

Transnational Filial Eldercare and Gender Negotiation in Fan Wu's *Beautiful as Yesterday: A Novel*

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Abstract

This paper examines Fan Wu's *Beautiful as Yesterday: A Novel* (2009) through Lynn Jamieson's concept of intimacy practices and Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity. It focuses on Mary, a Mainland China-born, US-based "eldest-daughter-as-son" who undertakes transnational eldercare for her mother, Fenglan. The study explores how filial piety is reshaped when Chinese Confucian ethics meets American individualism. It argues that eldercare is a dynamic, culturally shaped performance that reconstructs gender identity. Mary's evolution from a duty-bound provider to an emotionally invested agent shows how intimacy practices disrupt patriarchal norms, creating a daughterhood that meets son-coded obligations while nurturing expressive care. Meanwhile, Fenglan's self-disclosure challenges the self-effacing Chinese mother archetype, fostering a more intimate intergenerational bond. The paper demonstrates how intimacy practices act as micro-sites where global cultural flows reshape family ethics, offering a framework for understanding contemporary Chinese American women's literature.

Keywords

Transnational eldercare; Confucian filial piety; intimacy practices; gender performativity; mother-daughter relations

Introduction

Since the early 2000s, accelerating globalisation has seen a surge of Mainland Chinese immigrants to America, now the nation's third-largest immigrant cohort

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at roughly 2.5 million, 61% of whom hold college degrees and many of whom are young women (Greene and Batalova). As this highly educated group expands, Chinese American transnational families have become increasingly complex. Daughters in these families face the challenge of reconciling Confucian ideals of filial duty with the individualist norms of American culture while caring for their elderly parents across borders. In particular, little attention has been given to how transnational Chinese women navigate the fluidity of daughterhood as they negotiate shifting cultural expectations across different stages of their lives (Alford and Harrigan 352).

In China, filial piety obliges adult children, traditionally sons, to provide hands-on eldercare (Liu and Dupre 325). Limited public services and the legacy of the one-child policy intensify this burden, compelling migrant daughters to become “substitute sons” (Xie 5). Fan Wu’s *Beautiful as Yesterday: A Novel* (2009, hereafter *BAYAN*) dramatises these pressures through the character of Mary, a Beijing-born scholar who settles in the US yet remains responsible for her widowed mother. Framing filial duty within post-socialist China and contemporary America, the novel illuminates how intimacy practices—defined as daily actions that sustain closeness (Jamieson 151)—help Mary recalibrate eldercare from obligation to emotionally invested agency. Initially, as the archetypal dutiful eldest daughter, Mary experiences an emotional crisis through her transnational eldercare, one that compels her to renegotiate mother–daughter intimacy and thereby her gender identity. Wu thus reconceives filial piety as a dynamic gendered practice shaped by migration and cultural hybridity, mirroring wider tensions Chinese transnational women experience when they negotiate between tradition and self-reinvention. Guided by Lynn Jamieson’s intimacy framework and Judith Butler’s gender performativity, this paper analyses how *BAYAN* depicts daughters who reconfigure eldercare roles, challenge Confucian son-preference, and forge hybrid identities. By juxtaposing Chinese and American norms, we will show how evolving intimacy practices allow transnational daughters to balance familial duty with personal agency, thereby reframing both gender and family ethics across borders.

The Transnational Turn: Chinese Women’s Writing in English

Contemporary literary criticism on Chinese American women’s English-language writing typically follows two trajectories. The first emphasises immigrant narratives by writers raised in Western countries, exploring identity crises, cultural adaptation, and social integration within dominant cultural contexts (Parameswaran). Categorised as ethnic or ethnic bildungsroman literature (Feng), such texts often focus on ethnic identity and adaptation. The second trajectory

involves writers born in mainland China who emigrated overseas and produced autobiographical memoirs in English. Their works address historical trauma, particularly involving the Cultural Revolution of 1966-1976, and explore how mainland Chinese experiences shape diasporic identities (Xia). While both trajectories belong to diasporic literature, they differ in their emphasis on ethnic negotiation versus historical and personal reflection.

Since the turn of the century, however, a new generation of Chinese American women writers has emerged. They move beyond traditional ethnic or trauma-centred narratives. Influenced by globalisation, these writers engage with complex intercultural perspectives, navigating between post-socialist China and contemporary Western societies. Their works interrogate how sociocultural structures shape gender identity, focusing on intimacy practices as sites of cultural negotiation and identity construction across transnational contexts. This narrative shift challenges traditional, nation-centred frameworks, fostering richer intercultural dialogues marked by tensions between China and the West. The theoretical rise of transnationalism in literary studies has significantly influenced this shift. Transnationalism emphasises global interconnectedness, cultural fluidity, and the complexities obscured by nationalist perspectives (Nischik). It foregrounds how individuals from diverse backgrounds sustain transnational interactions, redefining cultural hierarchies and identity constructions (Jin; Lim). Within this framework, women writers act as cultural intermediaries, embodying hybrid identities and participating in “third culture” formation through daily intercultural interactions (Ong and Nonini). Consequently, Chinese American women’s literature provides micro-level insights into global cultural politics, revealing intimate and gendered dimensions of transnational experience that remain underexplored (Lee 357).

Wu’s *BAYAN* exemplifies the transnational turn in contemporary Chinese American women’s writing. Its protagonist Mary, who migrates from China to the United States (henceforth US), embodies the tensions between Confucian filial ethics and American individualism. Through Mary’s transnational eldercare, Wu dramatises how intimacy practices become critical sites for renegotiating gender roles and reconfiguring intergenerational bonds in transnational contexts. In alignment with Paul Jay’s view of transnationalism as a movement from belonging to transit, foregrounding “mobility, migration, travel, and exchange” (10), the novel shows how Mary’s eldercare not only enacts these forms of mobility but also illustrates how migration reshapes both gender identity and cultural belonging. Anchoring itself in the conceptual framework of the transnational literary turn, this study demonstrates how micro-level practices of

intimacy mediate cultural negotiations and reconstitute family ethics across Chinese and American worlds.

Eldercare Transformed and Gender Reconstructed across Borders

The act of filial piety is the foundational intimacy practice within Chinese families, which warrants examination through the lens of intimacy studies, particularly when exploring its transnational reconfiguration. Feminist scholar Jamieson defines intimacy as “the quality of close personal connection and the process of establishing that connection” (151). Building on Anthony Giddens’s view of intimacy as a central force in reorganising personal relationships with profound implications for young women (62), Lynn Jamieson highlights how women continually reconfigure intimacy by negotiating the tensions between cultural norms and individual agency (152). Her concept of intimacy practices, or everyday acts that sustain or reshape closeness, which range from preparing meals to physical touch or verbal self-disclosure, offers a key framework for understanding eldercare as an embodied form of intergenerational intimacy (153).

Butler complements this by arguing that gender is not innate but “performatively constituted by the very ‘expressions’ that are said to be its results” (25), such as repeated behavioural acts. For Butler, the gap between act and norm opens “a crucial space for the subversion of those very norms” (59). Thus, filial eldercare functions simultaneously as an intimacy practice and a gendered performance. In *BAYAN*, Mary’s role as the “eldest-daughter-as-son” exemplifies this intersection: her filial eldercare reiterates son-coded duties while also subverting them through innovative intimacy practices like hugging or emotional disclosure. Together, these two frameworks reveal the act of filial piety as both intimacy practice and gendered performance, showing how transnational eldercare enables Chinese daughters to renegotiate daughterhood beyond patriarchal prescriptions. This perspective connects Chinese traditions of filial piety with American individualist models of eldercare, situating Mary’s transformation from a duty-bound provider to an emotionally engaged agent within broader debates on intimacy, gender, and transnational family ethics.

In contemporary literary studies, intimacy has emerged as a distinct thematic concern for examining both the complexities of human relationships in literature and the broader cultural and political currents they reflect (Hook et al.). Yet research specifically addressing intimacy practices within literary texts remains limited. In the Chinese cultural context, intimacy has often been dismissed as a derivative of Western individualism and considered inadequate for engaging with the family-centred ethical foundations of Chinese society. Such dismissal risks obscuring how intimacy is continuously negotiated within

collective social norms and their inherent tensions in the Chinese context. Recent scholarship, drawing on Jamieson's theorisation of intimacy practices, has turned towards indigenous forms of intimacy, with particular attention to intergenerational relationships as key sites of ethical and affective negotiation in mainland China (Yan; Liu).

In China, intergenerational intimacy is both pervasive and deeply influenced by cultural and historical forces. Rooted in ethical obligations, reciprocal roles, and generational continuity, it forms one of the most foundational and enduring systems of emotional support within Chinese society. In contrast to the American tradition, which prioritises marriage as the most exclusive form of intimacy, China's patrilineal structure maintains powerful emotional bonds between parents and children, with mother-daughter relationships standing out in particular (Nauck and Suckow). As such, intergenerational intimacy is not only one of the most significant forms of intimacy in China, but also a key site where filial piety is embodied and reinterpreted across Chinese and American cultural contexts. Its most concrete expression lies in intimacy practices centred on filial piety, particularly in eldercare.

Filial piety in the Chinese context can be understood as a multilayered institution, originating in ancestor worship, elaborated in Confucian ethics, and later politicised and legalised as a principle of imperial governance that linked family order with sociopolitical stability (Zhang 3–5). As Yue Du observes, filial piety is not merely a familial virtue but an intergenerational, ethical, and legal institution, centring on a hierarchical relationship between parents and children. By analogising parental authority to sovereign authority, it became a cornerstone of imperial order, with the central practice of supporting one's parents enforced through both moral pressure and legal means.

In traditional Chinese family networks, filial piety occupies a central and sacred position, with sons, in particular, expected to fulfil their filial duty through co-residence, daily assistance, and embodied care—acts that sustain vital intergenerational bonds (Fei 25–26); conversely, daughters were typically excluded after marriage (Zhang 47, 72). Even today, familial eldercare remains the cornerstone of elder support, with adult children continuing to bear the weight of eldercare responsibilities (Wan, Yu, and Kolanowski). This model, steeped in relational obligation, is in stark contrast to the American system of eldercare, where support for the elderly is largely institutionalised through structures such as Medicare, Social Security, and assisted living. The American framework reflects a cultural ethos of contractual equality and individual autonomy in later life (Estes and Phillipson). While family involvement persists,

primary responsibility is often delegated to professional providers, underscoring a logic of contractual independence rather than the intergenerational reciprocity that defines the Chinese approach.

Since the 1980s, however, the traditional eldercare model has been redefined as a shared duty of all children due to structural pressures of the one-child policy (Du 19). Daughters have been gradually incorporated into both the legal and ethical subjecthood of filial responsibility, reflecting the erosion of entrenched patriarchal preference and marking a profound gendered transformation of filial piety in the post-socialist era (Ran and Liu). Globalisation and social change have further destabilised or reconfigured these norms, magnifying the dynamics within transnational contexts as migrant Chinese daughters are placed in a double bind: unable to fulfil norms of embodied filiality in China yet unwilling to fully adopt American eldercare models, they are compelled to assume the role of “substitute son” across borders (Xie 5). This shift represents not only a redistribution of eldercare but, as Butler’s notion of performativity suggests, a profound reconfiguration of filial ethics and gender identity. By assuming roles traditionally reserved for sons, daughters renegotiate and reconstruct what it means to be a filial daughter (Du 19, 253), revealing the adaptability of Chinese families in a globalised context.

In response to these shifts, scholarship has examined eldercare through intergenerational support policies (Hu and Scott), evolving filial ethics (Yan), and transnational eldercare practices (Yarris). However, these studies remain largely within anthropological and sociological frameworks, while little attention is given to literary studies, especially transnational Anglophone Chinese works like Wu’s *BAYAN*. This study intervenes in this gap by bringing together Jamieson’s theorisation of intimacy practices with Butler’s notion of gender performativity, conceptualising the Chinese daughter’s eldercare as an enactment of performative practice. The analysis of Wu’s *BAYAN* unfolds in two interwoven movements. The first situates the predicaments of Chinese mother–daughter relations, marked by estrangement, conflicting responsibilities, and the enduring weight of patriarchal ethics and historical trauma, thus laying the groundwork for understanding Mary’s transnational eldercare. The second turns to Mary’s role as a caregiver across borders, exploring how her practices negotiate cultural conflict, reconfigure intimacy, and ultimately redefine filiality within a Chinese–American domestic sphere. Taken together, these movements chart a trajectory from intimate alienation to reconstituted intimacy, showing how *BAYAN* dramatises the entanglement of filial piety, gender performativity, and intimacy practices across cultural contexts.

Mother–daughter predicaments in *BAYAN*

In *BAYAN*, Wu depicts a mother–daughter relationship in a transnational Chinese family that appears warm yet is marked by profound estrangement. Mary emerges as the quintessential figure of “other people’s child”—a cultural emblem in contemporary China of scholastic excellence, filial devotion, and social conformity. She not only secures academic and professional distinction but also shoulders the transnational filial obligations traditionally assigned to sons. Yet beneath this monumental image of the “ideal filial daughter” lies a fissured bond with her mother, Fenglan; this fracture is rooted in the entangled legacies of patriarchal ethics, historical trauma, and socioeconomic constraint.

Despite the severe hardships her parents endured during the Cultural Revolution and the family’s persistent poverty, Mary, a determined girl from a small-town background, receives unwavering support from her parents in pursuing her education. She gains admission to a top Beijing university and later earns a full scholarship to the University of California, Berkeley, eventually becoming a statistician in Silicon Valley. With a successful husband and son, she epitomises the Chinese ideal of success. Yet Mary’s excellence extends beyond professional achievements; as the eldest daughter, she dutifully fulfils her filial obligations. As her mother notes, since she left for America, “Mary didn’t ask me for a penny” (33). Since relocating to the US, Mary has provided financial support for her parents, visits China annually, and ultimately arranges for her widowed mother—who fears “dying alone” (39)—to live with her in America despite her husband’s objections.

Mary assumes eldercare responsibilities through both financial and physical support. By redefining the daughter’s role from the traditional view that a married daughter is a lost daughter to that of a central figure in transnational eldercare, she challenges conventional gender roles in the context of globalisation. Her efforts extend filial ethics across borders, reflecting both the resilience of traditional values and their adaptation to modern realities. This aligns with the rise of daughter-centred eldercare in urban China (Shi 29), as discussed earlier. Mary’s case illustrates how Confucian filial piety evolves as an ethical response to contemporary familial and societal challenges, highlighting the interplay between intimacy, obligation, and shifting gender norms.

Yet beneath this monument to the ideal filial daughter lies a deep fissure in her relationship with her mother Fenglan. While she has consistently fulfilled her filial duties of caring for her mother, she candidly admits, “for years I didn’t get along well with Ma” (259). This exposes the estrangement at the heart of their bond. This paradox of intimacy without closeness arises from a misalignment of intimacy practices across generations (Yan). While Fenglan’s maternal conduct is

conditioned by the socio-historical legacies of post-socialist China, Mary's coming of age in that context, followed by her emigration to the US, engenders new expectations for emotional reciprocity, producing an intergenerational gap.

A crucial dimension of this gap lies in the workings of Confucian patriarchy and familial ethics, which not only shape Fenglan's maternal role but also suppress the open expression of emotion. As Yan observes, patriarchal societies often preserve familial stability at the expense of emotional openness, producing families in which love exists but intimacy is absent. Within this framework, motherhood becomes instrumentalised: mothers are expected to provide material support, while their emotional agency is muted. Fenglan's love thus takes the form of practical care and quiet gestures, which Mary misreads as neglect, fuelling resentment and emotional distance. In letters, Fenglan repeatedly asks whether Mary "ate well or slept well or had enough to wear" (16), or, during a quarrel between Mary and her father, silently "put a roasted duck leg in her bowl" (71). Yet such understated signs of care not only fail to meet Mary's longing for explicit emotional affirmation, but also generate misunderstanding and alienation. Jamieson reminds us that while eldercare as responsibility reflects how individuals define and perform intimacy within specific sociocultural contexts, genuine intimacy demands more than duty and provision, it requires active emotional engagement. Fenglan's inability to express affection openly is therefore not an absence of love but the consequence of her emotional voice being constrained within a patriarchal system that values stability and sacrifice above self-expression. Her subjectivity is curtailed by cultural norms that idealise maternal self-denial while silencing emotional agency.

This dynamic of suppression is further sharpened by gendered asymmetries within the family: whereas fathers traditionally hold symbolic authority, mothers like Fenglan are confined to subtle and silent expressions of care. Such muted gestures, though grounded in love, are misinterpreted by Mary as indifference, eventually hardening into "resentment and disdain" (122). When her alienation from her mother reaches its peak, Mary even questions whether she is truly her mother's "blood daughter" (175). In this way, the novel dramatises how patriarchal constructions of caregiving distort emotional communication, fracture intergenerational intimacy, and create enduring dissonance between love and recognition across generations.

A second dimension of distance stems from the traumatic legacy of the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976), when Fenglan endures family loss, a forced marriage, assault, and forced pregnancy, experiences that led to suicide attempts and left her surviving reluctantly for the sake of her daughters. These starkly rendered experiences form the traumatic foundation of her later maternal

practices. In a family photograph at Mary's home, "everyone looked serious, even anxious, as if they were afraid that the decade-long nightmare had not ended" (73), vividly conveying the psychological scars of the Cultural Revolution. This image replaces warmth with fear, highlighting Fenglan's inability to heal and the resulting estrangement. Mary recalls Fenglan sitting silently in the kitchen for hours, "mouth agape, staring blankly into midair like a retarded beggar" (76). Yet upon sensing Mary's presence, she "leaps to her feet with unexpected agility, her face assuming a broad smile" (76), masking internal despair with a cheerful façade. This sharp contrast both demonstrates her deep love for her daughter and reflects the heavy historical burdens under which she must play the role of a cheerful and supportive mother while hiding her internal anguish and despair.

Rooted in Cultural Revolution-era trauma and cultural conditioning, Fenglan's silence serves as both self-protection and a barrier to intimacy. In this context, women, especially mothers, are expected to endure hardships quietly rather than reveal their inner wounds. Consequently, her emotional withdrawal becomes a source of intergenerational disconnection: by avoiding her past suffering, she forfeits the chance to cultivate a deeper bond with Mary. Although her will to survive emerges from the Cultural Revolution's devastation, that same history prevents her from providing the emotional care her daughter needs. Mary, receiving only this closed-off love, finds herself confused and unable to recognise her mother's pain; she even wonders if Fenglan "had some kind of mental disease" (77). This dynamic, where the mother struggles to survive and the daughter grows up emotionally deprived, captures how historical trauma and patriarchal norms intertwine, illustrating the ways silence, repression, and sacrifice shape both motherhood and gender identity in *BAYAN*.

A further source of estrangement stems from Fenglan's years of exhausting manual labour to support the family, which also impacts her capacity for emotional engagement with Mary. Mary recalls that her mother "never played with her" and "always looked tired and worried" (125). As Fenglan's youthful optimism gives way to the relentless burdens of economic survival, she becomes a "fat woman shamelessly bargaining at the market" and a "coarse woman in a dark blue factory uniform" (76). However, instead of empathy, Mary feels "pity," "disappointment," and "shame" towards her mother (76). Mary interprets Fenglan's "grey hair, bloated figure, and ever-present oil-stained blue uniform" as signs of failure rather than love (125), prompting her to distance herself, even refusing to invite her friend home for fear of her mother's appearance. According to Jamieson, intimacy requires ongoing interaction and mutual investment (24). Instead, Mary's sense of shame and estrangement undermines emotional

reciprocity, preventing her from recognising Fenglan's sacrifices and depriving her of the emotional sustenance that a nurturing bond might have provided.

Shaped by the trauma of the Cultural Revolution and societal norms that prioritise endurance over emotional expression, Fenglan's maternal intimacy practices thus reflect cultural and historical conditioning rather than a lack of love. Her emotional repression, self-sacrifice, and focus on material support fail to foster closeness, resulting in distance rather than warmth. Mary, having grown up in an environment that values emotional expression, misreads her mother's care as mere duty instead of "facilitating, producing, and sustaining a subjective sense of closeness" (Jamieson 151). This misperception deepens the generational divide between both mother and daughter and underpins the latter's emotional struggles and identity formation. Mary's childhood longing for emotional connection clashes with the distant love she receives, illustrating the complexities of intergenerational intimacy in both China and transnational contexts. Because she misattributes her mother's care to duty rather than affection, Mary feels unloved and withdraws into isolation, first during the Spring Festival in her university years, and later by emigrating to America—acts that reinforce the emotional chasm between mother and daughter. However, Mary's self-alienation only deepens her sense of loneliness and isolation; it is as though "a sorrow she could not articulate had already taken root in her heart, becoming an inseparable part of her life" (77). Mary even yearns for a "memory eraser" to forget the past and "love her mother sincerely" (122).

Since moving to America, Mary faithfully re-enacts filial and gender performativity by "visiting her mother once a year, sending her money regularly, inviting her to the US to live with her"; however, she "is just fulfilling her duty as a daughter, with little love involved" (122). Rooted in intergenerational trauma, this tense mother-daughter dynamic traps Mary as both victim and inadvertent perpetrator of emotional disconnection, which ironically blocks the intimacy she craves (Jamieson). Furthermore, Mary's "unbearable sorrow and loneliness" (17) threaten her professional success and family stability. She feels that she has "failed as a wife, daughter, and sister" when her family cannot meet her emotional needs (175). Turning to religion heightens her anxiety about forming intimate bonds, and erodes her self-worth. Jamieson's framework suggests that true intimacy demands mutual emotional investment, but the prevailing eldercare model in America deepens Mary's isolation.

The mother-daughter divide illustrates how historical trauma and patriarchal norms in mainland China impede intergenerational intimacy between mother and daughter over the years. Fenglan's unwavering adherence to filial piety clashes with Mary's evolving emotional needs, creating estrangement and

tension that underpin their relationship. This “duty without love” dynamic not only prevents their bond from becoming emotionally fulfilling, but also shapes Mary’s emotional struggles, sense of self-worth, and gender identity, even after she has migrated to the US.

Cultural conflict and emotional reconstruction

Mary’s awakening in a transnational context begins with the sharp conflict between her deeply rooted filial obligations and the American cultural emphasis on emotional expression. This tension is not only the source of her pain and sense of alienation but also the catalyst that drives her to re-examine her eldercare intimacy practices, to question the very nature of intimacy, and ultimately to awaken her own agency. This section will trace the course of that awakening. In the American context, intimacy “is highly associated with physical contact” particularly in intergenerational contexts that foster a sense of security and emotional engagement through practices like hugging, kissing, and verbal expressions (Seki, Matsumoto, and Imahori 310). Such practices make American intimacy more openly expressive compared to other cultural norms (Zhang and Wills), where physical and verbal forms of intimacy foster direct and open emotional connections. This sharp contrast with the more reserved and indirect expressions typically found in Chinese culture also foreshadows Mary’s later emotional conflicts and cognitive transformation.

The inner tension created by this cultural difference reaches its peak when Mary witnesses the interaction of a Western mother and daughter walking arm in arm: “The daughter stopped several times to adjust her mother’s silk shawl, gently whispering to her with each gesture” (121). This scene highlights the natural ease of physical intimacy in American culture, where both bodily touch and verbal exchange function as vital means of expressing affection and shaping cultural identity. Mary’s simultaneous feelings of “admiration, even jealousy” and her exclamation that “their intimacy looks so natural” highlight the restrained nature of bodily intimacy in Chinese intergenerational relationships, where societal constraints limit physical expressions of love (122). Reflecting on her own experience, she recalls, “She had never hugged her mother, not even in farewell, for such expressions did not exist in Chinese tradition” (166). This realisation deepens Mary’s awareness of the emotional distance between herself and her mother and compels her to reconsider both her understanding of intimacy and the motives behind her eldercare. She begins to wonder whether her devotion arises from genuine affection or merely from filial duty and cultural conditioning. This moment of questioning marks a crucial turning point and

initiates a shift from duty to love, providing the initial impetus for the awakening of her agency.

As Giddens observes, young women, as “reflexive subjects,” possess the capacity to reshape intimacy practices in ways that significantly influence contemporary social relationships (75). In this light, Mary recognises that her care for her mother has been grounded not in love but in the transformation of childhood “resentment” into “pity and responsibility” (122). This moment of insight is crystallised when, watching a pregnant daughter gently adjust her mother’s shawl, Mary asks herself if she had brought Fenglan to the US only to “soothe her conscience,” to prove to church friends that she is a “good Christian,” or simply to fulfil “cultural obligations and traditions” (121–22). Recalling that “duty makes us do things well, but love makes us do them beautifully,” she compares the mother–daughter bond to a plant “withering from lack of water and sunlight” (121–22). This metaphor signals her recognition that obligation without emotional nourishment leads to relational decay and emotional bankruptcy, which are detrimental to genuine intimacy. Through this moment of cultural mirroring and intense self-inquiry, Mary moves from passively enacting inherited filial scripts to actively pursuing emotional authenticity as a conscious agent.

Determined to enact this new understanding of intimacy, Mary applies for her mother’s US permanent residency and invites her to live with her in America. This action itself fulfils the ideal of filial piety, caring for her mother in her old age, but its motivation has shifted from external cultural obligations to an inner emotional pursuit, a wish “to reconcile with her mother” and a “hope for a harmonious mother–daughter relationship” (123). This shift from passive duty to emotional investment marks Mary’s transition from merely fulfilling obligations to actively cultivating a deeper intergenerational bond. The transformation is vividly illustrated when she greets her mother at the airport with a spontaneous “big bear hug.” Fenglan, however, remains motionless, “her body stiffening, arms hanging awkwardly at her sides,” until Mary, sensing her discomfort, “loosens her embrace, her face flushing with embarrassment” (116). This moment encapsulates Mary’s attempt to challenge the traditional Chinese disciplining of bodily contact through an innovative intimacy practice (the hug), which symbolises a more assertive, emotionally expressive femininity. Her shift from a culturally scripted Chinese femininity (reserved and indirect) toward an American-influenced model (open and expressive) reflects her negotiation of gender identity in the transnational context. Through physical contacts like embracing and touching, Mary seeks to redefine her gendered selfhood.

This episode reveals Mary's attempt to resist the tacit prohibition of physical contact in Chinese culture through the innovative intimacy practice of hugging. More than a simple greeting, the embrace functions as a Butlerian performativity through which Mary seeks to enact a more open, expressive form of daughterhood and femininity. Fenglan's rigid response signals the persistence of deeply ingrained cultural scripts and the resistance of habituated norms, turning what might seem like mere awkwardness into a site of embodied negotiation between competing cultural expectations. The attempt also highlights the clash between cross-cultural expressions of intimacy. Mary's bodily initiative challenges the traditional mother–daughter role distribution in Chinese culture, yet the differing cultural backgrounds prevent immediate emotional resonance. As Butler's theory of gender performativity suggests, everyday bodily intimacy is not simply an expression of feeling but an ongoing practice through which individuals construct and negotiate gender identity within social structures. Through this embrace, Mary actively reconstructs her gender role and reshapes intergenerational intimacy, illustrating the complexities of gender identity formation in the transnational context.

This embodied negotiation does not end with the airport embrace but prepares the ground for a deeper, reciprocal transformation that unfolds through subsequent shared intimacy practices of care and culminates in new forms of intergenerational intimacy. This transformation is especially evident in the act of linking arms, a successful attempt at physical connection initiated by Fenglan. As they walk home, Mary instinctively reaches out to steady her mother who stumbles over a fallen tree branch. After Fenglan regains her balance, Mary releases her grip, but Fenglan “thrusts her arm underneath Mary's and holds it,” signalling her need for dependence. This gesture not only implicitly affirms Mary's authoritative role as the supporter, but also subtly shifts the power dynamics in their relationship. Mary's response, “tightening her grip on her mother's arm,” shows that she is not merely passively fulfilling the caretaker role traditionally expected of a daughter. By emotionally responding and feeling “the warmth of her mother's arm inside hers,” Mary actively engages in the interaction, showcasing her agency in the process (123).

This moment disrupts the traditional one-way eldercare model, in which the daughter is expected to be the sole caretaker. Instead, both mother and daughter participate in a reciprocal exchange of care: the mother not only receives support but also asserts her own need for emotional reassurance. This reciprocal dynamic represents an innovative intimacy practice, as it shifts the power balance and transforms traditional gender roles within their relationship. As Jamieson suggests, such intimacy practices “enable, generate, and sustain a subjective sense

of closeness and being attuned and special” (151). Walking home with their arms linked thus becomes a site of embodied gender negotiation. In this moment, their physical closeness forms a subtle yet tense bodily dialogue between the physical submission demanded by Chinese filial piety and the Western ideal of individual autonomy. These opposing forces are delicately balanced through touch and the warmth they share.

This interaction illustrates Jamieson’s concept of intimacy practices that “both sustain and disrupt normative gender orders” (156). The empowering potential of these practices emerges as Fenglan, energised by her daughter’s support, “strides like a young person” (122). This transformation shifts eldercare from a one-sided duty to a mutually empowering dynamic, replacing the traditional hierarchy with a shared subjectivity and challenging portrayals of elderly immigrant women as passive care recipients. The movement from imbalance to rebalancing, and finally to walking home together, reflects three stages of cultural adaptation, negotiation, and fusion, while the strength of Fenglan’s arm and the warmth of Mary’s grip symbolise a new cross-cultural contract between generations.

Due to the physical contact in their daily interactions, the emotional connection between Mary and Fenglan undergoes a profound transformation through self-disclosure, another innovative intimacy practice for both of them. This process not only breaks the subtle paradigm of emotional expression in Confucian tradition but also creatively blends the intimate cultures of both China and America. As physical contact gradually becomes part of their daily routine, the cultural and generational barriers slowly dissolve and allow their emotions to permeate, ultimately forging a new type of intimacy that retains traditional warmth while incorporating open expression.

For the first time in the novel, Fenglan opens up to her daughter by recounting her past trauma. This scene acts as a profound moment of revelation as Fenglan expresses vulnerability. This act of self-disclosure, anchored in the security and trust of the growing mother-daughter bond, not only disrupts long-held cultural scripts but also constitutes an innovative intimacy practice. By exposing her pain and suffering, she creates an opening for Mary to reciprocate, and in doing so, develops a relationship that transcends duty and embraces mutual care. At the same time, Fenglan’s revelation signals a vital shift from one-sided filial duty to a mutually beneficial emotional exchange. By breaking the rigid model of the “stoic, self-sacrificing” mother in Confucian ethics, Fenglan challenges both the emotional suppression of Chinese mothers within Orientalist frameworks and the traditional notion of generational relationships. Her act within the context of cohabitation and eldercare exemplifies the fusion of

Chinese and American emotional expressions, offering an opportunity for cross-cultural emotional negotiation and advancing the reconstruction of traditional intimacy models. As Fenglan releases her long-suppressed emotions, Mary's response unfolds through delicate physical contacts. She "slowly covers her face with her palm," her internal shock and sympathy quickly transforming into action as she "snuggles closer, then embraces her, pressing one cheek against her face" (134). This sequence not only reflects the American cultural trait of direct emotional expression but also blends the traditionally reserved emotional expression of Chinese culture, effectively reconstructing traditional intimacy practices. Through her genuine embrace and emotional involvement, Mary shifts from passively accepting cultural roles to actively redefining the "appropriate" role for daughter. This marks a transformation in the mother-daughter care model, from a one-way obligation to a mutual emotional exchange, creating a new model that integrates American directness with Chinese warmth.

For Mary, her mother's emotional disclosure marks the long-awaited return of maternal affection, while for Fenglan, "opening her heart to her daughter" (145) signifies a rare defiance of the cultural restraint demanded of Chinese women. Their renewed intimacy embodies Jamieson's view that emotional and physical engagement reconstructs familial bonds across borders. Through this exchange, traditional Chinese modes of care merge with new transnational forms, creating a space for cultural adaptation and emotional reconciliation. In performing care and self-expression, Mary redefines daughterhood as an ongoing negotiation of gender and intimacy, aligning with Butler's concept of performativity and revealing how transnational women continuously rearticulate gender identity within shifting familial frameworks.

Conclusion

Wu's *BAYAN* illustrates how filial piety and gender roles are not static traditions but malleable scripts, continually reshaped by global migration and evolving cultural values. Through the lens of Jamieson's theory of intimacy practices, Mary's eldercare, encompassing cohabitation, physical affection, and narrative disclosure, emerges as a performative reconfiguration of kinship and gender obligations. Butler's gender performativity further illuminates how these actions do not merely reproduce patriarchal norms but revise and resignify them through iteration. Mary's transformation marks not only renewed female agency as she reclaims decision-making and narrative authority within the family but also a redefinition of filial ethics in transnational eldercare that blends Confucian responsibility with American emotional expressiveness and bridges cultural and generational boundaries. Simultaneously, Fenglan breaks away from the

archetype of the silent, self-effacing Chinese mother and becomes a dialogic subject whose emotional responses reshape the mother-daughter dynamic into a reciprocal, negotiated relationship. Together, both women construct a continuum of action–affect–ethics that redefine both intergenerational intimacy and female subjectivity across borders. Daughterhood, long marginalised in Confucian ethics, becomes a vital site for the renegotiation of gendered labour and kinship under transnational conditions. The novel ultimately demonstrates that the emotional costs of a duty-without-love eldercare model can only be healed through the integration of material responsibility and embodied intimacy.

By foregrounding the micro-politics of eldercare, this study contributes a critical framework that connects Chinese American literary studies with gender and transnational theory. It offers a productive model for analysing how transnational women navigate and reconfigure intimate relationships. Future research might extend this inquiry to other Asian transnational texts, further exploring how innovative intimacy practices recalibrate family ethics amid shifting regimes of work, mobility, and aging, thus enriching the poetics of transnational kinship.

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