

Examination of the Family in Singapore Film

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Abstract: The issue of the family unit and the problems that surround it plague reel society just as much as it does the real. This paper seeks to explore the different ways in which families are portrayed in Singapore film and how they reflect family culture in reality. Through films such as Jack Neo's box office smashes, *Money No Enough I & II*, Kelvin Tong and Jasmine Ng's *Eating Air* and short films such as Anthony Chen's *Ah Ma*, all of which span across different sub-cultures as well as time periods in Singapore, a greater understanding of how the family has evolved can be attained.

Crying, dying mothers and dysfunctional teens perched atop ledges of Housing Development Board (HDB) flats. Weepy scenes of death and the dreary hospital have recently been just as well visited by Singaporean film as their Korean counterparts in drama. From its flourishing period in the 50's & 60's, to its revival in the late 90's, Singaporean Cinema has often sought to dissect social issues close to the heart of the average Singaporean. The family, for centuries boasted by the government to be a strong pillar of society locally, is often brought under close scrutiny by filmmakers, and commonly with the help of the reel reaper.

Singaporean Cinema, an industry synonymous with big names like Jack Neo and Royston Tan, is in essence something extremely diverse and at its heart impossible to define. Even early successes such as movie legend P. Ramlee's *Ibu Mertuaku (My Mother-in-Law)*, 1962, have brought the family unit under the spotlight.

So, how accurate are the portrayals of families in reel society?

The family, as we know it locally, is affected by a number of factors. Its behaviour is usually exemplified in times of economic crisis and downfalls in the social setting, and influenced by our geographical traits and cultural values.

Financial Strain: A Catalyst to Family Instability

The magician with the economic influences is undeniably Jack Neo – the numbers are down in the films and up at the box office. The iconic film, which brought about the revival of the entire local film industry and is also the highest grossing locally made film to date, *Money No Enough*, explored how financial strains affected the family unit. The main protagonist, Keong, played by Jack Neo himself, is exemplary of how marital stability is hinged on the financial status of the family. Putting it over simplistically, perhaps, the film captured the essence of family instability in times of an economic slump, and reflected the current view of the family as a financial institution.

Attempting to replace family time with material comforts is also a scenario unique to affluent societies such as ours. *Gone Shopping*, a recent film (2007), explored the escapism of one woman through her obsession with shopping. The pride of the local tourism authorities, shopping, here is seen as a very empty form of replacement. Renu, who is left alone in the shopping mall by parents quarrelling over employment issues, is significant as the representative of youth and adults who are overlooked by family members in light of attending to bread-and-butter issues.

A slightly earlier film, Colin Goh and Woo Yen Yen's *Singapore Dreaming*, also centred on the lives of middle-class Singaporeans and their woes regarding money. The portrayal of the siblings as individuals who used money as the answer to all problems, saw how it could easily tear apart a family. The depiction of the father as a debt collector while alive maintained the merciless cycle of cash flow as well. Particularly significant is the early sequence where the workplace of CK is revealed. The attempts to mislead the viewer into initially thinking CK is a successful businessman in a big office play on the stereotypes of the middle-class Singaporean.

Social Class: A Downplay to Unity

As Singapore continues as the metropolis of towering buildings and skyscrapers, social class as a concept becomes increasingly important to the Singaporean. CK is despised by Huat as an insurance peddler, as it is seen as a job lower down the corporate ladder. Similarly, in Jack Neo's *Three Good Men*, an undeniably over-stated story chronicling the ventures of three men who left prison, social class is prohibitive in their family relations. Huang, whose story reaches the ears of fellow students in his daughter's school, is rejected by his embarrassed daughter in a scene that would eventually tug at heartstrings in the cinema. The already strained father-daughter relationship is brought to even lower levels.

Another early success at the box office, *Army Daze*, also makes an example of social class affecting the functioning of the family. Pereira's role

as the unconventional sissy male, rejected by his family, is a fine reflection of how in the social context, even the family may fail to embrace the individual.

Cultural Values: Presence and Relevance

Singapore Dreaming also effectively draws to attention the role of traditional cultural values in the modern family. The last ditch struggle for the inheritance between Seng and Mei is a reflection of the gradual irrelevance of sexism in today's society. It brings to light how traditional values, which for centuries have been touted to have kept families close knitted, can cause the breaking up of families instead in a modern context.

The patriarchal monopoly on family behaviour is also displayed in the short film, *Ah Ma*. The differences in the displays of grief by each family member show how modernisation has affected our basic behaviour and reactions. The son, who left the building to cry, is important in showing that cultural values are still observed by Singaporean families. Its relevance, however, is another question altogether. The submissive nature of the females are also evident, with the smoking daughter a representative of quickly modernising and westernising culture, where cultural values no longer take centre stage.

And yet, as we continue to speak of families kept close by traditional moral values, can we at all speak of Singaporean families in general as close-knitted? As the saying goes, the tighter you grip a bird in the hand, the harder

it tries to fly away. So, packed away in little Singapore, do family members try harder to get away from each other?

Geographical Constraint: Close Together, Miles Apart.

The stiflingly close conditions seen in Eric Khoo's *12 Storeys* is an example used to highlight the issue of alienation in our high-rise, multi-levelled HDB homes. The fact is that closely packing together residents not only failed to promote neighbourliness, it eliminated almost all interaction between them. In these suffocating surroundings, Trixie, a young teenage girl, struggles incredibly hard to get away from the domineering control of her brother. Trixie's family is a fine example of the failure of the family, where Meng's attempts to steer the family towards clean, politically correct aims, fail terribly in light of rebellion from his younger siblings.

Eating Air, a 1999 film by Kelvin Tong, revolved around the gangster teens of Singapore. While Ah Boy eventually found his way back home in times of rife and hardship, such as going home to collect food when he and Ah Gu were in hiding, it also showed how the youth were tearing themselves away from the family. It reflected how, in modern day society, the family was viewed increasingly by youth as more of a haven than a home. Ah Boy's reluctant but obliging ways to helping out in the family business, however, is also evident of how teens were still attached to family despite trying hard to get away from the familiar.

The sub-culture of gangsterism is also seen in the groundbreaking feature length film by Royston Tan, *15*, which garnered international acclaim and accolade, but was banned locally. The film, which follows the lives of five teenagers, makes surprisingly little reference to the family, for a nation that boasts of close-knitted families in the light of modernisation. In the hustling, bustling, prosperous urban landscape, *15* epitomises the struggling of youth to get away from their families in these small, constrained settings. Montages and quickly revolving shots employed also represent the fast spinning lifestyles of the youth as they try hard to leave the family unit behind.

Film in Singapore is still largely regarded as entertainment rather than as an art form. Singapore Cinema is a concept that is very much still in the making, and in its exploratory phase. As easily relatable issues continue to make waves at the box office, filmmakers will inexplicably churn out films that relate to the general Singaporean, and the family will continue to be examined.

Perhaps, in future, we shall be able to accurately catch a glimpse of realistic family life without having to endure another death of a mother.

1,374 words

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