the screen. Extending far beyond the visible moving on-screen images, *Family* crystalises the repression of queerness which pervades daily life. Through conducting a non-representational theory and queer reading-based interdisciplinary approach, this article releases mobile and affective images of being queer in a transnational situation.

Complex queer sensation does not refer to the certain emotion of being queer nor the cognition of queerness, rather it refers to a sort of force and intensity that are manifested or embodied by queer issues. To a certain extent, queer sensation pre-exists. According to Gilles Deleuze, sensation is 'the operation of contracting trillions of vibrations onto a receptive surface' (1988, 74). It suggests here that sensation refers to vibration and 'vibration already produces resonance' (Deleuze [1981] 2017, 48). In Tom Conley's reading of Deleuze, 'sensation takes place before cognition and thus pertains to significance' (2010, 247). This article understands the concept of sensation as the pre-cognition of certain representations, and sensation itself refers to an emotional resonance that embodies affective force and intensities. For example, you may feel someone is very gay but there is no clear evidence to prove their gay identity. This uncertain or doubt sensation might remain in your relationship with them for a while and even influence your behaviour towards them. I suggest that tracking queer sensation will reveal a different level of Chinese queer kinship which is subtle but surrounds queer people with affective intensity.

To explore affective queer sensation in the documentary I suggest that we should *read queer in a queering way*. I want to propose non-representational queer reading be used as an analytical tool that goes beyond the representational exploration of queer kinship and focusses on the affective relationship between queer people and other relatives. Rather than using a representational way to examine queerness, which would become a paradox between exact meaning and queer flexibility<sup>2</sup>, I want to investigate the affects

of being queer. For this, I will examine *Family*'s queer sensation and queer kinship from three perspectives: complex queer kinship, tacit expression and more-than-bitterness creation to understand the meaning of non-representational queer reading through in-depth analysis.

### Methodology: queer sensation and non-representational queer reading

I want to stress that it is difficult to view Wu's queer kinship as representative of Chinese queer kinship. Given Wu's Chinese-American middle-class identity, he has overcome many challenges for most queer people such as coming out to family, having a legalised marriage and having his surrogate children. Indeed, queer difficulties extend beyond such issues in China, but they are always seen as the main obstructions of queer kinship in a Confucian-cultural-based Chinese society (Wei 2020; Chao 2020). However, does it mean that when these problems are resolved, Wu can openly embrace his gay identity? According to the documentary that Wu has achieved so much in his queer life is precisely what enables queer kinship to be seen as much more complex. This complexity, at an affective level, is not simply about challenging or following normativity, rather about a series of performances that have already gone beyond any specific event and are preserved as the sensation of complexity itself. For example, as a Chinese American gay man, the complexity of his queer life is not simply about being openly gay in the US and 'staying in the closet' in China, rather how he navigates his performance in the different circumstance and questioning the singular action of 'coming out' or hiding the queerness.

In the Chinese context, Liu, Parry and Ding (2007) apply *wangliang wenjing* (penumbrae query shadow queer reading) as an approach to question how queer aesthetics are formed and shaped. 'Penumbrae query shadow' comes from the Daoist classic *The Book of Zhuang Zi*. Penumbrae refers to the partially shaded exterior region of the shadow projected by an opaque object, i.e. the shadow of a shadow. Metaphorically, queerness may be seen as living in shadows that are shaped by heterosexual norms. According to Liu, Parry and Ding, the valuable part of 'penumbrae query shadow' is that the one who asks the question is neither the shadow nor the opaque object, rather the shadow of the shadow (or the penumbrae). The idea of 'penumbrae query shadow' steps out of the hierarchy of hetero-homosexuality to question the whole system (2007, iv). As suggested, it is important to closely read the penumbrae itself, that is always there but easily overlooked. For example, in Wu's documentary, even though one of the key themes is whether or not 'come out' to his grandfather, reading the penumbrae questions why the action of 'coming out' is simply and naturally seen as the usual theme in the queer documentary. Has anything in fact been overlooked in the shadow of the usual topic of queer life? To explore this, the idea of queer reading should be highlighted.

The notion of queer reading derives from literature studies. However, as Jenny Björklund notes, 'queer readings have never been limited only to literary works but have been used to discover queerness in all kinds of cultural representations' (2018, 7). To avoid interpreting the term queer according to its old-fashion meaning of strange, Alexander Doty notes, 'queer readings aren't "alternative" readings, wishful or willful misreadings, or "reading too much into things" readings. They result from the recognition and

articulation of the complex range of queerness that has been in popular culture texts and their audiences all along' (1993, 16). In this article, queer reading is applied as a reading direction that charts Wu's queerness through the underpinning methods and aesthetics of making the documentary.

As regard how to undertake queer reading, Doty further suggests that 'a queer reading is not about inserting something foreign into the text but rather to discover things that are already there beneath the surface and bring them into the open' (1993, 16). For example, instead of giving meaning to Wu's documentary or interpreting the meaning of his editing or camerawork, queer reading in this article aims to release queer sensation that already exists beneath Wu's queer actions and bring this into the open. On reading Kosofsky Sedgwick's *Tendencies*, Hannah McCann and Whitney Monaghan note that 'queer reading is this process of challenging the dominance of heterosexual representation by making hidden desires visible, making inferred relations overt, and smuggling queerness into texts that were previously thought to deny it' (2019, 145). Therefore, I suggest, doing a queer reading using documentary analysis should also seek to chart the desires, and repression that are hidden and maintained within the visible images of even queerness itself. For instance, in what circumstance does Wu opt to stand in front of the camera, or hide himself behind the camera, and for what reason?

Although queer reading originally means to discover queerness in heterosexual-dominated mass media, queer reading can be seen as the method applied to re-integrate the queer message that might be there alongside obvious representations of queer. Simply put, to be a penumbra *reading the queer of queer*. As aforementioned, in this article, the penumbræ are queer sensation. In queer documentary, instead of simply staring at queerness, queer images, or queer icons because they are named as 'queer', it is apparent, using *Family* as an example, that queer sensation flows between queer and familial kinship, that queerness has affects and that queer people are affected by different socio-cultural backgrounds. Thus, applying non-representational theory is helpful here in reading queer sensation.

### **Non-representational approach**

I propose that non-representational queer reading comprises affect-based non-representational theory and the idea of queer reading. To expand the idea of non-representational queer reading, I refer to it as queer reading in a non-representational way. Instead of randomly combining non-representational theory and queer studies, both in fact embrace affect studies<sup>3</sup>. Affect is a big concept that has been variously defined (see Massumi 1995, 2002; Brennan 2004; Ngai 2007; Gregg and Seigworth 2010). So, I shall limit my focus here to a more specific sense of how non-representational theory engages with affect and supports the non-representational way of reading. In his book-length work *Non-Representational Theory: Space, Politics, Affect*, Nigel Thrift demonstrates that 'non-representational theory takes the leitmotif of movement and works with it as a means of going beyond constructivism' (2008, 5). According to Thrift, affect indicates 'the way in which each "thing" is acting, living, and striving to preserve' itself (13). Using 'life' as an example, non-representational theory is not about what life is, but about how we live in such a way which 'capture[s] the "onflow"' (5). In other words, it

provides an angle from which to chart life in itself rather than analysing the significance of life. Likewise, Hayden Lorimer stresses:

The phenomena in question may seem remarkable only by their apparent insignificance. The focus falls on how life takes shape and gains expression in shared experiences, everyday routines, fleeting encounters, embodied movements, precognitive triggers, practical skills, affective intensities, enduring urges, unexceptional interactions and sensuous dispositions. Attention to these kinds of expression, it is contended, offers an escape from the established academic habit of striving to uncover meanings and values that apparently await our discovery, interpretation, judgement and ultimate representation. (2005, 84)

The non-representational approach as a method is not about presenting a certain representation or image of something, rather, it is a means of exploring a sort of status running through life. This kind of status might not be obvious, but it is there, and it fills the crevices in between the so-called significance and surrounds all life's issues. Engaging with a non-representational approach to exploring queer life can therefore release the motivation, connections, correlations surrounding the queer life. Vannini (2015) summarises five areas studied, analysed and examined by non-representational theorists study: *events, relations, doings, affective resonances* and *backgrounds*, all of which re-emphasise that a non-representational approach engages with mobile, flexible and affective views. Non-representational analysis does not, however, mean using a rule to measure whether something is or is not, rather tracking the affective 'imprint' of matters, events, movements and actions, without interpretation, judgment and evaluation. Thus, I claim that non-representational theory champions the approach of *charting* queer sensation rather than *defining* it.

Charting affects is an inevitable pathway to exploring queer sensation as affect is the consistent part of sensation. Deleuze and Félix Guattari noted that 'a bloc of sensations' is 'a compound of precepts and affects' (Deleuze and Guattari [1991] 1994, 164). Here, sensation, affect and percept are about arts and creation, rather than anything exacting, as they are '*beings* whose validity lies in themselves and exceeds any lived (author's emphasis)' (164). Deleuze used painting as an example and explained that 'sensation is what is painted, what is painted on the canvas is the body, not insofar as it is represented as an object, but insofar as it is experienced as sustaining *this* sensation (author's emphasis)' (Deleuze [1981] 2017, 27). Thus, in an audio-visual art form, I propose that sensation is what is filmed. Queer issues in a first-person documentary are in many ways such as editing and shooting, not insofar as they are representations of queerness, rather they are experienced as the sensation of queerness. First-person documentary itself is a kind of artistic creation. As Alisa Lebow defines, 'the designation "first person film" is foremost about a mode of address: these films "speak" from the articulated point of view of the filmmaker who readily acknowledges her subjective position' (2012, 1). Thus, the content of a first-person documentary has already been processed by the filmmaker. A filmmaker as a creator, films and edits their life as the expression of queer sensation. We, as viewers, perceive the affects of documentary content, which is in fact, also affected by the sensation of queerness. Charting affect, performing non-representational reading and focusing on queer sensations, can therefore facilitate the way of understanding Wu's first-personal queer documentary and the reflected queer issues in a transnational-Chinese context.



A precondition of practicing non-representational queer reading is that we need to admit that a documentary presents more than objectivity and representation. It is true that documentary is about reality, as Bill Nichols notes: 'documentaries tell stories about what happens in the real world' (2017, 7). However, today's documentary is not limited to inherently constructing a representational view of the world. Documentary theory has shifted its focal point, regarding documentary as part of the filmic image to reappraise subjective, personal, cognitive and poetic elements which were marginal to documentary practice (Juhasz and Lebow 2015; Renov 1993a). Micael Renov argues that documentary is 'the film of fact', which is 'at a remove from the creative core of the cinematic art' (1993b, 13). However, it does not mean that documentary is 'disabled' when compared to fictional films. Catalin Brylla and Mette Kramer note that 'documentary is far more prone than fiction to a bricolage approach constantly intermixing different aesthetics, authorial interventions and modes of spectatorial address' (2018, 4). Furthermore, the way of looking at documentary shifts to aesthetic and cognitive concerns which are specialised by a documentary's form. As emphasised by Brylla and Kramer in their book, which focuses on considering cognitive theory and how documentary studies can promote 'a vital interpretation not only of how we perceive reality *through* documentary, but also of how we perceive it *because* of documentary (emphasised by authors)' (1). Here, a documentary is not just a mediator between viewers and the world but also a creative form, having its specific documentary affects and its way of communicating. Wu's *Family* not only present what queer kinship and familial kinship are, but carries its audio-visual way to communicate with viewers and the objects in the documentary.

Daniels-Yeomans (2017) has applied a non-representational framework by tracking experiences of trauma within documentary films. Taking into full account the recent development in documentary theory, it is posited that non-representational theory offers alternative methodologies for re-configuring dominant representational readings of documentaries. In his words, non-representationalism shifts explorations of the documentary which are 'preoccupied with the affective, corporeal and sensory properties of the image, dimensions of the documentary that exist – significantly – outside the strictly representational remit' (88). Looking through a representational lens is certainly one vantage point, but it is not by any means the only way of considering the documentary.

Inspired by the shift in documentary studies, when I explore queer sensation and queer kinship through a first-person documentary, I regard the documentary not simply as a visual document which reflects queer life completely beyond the screen, rather, I regard it as an art form that has itself already engaged with queer expression and queer practice. In other words, in addition to reading the representational meaning of a queer documentary, I want to non-representationally observe the aesthetics both in the documentary itself and in the making of the queer documentary. Thus, we may ask what the queer documentary offers us on both an experiential and affective levels. We perceive both visible cinematic images of queer people and interact with queer actions concealed beneath these queer images.

Wu's *Family*, as a first-person documentary, 'allows for greater degrees of subjectivity and experimentation and comes with its own unique set of viewer expectations and emotional affects' (Ros et al. 2018, 225). Subjectivity, rather than being a flaw of the first-person documentary genre, is precisely the valuable creation that facilitates the



affective communication between non-fictional people inside/outside the film, which 'enables an empathic merging of the perspective of the viewer with that of the filmmaker' (232). It switches the viewer's actions, redirecting them from watching a documentary to experiencing it with emotional resonance, with which queer sensation is interweaved and determines how viewers are affected by the documentary. That is, queer sensation affects the viewers perception. To read the affective message through the documentary, a non-representational approach is helpful as this considers the other side of any representations. In the next section, I will explore how queer sensation is maintained in a complex transnational queer kinship.

### **Queer sensation and *All in My Family*.**

I argue that the queer sensation of complex queer kinship is created by Wu's multi-strategies of being queer, which parallels the hybrid role of discursive identities in the documentary. Russell emphasises four layers of auto ethnography – speaker, seer, seen and editor (1999, 277), all relevant here in helping us to outline Wu's role in the documentary. In *Family*, Wu is the speaker or the narrator, who tells his family story by voice-over. Wu is also a seer 'at the origin of gaze' in that he observes his family, for example, when filming his family and interviewing other family members. From another point of view, he is 'seen' as part of his family image in front of the camera (277). In addition, Wu is the editor of the entire documentary. Through these multiple roles, queer sensation manifest as multiple ways of seeing inside and outside the documentary that queer the way of a single point of view. In the next section, following Russell's ideas of four layers, I will firstly explore how Wu as a seer observes his queer kinship and his birth family. Then, I will explore Wu's performance of being queer in his family when in front of the camera. Finally, I will explore how Wu, as an editor, presents and edits his queer story, rather than separating voice over as an independent section, this is presented as an important instruction of his queer life which cuts across all other layers.

### ***Seeing complexity***

In Wu's documentary, queer sensation as the 'penumbrae' sits alongside the actions of being queer in dealing with the familial acceptance of queer identity. At the beginning, we see an American nuclear family. Through Wu's voice over, we learn that it is not Wu's family rather his surrogate family. The documentary then cuts to a Chinese city and a huge clan party. Following Wu's camera, we are introduced to many members of this extended family, even when Wu is unable to remember their relationship to him. In the American family, the woman is pregnant with Wu's baby, which is a secret for Wu's extended Chinese family. As previously noted, the particular concern of concealing both being gay and having surrogate children runs throughout the documentary. Why is family an important theme for Chinese queer people? How do we see the contrast between Wu's own queer family and his Chinese extended family?

In the documentary, although Wu builds his family with his partner in America, far away from China, his parents come to visit, and he also brings his partner and children to China to visit his grandfather. Within this mobility of people between China and America, multi-strategies of being queer have been tightly intertwined. Weston (1997)

theorised that queer kinship in the US context during the 1980s challenged the normativity of nuclear families. Weston's 'family we choose' framework clearly pronounces the mobility of queer kinship that drives queer people to achieve sexual independence and seek out queer kinship outside the original family mode. Eng's (2010) *The Feeling of Kinship: Queer Liberalism and the Racialization* takes a psychic pathway and the political economy of globalisation into consideration and argues that a queer diaspora rises from an alternative form of family and kinship to that represented by the dominance of an Oedipus complex (which may be considered the normative structure of family and kinship). Moreover, it may be suggested that Wu in America has the flexibility to choose and build his queer kinship, but this is not fully representative of the image of his queer life.

In many situations in China, Wu as the filmmaker must stand behind the camera to film others. However, there is another situation play here, which I call *seeing as unseen*, referring to Wu's intentional utilisation of filming as a disguise. At the clan party, as Wu explains, he deliberately hides behind the camera to avoid attention. Familial attention always relates to Wu's marriage (from a heterosexual perspective), which represses Wu's queer identity. In this situation, standing in front of or behind the camera indicates the extent to which Wu feels the need to hide his sexuality. I argue that his unseen presence represents the difficulties and complexities of coming out in China as a moral consideration. The Confucianist obligation of filial piety often strengthens the tension between 'I am gay' (I want to be myself) and 'you are my child' (you owe me, you should listen to me, and you should extend the family line)<sup>4</sup>. This makes Wu feel that he must hide himself as being an unseen seer behind the camera to avoid talking about his personal life. In considering the Confucianist obligation of filial piety, Chou (2000) promoted an influential notion called 'coming home', criticising that coming out in queer politics is incompatible within the realities of queer kinship in China. A coming out strategy on a Euro-American campus highlights the pride of the individual as an independent unit from their familial kinship structure. However, simply distancing oneself from the family of origin would completely go against the meaning of family for Chinese people. Chou notes that 'coming home can be explicated as a negotiative process of bringing one's sexuality into the family-kin network by manipulating mainstream social categories' (2020, 263). This means that coming home is not about prioritising the self, rather prioritising the connection between self and family. For Wu, he can never sever the connections within his familial kinship.

Within the documentary, from the perspective of Wu as being an insider/outsider in his Chinese home, he is a hybrid of both coming home and coming out. Initially, Wu maintains the relationship with his Chinese family. He and his partner invite his parents to visit their home in America in an act that connects queer kinship and familial kinship. Thus, in America, Wu has combined coming out and coming home. When our view turns to that of Wu's extended family in China, coming out to family has its own set of borders and boundaries, meaning that not all family members are party to this process. For example, Wu's younger aunt is initially unaware of his queer identity, as aforementioned before, every insider actively keeping his gayness and relationship with his partner a secret in front of his grandparents. Wu comes home and comes out at the same time but has the mobility to negotiate the two strategies. Bao Hongwei proposed the idea of 'double consciousness' to 'capture the constant negotiation of identities of being both

transnational and Chinese’ as the experience of middle-class people in a post-socialist era (2020, 93). Middle-class Chinese prioritise to flexibly adopting ‘globalness’ which offers an escapable line from unsolved and unsurmountable life issues and social problems. This escape route offers another mode of living and one more choice of negotiation. Considering this idea of double consciousness, coming home or coming out, being gay or ‘staying in the closet’, are not a purpose that must be achieved, rather, strategies at working in negotiation between queer and familial kinship.

As a seer, Wu is not simply the one recording his life. Which role he is adopting at any given time represents the way of being queer itself. I want to stress that Wu’s way of being a seer is, in many ways, an *action* in his reaction to confronting the queer kinship complex. Thus, what we see in the documentary reflects not only the image of Wu’s queer kinship, but also perceived actions of his negotiation of queer-familial kinship. It is more than the representation of queer images on the screen as it has already exceeded this situation by developing into the sensation of building up queer kinship. In other words, this queer sensation is not directly caused by an event, such as the family party, rather is composed of queer actions towards the event.

### *Seen in reticence*

In the Chinese context, queer sensation to some extent, is repressed by the ‘virtue’ of uncertainty, which hypnotically protects the wistfulness of normativity. After Wu’s surrogate babies were born, Wu and his partner take children to China. In this scenario, Wu is the one seen on screen, where we observe his interaction with his grandfather, aunts, parents and his sister’s family. The key theme of this visiting scenario is whether Wu should tell the grandfather the truth about his sexuality. A secret family meeting is even held to discuss possible strategies for coming out to the grandfather. In the end, as aforementioned, Wu chooses to keep his silence. In choosing to make his grandfather happy that he already has two children, Wu must repress his queer identity. He introduces his partner as a good colleague, explaining that children’s mother has not returned to China on this occasion. As Song Lin notes, ‘Chinese queers engage in tacit, indirect ways of negotiation that coordinate their contradictory aspirations for both the embodiment of queer desires and identities and the sustainability of kinship ties and relations’ (2019, 117). Thus, Wu can tacitly pretend to be a hetero-norm and avoid unpredictable argument with his grandfather. Moreover, at the end of the documentary, Wu and his sister discuss whether the grandfather may already suspect something, having met Wu’s partner (as a colleague), as the grandfather no longer asks about Wu’s wife. In the documentary, there is no clear indication as to whether the grandfather knows the truth, rather there remains silence and uncertainty of Wu’s identity between Wu and his grandfather.

I argue that staying silence and maintaining uncertainty in the negotiation between queer kinship and familial kinship, at here as affective forces embody an ethical repression. The notion of ‘reticent poetics’ is relevant here. According to Liu Renpeng and Ding Naifei, reticent poetics is one of the Chinese aesthetic ideas originating from a literary tradition, ‘reticence (*hanxiü*) literally means both “holding back” (*han*) and “storing up” (*xiü*), and has been variously translated as “conservation”, “reserve”, and “potentiality”’ (2005, 34). In queer studies, Liu, Parry and Ding (2007) argue that reticent poetics is

seen as a tactic that prevents and protects sensitive topics, such as homophobia, from public issues and brings them to the fore at the right time. Liu, Parry and Ding (2007) further add that reticent poetics, as a rhetorical function, is a social historical discipline, controlled by aesthetics and ethics. If coming home is considered a sort of action, then the rhetoric poetics could be seen as the ethical force behind taking the action. Moreover, Huang Shuzhen and Daniel Brouwer note that, coming home is an ‘indigenous model of sexual behaviour’ in China, given that Chinese queers ‘foreground the principles of filial piety and “reticent poetics” in their navigations of sexuality, family, and social life’ (2018, 98). According to the same, the model of coming home takes into account ethics by prioritising filial piety and ‘prescribes the exercise of “reticent poetics” in order to maintain the harmony of social networks as an aesthetic’ (2018, 104). Thus, reticent poetics is seen as force, desire and motivation alongside embodied actions, such as staying silent and maintaining the uncertainty at home.

In voice-over mode, Wu explains ‘once I interviewed my family and learned how my coming out had hurt them, I no longer have the heart to come out to my grandpa, which would hurt them all over again’. For Wu, the success of carrying the familial ancestral line does not mean that he can eliminate collective negative feelings about queerness for his family. Gay shame remains outside the family door and affects his Chinese family. Psychologically, ‘shame attacks the global system of self-esteem and points to an individual and social failure of the person who suffers it’ (Escudero-Alías 2016, 62–63). The affect of shame can be seen as a ‘negative affect’ which can ‘restrict bodily and social mobility’ (Ahmed 2004, 154). Reticent poetics precisely distances the affect of shame from the grandfather because no one knows whether the grandfather can bear to know it. Therefore, to protect familial harmony, ‘Chinese non-heterosexuals seek to avoid destroying family relationships by preserving the family honour as their first priority’ (Chan 2017, 856). In this sense, reticent poetics embodies the negative affect of queerness.

It is worth noting that, in Wu’s situation, maintaining the uncertainty at home is not just Wu’s personal action, rather it is a tacit agreement between all those insiders of the truth and the grandfather. Where the grandfather to keep asking about who the mother of the babies, the truth of Wu’s sexuality, his same-sex marriage and the surrogacy would certainly be revealed to the family. The uncertainty can therefore be suspended in the grandfather’s action to stop asking for details of Wu’s marriage. Thus, in the documentary, reticent poetics is a double-sided tactic. Both the insiders and the grandfather choose to be tacit in that all insiders choose not to say, and the grandfather chooses not to ask. Moreover, reticent poetics infiltrate the compromise of both Wu and his birth family, which leaves space for Wu to both keep his queer kinship and protects familial harmony.

As the one is seen in the documentary, Wu directly presents a reticent part of his queer life. In contrast to the last part, in which Wu can physically hide himself, when in front of the camera interacting with other family members, here he adopts and performs reticent poetic strategy. In this situation, the ‘bloc’ of queer sensation is compounded by affective forces through reticent poetics. This affective force has no specific meaning rather it is a sense that Wu and his Chinese family as subjects are affected by invisible forces. Force, in many ways, refers to historical ethical values; those affected by this force not only display representations of queer life but also embody the sensation of disciplined forces. This queer sensation engages with the affective embodiment of disciplined reticence. It is

not about what queer people can say or cannot say about their identity, rather it refers, in the main, to a series of hesitation, repressed desire, uncertainty, instability and doubtfulness.

### ***More-than-bitterness editing***

On an aesthetic and affective level, queer sensation manifests as the deterritorialisation of certain emotional expression of queer life. As the editor of *Family*, Wu presents the story with his own narrative thus, he “writes’ an identity in temporal structures’ (Russell 1999, 278). That is, what we see in the documentary is more than what has happened in Wu’s life, and includes the manner of telling the story. In the documentary, we can see many of life’s trivialities, such as house cleaning, dining, mother’s nagging and parents’ quarrelling. These daily scenes are edited with lively background music. I argue that the life scenes in Wu’s documentary manifest the sensation of *a* life that is more than a certain cognition of queerness.

Throughout the film, close-up shots show his parents and sister’s weeping when they are recollecting Wu’s coming out. Weeping is a very common emotional expression in the Chinese queer documentary that serves to reflect the bitterness of queer life and of being related to queer people. Here, ‘to speak with bitterness’ or ‘to tell with bitterness’ (*su ku*) not only manifests as the traditional aesthetical image in the Chinese documentary but also specific to the queer documentary (see Robinson 2015, 300; Bao 2015, 43; Li 2010, 39). Thus, queer expression to a great extent becomes, a process of showing constant trauma in queer life, meaning that representations of Chinese queer life cannot escape this cognition of bitterness.

However, the emotional resonance of *Family* goes beyond simply empathising with queer difficulties. In many places, even though Wu may be seen at these times in the documentary (e.g. when Wu hires an assistant to film his family), he is not the main character in the story. This therefore gives viewers the opportunity to see other family members’ reactions to Wu’s queer kinship. At a family dinner, Wu narrates his younger aunt as the main character. When the younger aunt arrives, she is surprised and does not believe that the two babies belong to Wu because she was not even aware that Wu has married. According to the later interview with Wu’s older aunt, we are made aware that she pulled the younger aunt into the bathroom and told her the truth. Then, in the documentary, we see is the younger aunt’s extending warm welcome to Wu’s partner and tells him how the grandfather loves Wu. This melodramatic editing shows the rapid change in attitudes towards Wu’s queer identity. Moreover, this differs from the clan party in which the grandfather has plenty to say. This time he is very quiet making it difficult to infer the grandfather’s thought; however, throughout the scene, we do not witness any pressure from him as the familial figurehead and traditional patriarch. This dramatic family dinner scene ends with a close-up of a chandelier decoration engraved with ‘double happiness’. In Chinese custom, ‘double happiness’ is a special icon showing blessing to new couples. This dinner scene does not reflect the intensity of keeping a secret, rather it shows a family party with happiness, noise, surprise, excitement and perhaps a little suspicion as an afterthought.

There is no single cognition of Wu’s queer life, rather a ‘bloc’ of affective forces coming from multiple perspectives of *a* life. The title of the documentary, *All in My*

*Family* prioritises the position of family. As aforementioned, when Wu goes to China, his queer kinship is reconnected to a familial kinship, in that the queer life blends in his extended Chinese family diaries. However, the queer kinship is neither erased by nor engulfs the familial kinship. The negotiation between is transformed into a living moment or an experience that processes a life with queerness. Song Lin raises an idea called 'queering Chinese kinship' which:

sheds light on the productive tensions between queerness and kinship that are found predominantly within kinship system itself, and underlines the negotiative processes that do not directly confront, but tacitly appropriate and transform kinship roles and ideologies, thereby rendering kinship into a site for realizing and sustaining queer desires, intimacies and connections. (2019, 117)

Thus, rather following a certain way of being queer, Wu's documentary is queering the way of feeling queerness. According to queer theory, it presents a paradox through defining 'radical unknowability' in that there is no definitive representation of queer (Jagose 2009, 158). The multiple emotional resonance of queerness, therefore, affectively practices the idea of queer.

In this way, queer sensation is more than bitterness, more than happiness and more than any single cognition of queer. On the one hand, as aforementioned, sensation is neither an emotion nor a cognition, rather it exceeds materials such as an event itself. On the other hand, according to Wu's editing strategy, I suggest that queer sensation refers to the sense of the queer issue, which is embodied in the way queer arts are created. Different senses of queerness can inform the way of presenting. It is not about which sense is right or dominant, rather, that queer sensation itself is preserved from experience.

As the speaker, seer, editor and the one seen on screen, Wu's discursive identities showcase the different perspectives of the negotiation between queer kinship and familial kinship and intentionally complicate the way of being queer. Consequently, the documentary shows the multi-dimensions of queer sensation. I want to highlight that queer sensation is not about a certain understanding of queer, rather a series of queer actions, disciplined forces and perceived experiences that have been restored in memory, are experienced now, and are reflected in various art forms.

## Conclusion

This paper has focused on queer sensation within negotiation between queer kinship and familial kinship. Queer sensation can be seen as another form of queer sense alongside queer representations. From a global queer viewpoint, the particularity of Wu's Chinese American queer life facilitates various ways of thinking about the queer community by demonstrating the multi-strategies of being queer within the queer-familial kinship context. This is seen clearly through the documentary that in the way of being queer changes across different sets of familial relations. In the negotiation between queer kinship and familial kinship, rather than considering only the reasons behind different queer performances and differing reactions to queerness, charting queer sensation shows those queer affects that goes beyond queer representations.

Based on an analysis of *All in My Family*, I have elucidated an interdisciplinary approach by suggesting a methodology which brings together queer reading and

non-representational theory to release mobile and affective images of being queer in a transnational context. Non-representational queer reading of Chinese queer kinship is not simply about finding one mode as a criterion within which to examine kinship issues, rather refers to tracking of queer action, queer experience and queer movement within the queer life. Non-representational queer reading as an analytical tool, follows the characteristic of queerness – mobility, presenting a mobile charting process. In this case study, we have followed the multiple roles of Wu in the documentary to track various reactions to being a queer. Through charting these such reactions, it is noted that queer sensation is always there, even though it may be invisible.

Through analysing queer sensation in a Chinese first-person documentary, I regard *Family* as one example that offers another analytical framework which is distinct to representational analysis of queer issues. Since queer is mobile and undefinable, the strategy of charting the multiplicity of ways of being queer consequently configures the form of queerness. Thus, thinking about queerness, to a certain extent, encourages thinking about the flowing affects found within our queer network, something which takes us beyond the isolated queer persona. Moreover, through this networked thinking, there is potential to contribute to the ongoing enrichment of digital queer practices by charting a ‘bloc’ of queer sensation with non-representational queer reading.

## Notes

1. Surrogacy is illegal in Mainland China. Zhou (2020, 579, Note 2).
2. Queer flexibility refers to both queer experience that is not attached to the dichotomy of gender, sex and sexuality (see Warner 1993); and ideal queer theory which is undefinable (see Jagose 2009).
3. In this article, I am not going to openly discuss queer and affect theory, clearly evident in the past 20 years, thanks to the efforts of queer social scientists and ‘turn to affect’ theory (see e.g. Sedgwick 2004; Cvetkovich 2003; Berlant 2004).
4. See Wei (2020) and Chao (2020).

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No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

## Notes on contributor

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