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**The Asian Male Spectacle in Glen Goei's Film
That's The Way I Like It (a.k.a. *Forever Fever*)**

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**The Asian Male Spectacle in Glen Goei's Film
That's The Way I Like It (a.k.a. *Forever Fever*)**

Khoo Gaik Cheng

Introduction

The Singaporean film *That's the Way I Like It* or *Forever Fever* (*FF*) was released in Singapore in 1998 and picked up by Miramax, a subsidiary of Disney, for North American video distribution in 1999. It has had a fair number of reviews in the North American media: from the Toronto-based *Globe & Mail*, to the *LA Times*, the *Seattle Post-Intelligencer*, the *Austin Chronicle*, and *Village Voice*. The North American critical reception is somewhat tinged by the American-centric worldview that holds up Hollywood as the measuring stick for other national, diasporic and transnational cinemas. *FF* is received as an aspiring but second-rate *Saturday Night Fever*: “‘Like It’, but we’ve seen it all before’. (Paula Nechak of the *Seattle Post-Intelligencer*, October 22, 1999) Or note *Film Journal International* David Noh’s rather strong reaction: ‘It’s a complete cartoon, but not so much funny as downright embarrassing’. Ignorant of Singaporean culture, Noh goes on to criticize Singlish as ‘squawky, abrasive pidgin dialect’ that is ‘off-putting and demeaning, unfortunately rendering the characters more coolie than cool’. Such a comment reveals more about Asian American self-hatred and angst than it does about Singaporean cultural difference. It also fails to understand the subversive usage of Singlish, the colloquial hybrid form of English that is periodically banned by the state on television and radio.¹ Criticisms like Noh’s do not acknowledge other intended meanings specifically mediated through an understanding of Singaporean culture. Perhaps the concomitant question raised by this dilemma is the danger of a uniform (and culturally un-informed) interpretation of English-language films from postcolonial countries with fledgling national cinemas marketed and distributed in North America.

What I would like to do in this paper is to show how this film projects a particular representation of Asian (read: Singaporean Chinese) masculinity that is as comfortable in its hybrid localized global identity as Singlish uniquely captures the grassroots national identity. Such a representation, I argue, mobilizes its hybrid dynamic space-in-between in order for each polar position to interrogate and deconstruct the other. For example, what do you get when you cross Bruce Lee with the young John Travolta? The character Ah Hock represents neither one nor the other in their original form but, rather, portrays a particular kind of Singaporean hybrid masculinity.

To be fair to some of its critics, *FF* borrows much from *Saturday Night Fever*, beginning with the arc of the film: there is the favored brother who disappoints the family, the same number of family members sitting down to dinner, the ‘don’t touch my hair’ scene, two contrasting women for the protagonist to choose from, a suicide, and reconciliation with the woman of his choice early the next morning. As for plot ideas, the film also riffs from *Enter the Dragon*, *The Purple Rose of Cairo*, *Play It Again, Sam*, *Shall We Dance* and *Strictly Ballroom* (Nechak). However, while Goei may have begun with a Hollywood textbook of scriptwriting, he then moved on from

there: for example, substituting a different dilemma for the protagonist's brother, which I will discuss a little later.²

Deconstructing traditional Chinese *wen-wu* masculinity

While my title broaches a masculinity that is visually spectacular, male subjectivity has to be contextualized and understood beyond the visual. The 1980s and 1990s was a period in which an Orientalist 'Asian (neo-Confucian) past' was reaffirmed by the Singaporean government (Niyogi De 2002: 194). This saw an ideological alignment by the PAP leadership against the West, and on the side of East Asian powers that espoused a non-liberal patriarchal form of nationalism (Chua Beng Huat 1995, 146-7 qtd in Niyogi De 194).³ Simultaneously, this strategy may have reflected a paranoid fear on the part of the PAP government of its inability to restrain the excesses of westernizing modernity (i.e. materialist consumption), which it had fostered through various educational, socio-economic, housing and other policies in the pursuit of national development and economic growth. This dynamic tension between East and West, modernity and tradition, rather than being left alone to develop in its organic fluctuating forms and in multiple grassroots and temporal locations, also underwent much state engineering and construction, as made evident in the narrative of the masculine self/Nation in Senior Minister Lee Kuan Yew's memoirs, *The Singapore Story* (1998). For instance, the 'we' Lee constantly refers to in his memoirs is gendered male; it is the 'founding fathers' of postcolonial Singapore and he names his male compatriots. The conflation of the state and Lee himself as the man whose actions and leadership are responsible for Singapore's economic success story is clear from the outset. He therefore provides a masculinity to be emulated. Here evidently, Singaporean masculinity undergoes self-refashioning as a half Peranakan Chinese, middle-class English-colonial-educated Lee shapes an ideal Singaporean masculinity that is partially based on Victorian gentlemanly codes as well as neo-Confucian patriarchal ideals.⁴ The search for an ideal nationalist and anti-western identity in the throes of a consumerism that threatens to destabilize subjectivity led, not to a return to the Malay or culturally hybrid past of Singapore, but to a Sinicization of Singaporean masculinity.⁵

This brings us to the two ideal traditional concepts of Chinese masculinity, the dichotomous *wen-wu*. In *Theorising Chinese Masculinity*, Kam Louie explains that those who possess *wen*, literary and cultural attainment, are scholars (*wenren*), with Confucius being considered the ultimate *wen* male. He is a poet, a gentleman, a rational thinker. On the other hand, the military general and now deified Guan Gong, deemed 'the greatest man of military prowess' in Chinese history and literature, embodies *wu* (Louie 2002: 8). *Wu* signifies physical force and power. Often, the *wuxia* or chivalrous fighter is someone who possesses 'bravery, mateship and physical strength' (2002: 11). *Wu* heroes are supposed to eschew women for loyalty to their male counterparts and to fight for righteousness (*yi*). The ideal male should have a balance of both *wen* and *wu* qualities. As Louie states, 'The Master [Confucius] himself has stipulated courses on the *wu* skills of charioteering and archery as compulsory skill for the *junzi*' (2002: 141). But historically, and in Chinese diasporic societies, it is the scholarly or *wen* masculinity that is privileged, with its emphasis on higher education and, concurrently, its middle- and upper-middle-class leanings: 'From the Tang Dynasty until now, *wen* men continue to hold the high moral ground and claim to be a spiritual aristocracy' (Louie 2002: 76). I would extend this hypothesis to Singaporean Chinese masculinity.⁶

In fact, the project of writing Singaporean national subjectivities usually begins with documenting immigrant roots, predominantly Chinese immigrant histories which, intentionally or otherwise, at once implies the erasure of non-immigrant/indigenous pasts. For example, contributing to a representation of Sinicized Singaporean masculinity, Stella Kon's 1986 novel, about a newly-arrived Chinese immigrant in Singapore before 1911, sets up this *wen-wu* dichotomy in its title, *The Scholar and the Dragon*.⁷

The late-1990s model male Singaporean citizen is perhaps best captured by the character, Meng, in Eric Khoo's film *12 Storeys* (1997). Esha Niyogi De defines Meng as a conscientious civil servant, Western-educated, technologically trained, English-speaking, upwardly mobile, aware of current events and filled with the best of Confucian paternalism and moral uprightness—he makes sacrifices for his family, and always abides by strict sexual morals (Niyogi De 2002: 197). In short, he ostensibly embodies the Singaporean modern *wenren* that has been shaped through the hybrid neo-Orientalist Confucianism of that period, though this ideal image is subverted in the film when the repressed Meng unravels and finally loses his self-control.

The *wenren* in *Forever Fever* is Hock's younger brother, Leslie, who is studying medicine. Hock's parents shower attention and parental pride on Leslie. They belittle Hock because of his menial job working in a supermarket stocking shelves, his father insulting him for always being late for dinner because he stops to look at his 'half past six motorcycle'. His father claims he is 'half past six' and has a 'half past six job' and 'half past six friends'. Hock's desire to own a Triumph motorcycle marks his working class machismo. In addition to this working class male mentality and lifestyle, Hock's obsession with Bruce Lee and kungfu makes him the film's definitive *wu* protagonist in contrast to his *wen* brother. This also makes him oblivious to women: it is the Italian-American Tony Manera, stepping out of the screen, who points out to Hock that Mei, his childhood playmate, is a 'hot chick'.

Filmmaker Glen Goei admits that his two greatest influences growing up in 1970s Singapore were disco and Bruce Lee's kungfu movies. Yet, how does one recuperate or mimic Bruce Lee at a period when Lee, or for that matter, Jackie Chan or Jet Li, may have come to signify another stultifying stereotype of Asian masculinity as martial arts cinematic spectacle? Are there no other available Asian male role models, one might well ask. As I have explained, there is: the scholar figure as signified by Leslie. However, *wen* masculinity is very quickly dismantled because of Leslie's need to express and literally embody overt femininity (*yin*); the *wen* image being deconstructed by his transsexual identity and decision to leave medical school. So perhaps the question needs to be answered with another: why does the narrative privilege working class *wu* masculinity as symbolized by Hock's character? I suggest this narrative positionality in itself challenges the dominant Singaporean state ideology that emphasizes high achievement and competition in education and professional careers. In fact, Goei's film emerged around the same time as a whole slew of Singaporean films that focused on portraying the working class aesthetic: the precursor Eric Khoo's *Mee Pok Man* (1995), *12 Storeys* (1997) *Eating Air* (1999), and most famously, Jack Neo's series of films that began with *Money No Enough* (1998).

Even as Hock's kungfu antics analogize him with other international *wu* figures like Bruce Lee and Jackie Chan, Goei's representation of the Singaporean *wu* hero is quite different.⁸ In *Ah Hock*, Goei fashions a postcolonial hybrid masculine identity, one that combines commercial disco with kungfu, and the sexual confidence of John Travolta (Tony Manera) with the wisdom of Bruce Lee. This hybridity follows logically from the film's opening scene. It displays a world map which locates

Singapore spatially and audibly within the global spread and ‘flow’ (Appadurai 1996) of disco fever as the sound of radio deejays introducing disco in various languages is accompanied by dots of radio stations on the global map lighting up across continents. Temporally, the year 1977 appears juxtaposed on the map to signify the moment of disco’s arrival or, rather, the arrival of American cultural and neo-economic imperialism in Singapore. In reality, though, this is merely a newer wave of imperialism that reiterates Singapore’s *always already* globalized cultural and historical image. This hybrid image twinges the hegemonic Singaporean discourse of neo-Confucianism that relies on the elitist Arnoldian definition —one which privileges ‘an upper-class Chinese culture and which attempt[s] to foreclose culture and political changes ensuing from the nation’s location within global capitalism and the transnational flow of information/culture’ (Gabielpillai 1997: 16). Gabielpillai states that the Arnoldian discourse of culture was deployed to suggest that ‘cultural hybridity (Westernization) and change meant cultural erosion, cultural inauthenticity and a lack of moral vigor’, and then used to ‘shut out influences of women’s movements, radical identity politics and other threats to state power’ (1997:16). If so, the representations of working class hybrid masculinity and transsexualism in *Forever Fever* would indeed prove to be the hegemonic state discourse’s unworkings.

An analysis of Singaporean Chinese masculinity also merits a look at the gender roles he is obligated to perform as dutiful son and loyal brother. Here, conservative patriarchal Confucian values of filial piety, respect for one’s elders and the pre-eminence of family ties exist in tension with the values of a liberal, more individualist-oriented modern capitalist society.

First, within the family, tension arises from the parents’ unequal treatment of the two sons, leading to petty rivalry and jealousy between the brothers. Hock is frustrated with the lack of respect he receives from his parents despite his financial contribution to the household when his father was out of work. But after Leslie’s expulsion from the family home by their homophobic father and Leslie’s subsequent attempted suicide, Hock gives up the prize money from the dance competition to his younger brother for his sex-change operation rather than use it to purchase the motorcycle of his dreams. Family values ‘triumph’ over individual materialist desires (no product placement intended). The motorcycle had earlier provided him with a fantasmatic sense of plenitude and *jouissance*, eroticized through his caress of the shiny metal bodywork, licking of his lips, hands grasping the handlebars, eyes closed as he dreamt of riding the motorbike down a beach road with swaying palm trees, later with the attractive westernized Julie clinging to his back. This scene gives substance to Susan Faludi’s point about how men, not just women, have become the targets of commodification and marketing. She quotes an adman from Friedan’s *Feminine Mystique* who claimed that ‘properly manipulated’, ‘[not only] American housewives [but men too] can be given the sense of identity, purpose, creativity, the self-realization, *even the sexual joy they lack*—by the buying of things’ (Friedan 208 qtd. in Faludi 1999: 601, italics mine). For Hock, the dream of owning the motorcycle is deferred for family and a more practical love, one that acknowledges the wide class gap between him and the sophisticated Julie.⁹ Instead of riding away into the sunset with an unattainable woman, Hock stays put to fulfill family obligations, content to place the deferral of his materialist dream with his simple, childhood friend turned realized girlfriend, Mei: their final scene together shows him giving her his beloved helmet for safekeeping. This is in striking contrast to *Saturday Night Fever*, which emphasizes class mobility and individualist values.

Another point to make about the film's emphasis on family values is reflected in its overall content. Considered 'sweet' and definitely gentler in tone than *SNF*, there are no scenes of sex or sexual violence. Violence is contained and limited to the realm of men whereas in *SNF*, the gang Tony's friends attack includes a woman who fights back. Moreover Hock employs violence only in self-defence. Whether this gentle representation can be attributed to Singaporean socio-cultural specificities, or Goei's own nostalgic lenses of his teenaged years as a period of sexual and moral innocence, we ascertain that at least Hock's friends are neither violent nor misogynistic. Goei exposes the sexist boasts of Hock's pals as empty talk or, in Singlish, 'talk cock only'. For example, although his friends speak as if they are sexually experienced, they are never seen with any women other than their childhood friend, Mei. In contrast, the men in *SNF* are racist, homophobic and misogynist: Travolta's two buddies rape a woman friend in the back of a car, they insult Latinos, African Americans and two gay men walking on the street. Clearly, *Forever Fever* targets a family audience with its PG (PG-13 in the U.S.) rating, and even its liberal message of tolerance and acceptance of queerness is moderated by the narrative's central focus on the good-natured heterosexual brother and sidelining of the queer one.

The film reserves its strongest criticism for the rigid patriarchy symbolized by Hock's disciplinarian, pragmatic father, whose ideological beliefs and actions are not only old-fashioned but are also shown to have dire and tragic consequences for Leslie's individual wellbeing and the family as a whole.¹⁰ Pa's values of neo-Confucian masculinity are challenged both by Leslie's gender-bending proclivities and rejection of the capitalist, instrumentalist dream, as well as Hock's working-class re-modeling of himself into a blend of Tony Manera and Bruce Lee. The generational cleavage between father and sons is evident but this division also places the younger men on the same side as the empathetic women in the family. There is the mother who is at Leslie's bedside in the hospital as well as the younger sister who admitted to Hock the night before that she missed Leslie and pleaded with Hock not to leave them. In fact, the close-knit family is reconstituted at the hospital, but with a missing traditional patriarch as if to reinforce a kind of *yin* solidarity that suggests how gendered the qualities of unconditional love and openness to change seem to be.¹¹ Thus, the film also subverts what Gabrielpillai regards as the hegemonic discourse that seeks to rechannel the desire for a postcolonial East-West cultural hybridity, represented as female, 'towards a Chinese culture represented as male (strong, pure, promising the return of an ethnic cultural power conceived as the restoration of a male, decolonized identity)' (1997: 299).

Traditional masculine roles are deconstructed and reconstructed by the end of the film to become more extroverted, sensitive and expressive. And Hock, despite his macho preoccupation with motorcycles and kungfu, is not immune to this. When his brother comes out, he makes an attempt to understand him and to bond with him. He becomes self-conscious about making insensitive gender jokes at Leslie's expense. More importantly, he finally recognizes his brother's name change by using it—from the common working class macho 'Ah Beng' to the gender ambiguous 'Leslie'—now understood by both Hock and the audience as a signifier of Leslie's new *yin* identity. Hock's new image as a more sensitive but confident man is improved by his relationship with Mei. On the way to watch a Bruce Lee film, Hock and his friends encounter and harass some transsexuals only to be stopped by Mei.¹² Then when the rest of the group decide to watch the new disco movie, Hock initially declines, claiming that dance movies are for '*ah kwas*'. This hokkien term is best translated as

‘queer’ and appears as such in the English subtitles. Like other Southeast Asian queer terms such as *bakla* (Tagalog), *banci* (Indonesian), *pondan* and *mak nyah* (Malay), or *kathoey* (Thai), it more commonly describes a man who crossdresses or behaves like a woman and whose sexual orientation is left ambiguous.¹³ Of course, by the end of the film, our protagonist Hock is a reformed homophobe.

Mei is not the only one who encourages self-reflection in Hock. Both his male role models Tony Manera and Bruce Lee advise him, ‘Don’t think, feel...’ Such advice may be given a more political reading—instigation to escape from the brutal rational pragmatism forced on Singaporean society. Asking Hock to ‘feel’ implies rousing the most immediate intimate instincts, calling forth the operations of affect, emotion, and the senses. It requires him to be in touch with his heart, gut, liver, parts of the body other than the brain; and when it comes to fighting and dancing—the hands, hips, muscles, legs, feet. A good *wuxia* should ideally be able not only to master fighting skills but have the emotional capacity and control to carry out his spectacular moves.

In fact, feeling rather than thinking is precisely what Leslie does when he announces suddenly on his 21st birthday that he is a woman and is going for a sex change operation, thereby giving up the image of the ideal scholar gentleman (*wenren*) and going to medical school to be the woman that he has always felt him/herself to be internally. In the later scene where he confronts his father, he says:

I’ve tried, Pa, all my life I’ve tried to please you and Ma. Did you know I took up medicine just to please you? Do you know how much I hate it? ... Pa, I can’t live a lie anymore. I’m sick and tired of being someone that I’m not. I want to start living life for myself. And this is who I am. Pa, please understand.

Thus, Leslie shifts from reflecting the qualities of the ideal Chinese masculinity (*wen*) to outwardly expressing the more feminine aspect of his subjectivity, *yin*. The dialogue and acting in this scene highlights the inner tensions within Leslie as he struggles between fulfilling social obligations and the pursuit of individual happiness. His coming-out then accounts for his frequent absences at the family dinner table, his discomfort with living a double life and being responsible for his parents’ happiness.

This latter subplot about Leslie has been described by one reviewer as coming ‘out of left field’ (Rhodes 1998:1) and by another as ‘totally unexpected’ (Thomas 1999: 1). But Singaporeans might be able to explain this subplot by quoting a gynecologist from the National University Hospital who stated in 2001 that ‘Singapore has been one of the leading centers for sex-change operations for the past 30 years’ (Leong 2001). The Gender Identity Clinic at the National University Hospital has performed more than five hundred sex-change operations since 1971 (Frances 2003). The subject of sex change was obviously controversial as the government closed down the Gender Identity Clinic in 2001 only to recently reopen it in June, 2003.¹⁴

However, even without this specific historical knowledge about Singapore being a centre for sex-change operations, the underground roots of disco itself uncovers hints of social transgressions.

Disco

Albert Goldman notes: ‘In just one short year, disco exploded from an underground scene down on the New York waterfront or out in the boros and barrios into a vast

international entertainment industry' (1978: 7). This underground space evolved from 'an elaborately decorated bar or supper club' into an industrial space of the Garment District of New York City. Here, not only were LP discs spun, sampled and mixed by 'disc jockeys', but a lot of dance steps were developed by and co-opted from African American and Latino dances. For example, 'The Hustle' in *Saturday Night Fever* is a combination of traditional Latin dance steps and the African American 'Lindy twirl' (Goldman 1978: 155). Other disco experts focus their attention on the emergence of gay dance clubs like the Paradise Garage, which first opened in 1976 in New York City:

The Paradise Garage offered an ideal setting [...] where gay men could freely articulate their sexuality. Freedom of sexual expression was of central concern, and disco became a musical medium through which African-American (and eventually Caucasian and Latino) homosexuals expressed their social identity. (Wilson- McLeish 2002: 1)

The style of loud, beat-oriented dance music known as disco evolved out of funk and soul music, both of which were already coded black socially, and disco 'gayed-up' the sound by adding more explicit lyrics and a pounding bass (Wilson-McLeish 2002: 1). Most critics agreed that the underground roots of disco were deeply embedded in the historical context of an era immediately succeeding the Civil Rights and Stonewall movements. And Faludi reminds us that transsexuals and drag queens were at the forefront of the Stonewall riots, though the role they played was later overshadowed by the focus on male gay rights (501-504). Minority groups in the 1970s were struggling to gain autonomy and equality, and 'a particularly marginalised group of gay African-Americans living in New York were busy building a cultural identity' (Wilson-McLeish 2002: 1). Disco was 'often perceived as the preserve of [...] blacks, gays and working-class women' and the 'Disco Sucks' campaign that followed shortly after, 'a white, macho reaction against gay liberation and black pride more than a musical reaction against drum machines' (Dave Haslam in jahsonic.com/Gay.html). At the same time, we should not make the same mistake as film reviewer Ross Anthony does in his interview with Goei, when he refers to Leslie as 'gay' instead of 'transsexual'. Goei makes it clear that there is a difference between the two terms by correcting Anthony. Nevertheless, a case can be made for these original disco dance clubs being queer/queer-friendly spaces.

Disco was a spectacle in more ways than one: not only did it introduce music and flashy dance moves, it also made fashion a compulsory component of its vocabulary. This fashion was not limited to women. In *Saturday Night Fever*, Travolta's character spends crucial screen time grooming and dressing up. This is perhaps unsurprising, for Goldman characterizes the real thrust of disco culture as 'toward love of self', or, as more particularly reflected in *SNF*, male narcissism (Goldman 1978: 11). Notably, the best dance scenes in *SNF* and *FF* are the solo performances by Travolta and Adrian Pang. Moreover, the viewers are made to identify with and gaze at Hock more so than at any other female characters in the film.

Part of Travolta's costuming included not just a polyester shirt and tight pants but two gold chains and groomed hair. Wearing jewelry for men is part of southern Italian culture and accompanied by his characteristic Manera strut, Travolta's character defined a very 'manifestly' uncompromising heterosexual masculinity whose aspects are played out in homophobic threats and insults hurled at two gay men walking down the street. Lessening the severity of men's fashion, particularly 'the

plain, black, bourgeois suit', in what J.C. Flugel characterizes as 'the great male renunciation', disco lightened and softened up the somber tones of western men's wardrobe since the Victorian era, allowing men to wear loud colors and soft material without being considered effeminate (qtd in Ramsay 1995: 13). Indeed, Hock benefits from a polyester or silky masculinity whose confidence is mediated through disco and John Travolta, down to the strut and the famous white suit. Hock even goes to get his hair permed by a visually extroverted gay hairdresser, in contrast to his earlier homophobic behavior. Perhaps this is a testament to the change that disco, with its themes of sexual liberation and male narcissism, can wrought.

For Ah Hock, disco is not just skin deep. It allows him to be more extroverted, to get in touch with his expressive side. It is a liberating and empowering feeling described by the upper-class Julie, in one of her feeble/forced attempts at Singlish, as 'damn shiok!' Peter Braunstein of *The Village Voice* explains that disco ushered in 'a sustained exploration of the sexual self, including the femme side of the male persona. With its fluid structure of crests and flows, disco music allowed men to imagine the wavelike and recurrent quality of the female orgasm, and to enter a world of psychic plenitude where the spartan injunctions of machismo had been overthrown' (1998: 3). In other words, to carry through a cheeky earlier psychoanalytical interpretation, Hock's attraction to disco substitutes for his love for motorcycles.

However, disco does not make him less of a man, less *wu*-like. What he successfully does is to incorporate his kungfu moves into disco. Moreover, when he prepares for the big competition night, he does not rehearse his dance steps. Instead, he works out as if preparing for kungfu: doing push-ups, sit-ups, throwing kungfu punches, at the end of which his sister playfully tells him, 'Now, Little Dragon, you can go and bathe'.¹⁵ This workout comes in useful as Hock's physical fitness is indeed put to the test; first by some hired thugs in the men's washroom before his turn on the dance floor, and after that when he has to use kungfu to fight off his envious rival competitor.

The disco that arrived in Southeast Asia in the late 1970s had already undergone commercialization in the United States. This was a mainstream, heterosexual version perhaps characterized by Goei's choice of sound tracks in *Forever Fever*, which is romantic rather than explicitly sexual like Donna Summer's hit, 'Love to Love You Baby', a 17-minute track which contained twenty-two simulated orgasms. For Goei, the post-Vietnam 1970s signaled a time of relief and celebration. Disco 'was all about being carefree and enjoying a period of fun. It was very accepting to all age groups, cultures and races'.¹⁶ I would add that in Singapore, disco could only exist in the form of a purely commercial, mainstream musical type of mass culture. Disco had lost its raw edge by going mainstream, and *SNF* was one obvious sign of this co-optation: 'The only way to represent the ecstatic power of disco was to de-gay it. And even in the '70s, that's exactly what the most famous disco movies did' (Braunstein 1998: 1). Braunstein, writing about *SNF*, elaborates: 'Repression and hierarchy, not arousal and surrender, drove that version of the disco boom. Its anthem was "Stayin' Alive," not "Love to Love You Baby"' (1998: 2). In fact, the only hint of underground culture associated with the early days of disco in *FF* is the transsexual brother whose presence seems an anomaly to some critics. Yet Leslie does not even make it to the disco in his ballroom gown, perhaps unconsciously affirming the purist (homophobic) need to isolate queerness from pleasurable mainstream 'heterosexual' entertainment. For an imported popular culture like disco to be accepted in mainstream Singapore, any trace of transgressivity has to be erased, sanitized or controlled.¹⁷ As for the Singapore underground gay scene during the

1970s, there was only one out of three gay venues with a dance floor but which, unfortunately, did not allow dancing among same-sex partners. Moreover, a gay venue could also stop being gay if the proprietor decided it was bad for its image, as was the case with Treetops (Heng 2001: 81). It was not until April 1983 when a disco, Niche, opened that allowed same-sex dancing (ibid).

Goei's 1990s' disco film is colored by the same commodified global re-nostalgia that spurred the recent vintage fashion explosion and saw the production of *Boogie Nights*, *Summer of Sam*, *The Last Days of Disco* and other films set during the 1970s. On the other hand, Goei also points out that he intentionally set the film in 1977, two years before the opening of the first McDonald's outlet in Singapore: 'McDonald's is kind of a signpost for me of the onslaught of Western culture, and I wanted this movie to be before the end of our "simple lifestyle"' (interview in ironminds). By 'simple lifestyle', Goei may be referring to specific Asian difference that shows up in the form of *kopitiam*¹⁸ culture that predates American corporate fast food culture in Singapore. At the same time, Goei might also be disingenuous in suggesting that his film reflected a generation who may not be 'very westernized' compared to those growing up after 1978. After all, 'East' and 'West' already intermingles linguistically and culturally in *FF*, before we see Hock's derivative, pastiche, yet freshly hybrid solo dance routine.

In fact, the dynamic hybrid space-in-between adopted in the film is reflected in the self-conscious overturning of certain classical western viewing expectations, specifically its playful nod to Mulvey's theory of the female gaze. The film reverses the male gaze in several ways. The opening shot follows a hip-swaying, confident, middle-aged Chinese woman going into the store Hock works at. But unlike *SNF* where Tony sexually objectifies several women on the street, Mrs. Chan pursues Hock as a potential son-in-law, flirting with him and giving him a photograph of her two daughters, facsimiles of her. Here the female gaze is given a 'familial' twist. Also, we see Hock's teenaged sister, who is always reading romance novels, peeping at him while he is bathing and singing. The audience is then made to identify with her gaze as the camera closes in on the peeping hole and we see Hock. Simultaneously, the sexual and pseudo-incestuous current of this scene is undercut by its humor. The grandmother comes along and smacks Mui for her voyeurism and Hock emerges from the bathroom quoting Bruce Lee.

Conclusion

While critiquing the authoritarian Chinese father through western liberalism, the film does not totally embrace the notion that the individual male self can be produced and defined in isolation from community and society, which is a message that actually emerges quite clearly in *Saturday Night Fever*. However, I am not attempting to essentialize or make the neo-Orientalist claim that the concept of family values is distinctively culturally 'Asian'. In fact, as Susan Faludi points out in her book *Stiffed*, postwar American masculinity is in crisis because market and neo-liberal economic forces shape masculinity as essentially narcissistic, objectified and removed from the social realm. In an image-driven society, the perception of men having to be in control takes precedence over their actual usefulness and social engagement as workers, craftsmen, fathers, and community contributors. And that gradually, American manhood becomes 'less and less about an inner sense of self, and more and more about a possession that need[s] to be acquired' (Kimmel ix qtd in Faludi 1999: 11). *Saturday Night Fever* is thus a product of the contemporary American culture of image consciousness and male narcissism in the way that it defines Travolta's

character and masculinity. And *Forever Fever* then perhaps can be said to be a product of Singaporean culture, as one that simultaneously speaks about and speaks back to the hegemonic discourse of ideal masculinity within Singapore. Unlike the masculinity described by Faludi, which is unable to escape the grip of commodification and marketing strategies, Goei portrays characters at what he considers to be the beginning point of the penetration of American brand logo-ization into Singapore—1977. They consume western culture (whether it be Triumph motorcycles, escapist romance novels or disco) without ultimately letting it consume them.¹⁹

Forever Fever was one of four local films released in 1998 in Singapore which were all made without government funding (Ng). The Singapore Film Commission was launched in April the same year to provide funding to deserving filmmakers making shorts and features. While the government may fund controversial films like Royston Tan's *15* (2003), the version accepted for nation-wide release had 27 cuts. Thus, censorship continues to be a problem for counter-hegemonic films. However, the criticism of state patriarchy in *Forever Fever*, given its setting in the remote nostalgic past, may seem more palatable compared to the gritty contemporary documentary-style feature, *15*, which exposes the grim living realities of marginalized male youth in the city-state. Moreover, while *FF* makes a point about accepting queer identity, it does so only superficially, touching on aspects of gender rather than sexuality.

Spectacular, very visual forms of masculinity dominate *Forever Fever*. The heterosexual working class disco-kungfu king and the transsexual drag queen undermine and outshine the traditionally privileged form of Chinese masculinity embodied by the scholar male. Yet, a cynical reading indicates that these alternative representations of Singaporean masculinity signal the beginning of a period of tolerance to diversity and creative expression that the Singapore state is keen to foster only in the name of economic reinvigoration.²⁰ Like its see-sawing language policy in the past, which at times allowed Singlish to be used but then rescinds this tolerance once the latter becomes too widespread, it remains to be seen how far the state will permit the testing of its liberal boundaries when it comes to gender and sexual politics.²¹

Notes

¹ Mohan Srilal, 'Quick Quick: "Singlish" Is Out In Re-Education Campaign', *Asia Times*, 28 Aug. 1999. A popular working class character Phua Chu Kang in the sitcom, *Phua Chu Kang*, was sent to basic English classes for adults, run by the Institute of Technical Education, on the weekends and evenings after the Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong, in a nationally televised speech, blamed popular local television use of Singlish for the decline in the standard of spoken English in Singapore. The Television Corporation of Singapore (TCS) took Goh's half joke seriously, and disclosed its agreement to comply in a month's time.

² Ross Anthony, 'Interview with Glen Goei'.

³ For more details, see Matilda Gabrielpillai (1997).

⁴ Conversation with Philip Holden and Matilda Gabrielpillai on 5 August 2003. Holden is working on Lee Kuan Yew's memoirs.

⁵ In her Chapter 5, Gabrielpillai demonstrates how Singaporean novels and short fiction of the 1990s hegemonize the discourse of identity ‘by Sinicizing Singapore history, demonizing certain ideologies such as feminism and individual rights, and recirculating readers’ desire from a post-colonial East-West cultural hybridity represented as female (impure, weak, hysterical, lacking), channeling it instead towards a Chinese culture represented as male (strong, pure, promising the return of an ethnic cultural power conceived as the restoration of a male, decolonized identity)’ (1997: 299).

⁶ Philip Holden and other Singaporean Studies critics would disagree. For Holden, the reconstruction of Singaporean chineesness in the 1990s may already include hybrid, neo-orientalist notions of ‘chineesness’. This construct arguably also emphasizes *wu* rather than *wen* masculinity. For example, Holden points to militarism, national service, the vigilante corps, Lee Kuan Yew’s notion of the ‘rugged society’, and Lee’s self-description as a ‘gangster’.

⁷ The dragon, the emblem of *wu* masculinity, symbolizes phallic power and ‘male potentiality’ that is ‘at ease in the universe’ and able ‘to shrink and extend at will’ (Louie 2002: 27).

⁸ See Kam Louie’s chapter 8, ‘Bruce Lee, Jackie Chan and Chow Yun Fat: Internationalising *wu* Masculinity’ in *Theorising Chinese Masculinity*.

⁹ Her role model is Rudolf Nureyev and New York City is where she aspires to go whereas the furthest he has traveled is across the causeway to Malaysia.

¹⁰ Naturally many have read the authoritarian father figure to represent Singapore’s former Prime Minister, Lee Kuan Yew and Goei acknowledges this: ‘People have asked me if the father was a metaphor for the government. It wasn’t meant to be, but it could be seen that way’ (interview with Ross Anthony).

¹¹ Such a treatment of gender comes as no surprise as Goei, also an actor, played the role of Song Liling in David H. Hwang’s *M. Butterfly* on the London stage. Thus, as a filmmaker, Goei cannot but be aware of the gender and racial implications of his script.

¹² The deliberate ethnic costuming of the three transsexuals deserves some attention. By dressing them in the Chinese cheongsam, the Indian sari and the Malay kebaya to represent the three main ethnic groups, perhaps the filmmaker is camping up ethnicity as if to say that queerness is cross-racial or universal. Conversely, he could be pointing out the limitations of representing ethnicity in Singapore by drawing our attention to ethnicity as racial performance. Transsexual ethnic drag simultaneously invests in and divests the simplification of costumed ethnicities. However, this ethnic gag or gesture doubly marginalises the Malays and Indians in the film who play only either supporting roles (popular drag queen Kumar playing a straight dance instructor) or provide ‘colour’ and diversity on the dance floor.

¹³ According to anthropologist Michael Peletz who wrote about the Malay equivalent, *pondan*, ‘In keeping with the relative deemphasis of sex and gender in local [Malay] society and culture, the encompassing nature of the *pondan* concept works against the elaboration of distinctions—found in English and many other languages—between transvestism, transsexualism, hermaphroditism, homosexuality, and effeminate behavior’ (1996: 123).

¹⁴ See Leong Pik Yin, ‘Doors Close On Sex Change Operations’, 30 May, 2001. As a result of the shut down of the clinic, many Singaporeans were rerouted to Thailand, Australia or the USA. The *Straits Times* (8 June 2003) reported that the clinic has reopened but few transsexuals knew about this (Leona Lo, 2003, ‘Set Clear Standards of Care for Transsexuals in Singapore’). Lo, a transsexual herself, explains in her website that Singaporean policy towards transsexuals has been progressive. In 1997, legislation was passed allowing male to female transsexuals to reflect their new status on their identity cards and in marriage after the gender reassignment procedure. The clinical management of transsexuals in Singapore, however, remains shrouded in secrecy.

¹⁵ Little Dragon is of course, a reference to Bruce Lee.

¹⁶ Rachel Killian, 'That's the Way I Like It: Disco's Heyday in Singapore'. Interview. Nov. 2, 1999.

¹⁷ The recent announcement made by Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong in the July 7th edition of *Time* magazine (Asia edition) about the change in national policy allowing homosexuals to be hired in the Singaporean civil service is perhaps, ironically, one such example of the continuing culture of surveillance and control of sexualities in the city-state. Homosexuals working in the civil service have to openly disclose their 'sexual preference' ostensibly in order to prevent being blackmailed.

¹⁸ Hokkien for 'coffeeshop' which also serves food at very affordable prices.

¹⁹ Hock's younger sister who initially insists on being identified as the heroine of each romance novel she reads, i.e. 'Dominique', eventually puts away her fantasies to settle for her real name, Mui, when the family comes under crisis.

²⁰ I am not alone in holding this opinion. Someone named Charmaine Tan who was interviewed by Reuters journalist Sophie Hares states that 'in the end, the issue of economics will always override everything else'.

²¹ Philip Holden and Yao Souchou would regard gestures of transvestism and pushing of sexual boundaries as less counter-hegemonic than my reading in this essay suggests. When I asked Russell Heng after his paper presentation 'Gay Citizens and the Authoritarian Singapore State: The Dynamics of Coalition Governance' at the Third International Convention of Asia Scholars in Singapore 19 Aug. 2003 whether gay politics in Singapore is 'all about having fun', he replied that this is the impression the Singaporean government would like to give. Despite the proliferation of gay saunas, bars and clubs in the last few years, section 377A from the Singapore Penal Code still regards acts of 'gross indecency' between two men as punishable by up to two years in jail (Hares).

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