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Affect/Family/Filiality
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My daughter does not raise her voice at me … My daughter obeys without question … You want to be American? Fine! I treat you just like American. When you turn eighteen year old, you out of my house!

Ching-fei Chang, “Homecoming”

Why affect?

In Asian American literature, the second-generation bildungsroman is often interchangeable with stories of intergenerational conflict—the combined strain of familial stories so common as to be considered a “master narrative” (Lowe 1996: 63) or “the main material for a core body” of this literature (Chu 2000: 16). And where notions of family and filiality are activated, feeling is thick in the air. This is true across a litany of canonical works (texts such as John Okada’s No-No Boy, Milton Murayama’s All I Asking for is my Body, Frank Chin’s Year of the Dragon, Amy Tan’s The Joy Luck Club) as well as in more recent writing such as Jhumpa Lahiri’s The Namesake or Lac Su’s I Love Yous Are for White People.

Surprisingly little Asian American literary criticism, however, has been generated at the particular intersection of affect, family, and filiality. Theories of feeling in Asian American literature have gravitated toward the paradigms of melancholy and loss, to explore the psychic formation of the Asian subject in an American racial landscape (see Anne Cheng, David Eng, and arguably even Juliana Chang’s work on melancholia in the Leong family in Bone). Meanwhile, scholarship on family dynamics in narrative, while diverse methodologically, has tended either to champion or to censure the harsh emotional tenor of intergenerational conflict tropes—of subjects enraged, fearful, or guilt-sodden, hounded by filial piety—without taking up the analysis of feeling per se. This is dangerous, in that to engage in debate about how familial subjects do or “should” feel without exploring the mechanics of how feeling is produced, regulated, or used is to risk being drawn into recapitulating the very terms of filiality—terms which, at their base, are arguably about how subjects should feel about and thus act toward their parents or ancestors. In scholarship which addresses family feeling without theoretical study, emotions may be a critical liability, taken opaquely for functions of plot and character. This trap is easily sprung, as everyday language constructs emotion as “something that belongs to a
subject or object, which can take the form of a characteristic or quality” (Ahmed 2004: 119). Thus, the ways that we have for speaking about emotion tend to mire us in the (inter)personal: framing conflicts as a matter of individuals and obscuring the issues. (Such mired readings, in fact, are what students untrained in literary studies tend to do.) Again, such readings reinforce the discourse of filiality, which itself insists on an (inter)personalizing logic: In familial terms, emotions such as love and pride, guilt and shame and fear form the “content” of the subject and her relationships, constituting the good/bad child.

More often, however, the injunction in literary criticism to “depersonalize”—“remov[ing] the focus from the personalities and idiosyncrasies of the characters to a larger arena” (Wong 1993: 39) in order to achieve a socially meaningful analysis—has led critics to excise feeling. Thus, in an alternative set of readings, the emotional or affective discourse in family narratives has been set aside, whether as problematically misleading or as secondary to the analysis of structural or material realities of domestic relations (see Lisa Lowe and my own previous work, for examples; Leslie Bow’s thesis on the construct of betrayal and Sau-ling Wong’s on the binary of Necessity and Extravagance may come closest to exploring the uses of feeling in these narratives, although still not directly). Yet, precisely because the ideologies of filiality dictate that subjects do not question the prescriptions for their emotions and behavior—that they not examine the more complex composition of their feelings regarding their “real conditions of existence” (Althusser 1998: 155)—for that very reason is the direct and critical treatment of feeling in narratives of family and filiality so necessary: “Too many questions! ... You do not need to understand. Just behave, follow your mother’s example ... Do not shame me” (Tan 1989: 69). In other words, as an Asian American filial subject, a critic’s own training in filiality can make its study, though indispensable, particularly difficult.

For literary-critical purposes, then, observing a conceptual distinction within feeling, between emotion and affect, can be very useful in guiding analysis around the morally-charged pitfalls of familial love, guilt, anger, and the like.2 Whereas emotion hovers at the level of the person and interpersonal relations, affect shifts the scale of critical attention to what theorists have described as “the molecular level of bodies” (Clough 2007: 19). The affect register of feeling is said to operate at a level “other than conscious knowing” (Gregg and Seigworth 2010: 1): at a mind/body substrate that makes it sensory in function, like a nervous system that processes social in addition to physical stimuli. So conceived, affect comprises a realm of “incipient” responses (Massumi 2002: 30), which “can serve to drive us toward movement, toward thought and extension” (Gregg and Seigworth 2010: 1). Emotions, on the other hand, are feelings which have emerged into individual consciousness, and gelled into meanings. In other words, at the emotional level, feelings have been cognitively registered and sorted by the experiencing subject.3 While emotions of which we are cognizant find their ways to language, affect captures wordlessly—processing input and priming action with sensory-style dispatch, before or beyond the coalescing of the subject. To focus on affect, then, is to enable the study of feeling as part of a biopolitics of control—a biopower even more fine than the subject-level attentions of Foucauldian discipline.

Thus, rather than asking at the outset how the subjects of family and filial discourse feel (with that question’s often therapeutic expectations of healing self
or family), we ask here, in a diagnostic mode instead, what their affects do: how such affects are produced and circulated, and how these affects produce relations of power. In other words, using affect theory to read Asian American narratives of filiality helps to locate the family as part of an extensive circuit: one through which socially normalized, market-driven attention and attachments are moved.

**Portrait of the model minority as a filial child**

While both categories of feeling can be useful to power and capital, the ways that non-conscious workings of affect are susceptible to being managed have a particular salience for intergenerational Asian American family narratives. That is, the advantage of approaching feeling as circulating, fluid dynamics rather than discrete, personal transactions lies in the former’s view to the systemic. Affectively, bodily feeling is perceived as part of the flow of value and information mediated by market and media technologies, by state and labor infrastructures, as well as by private spaces and circuits of indebtedness that take the name of kinship. Seen in continuity with other modes of capitalist production, the Asian American household loses the luster of exceptionalism that cultural nationalist and feminist impulses may sometimes cast upon it, as a supposedly non-hegemonic cultural space, run on women’s care work.

To accept that the reproduction of labor power in the household must be both physical and ideological is to accept that the management of affect within the family is no more inherently beneficent or immune to capitalist logic than are the household’s socioeconomic goals. As Milton Murayama’s character dutifully recites, the “best” virtues in plantation society “are filial piety, patience, knowing your place, loyalty, knowing your duty, hard work, guts” (Murayama 1988: 35). In other words, family feeling, too, is biopolitical.

In stories from the late twentieth and twenty-first centuries, Asian American literature makes abundantly clear that the immigrant family is active in the education and training of subjects for the labor force (akin to if not directly overlapping with more formal sites of schooling)—and over that period, increasingly for a particular professional-managerial sector of the labor force. Familial insistence on graduating a narrow band of professionals—medical doctors, pharmacists, or investment bankers, as well as lawyers and engineers—echoes through Asian American stories like the most common of knowledge. (See Frank Chin’s *Year of the Dragon*, Catherine Liu’s *Oriental Girls Desire Romance*, and Sheba Karim’s *Skunk Girl* for some well- and little-known examples.) Social science explanations such as “relative functionalism” link the fixation on technical-managerial professions prevalent in Asian immigrant families to American structural realities. In general, these studies hold that the favored professions appeal not only because of their pay scale, but also because of their greater reliance on “objective” measures of qualification—a buffer against prospective racial discrimination in hire and promotion (see Okazaki and Sue 2009 as well as Xie 2003). In other words, these are strategies for adapting the child to the market. They supply the racialized American labor economy’s demand for highly paid, because highly profitable, model-minority workers.
But consider the efforts of affective management needed to turn the variegated raw material of children's abilities and proclivities into a single grade of human resource: technically proficient, financially motivated, compliant to the chain of command. Capital must organize the affective conditions of possibility for the social subjects its industries will require. Take for instance the health-care industry, which would grind to a halt without mechanisms for the affective management of its workers, mechanisms that channel their discontents with wages or working conditions into notions of “meaning” in the work (Ducey 2007: 192).5 But if an industry’s channeling of “investment of desire” (Hardt and Negri 1999: 87) on the job requires an extensive apparatus of educational and training institutions and mechanisms, how much more prodigious must be the undertaking to reroute a growing child’s polymorphous desires and aspirations, such that they become affixed to constructs of economic pragmatism and social prestige? How much more must affect be needed, to link her sense of self and worth to rubrics of obedience and achievement? “I was also to aspire to be a professional, i.e., a doctor, engineer, lawyer, etc., no matter what my passions or dreams were” (Lé 2007: 198). It is this process of directing cathexis, and the attendant costs, which we often find recorded in intergenerational narratives—although perhaps as ambient noise, not necessarily explicated in language.

**Priming the filial subject**

As mentioned above, affect can function to herd us toward movement and thought—in a given direction each time, and over time, potentially away from others. Social theorist Brian Massumi calls the moment of affective experience “the beginning of a selection” between “mutually exclusive pathways of action and expression, all but one of which will be inhibited, prevented from actualizing themselves completely.” Such experiences, moreover, build into “tendencies” (Massumi 2002: 30), as grooves are worn by the passage of affective charge. We may imagine affect as provoking “habituated behavior stored in what could be termed ‘muscular memory’”; as a scholar of pedagogy explains, affect’s “accumulation in the body can promote the desire and capacity to learn,” to engage, or otherwise to act (Watkins 2010: 279; emphasis added). Thus, a society keen to set the directions in which the subject becomes “capable” as she coalesces, the angles at which she tends to extend herself or away from which she unconsciously leans, is a society that concerns itself with what she “feels” at this level.6 In comparison, traditional rewards and punishments are clumsy training tools, coming in after the fact and necessarily contrived in their relationship to action. (Unlike the autonomic alarm that accompanies a stumble, a spank is imposed to contradict the actual pleasure of a cookie already stolen and eaten, or dollars are attached to “incentivize” any number of inherently unconnected activities.) But affect rigs what the acting subject will do, by influencing the stimuli, the information, to which her nerves and senses respond. Thus, affect is conceivably how filial logic comes to “make sense” to its participants to begin with, how those relations are paved—i.e., how the system (any system) meets its embodied subject. Which is to say, affect attempts to predict the interpellated subject.
Following Louis Althusser’s theory of interpellation, we understand that in order to answer to any given ideology, one must feel oneself addressed by that ideology—and it is that very acknowledgment that the law applies to one that makes one its subject. To illustrate this process, Althusser imagines ideology as a police officer recruiting his intended subject from amongst others on the street by means of shouting a generic “Hey, you there!”—a mysterious mechanism that (“nine times out of ten”) inexplicably finds its target. While Althusser does not mean for his “little theoretical theatre” to be taken literally, taking affect into account may nonetheless enable us to resolve the inexplicable element in his skit. If the individual “by this mere one-hundred-and-eighty-degree physical conversion … becomes a subject” (Althusser 1998: 162), then affect, which Massumi alternately calls intensity, speaks to why she in particular, in contrast to those around her, is more apt to turn reflexively at certain hails to subjectivity. (Thus, to understand affect as non-conscious or non-discursive is not to suggest that it is unsocialized.) Consider that, “[w]hile individuals are innately predisposed to affective response, much of what we respond to, and how we respond, is a consequence of learning: the repeated experience of similar affects accumulating in a dispositional tendency” (Watkins 2010: 283). The calls of filial piety are likely “sensible” to her who will then answer to its ideologies, more so than to others. For her whose affects have been tuned to the frequencies of obligation, the utterances of obedience—“Harvard,” “doctor,” or “saving face,” say—are clarion calls, whether they trigger identification or incrimination.

This is to say that familial production of the filial subject cannot proceed without affect, insofar as affect is instrumental to the training of capacities and proclivities. Filial piety as an affective disposition is a learned responsiveness to coded stimuli. It is a heightened, habitual sense of inadequacy, of indebtedness—a posture from which dissent is instantly defused or even obstructed, compliance easily surrendered. It is guilt on command, concession on tap. But keeping in mind that affect comprises a “bundle of potential functions” (Massumi 2002: 34; emphasis added)—not the end-result of action or subject—means that the processes intended to yield this sense of inadequacy and indebtedness can yield different, unintended actions and expressions instead. The same affective conditions which pave the way for subjects who are uncommonly likely to feel recognized by calls to model-minority performance, also make for subjects uncommonly likely to feel misrecognized by them: subjects to whom filiality is more dog whistle than homing device. To the narrator of Evelyn Lau’s Runaway: Diary of a Street Kid, for example, the sound of filiality is shrill, and prompts her to destroy its source or, short of that, herself, in order to silence its demands. But while her answer is defiance rather than obedience, she is no less affectively attuned to the hail than is the most filial of her figurative siblings; the subject may choose her emotional response, but not her affective responsiveness.

Obedience under the skin

As much as the distinction between registers of feeling is useful for reading the familial production of filiality, however, it is equally true that many a rich theory of
feeling proceeds without aggressively partitioning affect from emotion. Indeed, the study of filiality may itself suggest that this conceptual wedge is more tactical than ontological. To see this, we turn now to Sianne Ngai’s study of negative, “ugly” feelings in literature, in which she distinguishes between strong passions such as jealousy, which are “intentional” and “object-directed,” and then a category of what she calls “minor affects.” In the strong camp, emotions are experienced with prepositions fully deployed: love “for,” fear “of.” But minor affects include inglorious feelings such as anxiety or irritation—the causes and therefore objects of which are not so clear (Ngai 2005: 20). These latter set are more akin to moods, ambient and diffuse, and rather than flaring and dying, they may go on indefinitely: in a drawn-out flatness, like an unending minor chord. Ngai’s model of “transitive” versus “intransitive” feelings seems partly to recapitulate the basic distinction with which this piece began: Emotions are known to and even directed by the subject; affects flood the system like a kind of wash, tending to comprise neither action nor expression per se. Yet there are also key conceptual differences between the more common taxonomy we have been using, and Ngai’s own. Perhaps chief among these is that Ngai’s minor affects may be conscious; they are not confined to an autonomic or pre-interpretive register (more on this shortly). Of at least equal importance, however, is the role Ngai identifies for agency, as a kind of fulcrum between qualitative modes of feeling. Whereas emotions may be diagnostic or strategic—assessing a situation or perhaps acting upon it as well—Ngai sees minor affects as diagnostic only, because they “read the predicaments posed by a general state of obstructed agency with respect to other human actors or to the social as such” (2005: 3; emphasis added). In this sense, then, affects are feelings generated by situations in which the pathways to action or expression have been blocked, and which thus must remain suspended in the potential.

In our discussion of filiality thus far, we have chosen like Ngai to bypass the more high-profile feelings and to focus instead on affect. And indeed, to treat feeling in terms of a flow of information rather than as a transfer between persons, has likewise been to relieve it of any of its prepositions. To bracket feelings from the interpersonal has been to bracket them from their syntax. It has been to take rather literally the physiological attribution of affect to the nervous system: affects not as directed phenomena, but as diagnostic responses to situations, to stimuli. This is to experience guilt, for instance, as an electric shock delivered to the system, ringing in every nerve. Adding agency to the conversation now shows us why such an approach has been so fruitful for studying filiality in particular.

What is it to be angry, but not angry “at”? And might that describe Jade Snow Wong, whose bubble-gum memoir is full of rage she cannot aim, yet which same rage never fully emerges? This is to say that even classic emotions like anger and fear, both of which Ngai refers to as exemplars of strong passions, can be intransitive, come unfastened from their objects—and behave like moods. The difference between transitive and intransitive anger is not quality of feeling, but context. In other words, if partly situational, the shift between (strong) emotion and (minor) affect can be a function of socialization and not exclusively of physiology. In its transitive form, anger might lash in an arc from angry subject to offending object. Following that spike of expression, which Ngai calls cathartic, such anger might
believably dissipate, having expended its charge. But suppose a context where the merest outward display is forbidden—where any shift of facial expression, any heaviness of hand or step, the barest modulation of volume or tone in voice is liable to provoke further affliction—and in that context, anger may learn to become intransitive. It surrenders expression, direction, and object; it becomes a humming under the skin—a sensory experience. Such conditions are the production floor for the filial child: a subject in whom anger and resistance are best dissipated before they rise into word or action or conscious knowing, in whom obedience must become autonomic. Rather than wait for that which is potential to become a punishable actuality, filiality trains the model minority child to lose arguments affectively, long before words can be sharpened to a point.

Depression, on the other hand, Ngai categorizes as an affective mood, explaining that “we can ask what makes a person depressed … and sometimes get an answer, but the answer need not tell us what they are depressed about … [Such moods] are either objectless, or have near all-inclusive and undifferentiated objects” (Ngai 2005: 179). In her essay “The Country of Depression,” Evelyn Lau reflects that, “pain, or panic … had an acuity that depression … lacked. When I was depressed I would have given anything for a sharp, precise emotion, even if it was only sadness. Depression had no edges and therefore no borders, no discernible beginning or end” (Lau 2001: 24). In a classic etiology of affect, depression’s unspecific/unspecifiable content can be accounted for as a pattern of events never yet admitted to language, never yet coupled with meaning, even as it may be recurring still. But as Ngai herself further notes, moods “sometimes involve emotions searching for appropriate objects” (Ngai 2005: 179; emphasis added). If it is true as they say, that depression is anger turned inward, then today’s minor affect may be what has become of yesterday’s emotion: dissatisfactions rerouted from their proper causes, hurts unmoored from their original source. It is not enough, however, to think of depression as anger inverted, even supposing the registers have shifted. To derive depression from this route is not only to take the strong passion that is anger, and sever it from its objects and purposes so that it becomes intransitive, an affect vibrating in quarantine; it is further to turn that affect into a sensory experience that misdiagnoses—that “reads” painful stimuli as something else, as everything else, as nothing outside the subject at all. Thus, whereas affect theory has generally conceived of any crossover from affect to emotion as unilateral (meaning it moves from inarticulate affect to articulable emotion), filiality suggests that the affective training and education of subjects can flow in both directions. Where dissent is impermissible to thought, even fully realized passions may be downgraded to affects, because it is only at the affective level—at a substrate that can bypass or precondition choice—that absolute obedience can hope to be elicited.

In the end, then, a literary-critical shift of focus from emotion to affect may prove useful in studying familial discourses of filiality, not because the latter is analytically less “subjective” or qualitatively different, but because in the downshift to intransitive feeling lie the very habits of the filial: Ugly emotions daring not to find their rightful objects become senses that communicate only to the self. As such, they slip easily into becoming communications only about the self, their pain delivering messages of inadequacy and guilt about the internal rather than external world: “I began
to think I was crazy. If I was being treated so badly and it was my fault, perhaps I was not simply selfish, incompetent, mean, impatient ... perhaps I was actually mentally ill” (Liu 1997: 151). When events of power read to the child or worker as undiagnosable, irresolvable failures of selfhood instead, filial ideology has hailed its intended, embodied subject.

Notes

1 On usage: At its most basic, filiality is the relationship of child to parent, but in the Asian American context, the term more often refers to a sense of what is befitting of such a relationship. Thus it is used here in the latter sense, interchangeably with “filial piety,” to mean the parenting ideology that the role of the child is defined by filial debts and obligations. Note that in this usage, there is no “good” vs. “bad” filiality; one is filial (i.e., fulfilling such duties) or one is not.

2 There are, of course, varied and contradictory definitions and usages of the term affect, in the sciences as well as humanities. Rather than hope to be accountable to all of them, this discussion leans toward roughly phenomenological readings of affect, in keeping with recent “critical work ... invested in how concepts like affect, emotion, and feelings aid in comprehending subject-formation and political oppositionality for an age when neoliberal capital has reduced possibilities for collective political praxis” (Pellegrini and Puar 2009: 37).

3 On usage: I use emotion here to mean “a psychological, at least minimally interpretive experience”; affect to name its more physiological aspect, experienced through the body while very much still a part of mind; and, following Rei Terada, feeling capaciously to encompass both (Terada 2001: 4).

4 Sara Ahmed urges an analogous shift in her piece “Affective Economies,” from which I quote above—although, it should be noted, without distinguishing qualitatively between emotion and affect: “Rather than seeing emotions as psychological dispositions, we need to consider how they work ... to mediate the relationship between the psychic and the social, and between the individual and the collective” (Ahmed 2004: 119). While I believe the separation of affect as a category gains us additional insights important to filiality, this chapter will eventually bring emotion and affect provisionally back together, and thus is not incompatible with her model. (There are, in fact, strong resonances between Ahmed’s work and that of Sianne Ngai, to whom we turn at that later point.)

5 The construct of “meaningful work” substitutes for forms of compensation which the employer is responsible to provide, thus working to sustain good citizenship even especially in the face of workplace or industry bad faith. Although Ariel Ducey’s study does not focus on Asian American health-care workers in particular, she does offer an ethnographic account of how an extensive educational industry has emerged to recruit, train, and retain the labor force for the health-care field—in part via directed intervention into the affects of workers who might otherwise become “disaffected” with their jobs.

6 Among the various derivations of affect, we select here its potentiality for cohering into tendencies or habits of behavior; as such, what “practiced” affects emerge are not ontologically inherent but socially habituated. While the primary objective of this chapter is not to intervene in affect studies per se, the path that feeling takes through filiality leads away from strict and arguably limiting definitions of autonomic feeling as fundamentally alien to meaning and thus ideology (see Leys 2011: 450).

7 Elaine Kim, for instance, characterizes the tone of the autobiography as “enraged,” yet also notes “the emotional life that Jade Snow Wong might have expressed in her autobiography never fully emerges” (Kim 1982: 71).

8 Such ambiguity or misdirection is endemic to minor affects, according to Ngai: “the question of whether one’s paranoia is subjective or objective is internal to paranoia,” and likewise, “[w]hile envy describes a subject’s polemical response to a perceived inequality in
the external world, it has been reduced to signifying a static subjective trait: the ‘lack’ or ‘deficiency’ of the person who envies” (Ngai 2005: 21).

Bibliography


