

ALICE WU

b. April 21, 1970

FILM DIRECTOR

“I take a character who would never think she’d be a main character ... I make her front and center.”

Her film “Saving Face” paved the way for Asian-American and LGBTQ cinema.

Alice Wu is a director and screenwriter. Her landmark film, “Saving Face” (2004), one of the first mainstream movies centered on Chinese-American and lesbian characters, paved the way for Asian-American and LGBTQ cinema.

Born to Taiwanese immigrant parents, Wu grew up in the San Francisco Bay Area. She studied computer science at MIT and Stanford University. At age 19, she came out to her mother, speaking in Mandarin, the family’s native language. Her mother reacted harshly, vowing never to see her daughter again, before reaching out two years later to reconcile. Wu’s experience coming out and the subject of familial love and traditional expectations inspired the screenplay for “Saving Face.”

After graduation, Wu worked as a software engineer for Microsoft. In her late 20s, after attempting to write a novel about her relationship with her mother, Wu began taking night classes in screenwriting. In three days, she wrote the first draft of “Saving Face,” a romantic comedy about a closeted Asian-American lesbian surgeon who discovers her 48-year-old mother is pregnant out of wedlock. Although Wu started writing purely for self-expression, she realized her screenplay had potential. Her professor suggested Wu try to option it but told her it would likely be produced with straight or white characters. Wu decided her only chance to make the film as intended was to quit her job and try to direct it herself.

Wu left Microsoft and moved to New York City. She gave herself five years to make the movie. As predicted, major studios questioned her vision, wanting to whitewash and “straightwash” the project, but Wu pressed on.

Released in 2005, “Saving Face” received a series of nominations and film festival awards. After the movie’s world premiere at the Toronto International Film Festival, Sony Pictures Classics acquired it for distribution. Praised for its wry humor and relatability, the film played worldwide. It has become a queer classic and influenced a generation of Asian-American and LGBTQ actors and directors.

In 2016, after dabbling unsuccessfully in additional projects and leaving the film industry for a time to take care of her sick mother, Wu began outlining the screenplay for what would become “The Half Of It.”

Based loosely on Wu’s teenage friendships, the coming-of-age dramatic comedy also features a queer Asian-American lead. Netflix released “The Half Of It” in 2020. It won Best Narrative Feature at the 2020 Tribeca Film Festival and an Independent Spirit Award for Best Screenplay in 2021.

Shortly after the film’s release, Queerty magazine named Wu to its list of 50 LGBTQ heroes.



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