

CONSTRUCTING A NEW ASIAN MASCULINITY: READING *LILTING* AGAINST
OTHER FILMS BY ASIAN FILMMAKERS

by

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THESIS ABSTRACT

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In western media, Asian men have traditionally represented as either effeminized or emasculated. First providing a historical and ideological account for such representations, this thesis proceeds to analyze the advantages and disadvantages of the three strategies that Asian filmmakers have adopted to counter this stereotype: the assimilationistic strategy, the segregationistic strategy and the integrationistic strategy. Eventually, this thesis proposes a new way to cope with dilemma by providing a close reading of a British independent film, *Lilting*. It argues that a fourth strategy, which is named the dynamic strategy, can be detected. Because in this film masculinity is presented as a fluid quality that flows through different characters and does not attach to race or any other fixed identity, there is no need to struggle against the demands imposed by the white hegemony.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Asian women have traditionally received a lot of academic attention in gender studies, and their femininity has been extensively studied. Scholars such as Ray Kathryn, Pratibha Parmar, Celine Parreñas Shimizu and Shoba Sharad Rajgopal have written profusely on how Asian women are represented in the Western media, and they have invariably laid an emphasis on sexuality. In her book *The Hypersexuality of Race: Performing Asian/American Women on Screen and Scene*, Shimizu contends that “Asian/American women are tied to a tradition of excessive and perverse hypersexuality in representation...[they] cannot but live through their racial sexualization” (15, 17). Parmar suggests “Asian women’s femininity is very often linked to notions of fertility” (290), and Kent A. Ono and Vincent Pham mention that “the reigning stereotypes for women related to the virgin and whore dialectic have been the Lotus Blossom and Madame Butterfly, on the one hand, and the Dragon Lady, on the other” (66). According to Ono and Pham, Asian women are either depicted as demure, passive and supplicant, or conniving and sexually manipulative; in either sense, they are defined by their sexuality. When discussing Asian women’s stereotypes “as submissive and dainty sex objects,” Yen Le Espiritu indicates that they are depicted as sexually available, so that they can “become yet another possession of the white man” (94-95).

However, Asian men find themselves in an almost opposite situation. On the one hand, in the academia they receive much less critical attention Asian women. On the other hand, in real life their representation is consistently characterized by a lack of sexuality. While Asian women are seen as hypersexual, Asian men are perceived as

asexual, emasculated or feminized. This representation was ubiquitous in the media in last century, and still lingers on even today. For instance, at the beginning *Parks and Recreation* (2009-2015), an NBC sitcom, the Indian character Tom Haverford is surprisingly married to a beautiful white woman, Wendy. However, as the show progresses, the audiences discover that Wendy is Canadian and she and Tom are good friends in college; as a favor, Tom marries her, so that she could secure a green card. Wendy ruthlessly rejects Tom, when he starts to develop genuine feelings for her after their divorce.

In recent decades, the dilemma that Asian men face has been noticed by more and more scholars. These scholars, such as Richard Fung and Tan Hoang Nguyen, both of whom will be extensively discussed in this thesis, have vehemently protested against this representation of Asian men. Many Asian filmmakers have also produced various films, both independent and mainstream, in order to counter the stereotypes. In the following, I will discuss some of these films in detail and describe the strategies that the filmmakers have adopted in order to remasculate Asian men. I will mainly focus on films that are pornographic in content, in that the relationship between sexuality and power is most visibly represented in such films. I will also pay a close attention to films that address homosexuality, because in the popular imagination emasculation is often translated into effeminization and Asian men, who are seen as asexual, are constantly associated with homosexuality.

The first chapter of this thesis will describe how Asian men are currently represented in media and provides ideological and historical explanations for such representations. The second chapter will discuss how Asian masculinity is represented in

Chinese films, and how Western film critics perceive these films. The third chapter will be devoted to the films that Asian filmmakers have produced to correct the misrepresentation of Asian men; in this chapter, I will argue that three main strategies (assimilationistic, segregationistic and integrationistic) can be detected. In the fourth chapter, I will consider the obstacles that Asian filmmakers might encounter within the industry, and examine *Better Luck Tomorrow* (2002) as a prop to the following discussion. The last chapter will constitute the cornerstone of this thesis. After discussing the advantages and disadvantages in the strategies that previous Asian filmmakers have adopted, I will conduct a close reading of *Lilting* (2014), a British independent film directed by Hoang Khaou, and argue that it presents a new perspective to view masculinity and a new solution to Asian men's dilemma.

CHAPTER II

ASIAN MEN AS SEEN IN THE WEST

All masculinities are not created equal; or rather, we are all created equal, but any hypothetical equality evaporates quickly because our definitions of masculinity are not equally valued in society...The hegemonic definition of manhood is a man in power, a man with power, and a man of power (Kimmel 124).

In 2011, Ken Jeong, a Korean American actor/comedian who is most famous for portraying the Chinese drug dealer Leslie Chow in *The Hangover Trilogy* (2009, 2011, 2013), shot a series of photos for GQ Style. Entitled “Just the two of us (with Ken Jeong),” this set of photos feature two white models and Ken Jeong in four different scenes. The caption eloquently illustrates its theme:

When you and your bodacious girlfriend (who, if you’re lucky, looks like Kate Upton) jet off for a summer romp, pack a bag full of slimmed-down cords—and not much else. You’ll look sexy, and she’ll keep those starry eyes locked on you—even if you get photo-bombed by funnyman Ken Jeong.

In the four photos (the second and the third photos are entitled “You just got bombed” and “Who’s the girl”) we see the two models engaging in intimate and sexually charged activities in different settings, with Ken Jeong invariably posing funny positions in the background. For example, in “On him,” the male model, who is attractive and athletic, lies on his back on the springboard near the swimming pool, and Kate Upton, the female model in Bikini, poses on his body. Upton rests her hand near the male model’s crotch, and he holds her face near his own. On the other side of the pool, we see Ken Jeong,

inappropriately and awkwardly dressed (green coat, flamboyant shorts, and sneakers) and about to jump into the pool. He opens his coat and reveals his flabby body. His facial expression is so exaggerated as to verge on farcical. The other three photos are shot in the same vein, the only difference being that Ken Jeong uses props to emphasize his awkward position. In “You just got bombed,” he wears a pair of bra that is dented and in the fourth picture he wears a tiara. In “Who’s the girl,” he holds a long stick around his crotch to simulate an erect penis.



You just got bombed. Peggy Sirota. GQ Style. 2011.

This series of photos is self-explanatory in many senses. It creates a sharp and vivid contrast between the white male model, who is tall, athletic, attractive and sexual, and Ken Jeong, who is short, flabby, farcical and effeminate. To put it into a nutshell, Ken Jeong is everything that the male model is not (it is also noteworthy that the male model, unlike his female counterpart, is not named, and his face is partially concealed in all the

four pictures; therefore, he is a symbol on which every white man can project himself). Ken Jeong exhibits two contradicting tendencies: sometimes he tries to copy the masculine traits of the male model, and at other times he tries to acquire the feminine traits of Kate Upton's. In both attempts, he fails terribly, thereby creating the dramatic effect. What is particular about these photos is the spatial demarcation. In all of them, there are lines that create a clear division (such as the blanket in "You just got bombed" and the wall in the last one) and separates Ken Jeong and the models into two worlds. To put it in another way, Ken Jeong is banished from the universe of sexuality.

How Ken Jeong is represented in this series of photos sheds much light upon how Asian men are perceived and portrayed in the west. Through a large number of in-depth interviews with Asian Americans, Rosalind Chou (105, 107) comes to the conclusion that "[east] Asian-looking are constructed as physically weak...in the white racial frame... To be considered the perfect male in the United States is to suppress all female tendencies and dispositions. However, Asian and Asian American men are feminized in representations of hegemonic white Western masculinity." Consequently, Irwin, one of Chou's interviewees, remarks that in his life experience that he has been emasculated and he tends to think of himself as "something other than what you think of when you think of the word 'man,' 'guy,' a 'male,' a 'dude,' whatever, but not a man" (Chou 107).

This sentiment that the Asian male is not a man is actually echoed in Richard Fung's seminal article, "Looking for my penis: The eroticized Asian in gay video porn." Fung and his friends wanted to enter a gay club in Toronto, but the doorman asked them to prove their queer credentials. This is because before a person is a gay, he has to be a man. Consequently, Fung (340) asks, "if Asian men have no sexuality, how can we have

homosexuality?” This absence of sexuality is fully reflected in Ken Jeong’s pictures, where he tries to alternately acquire masculinity and femininity with different props. Being desperately aware of his conundrum, he tries to either imitate the white man, who is symbolized by a huge penis, or turns himself into a woman.

This confusion and want of sexuality is fully performed in media. Most significantly, in David Henry Hwang’s 1988 Tony-award-winning drama *M. Butterfly*, Song Liling, a Peking opera singer/communist spy who is mistaken by the French diplomat Gallimard as a woman, declares that “I am an Oriental. And being an Oriental, I could never be completely a man” (83). There is no doubt that here Hwang is making reference to Edward Said’s Orientalism, which Said defines as “the basic distinction between East and West...the starting point for elaborate theories, epics, novels, social descriptions, and political accounts concerning the Orient, its people, customs, ‘mind,’ destiny and so on” (2). Orientalism enables the westerner to support the image (big, strong, powerful, civilized, masculine) that it has constructed for themselves by relegating the Orientals to the very opposite (small, weak, impotent, backward, feminine), thereby providing the rationalization for its colonizing efforts. Orientalists do not intend to perceive and understand, instead, they are determined to grasp, interpret, incorporate and manipulate (12).

Acutely aware of the intersection between race and gender, David L. Eng (1) maintains that “[such] is the particular crossing of sexual and racial fantasy that compels Gallimard’s colonial world order, a fantastic reality in which the *Oxford English Dictionary* would define Oriental as ‘submission,’ as ‘weakness,’ as ‘woman.’” In his book, Eng (2) stresses that it is impossible to analyze race and gender/sexuality as two

distinct discourses; instead, “they must be understood as mutually constitutive, as drawing their discursive legibility and social power in relation to one another.” Though I will not borrow much from his psychoanalytic approach toward this issue, I am in full agreement with Eng’s assertion that the sexual identity of Asian American men has been produced and inflected by their racial position in society from the very beginning.

Consequently, when we talk about how Asian American men are being represented (given the limited scope of this thesis, I will mostly discuss sexuality, which is not to say that other stereotypes, among which is the well-known model minority, do not exist or do not matter), we have to think of their racial history. In the 1700s, Filipino mariners, who are considered the first Asian immigrants, arrived in the region that is later known as Louisiana, and a large number of Asian laborers, mostly from China, Japan, Filipino, Korea and India, came in the middle of the 1800s for the California Gold rush. They also worked on the plantations in Hawaii as well as in the Southern states where the institution of slavery was just abolished (Takaki 23). In the late 1800s and early 1900s, more Asian laborers, particularly from India, came to America, and most of them were concentrated in California and Washington. The peculiar circumstances of these laborers determine how they were seen in society.

According to Espiritu (46), the economic situation at that time led to the passing of certain legislations, such as the Page Law in 1875, in America, which limited the immigration of Asian women; single laborers were considered ideal, as they resulted in fewer costs and were more mobile. The 1917 Immigration Act took one step further and banned Asian Indian men from bringing their wives to America. As it became next to impossible to Asian men to marry within their own racial community, they were likely to

marry white women. This, certainly, was a scenario that was deemed undesirable. Consequently, anti-miscegenation laws were passed, which would revoke the citizenship of white women that should marry men of other races (Chua & Fujino). Yen Le Espiritu concludes that “America’s capitalist economy wanted male workers but not their families” (17). Consequently, the Asian men found themselves in “forced bachelor societies” (Nguyen 226).

As a matter of fact, the relationship between race and sexuality/masculinity was authentically represented in law at that time. Lisa Lowe (11) notes that “[racialization] along the legal axis of definitions of citizenship has also ascribed ‘gender’ to the Asian American subject.” Before 1870, only men could be granted citizenship, and this privileged was extended to African American men in that year. Asian men had to wait another half a century before the repeal acts of 1943-1952 allowed them to acquire citizenship. Therefore, Lowe (11) suggests that “[whereas] the ‘masculinity’ of the citizen was inseparable from his ‘whiteness,’ as the state extended citizenship to nonwhite male persons, it formally designated these subjects as ‘male’ as well.” That Asian men were not considered eligible for the American citizenship, a privilege reserved for men, is proof positive that they were perceived as emasculated in the American imagination at that time.

These legislations created a unique situation for Asian men by depriving them of possible female spouses. Shek (382) claims that at that time “Asian American men appeared to be both hypermasculine and effeminate”: hypermasculine, because they posed a danger to white women; effeminate, because their sexuality was suppressed and left unsatisfied. Another social circumstance that enhances the impression that Asian men

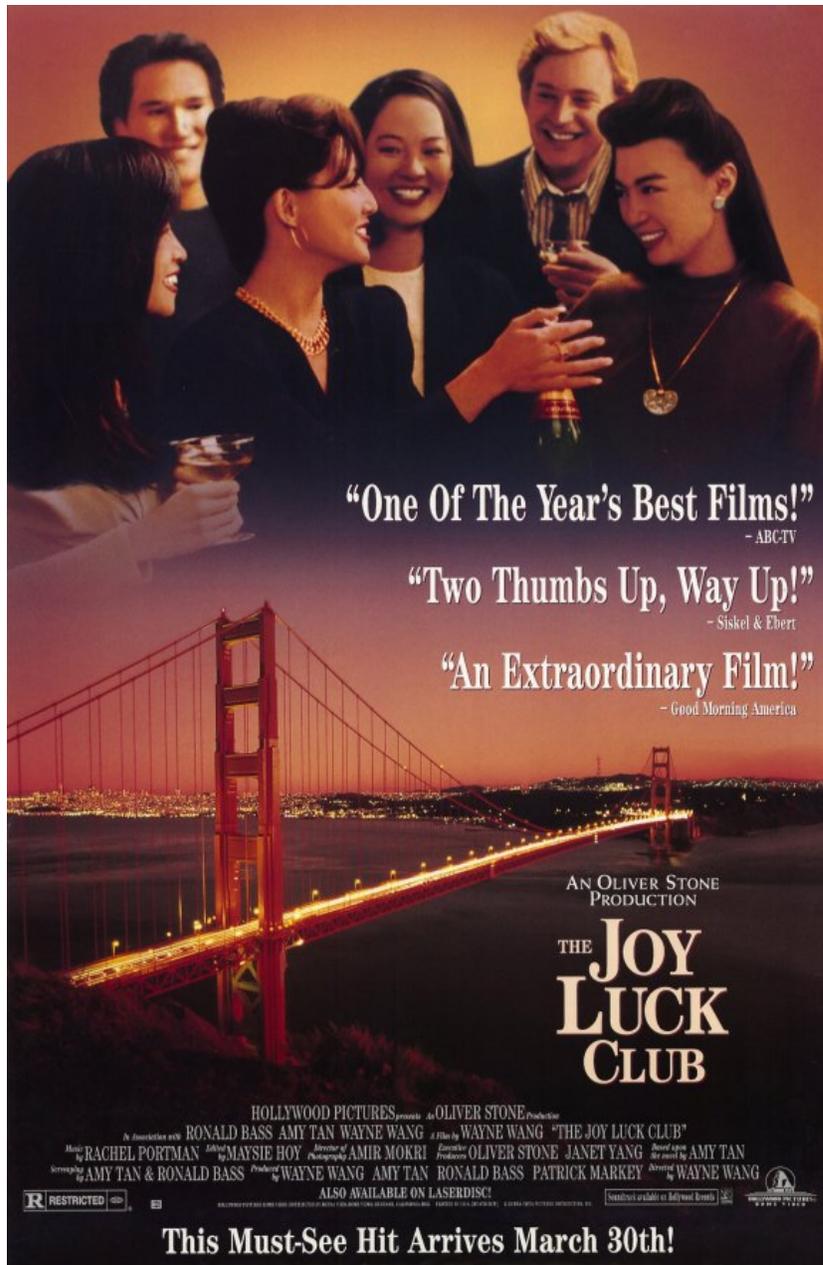
are emasculated is the kind of professions to which they were often confined. Due to limited job opportunities, many Asian men at that time could only assume job positions (restaurant, laundry shop, etc.) that are traditionally considered feminine (Takaki 27). As for the Asian hypermasculinity, a good example is the Yellow Peril, a term coined by Kaiser Wilhelm II, which “blends western anxieties about sex, racist fears of the alien other, and the Spenglerian belief that the West will become outnumbered and enslaved by the East” (Leung Wing Fai, “Perceptions of the East”). John W. Dower describes the Yellow Peril as “the vision of the menace from the East was more racial rather than national. It derived...from a vague and ominous sense of the vast, faceless, nameless yellow horde: the rising tide, indeed, of color” (156). It needs to be mentioned that the referent of the Yellow Peril has experienced a significant change over the years (Takaki 48). Originally, it refers to the Chinese coolies or labor slaves in the U.S. Later, given Japan’s military expansion, which culminated in the bombing of Pearl Harbor in 1941, the term started to describe the Japanese immigrants. Later, it was gradually broadened and included all the people of East Asian and Southeast Asian descent. The image of the Yellow Peril confirms David L. Eng’s statement that race and sexuality are inextricably intertwined, but it also suggests that this intersection is actually amazingly malleable. In “Looking for my penis,” Richard Fung notices a sharp contrast between Asian male and African male. He (236) suggests that “[the] contemporary construction of race and sex as exemplified by Rushton has endowed black people, both men and women, with a threatening hypersexuality. Asians, on the other hand, are collectively seen as undersexed.” Consequently, the descriptions of the Yellow Peril are actually much closer to the popular imagination of the African male. Therefore, we can see that the sexual

construction of Asian, or any race for that matter, is very elastic and can be manipulated as demanded by the circumstances.

Nevertheless, it needs to be noted that the Asian male hypersexuality is very different from the primal hypersexuality that has been traditionally attributed African male. According to Jachinson Chan (83), under the influence of the Yellow Peril discourse the Asian men are seen more as sexually deviant; their sexual power is often enhanced by mysticism. As Vijay Prashad (42) observes, in the 1900s many South Asians arrived at America and tried to peddle “Eastern Wisdom” to the Hollywood elites. Consequently, in the final analysis the Asian hypersexuality still does not meet the western standards within the framework of hegemonic masculinity, which are symbolized by muscles, body hair, strength, virility, etc. When thinking of a sexually dangerous Asian man, we think of a thin Taoist preacher, who sneaks into women’s bedrooms during the night. Therefore, it is not surprising that this aspect of hypersexuality eventually fades from the stereotypes of Asian men. In “Racist love,” Frank Chin and Jeffery Paul Chan (79) distinguish between two types of racial stereotypes: “[the] unacceptable model is unacceptable because he cannot be controlled by whites. The acceptable model is acceptable because he is tractable. There is racist hate and racist love.” The emasculation and feminization of Asian men is, consequently, a result of racist love, and it ultimately dominates over and eliminates their supposed hypersexuality.

Against the ideological and historical background that I have described above, it is no wonder that “[within] the framework of hegemonic masculinity, Asian American masculinities are then subordinated, as are other forms of masculinity, such as those among men of color, gay men, and bisexual men” (Shek 388). This kind of image is

dutifully and truthfully reflected in the media. *M. Butterfly* is a great case in point, and it is hardly an isolated case. For example, in *The Joy Luck Club* (1993), a film that is actually based on an Asian author's original book and directed by an Asian director, the Asian men are presented in a manner that underlines their lack of masculinity, if not sexuality. They are invariably unsuccessful, misogynistic, and, in general, contemptible, and the women eventually marry white men. In the *Hangover Trilogy*, Ken Jeong, who introduces this thesis, plays a "fresh-off-the-boat" Asian drug dealer Leslie Chow that, with his broad Asian accent, constantly talks about his small penis. It is commonly speculated that Leslie is gay; GLAAD (Gay and Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation), for example, lists him as one of the offensive gay characters in major studio films (Lily Rothman). However, there is no clear indication whatsoever about Leslie's sexual orientation in the film; therefore, the feminized representation of Asian men has been directly translated into homosexuality.



The Joy Luck Club. Dir. Wayne Wang. 1993

However, the current image of Asian men could not be exclusively attributed to the aforementioned factors. There is something inherent about Asian men (aside from their physique) that invites westerners, or makes it easier for them, to form stereotypes in a certain direction. Cliff Cheng conducts a comprehensive study on masculinities in organizations and finds out that within each social class, Asian American men are least

likely to be elected for leadership. According to Cheng (191), “[the Asian and Asian American men] did not perform hegemonically *real masculinity* as emically defined by the Assessors, although they acknowledged that Asian and Asian American men can perform such a role (only by violating the Confucian norms of their heritage cultures).” The attributes that are listed by the Asian and Asian American men in this study include deference, humbleness, politeness, respectfulness and being noncompetitive and nonindividualistic (192). These attributes together construct a type of masculinity that is being dismissed, rejected, distorted and vilified in the mainstream society. In the next chapter, I will focus on how the kind of qualities, which are valued in the Confucian system, is being misinterpreted and contributes to the feminization of Asian men in American cinema.

CHAPTER III
CHINESE MASCULINITY IN CHINESE CINEMA:
A WESTERN (MIS)INTERPRETATION

Having discussed how western filmmakers portray Asian male in western films, I will now spend some time discussing how western film critics interpret male characters in Chinese films, especially those that are considered to be masculine in the Asian/Chinese context, as these interpretations are likely to shed some light on how the western film industry perceives Asian masculinity. In this chapter, I will mainly focus on four films, *Drunken Master* (1978) and *Drunken Master II* (1994), *The Killer* (1989), and *Hero* (2002). By analyzing these films, I argue that western film critics tend to misconstrue the kind of masculinity that is presented in Chinese cinema and distort it into signs of effeminization or emasculation. The specific reason for this misconception (whether it results from an innocent difference in cultural codes or a stubborn refusal to acknowledge Chinese masculinity) lies beyond the scope of this chapter, but a possible explanation, aside from the obvious ethnocentricity, lies with the ideological and historical context in which Westerners/Americans usually view Asian males, which I have discussed in the previous chapter.

In *China on Screen: Cinema and Nation*, Chris Berry and Mary Farquhar (135-136) argue that three Confucian codes, filiality toward parents and ancestors (*xiao*), brotherhood (*yi*), and loyalty (*zhong*) “regulate male behavior and...privilege men in governing the family as fathers and ruling the nation as emperor and bureaucrats”. Although these codes mainly describe premodern hierarchy and obligations, they are still widely circulated in Chinese cinema and “persist as mythic symbols of national identity,

ideal masculine behavior, and institutional governance” (Berry & Farquhar 136). To a significant extent, they determine how Chinese men should act. However, these codes are perceived differently by western film critics, who consider the traits thus celebrated to be adolescent, homoerotic or emasculating; therefore, they are dangerously close to the conclusion that the Chinese society does not actually foster masculinity, an assertion that would exculpate western filmmakers from the charge that Chinese/Asian men are being castrated in the western film industry.

1. *Drunken Master I+ II*

Drunken Master is a martial arts film directed by Hong Kong director Yuen Woo-ping, starring Jackie Chan, Yuen Siu-tien, and Hwang Jang-lee. As one of Jackie Chan’s most famous films, *Drunken Master* is a huge commercial success at that time, earning HK\$ 6, 763, 793, and is listed by Tony Chan as one of the two films (the other film is *Snake in the Eagle’s Shadow* [1978], with the same director and cast) that “redefined the action-comedy genre...ultimately changing the way action cinema has developed ever since” (“Kung Fu comedy: A genre deceased”). Its sequel is equally successful.

The film follows the development of a Chinese martial arts legend, Wong Fei-hung, played by Jackie Chan. As a young man, Wong Fei-hung is recalcitrant, mischievous and swashbuckling. As he could not stay away from trouble, his father decides to discipline him and forces him to concentrate on the training of martial arts under the supervision of Beggar So, the Drunken Master. Unable to stand the rigorousness and hardships of the training, Wong Fei-hung tries several times to flee, but returns to his teacher because of the skillful villains that he encounters. The film reaches its climax when Yim Tit-sam, the

ultimate villain, is contracted to assassinate Wong Fei-hung's father. Eventually, making use of the skills that he has learned from Beggar So, Wong Fei-hung is able to defeat Yim Tit-sam and save his father, thereby enacting the Confucian code of *xiao*, filiality towards parents and ancestors.

Drunken Master II, the sequel to *Drunken Master*, continues to portray the growth of Wong Fei-hung as a martial arts master, though the story appears against a much more complex background. As the film is made in 1994, three years before Hong Kong's handover to People's Republic of China in 1997, the self-identity of Hong Kong comes into discussion, and the father figure, in a sense, merges with the national identity. As in *Drunken Master*, Wong Fei-hung has a tumultuous relationship with his father, Dr. Wong Kei-ying, who remains a disciplinarian and forbids his son from practicing drunken boxing, claiming that boxers are inclined to excesses. At the beginning of the film, against his father's orders, Wong Fei-hung conceals their ginseng in the first class section, which is occupied by members of the British Consulate; however, when he retrieves his package, Wong Fei-hung accidentally takes a similar package that belongs to a Manchurian officer, which turns out to contain Emperor's Jade Seal, an item that signifies Chinese royal power. Various adventures follow, in which the British ambassador and the Chinese boxers fight for the Emperor's Jade Seal. Eventually, with his drunken boxing skills, Wong Fei-hung defeats the henchmen of the British Consulate and gains the possession of the coveted national treasure. Consequently, like in *Drunken Master*, Wong Fei-hung saves his father, though in a more symbolic sense. At the end of the film, he also reconciles with his real father, but there are hints that some conflicts remain unresolved.

In both *Drunken Master* and *Drunken Master II*, Wong Fei-hung enacts one of the important Confucian codes, filiality, as discussed above. Although the father-son relationship is strained from time to time, Wong never shrinks away from his obligations toward his father. Even Wong himself criticizes whatever resentments he might harbor. However, when western film critics view these films, they are less interested in the filial duties that Wong, as a son, performs toward his father (the performance of such duties attests to Wong's masculinity in the Chinese culture); instead, when analyzing the tense father-son relationship, they pay more attention to Wong's adolescent personality. When dissecting Jackie Chan's characters in Hong Kong action comedies (*Drunken Master I+II* being quintessential examples), Mark Gallagher (119) flatly states that "Jackie Chan's persona, which both emphasises the performer's physical mastery and situates him as comic underdog, challenges Western—and to some extent, *global*—definitions of masculinity, suggesting the tenuousness of ostensibly stable, *historically rooted* models of male agency and control (the italics are mine)". Gallagher attributes Jackie Chan's feminization to his burlesque body, vulnerability, lack of sexual appeal, conspicuous demonstration of muscles (which are often fetishized in Hollywood films), dissatisfying stature, etc., traits that are often associated with youth, and indicates that he is placed in "submissive, masochistic positions" (119). Berry and Farquhar try to modify Gallagher's assertion and argue instead that the features that Gallagher identify as feminine are actually adolescent. "They dramatize all the risks, trauma, and fantasy of male adolescence—adventure, a passing curiosity about girls, humiliations, and trials before the onscreen representatives of 'serious masculinity', especially the 'father'" (145).

Therefore, we can see where western film critics would have disagreed with their counterparts (in actual fact, Jackie Chan's masculine image is so indisputably and deeply entrenched in the Chinese society that few scholars are interested in this topic). Chinese filmmakers do not see adolescence as a phase divorced from mature masculinity. When the adolescents perform the essential duties as dictated by the Confucian codes (in this case, filiality), they are considered satisfactorily masculine. Little attention is paid to other criteria, such as sexual appeal or muscular display. They are either secondary or simply trivial. This is why Jackie Chan portrays so many characters that could be described as "the *kung fu* kid" (Stephen Teo 123) in his Hong Kong films, because the filial *kung fu* kid is one of the most essential images of Chinese masculinity. In contrast, western film critics tend to see a much bigger gap between adolescence and adulthood. Berry and Farquhartry (149) maintain that "the entire movie is carnivalesque in the Bakhtinian sense as its comedy relies on 'two worlds': the official world of serious masculinity and the transgressive world of adolescence". As adolescent boys have not yet fully developed sexuality, they are considered to be the opposite of masculine men. Instead of seeing filiality as a masculine attribute, western film critics are more likely to associate it with timidity or conservativeness.

2. *The Killer*

Written and directed by John Woo, *The Killer* is considered to be his masterpiece. Although commercially it is not a spectacular success in Hong Kong, this film is widely praised in the west and influences many directors, such as Quentin Tarantino.

The Killer revolves around the complicated relationship between assassin Ah Jong and police detective Li Ying. Because he has accidentally damages the eyes of a nightclub dancer Jennie, with whom he later falls in love, Ah Jong decides to accept one last task in order to pay for her operation. Li Ying, consequently, tries to capture Ah Jong, but in the process finds out that the latter has actually exhibited many sterling qualities. When there is crossfire between Ah Jong and the gang that he used to work for, Li Ying somehow finds himself entangled and flees with Ah Jong. A deep friendship develops between the two men. At the end of the film, when they are hiding in a church, the hit men from the gang arrive and one of them kills Ah Jong. When the police squadron arrives, that hit man pleads for mercy, but Li Ying shoots him nevertheless.

If the differential perceptions of Jackie Chan's person have not received sufficient attention, the nature of the bond between Ah Jong and Li Ying in *The Killer* has been seriously debated. Chinese filmmakers see it an enactment of one of the Confucian codes that have been discussed at the beginning of this chapter. Stanley Tong observes that "[in] Chinese culture there are four things, four qualities that everyone must know...and *yi* which means when you are a friend you are willing to give your life for your friend. John Woo's movies contain these elements with which most people identify" (Heard 50). The brotherhood celebrated in *The Killer* is so powerful that it transcends the usual divide between hero and villain. However, this brotherhood proves to be disturbing, or at least, abnormal, in the western film critics' eyes.

When analyzing *The Killer* and *A Better Tomorrow* (1986), another John Woo film, Julian Stringer argues that "one of the most interesting examples of historical crisis in film masculinity today is that of the modern Hong Kong action cinema" (28). Although

Stringer (30) concede that these two films “are *probably* not gay movies...because they repress rather than foreground sexuality” (the italics are mine), he still finds the intense gaze between the male characters, such as the one in the final scene of *The Killer*, to be problematic. In Stringer’s opinion, the homoerotic feelings are toned down, because in the 1980s sexual intercourse between two men is still seriously punished (Emily Lau “Out of the Closet”). Therefore, Stringer maintains that the intense relationship between Ah Jong and Li Ying, which Stanley Tong identifies as “*yi*”, carries strong sexual undertones, though social circumstances do not allow this relationship to be further developed.

Stringer’s interpretation of Ah Jong and Li Ying’s relationship is hardly exceptional in the west. Berry and Farquhar (155) point out that “[many] commentators see the bullet-removing scene as homoerotic, at least to Western eyes”. In actual fact, they themselves side with this opinion, arguing that “violence between men breeds romance” (154). So popular is this interpretation that, in his documentary *Yang + Yin: Gender in Chinese Cinema*, Stanley Kwan asks John Woo whether the bullet-removing scene is charged by homoeroticism. John Woo directly denies the existence of sexual tensions in this scene, claiming that the intimacy is a natural result of the romanticized friendship between the two men. However, he freely admits that he does not monopolize the interpretation of the film; once it is finished, anyone is allowed to read the film from whatever perspective.

Therefore, brotherhood, another Confucian code, is redefined by western film critics. Instead of recognizing the masculine traits that it carries, they tend to impose homosexual undertones upon the intense relationships between Chinese men. The

devotion, the tenderness, and the exclusion of woman (in *The Killer*, Jennie, Ah Jong's girlfriend, has lost her sight and is, consequently, excluded from Ah Jong and Li Ying's adventures): all these characteristics that are celebrated in Kam Louie's *wen* and *wu* model of Chinese masculinity are read as signs of homoeroticism and homosexuality. To which extent homosexuality is divorced from masculinity is a question worth debating; however, it cannot be denied that in the west homosexuality is inextricably intertwined with femininity. Therefore, when a tinge of homosexuality is read into Chinese brotherhood, it is difficult for western film critics as well as western audiences to recognize the masculinity in the Chinese men.

3. *Hero*

Hero is the first blockbuster directed by Zhang Yimou, an internationally acclaimed Chinese director, whose earlier works focus on the lives in Chinese countryside. At that time, *Hero* is the most expensive as well as the highest-grossing Chinese film. It is loosely based upon the story of Jin Ke's assassination of the King of Qin, before he unites the seven kingdoms during the Warring States Period and establishes the first united empire in China. Several assassins (Nameless, Broken Sword, Flying Snow and Long Sky) collude to stage a show in front of the Qin armies, so that Nameless could gain the king's trust. When Nameless is within ten paces of the emperor to present the other assassins' weapons, he is supposed to kill the emperor. However, when Nameless is close to executing his plan, he confesses the whole scheme. He, too, yearns for a united and peace state, in which the people would be spared from the deaths and hardships brought by enduring wars. Consequently, in the name of *tianxia* (under the heavens), Nameless

foregoes the assassination. Nameless is executed at the end of the film, but he receives a funeral as a hero.

The ideology of *Hero* is widely praised among the Chinese film critics. The assassins (Nameless and Broken Sword in particular) in this film sacrifice their personal pursuit for the sake of the people, thereby enacting the code of loyalty to the state as embodied by the emperor. Putting the state before one's personal interests is considered laudable in the Chinese culture. For example, Wang Zongfeng (47) maintains that heroism should consist in an understanding of the Way and a transcending of personal desires and praises Zhang Yimou for realizing this cultural identity. Peng Lirong (23) suggests that *Hero* demonstrates the fundamental philosophical principles in Chinese traditional culture and celebrates the poeticism of the assassins, which is a product of the Chinese culture. Rejecting the western, nationalistic reading of *Hero*, which will be discussed in the subsequent paragraph, Feng Lan instead applauds Zhang Yimou for “[sharing] the same ‘primitive passions’ with...cultural nativists for recuperating an alternative worldview from traditional Chinese culture, one that may help the postmodern Chinese mind to reconceptualize cogent orientations toward and relationships among the individual, the nation, and the world” (23).

However, the perception of the values that are exhibited in *Hero* is entirely different in the west. Wendy Larson (187) suggests that film critics “often interpret [the film] as an example of fascist aesthetics that supports totalitarianism in general and the Chinese authoritarian state in particular”. Mark Harrison laments that Zhang Yimou has been co-opted by the Chinese Communist Party and suggests that *Hero* is “a grating rehearsal of the urban nationalist ideology of the CCP—invoking a great Chinese national future and

a unified people, but condemning ‘the people’ as being unable to be trusted with this national mission themselves”. Therefore, while Chinese critics and scholars pay more attention to the sacrifices that the assassins voluntarily make, western critics focus more on the submission that is imposed upon them by the ideology of *tianxia*. Berry and Farquhar (164) argue that the assassins, Nameless in particular, have been “emasculated by a kingly power, by the military symbols of power, and by the idea of a united China”. During his audience with the king, Nameless is deprived of his sword, which Berry and Farquhar see as phallic symbol. This symbolic castration is also apparent in the name of Broken Sword, who convinces Nameless into abandoning the assassination in the first place. Therefore, while Chinese scholars see the enactment of loyalty as empowering and masculine, western scholars see it as emasculating. Again, we are faced with a drastic difference in perspective.

In this chapter, I discuss how the three essential Confucian codes, *xiao* (filiality), *yi* (brotherhood), *zhong* (loyalty), which regulate how Chinese men behave, are perceived differentially among western film critics. Their interpretations of *Drunken Master* I+II, *The Killer*, and *Hero* suggest that, for some reasons, masculine traits and characters in Chinese films are often considered feminine, homosexual, or emasculated in the western discourse. As I have mentioned in the beginning, it is not my intention to explore the reasons for such (mis)interpretations. However, the very existence of these (mis)interpretations is very relevant to how Asian men are perceived and portrayed in western films. After all, if these lesser men are the best that Asian filmmakers can do, why should we be bothered to impose masculinity on them?

Chapter IV

THREE MAJOR STRATEGIES

3.1 Reaching a racial identity

In the preceding chapters, I have described the conundrum that Asian men face in the West as well as how this conundrum has been translated into the media. Under these specific circumstances, Asian men have developed and negotiated a unique racial identity, which Janet E. Helms (3) defines as “a sense of group or collective identity based on one’s *perception* that he or she shares a common racial heritage with a particular racial group” and determined by the access to social resources. In the racial identity models developed by Helms and Cook (81), the individuals have interpersonal and intrapsychic reactions “for overcoming internalized racism and achieving a healthy socioracial self-conception under varying conditions of racial oppression.” However, in another article (29) Helms stresses that a person’s racial identity is far from monolithic and contains multiple statuses, though there is no denying that certain statuses will dominate over others.

In the existing literature, several approaches toward the construction of an Asian masculinity within an unfriendly white hegemony can be detected. For example, when working with Asian American undergraduate students, Alvin N. Alvarez has noticed that “[even] a cursory poll of Asian American students about Asian American racial identity will most likely yield a continuum of reactions, ranging from pride to confusion to outright rejection of such an identity” (35). Consequently, in her study on the racial identity of people of color in the United States of America, Helms (19) describes six statuses of identity development: conformity, dissonance, immersion, emersion,

internationalization, and integrative awareness. These six statuses are generally self-explanatory, but I will give a brief explanation in the subsequent paragraph.

Conformity refers to a suppression of one's own racial and cultural traits and an effort to satisfy the expectations of the new culture. This perspective could be described as "color-blind" and often results in serious anxiety, because "[adopting] a Conformity worldview... involves an Internationalization of the values, norms, and beliefs of the dominant culture and a devaluation of Asian Americans and Asian culture, values, and norms" (Alvarez 36). This perspective is more common when there is limited contact with other Asian Americans. Dissonance emphasizes the importance of race and challenges the color-blind perspective. It disputes the idealization and celebration of the dominant culture and, mostly likely, leads to a reexamination of the individual's racial connections as well as racial importance. More confusion and anxiety are associated with this status. Both immersion and emersion deal with a differentiation of the home culture and the dominant culture. Immersion refers to "a dualistic racial worldview based on an idealization of all aspects of Asian or Asian American culture and a denigration of all white individuals and white culture" (Alvarez 36); consequently, the individuals will explore their racial and cultural background and achieve affirmative self-definition, with which they will challenge the stereotypes imposed by the dominant culture. Emersion gives more importance to the reestablishment of the connections to the individuals' home culture, such as cultivating a sense of solidarity with other Asian Americans. These two statuses could be generally described as a rediscovery and celebration of one's home culture and a newly developed hostility to the white culture, although I would argue that the emotional intensity declines as one moves from immersion to emersion.

Internalization involves another reassessment of one's worldviews and cultural experiences; this is a reflective phase where the individuals reconcile themselves to the strengths and weaknesses of the dominant culture as well as their home culture. They try to find a balance between the two definitions of themselves and develop a peaceful and satisfying racial identity. Integrative awareness, which is the last status, is defined by "a sense of racial self-esteem rooted in a self-affirming definition of oneself as an Asian American" (Alvarez 40). At this stage, the individuals integrate the personal identification and the group identification and arrive at a holistic concept of self in which racial identity exists in harmony with other identities, such as gender, sexual orientation, class, etc.

I find Helms' model interesting and useful. However, it describes an idealistically dynamic and progressive process, a process that does not necessarily complete itself. It is imaginable that, in some cases, the individuals are stranded in one stage and never proceed to the next. Therefore, this model is too linear and deterministic and it excludes other possibilities that might result from the struggles to achieve a satisfactory racial/sexual identity. Furthermore, when we discuss strategies, we are more likely to think of a tactic than a process. For this reason, I contend that Helms' model cannot be applied without modification when we discuss the strategies that Asian males employ to solve their difficulties, though it will shed much light upon the strategies that I have witnessed in my research.

3.2 Three major strategies

In the process of my research (mainly on the Asian filmmakers' representation of Asian masculinity), I believe the strategies that I have come across could be reasonably classified into three main categories. The first category, which I will call the assimilationistic strategy, corresponds to the conformity status in Helms' model. Those films that fit into this category attempt to represent Asian men in the same light as white men. The filmmakers bestow the same masculine qualities that are deemed desirable in the white hegemony upon Asian men, thereby turning them into white men with yellow skin (or a banana man, as is commonly described in the slang). The second category, which I will call the segregationistic strategy, corresponds to the dissonance, immersion and emersion statuses in Helms' model. It emphasizes the celebration of the native culture. The filmmakers are determined to promote the message that Asian men are masculine, in and of themselves, often by referring to the traditional patriarchal Asian culture. The third category, which I will call the integrationistic strategy, corresponds to the internalization and integrative awareness statuses in Helms' model. It tries to achieve a balance between the white culture and the Asian culture. Those filmmakers intend to construct a new kind of masculinity that is informed by Asian culture and approved by the white culture. (The terminologies that I use here, assimilation, segregation and integration, are borrowed from John W. Berry's fourfold model on acculturation, though the meanings of these terms are not necessarily the same). In the following, I will discuss the disadvantages of each strategy through analyzing mostly pornographic works, which are particularly relevant, as they directly confront the issue of sexuality, before advancing a fourth strategy that is based upon my reading of Hong Khaou's *Lilting*.

3.2.1 The assimilationistic Strategy

In *Aiiieeee! An Anthology of Asian-American Writers*, Frank Chin, Jeffery Paul Chan, Lawson Fusao Inada, and Shawn Wong express their frustration and fury at the fact that some people “consciously set out to become American, in the white sense of the word, and succeeded in becoming ‘Chinese American’ in the stereotypical sense of the good, loyal, obedient, passive, law-abiding, cultured sense of the word” (x). The authors are concerned that the Asian Americans are plagued by “the dual personality” (x), which demands that they are either Asian or Americans, and, consequently, are deprived of a whole subjectivity. From a cultural nationalistic perspective, the authors want to reject the main stereotypes and “[prescribe] who a recognizable and recognizably legitimate Asian American racial subject should ideally be: male, heterosexual, working class, American born, and English speaking” (Eng 209). In Wong and Santa Ana’s opinion, this argument is based on an “original manhood that is U.S.-centric” and reminiscent of western figures such as “adventurous cowboys...indomitable pioneer, and brawny working-class laborer” (191). To my mind, Frank Chin and his colleagues’ claim is a typical example of the assimilationistic strategy.

In “Looking for my penis,” Richard Fung analyzes several American gay pornographies that feature Asian actors and comes to the conclusion that these works point to the emasculation of Asian men in the western imagination. His mainly focus is Sum Yung Mahn, a Vietnamese American gay porn actor, who has worked in six videotapes and is the only Asian actors that could count as a star in that industry (when he wrote this essay; another Asian gay porn star will come into discussion soon). Fung emphasizes that “[in] examining Sum Yung Manh’s work, it is important to recognize the

different strategies used for fitting an Asian actor into the traditionally white world of gay porn and how the terms of entry are determined by the perceived demands of an intended audience” (238).

Sum Yung Mahn assumes the passive role in the sexual intercourse in *Below the belt* (1985), a video that is directed by Philip St. John and heavily appropriates Oriental elements. Fung notices that, for Sum Yung Mahn, the anal intercourse is “an act of submission, not of pleasure” (239), the evidence being the lack of dubbed dialogues, which commonly accompany such scenes. Therefore, Fung argues that this video is a clear demonstration of racial power dynamics. As most of the actors in the video do not change their role in anal intercourse (top/bottom) and penetration often occurs as an act of punishment, that Sum Yung Mahn invariably assumes the bottom role (often with humiliation and pain) suggests that he is despicable and powerless. On this subject, Fung (240) clearly states that “[as] with the vast majority of North American tapes featuring Asians, the problem is not the representation of anal pleasure per se, but rather that the narratives privilege the penis while always assigning the Asian the role of bottom; Asian and anus are conflated.” As Sum Yung Mahn does not even receive a fellatio in *Below the Belt*, his penis is rendered irrelevant and his masculinity non-existent. To put it simply, that Asian actors are frequently assigned the passive role in anal intercourse points to their perceived lack of masculinity.

This is why Nguyen Tan Hoang develops an intense interest in Brandon Lee, an Asian American porn actor who assumes only the active role (in the latter half of his career he becomes more versatile). I consider the representation of Brandon Lee typical of the assimilationistic strategy, in that he acquires all the traits that the white hegemony

deems masculine. “Brandon Lee is just another random (American) gay guy one could easily find cruising in a West Hollywood bathhouse” (Nguyen Tan Hoang 224).



Asian Persuasion. Dir. Josh Eliot. 1997

However, even though Nguyen freely admits that Brandon Lee’s successful career is an amazing achievement, as “being a fierce top...[Brandon Lee] represents a very significant departure for an Asian actor in the world of North American gay porn” (226), he is unsettled by the racial packaging of Brandon Lee. As mentioned above, Brandon is encoded as American in his works, but this packaging is only successful when he is clearly differentiated from other Asian actors in the film. The characterization of Asian actors in western gay pornography is relatively uniform. They speak a heavy accent and slur the few lines that they have; they work in menial or “feminine” professions, such as restaurant, laundry shop, bathhouse, etc.; they carry themselves in an awkward and nervous manner; they are all defined by a “fresh-off-the-boat” look, which emphasizes

their foreignness. In a scene from *Asian Persuasion*, Brandon Lee penetrates an Asian actor who fits almost all these descriptions. In contrast, Brandon Lee is presented as young, naturalized, muscular, rich and well-endowed, and these qualities bestow him masculinity and the role of top. This contrast between Brandon Lee and the other Asian actors worries Nguyen. He argues that

[for] although his work does invert the passive houseboy-bottom paradigm critics like Fung have protested against, this new and improved ‘positive image’ of the Asian American top comes about at the expense of relegating other Asian men to the same old, tired, abjectified position of unassimilable, forever bottomhood. Though the Asian penis has been found, there are only a few inches of it to go around, or it comes to resemble another white pink dick, tinted yellow (238).

Therefore, from Nguyen’s analysis of Brandon Lee’s appearance in major studio gay pornography we can see the problems with the assimilationistic strategy. This strategy, which attempts to acquire masculinity through adopting the qualities that are valued in the western society, implies an approval of the white masculine hegemony. As a matter of fact, it more than approves of this hegemony; the assimilationistic strategy straightforwardly acknowledges it as the only legitimate masculinity. When Asian men adopt this strategy to assert their masculinity (to which extent they will succeed is debatable, as Nguyen note that Brandon Lee’s racial flexibility results from his star image and he is more like an exceptional case), they are making the political statement that other masculinities either do not exist, or are illegitimate or inferior: if an Asian male wants to become a man, he must suppress his Asianness and encode himself as a

Westerner via imitation and mimicry. The binary between masculine white man and effeminized and emasculated Asian men is being essentialized by their attempted racial flexibility.

3.2.2 The segregationistic strategy

In my model, the segregationistic strategy focuses on excluding the negative influences exerted by the dominant culture and celebrating the masculinity that is valued in one's home culture. I describe this strategy as segregationistic, in that it attempts to carve out a niche that is nativistic and autonomous, distinct from the dominant culture. In other words, it endeavors to construct an independent discourse without actually negotiating with the dominant discourse.

A good example of this strategy is Darrell Hamamoto's pornographic films *Yellowcaust: A patriot act* (2003), together with its companion documentary *Masters of the pillow* (2003) made by James Ho, which narrates how *Yellowcaust* is made. *Yellowcaust* presents the explicit sexual intercourse between Chun Lee, who is an amateur Asian American actor, and Leyla Lei, who is a professional Asian American porn star. During an interview, Hamamoto suggests that he "wanted to [create] pure unadulterated physical pleasure between a Yellow couple to cut against the grain of our common history rooted in U.S. imperialism and the systematic acts of genocide that have been inflicted upon us in order to sustain the social order" (Amy Ikeda). During the scene where Chun Lee ejaculates, a scene that is commonly known as the money shot, a text appears that declares that "[the] joy of Yellow bodies will not be denied by the state." This statement is interesting, especially when we juxtapose it with Nguyen and Fung's

appraisal of major studio American gay pornography. When describing his own experience of watching pornography, Fung (158) laments that “I may find Sum Yung Mahn attractive, I may desire his body, but I am always aware that he is not meant for me.” Nguyen (252) recommends that future pornography filmmakers stop treating Asian actors as “object of somebody else’s fantasy...[and] place Asian American male *immigrant*-subject at the center of the pornographic fantasy scenario...as the central desiring subject.” At least in this respect, Hamamoto’s work has fulfilled the hopes that have been uttered by previous scholars.

What is particular about *Yellowcaust* is that while Chun Lee and Leyla Lei perform various kinds of sexual activities, ranging from kissing and caressing all the way to penetration in a number of positions, the audiences can also hear the howlings from a massacre and read the texts that narrate the atrocities committed against the Asian people by American soldiers. It tries to create a pan-Asian identity that is directly in direct and violent opposition to white Americans, an identity that is achieved and celebrated by intraracial sexual pleasures. In *The Remasculinization of America: Gender and the Vietnam War*, Susan Jeffords talks about how the representations of Vietnam help restore the patriarchal values in America, thereby effecting a remasculiniazion in the discourse.

Viet Thanh Ngygen (133) argues that

Asian American remasculinization is inevitably influenced by this dominant discourse of remasculinization...for it partakes in American patriarchy’s attempts to continue the masculinization of political and economic public life...[although] it opposes the racialization and subordination of races

that in the past characterized this masculinization of nation-state and civil society.

Consequently, by heavily referencing the war violence that have taken place between the races, Hamamoto is apparently influenced by the remasculinization efforts and his works, as a result, are comparable to those that have been produced during the Vietnam War. On a certain level, I would argue that there is a strong similarity between the assimilationistic strategy and the segregationistic strategy, although at first glance these two are the exact opposites. The segregationistic strategy gives priority to gender/sexuality over race by focusing on developing the *inherent* masculine qualities in Asian men. The qualities that are often considered inherently masculine are essential to patriarchies both in the east and in the west, and this why Viet Thanh Ngygen would suggests that the remasculinization efforts on the part of Asian Americans actually partake in the American patriarchy's similar attempts.

At this point, the disadvantages of the segregationistic strategy should become clear. *Yellowcaust*, which is typical of the remasculinization efforts, lays so strong an emphasis upon the reinstatement of Asian masculinity that it relegates women to an objectified and fetishized position. Celine Parrenas Shimizu (170) argues that “[premiered] on the belief that Asian American men have been victimized by the repressive power of sexuality and racist regimes of representation. . . both films [*Yellowcaust* and *Masters of the Pillow*] propose a patriarchal heroism for the filmmakers and a heteronormative prescription for sexuality that renders women as bridges to male pleasure.” In an interview, Hamamoto declares that he “[refuses] to allow Asian Americans to be passive victims” (Dorothy Korber). This obsession with racialized victimization explains why Hamamoto selects an

amateur male actor and a professional female actress: Leyla Lei's hypersexuality offsets Chun Lee's inexperience, and her professionalism is able to be utilized to restore his sexuality.

While in the assimilationistic strategy Asian male acquires his masculinity at the expense of other males who are not yet assimilated, in the segregationistic strategy it is the women's interests that are being sacrificed. King-Kok Cheung, a female critic, bemoans that "many writers and critics who have challenged the monolithic authority of white male literary historians remain in thrall to the norms and argument so the dominant patriarchal culture, unwittingly upholding the criteria of those whom they assail" (158). In *Yellowcaust*, for instance, the camera is exclusively focused on Chun Lee, who, as amateur porn actor, occupies a privileged position and is served by Leyla Lei. Having much more experiences, she is able to follow the camera to accentuate Chun Lee's central position. Crystal Parikh (860) argues that "the *writings* of Asian Americans are even more urgently crucial for a reinscription of...hierarchical matrices", and I believe *Yellowcaust* serves as a perfect example here. While Parikh hopes that the misrepresentation of Asian masculinity is an opening for building "alternative models of Asian Americanness, models that seek to do justice to marginalized others" (860), Hamamoto is solely interested in restoring Asian men in a position of power in the patriarchy, a position that currently is occupied by white men only. Furthermore, Hamamoto is hardly alone in this kind of chauvinism. In "Racist love," Frank Chin and Jeffery Paul Chan state that "[our] nobility is that an efficient housewife. At our worst we are contemptible because we are womanly, effeminate, devoid of all the traditionally masculine qualities of originality, daring, physical courage, creativity" (68). Underlying

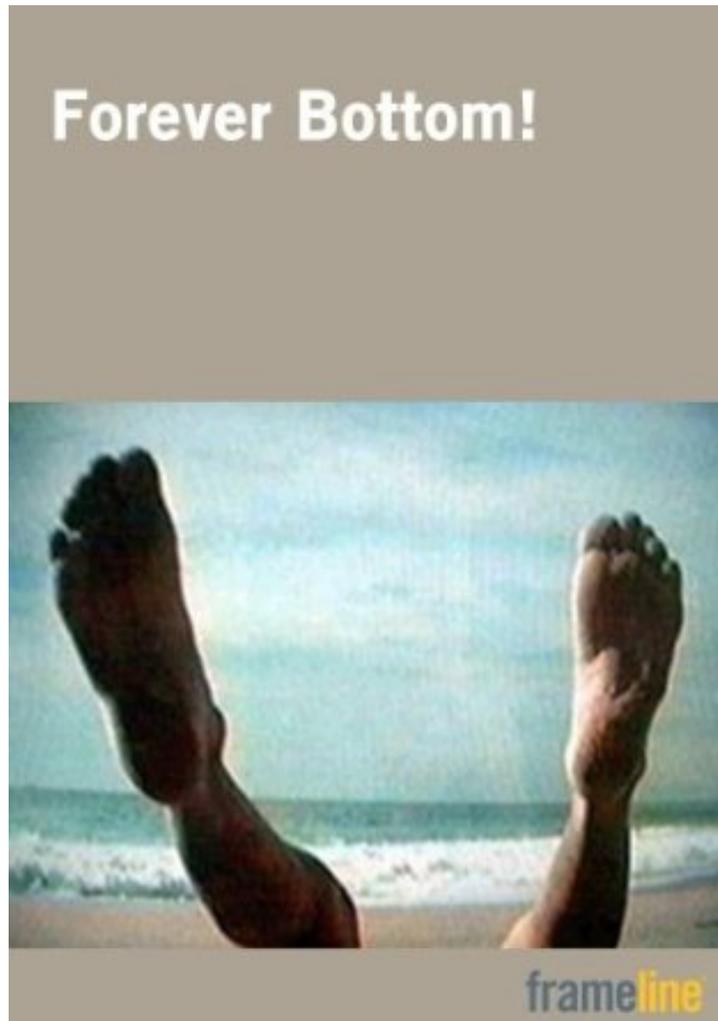
their complaint is the belief that feminine qualities are inherently inferior to masculine qualities. Instead of being furious at being assigned unmatching qualities, they are really furious at being assigned unworthy qualities.

On a side note, while criticizing the male hegemony that is promoted in this video, Shimizu (169) also points out that Hamamoto is creating a false common pan-Asian identity, in that he only narrates how Asians have been victimized by white people and does not remark on the atrocities that Asians commit against each other (such as Japan's invasion of China and Vietnam during the Second World War). This negligence of the nuances among Asian ethnicities also attests to his excessive zealot for the remasculinization of Asian men, a zealot that blinds him to other equally legitimate and important demands, a zealot that renders his approach fundamentally questionable.

3.2.3 The integrationistic Strategy

In contrast to the previous two approaches, the integrationistic strategy seems to be the most promising one. Here, John W. Berry's definition is more relevant: "there is some degree of cultural integrity maintained, while at the same time seeking to participate as an integral part of the larger social network [sic]" (43). In my model, I define the strategy as the attempt to reach a balance between conforming to the white hegemony and reveling in the native culture. To be more exact, those filmmakers who adopt this strategy, to a certain extent, accept the stereotypes that are concocted by the dominant discourse so as to enlist its support, but, at the same time, they try to put a new spin on the stereotypes and argue that these stereotypes are actually signs of masculinity. Because the new model of masculinity that they construct is based upon the conditions

set by the white hegemony, there is a greater chance that their efforts are perceived more as a negotiation than as a challenge; consequently, they are more likely to succeed. To illustrate the integrationistic strategy, we will turn to *Forever Bottom!* (1999), a four-minute film directed by Tan Hoang Nguyen.



Forever Bottom! Dir. Hoang Tan Nguyen. 1999.

Nguyen has repeatedly lamented the effeminization of Asian men in American gay pornography, which is attested to by the fact that the few Asian actors almost invariably assume the passive role in anal intercourse. This film is his statement on the status quo. In

Forever Bottom! we see a Vietnamese actor (who is Nguyen himself) engaging in hardcore sex and being penetrated in various positions and scenes, such as the bathtub, the car, the beach, etc. Traditional Vietnamese music is played in the background to emphasize the race and ethnicity of the actor. While in his analysis of Sum Yung Mahn Richard Fung points out that the Asian actors are agonized and humiliated by the penetration experience, the actor in *Forever Bottom!* obviously derives an enormous amount of pleasure from the coitus. His expressions and moans indicate that he is insatiable for the penetration, and the few provocative lines that are narrated by the supposed penetrator (“You like that big dick up in your ass, don’t you?”, “Tighten that ass!”) enhance this impression.

In this film, Nguyen poses a challenge to the equation between penis and power by “[refusing] to hierarchize the position of bottom as one without power” (Shimizu 196). The immense pleasure that Nguyen experiences, according to Shimizu, forces us to recognize that the passive voice should not be considered “undesirable, powerless, and colonizing.” In his book, appropriately entitled *A View from the Bottom*, Nguyen develops the concept of bottomhood, which questions the intimate relationship between the bottom position in sexual intercourse and the feminized role that has been imposed upon Asian male.

[Deploying] bottomhood as a tactic that undermines normative sexual, gender, and racial standards...the book conceives of [it] capaciously, as a sexual position, a social alliance, an affective bond, and an aesthetic form. Posed as a sexual practice and a worldview, this flexible formulation of bottomhood articulates a novel model for coalition politics by affirming an

ethical mode of relationality. Instead of shoring up our sovereignty by conflating agency with mastery, adopting a view from the bottom reveals an inescapable exposure, vulnerability, and receptiveness in our reaching out to other people (Nguyen 2).

In regarding to the segregationistic strategy that I have described above, Jachinson Chan (11) cautions that while we should not repeat Frank Chin's mistake and resort to misogyny in the remasculinization efforts, constructing a new model of masculinity that is non-patriarchal "[risks] the stigmatization of being effeminized and homosexualized." However, by developing the idea of bottomhood, Nguyen makes it clear that there is actually something to be gained from the alliance between this newly constructed Asian masculinity and feminized stereotypes, in that it will be able to undermine racism as well as heteronormativity. This alliance creates an inclusive space that allows all kinds of masculinity to be a desiring subject. In his opinion, the construction of a new masculinity, be it gay or Asian, is often achieved "through the collusion with misogynist heteronormativity...and the marginalization of male effeminacy and femininity" (14). Even in gay porns that try to celebrate the pleasures of bottoms, the climax of the scene, or the money shot, still rests on the bottom's penile ejaculation. The bottoming experience is, as a result, seen as an extension of penetration, a privilege that is reserved for men. Eventually, he argues that "bottomhood...[is] a critical strategy that allows us to reflect on other meanings feminization and emasculation articulates besides being the effects of white racism on Asian American manhood" (6). It exploits the special sexuality that has been inscribed on the body of Asian male and proposes a new masculinity that fundamentally undercuts heteronormativity. As I have

suggested at the beginning of this section, a new spin on the familiar stereotypes is envisioned, with neither resistance nor subversion (Nguyen 20).

I am fully aware of the advantages of the integrationistic approach. The absence of direct confrontation with, or the apparent complicity in, the dominant discourse certainly enhances the success rates of this strategy; by refusing to restore to heteronormativity, it also takes into account the interests of other groups. However, a possibility of misinterpretation always lurks. When theorizing about bottomhood, Nguyen himself admits that “in spite of assertions by some critics that the gay resignification of dominant masculinity operates to subvert and undermine its power, it should be noted that gay men’s eroticization of dominant masculinity also constitutes a pseudoreligious devotion to such masculinity” (9). When talking about bareback sexual discourse, he also observes that “this ‘outlaw’ brand of gay male bottomhood indicates not the disruption of masculine norms, but rather, an enthusiastic affirmation of those norms” (13). When the power of the dominant discourse is strong, the act of appropriation is not always effective. It is open to many interpretations and might be instrumentalized by the dominant discourse to prove its veracity. In the present case, the emphasis on the unique relationship between Asian masculinity and bottomhood might be missed by many, and the construction of Asian masculinity upon bottomhood might simply be cited as another example of Asian men’s emasculation or effeminization. In this scenario, the integrationistic strategy will be co-opted by the hegemony as a new means to enhance its dominance.

CHAPTER V

NEGOTIATING WITH THE INDUSTRY

Lisa Lowe (11) observes that “Chinese male immigrants could be said to occupy, before 1940, a ‘feminized’ position in relation to white male citizens.” This tendency, to a large extent, persists in today’s mainstream media. In the twenty-first century, we can still see stereotyped Asian male characters, such as Han Lee, the stout and effeminate restaurant owner that every employee can bully in *2 Broke Girls*, and Raj Koothrappali, the scientist who is inherently incapable of speaking to women in *The Big Bang Theory*. Every once in a while, there will appear an Asian male character that is portrayed in a somewhat positive light, such as Glenn Rhee in *The Walking Dead*. However, though he exhibits masculine traits and eventually marries a white woman, Glenn still delivers pizza for a living (naturally before the zombies dominate the world) and looks immature and timid in contrast to his more rugged white comrades. Therefore, while some directors are becoming aware of the awkward and painful niche the Asian actors usually occupy, they are taking small and cautious steps to rectify the situation.

In contrast, independent Asian filmmakers exhibit a boldness that seems to be much craved for. Margaret Hillenbrand (51) suggests that, with close-focus empiricism, political grandstanding or art house avant-gardism, “they devise their own means for bringing space, truth, and dignity back to Asian American masculinity.” These films, such as Wayne Wang’s *Eat a Bowl of Tea* (1989), which exposes the wounds on Chinese masculinity left by the *Chinese Exclusion Act*, Stephen Okazaki’s *American Sons* (1994), which consists of a series of soliloquies in four Asian American men bitterly narrate the racism that they have suffered, and Darrell Hamamoto’s *Yellowcaust: A Patriotic Act*

(2003), which shows an amateur Asian American actor engaging in sexual intercourse with a professional Asian American actress. These films directly and unflinchingly address the conundrums of gender and sexuality faced by Asian American men and vociferously demand immediate transformations. However, this kind of audacity is strictly confined to a niche and seldom seen in the works that appear in the mainstream.

There are many reasons for this discretion. The most obvious answer is that the audiences react unsympathetically to films that violate the stereotypes of Asian men and elevate them to the same status of their Caucasian counterparts. In *Romeo Must Die* (2000), a retelling of “Romeo and Juliet,” which is often considered to be Jet Li’s breakout film in the English-speaking world, Jet Li, who plays the main role, has almost no physical contact with his romantic partner, Aaliyah. The lack of sexuality for a male leading character in an American action film is extraordinary and thought-provoking. Originally, Jet Li kisses Aaliyah at the end of the film; however, this ending “didn’t test well with an ‘urban audience’” (Vargas “‘Slanted Screen’ Rues the Absence of Asians”). Eventually, Jet Li gives his girlfriend a hug.

However, it is not reasonable to attribute the entire blame to the market. For example, the Center for Asian American Media (CAAM), “a nonprofit organization dedicated to presenting stories that convey the richness and diversity of Asian American experiences to the broadest audience possible” (“Center for Asian American Media”), is considered to be exerting a limiting institutional power over Asian American films. Jun Okada (“The PBS and NAATA Connection”) suggests that CAAM, then known as NATTA (National Asian American Telecommunication Association) “was formed to acquire, package, and distribute independent Asian American films.” As it decides which

films are to be aired on national PBS, CAAM wields a huge influence upon how the audiences perceive Asian Americans. However, Jun Okada indicates that the films that CAAM sponsors are often burdened with “‘the politics of resentment’, which perpetuate the ideology of injury that defines and limits Asian American film and video in negative terms, frequently in terms of political injustice or historical trauma” (“The PBS and NAATA Connection”). “The politics of resentment”, a concept developed by Wendy Brown (27), “fixes the identities of the injured and the injuring as social positions, and codifies as well the meanings of their actions against all possibilities of indeterminacy, ambiguity, and struggle for resignification or repositioning.” This preoccupation with victimization, to a certain extent, prevents Asian filmmakers from concentrating on building male characters that break stereotypes and are considered, on whatever levels, masculine. If anything, it causes the Asian filmmakers to become obsessed with the definition that have been imposed upon their identity. It needs to be said that the politics of resentment, in a sense, defeats its own purposes, in that it renders the films self-absorbed and didactic, hence repulsive. In an interview with *PopMatters*, Justin Lin, an Asian filmmaker whose work will be discussed in the following, states that “[when] people hear that, ‘Asian American film,’ they think it’ll be preachy or educational, or academic” (“Better Luck Tomorrow”). Consequently, Lin advocates for three-dimensional portrayals of Asian characters on screen. Margaret Hillenbrand (55) takes one step further and argues that “the indignities of long-term marginalization force an almost obsessive focus on the self...[and] the self thus produced can seem diminished by overarticulation, speaking in a voice that protests too much and so somehow rings hollow”. Furthermore, when filmmakers receive funding from this association, they must

tailor their works to the needs of the PBS broadcast scheduling process. However, although CAAM aims to enrich the media representation of the Asian American community, its contract with PBS and CPB dictates that the films that it funds be palatable to the general audiences. Therefore, the mainstream market has a say even in the films funded by an association specifically designed to promote the representation of Asian Americans.

From the discussion above, we can see that when Asian filmmakers try to redefine the presence (or absence) of Asian masculinity on screen, they at least face resistance from two sources in the industry, to say nothing of the more practical matters, such as financial difficulties. Consequently, the filmmakers need to act tentatively and judiciously, if they want to make any change. According to Hillenbrand (51), “if mainstream and Asian America are to meet, it must—superficially at least—be on the former’s terms.” She agrees with Sandra Liu, when the latter claims that the system is conservative and will resist the filmmakers’ attempt to reform, but “[access] to the fuller range of resources in the mainstream film industry and socially committed filmmaking [are] two complementary strategies that work together to challenge and subvert dominant ideologies and structures” (104). “Selling out” seems to be the only option, as it guarantees some positive representation that can be accessed by both the Asian niche as well as the general audiences. It needs also to be stressed that the refusal to make compromises could be misinterpreted. It does not necessarily points to the sanctity of Asian masculinity; instead, the inflexibility, which necessarily causes the industry to shun Asian American films, can be construed as an accomplice in the mainstream’s rejection of Asian masculinity.

4.1 *Better Luck Tomorrow*

However, how to strike a balance under the conditions as outlined above is a sensitive question, Hillenbrand wonders whether “the crossover essentially means compromise, mimicry, and obedience” (51). She considers the crime-drama film *Better Luck Tomorrow* (2002), directed by the afore-mentioned Justin Lin, to be a laudable example in this direction. I use this film as a prop in my own analysis of *Lilting*.

Better Luck Tomorrow, a crime thriller directed by Asian filmmaker Justin Lin, is loosely based upon the murder of Stuart Tay by four honor students in California. Ben Manibag, Virgil Hu, Han Seoul-Oh and Daric Loo are four Asian American high school students who live up to the expectations of overachievement. However, at the same time they also distribute cheat sheets around the school to make money. As this illegitimate business gradually expands, it later includes burglary and the sale of drugs. During the latter part of the film, Steve Choe, another overachieving Asian American student whose girlfriend, Stephanie Vandergosh, Ben admires, wants to hire them to rob his own parents’ house as a wake-up call. However, as Steve is rich and arrogant, the gang decides to beat him instead, so as to give him a wake-up call. However, the plan does not go smoothly, and they eventually murderd Steve and bury his body. The murder proves too much for Virgil, who attempts to commit suicide but does not succeed. Ben and Stephanie kiss at the end of the film, but Ben’s voice-over says that “for the first time in my life, I don’t know what my future will hold. I don’t even know what the other guys are gonna do. All I know is that there is no turning back.”



Better Luck Tomorrow. Dir. Justin Lin. 2002

In an interview with Asian American Film, Justin Lin talks about the theme of *Better Luck Tomorrow*. “[The film] is really exploring the whole youth culture of today, specifically Asian American, but also just the general mentality of teenagers today...we’re trying to explore and raise questions” (Konrad Aderer, “Justin Lin: Getting Better All The Time”). Therefore, although Lin mentions that this question is made more interesting when discussed “within the context of Asian American males,” race, gender and sexuality are apparently not the central theme of this film. These questions, nevertheless, come to the surface.

In several scenes, the director touches upon the racial emasculation that Asian males often face in their lives. In my opinion, the characters are alarmed and upset by these situations; however, they do not directly confront and challenge the stereotypes that are

imposed upon them. Instead, what they try to do is to distance themselves from those stereotypes so as to avoid being defined by them.

At the beginning of the film, Ben cooperates with Stephanie, a girl that he adores, in the biology class. In this short scene, we see a casual Stephanie extracts blood from a timid Ben's finger. There is a close-up on the blood slowly dripping onto the glassware. I would argue that the scene carries strong sexual undertones, in that it is reminiscent of the first sexual experience that a girl might have; virginity, with the blood as its symbol, is very much valued in the oriental culture. However, the roles in this scene are switched. Shy, tentative and frightened, Ben assumes the qualities of a virgin girl who is about to be violated. In contrast, Stephanie is much more experienced and careless. She is supposed to count till three, but sticks the needle into Ben's finger when she counts one. When the process is complete, she unsympathetically remarks, "See, that wasn't so bad." Therefore, although this film intends to construct a new Asian masculinity, it does not try to do so in a vacuum. The director freely acknowledges the kind of biases and stereotypes that surround Asian men and incorporates them into the background. In this way, the audiences could witness the dynamic negotiation that is being made with the dominant discourse, and, consequently, are more aware of the director's intentions. The follow-up scene is also significant. When Ben, again diffidently, approaches Stephanie, who is waiting for her boyfriend outside the building, she makes fun of Ben for putting a Band-Aid on his pricked finger. This joke obviously hurts Ben's masculinity, which is just confirmed by his successfully completing the coach's task in the basketball court (shooting the ball twice). As a result, when Stephanie dismissively asks him whether he wants to become a doctor, a cliché profession for overachieving Asian students, he

instantly denies and says that he intends to become a professional basketball player, a job that is more valued by white men. Stephanie continues to tease him about his deficient size, a joke that could not help but remind the audiences of Asian men's supposedly small penis. Ben declares that "only the size of your heart matters" and recycles the joke when Stephanie says that she would like to become a cop. Here, we see the same thing is happening with Ben: when he is affected by the stereotypes of Asian males, he does not directly defend Asian males. Instead, he tries to detach himself from the very identity. By not engaging with the existing discourse, he is able to construct a new masculinity from scratch.

This can also be seen in the following scene. Ben is the only Asian player on the school's basketball team, and all his team members are either black or white. However, the coach never allows him to actually play during the match. Although Ben freely admits that playing basketball, together with his many other extracurricular activities, is only an enhancement to his college application, the negligence that he receives still upsets him. In contrast, the sexuality of Stephanie is fully acknowledged, as she is well integrated into the cheerleaders (there are also rumors that she appears in pornography). Right before a match, he is interviewed by a student journalist who asks him about how he feels about being a "benchwarmer" and the "token Asian." Obviously surprised and disconcerted, Ben answers haltingly that "we all have our roles." This scene is interesting, in that it directly confronts the issue that the integration of Asian male is only superficial, or only for "cosmetics" purposes. But what is even more interesting is how Ben reacts to this issue. Apparently, he himself has never given it any thought. Intelligent and sophisticated as he is, Ben could only weakly protest that he "[busts] his ass to be on

the team” and insists that what really matters is that he *is* on the team, even though he never has the chance to play. This response points at Ben’s sense of uncertainty and insecurity when he is forced to confront the difference between his perception of himself and his *real* identity as is perceived by society. That he stresses that he is on the team suggests that he tries to create a distance between himself and the minorities that, having been victimized, are now being compensated for the sake of appearance. This interview is apparently a disquietingly sobering experience for Ben (at the end of it, in a series of close-ups confusion and disturbance is clearly written on his face). However, when the report is published and the coach is pressured into letting him to play, Ben quits the team, although he is fully confident that he is competent and capable. This decision further enhances the impression that Ben’s resolution to construct his identity/masculinity without the interference of his racial background. He wants to create a space that is far away from what is supposed to define him. As he does not have to confront the existing discourse, he will not be perceived as aggressive or submissive.

Jachinson Chan condemns the fact that when Chinese men want to prove their masculinity, one way or another they are forced to articulate, circulate and perpetuate the stereotypes; consequently, Chan argues that “the construction of a Chinese American male is inevitably bound by refuting, denying, or rejecting...stereotypes” (8). In order to escape from “the representational power” (Hillenbrand 60) of these stereotypes, Ben chooses to remove himself from this identity of an Asian American, together with all the stereotypes with which it is burdened. This is not to say that he completely denies his Asianness; as a matter of fact, throughout the whole film he directly acknowledges that he fits into the category of the overachieving Asian kids, and, as the narrator, he is

perfectly aware that his story is made interesting by his violation of the expectations that people have of the overachieving Asian kids. However, his Asianness is perceived and treated as external to his identity. When he constructs, defines and defends his masculinity, his Asianness is not a relevant factor. In this way, he does not have to deal with the obstacles in the two strategies that have been previously discussed. He needs neither suppress nor assert his Asianness.

However, when we think of Ben as carving out a new space to construct his masculinity, we need to ask where that space is situated. However, Margaret Hillenbrand (61) suggests that “[even] a casual observer would struggle to miss the point that *Better Luck Tomorrow* is promiscuous in its cinematic quotations”; the films from which the director has borrowed include *Goodfellas* (1990), *Sixteen Candles* (1984), *The Breakfast Club* (1985), etc. The connection between gun and masculinity, which is often seen in American gangster films, is recycled again and again. When the four main characters share a prostitute in Las Vegas, Virgil actually sticks a gun into his underwear in order to affirm his masculinity. As a matter of fact, a critic claims that “you could have replaced everyone in this movie with the cast of some lily-white show like Dawson's Creek and nobody would notice the difference” (Brian McKay “Better luck next time”). This is probably due to the fact that Justin Lin intends the film for the general public. Mimicry is a common cinematic technique, and there is no denying that the film could be interpreted as a comment on the situation that Asian men face (they have to refer to classic, western models of masculinity in order to build their own identity); however, the abundant references to western models lead to the question: to which extent the film should be considered a successful negotiation on the behalf of Asian filmmakers? After the

audiences see four Asian young men shrugging off the stereotypes without confronting them and constructing their identity with western clichés, it is difficult for them not to be tempted by the idea that the western masculinity, after all, is the default. *Better Luck Tomorrow* tries to create something new, but it is too much indebted to the existing industry and discourse to achieve this purpose. When mimicry transitions into imitation, its power is lost.

From the discussion of *Better Luck Tomorrow*, we can see that it is difficult for Asian filmmakers to strike a balance when they attempt to articulate their identity; they are frustrated by too many forces. With this question in mind, we will move onto the analysis of *Lilting*.

CHAPTER VI

CLOSE READING OF *LILTING*

Having discussed the three strategies that have so far been developed by Asian filmmakers as well as the specific circumstances in which these filmmakers need to negotiate, I will now turn my attention to *Lilting* (2014), an independent film written and directed by a Cambodian-born British director Hong Khaou. On January 16, 2014, this film was premiered on Day One of the Sundance Film Festival, where it won the Cinematography Award and was nominated for the Grand Jury Prize. In the next year, it won the 26th GLAAD Media Award in the category of Outstanding Film—Limited Release. *Lilting* receives generally positive reviews from film critics. *The Guardian* praises Hong Khaou for “[weaving] a complex disquisition on mourning, memory, love and language, with a confident avoidance of overt emotional rhetoric” in “an affecting, intelligent, unapologetically downbeat feature debut” (Jonathan Romney). *Variety* calls *Lilting* “[intimate] and sensitive almost to a fault” and suggests that “the film may be modest in scale and impact, but its genteel approach and cross-cultural storytelling should speak to a refined arthouse niche” (Justin Chang). Commenting on the film’s unhurried and voluptuousness, *The Hollywood Reporter* compares its style to Wong Kai-wai’s masterpiece, *In the Mood for Love*. Nevertheless, some critics are more critical. For example, Dan Callahan considers the film “[suffering] from a lack of plausibility in its central situation”, and Manohla Dargis maintains that Junn, one of the leading role played by Cheng Pei-pei is “a one-dimensional plump” who is unbreachable till the very end and her crankiness “lacks conviction”.

This film centers on the relationship between Junn, a Cambodian Chinese woman who has immigrated to England twenty-nine years ago, and Richard, a British gay man who is in a stable relationship with Junn's son, Kai. Because Junn suffers from memory loss, Kai places her in an upper-scale retirement home against her wish. Junn knows that her son lives with an intimate friend, but she is either unaware or in denial of the homosexual nature of this relationship. Believing that Richard is the reason that she could not live with her son, Junn resents him bitterly. On the afternoon that Kai decides to come out to Junn, he is hit by a truck and dies. The story unfolds after this event, though flashbacks, some of which are imaginary, are woven into the narrative. Richard attempts to understand and reconcile with Junn, with the hope of inviting her to living with him eventually. As a friendly gesture, he hires Vann, supposed a second-generation immigrant, to translate for Junn and her romantic interest, Alan, at the retirement home. Vann also facilitates the communication between Junn and Richard, which leads to the final scene, in which the two shares their intimate feelings, including Richard's homosexuality and Junn's deep loneliness.

Comparable to *Better Luck Tomorrow*, which has been analyzed in the previous chapter, *Lilting* is also not a film that tries to directly address the issue of sexuality. Among several themes that this film touches upon, it focuses more on the difficulties involved in bilingual communication; the director frankly admits that “the drive behind it was language and communication” (The Gryphon). Coming from a Chinese background and growing up in England, Hong Khaou is bilingual and has experienced many conflicts in his own life; these conflicts make themselves felt in the film (Jose Solis). In an interview with *New Republic*, Hong Khaou states that “it’s about a mother who hasn’t

assimilated to the Western way of life” (Elaine Teng). While acknowledging the influence that his racial background exerts over his creation, Hong Khaou denies that he is in any sense “obligated” to tell Asian stories. Therefore, like Justin Lin, he intends to reach a wide audience rather a niche.

On the subject of homosexuality and coming out, he declares that this film is not about how difficult it is to come out in a Chinese family, but “how difficult it is to come out, full stop” (Elaine Teng). He thinks that coming out is an experience that is universally difficult; it is not made more so because it takes place in an East Asian background. How to construe the directors’ claim to universality is actually difficult; although *Lilting* is an independent film, the director still needs to secure funding from Microwave and catering only to a narrowly defined niche will significantly affect the film’s reception. Therefore, that Hong Khaou attempts to put a universal spin on his particular experience (during many interviews, he admits that this film is semi-autobiographical) could be seen as a negotiation with the industry, as has been discussed in the previous chapter.

When it comes to the construction and representation of Asian masculinity, *Lilting* is drastically different from other works by Asian filmmakers that have been mentioned during my discussion of the major strategies. I argue that a fourth strategy can be detected in this film, which I shall name the dynamic strategy. Firstly, the strategy employed here is much more interactive, whereas the other three strategies are solely focused on the Asian male. In Brandon Lee’s porn videos, we see an Asian man who looks, speaks and behaves exactly like a white man and, consequently, is able to enjoy the privileges traditionally reserved for white porn actors. Aside from the sexual intercourse, there is

little interaction between him and other actors, be they white or Asian. The few lines that are exchanged are scripted and formulaic, as one would expect from porns. In *Yellowcaust*, the camera is completely focused on Chun Lee, the Asian actor. As he occupies the central position, there is little communication between him and Leyla Lei, the Asian actress. Throughout the film, Leyla Lei exists to pleasure Chun Lee, to restore his masculinity, and to reiterate the importance of the Asian identity. *Forever Bottom!* is an even more extreme case. Because Nguyen wants to stress the pleasurable experience of being penetrated, throughout the whole film the person (or persons) who penetrate(s) never make(s) an appearance. Literally, we only see the bottom. Although there is a voice-over in the background that narrates provocative messages, we could not be certain that it comes from the other man in the intercourse.

In *Lilting*, the situation is very different. It must be acknowledged that this is feature film that lasts more than ninety minutes and the director certainly have more time to develop a fuller and richer picture. Nevertheless, the assiduousness with which Hong Khaou tries to cultivate a vibrant dynamic cannot be overlooked. The negotiations between Richard and Kai, Kai and Junn, Richard and Junn, Junn and Alan, Richard and Van, etc. form the cornerstone of this film and communicate the central messages. For example, in the beginning scene, when Kai visits Junn in the home, there is a tense discussion over race and sexuality. At first, Junn happily tells him about her new romantic interest (who is Alan, as the film later reveals), and the whole conversation takes place in ease and joviality. Kai reclines on the bed, and Junn talks with a visible self-satisfaction. Kai moves close to her when she reveals more details, such as she is looking for a good time, instead of a serious relationship, and they sometimes kiss. Junn

says that this charming man brings her flowers everyday and sees her as an exotic Oriental beauty, even if she talks rubbish. Laughter breaks out from time to time. However, this changes when Kai asks Junn when this man is English. When Junn answers in the affirmative, Kai asks her whether she has a preference for men whose skin is white, since his father is half white. All of a sudden, a stern expression appears on Junn's face; she turns her face to Kai and answers curtly, "Your father is just a Chinese [你爸爸根本就是个中国人]". At this point, someone knocks at the door and the conversation is conveniently terminated.

From this short exchange, we can see that Junn's self-identification is quite unstable. How she perceives her Asianness in juxtaposition to white/white men is subject to changes. On the one hand, she is happy when the white man admires her for her Oriental beauty; exoticization does not offend her. On the other hand, she becomes instantaneously irritated, when Kai suggests that she has a weakness for white men. This response could indicate that she resents the fact that Asians and white people are strictly divided into two distinct categories. It is possible that she might believe that differentiation is a preparation for the establishment of hierarchy. Therefore, she does not want her romantic interest to be racialized, and, by insisting that Kai's father is a complete Chinese, refutes this claim. However, this response is subject to another interpretation, namely that Junn acknowledges that the white superiority is a commonly accepted fact, but she refuses to participate in this mentality. This surmise is corroborated by her earlier criticism of the English who cannot distinguish Chinese and Japanese. Kai's suggestion, which is innocent in his own opinion, places Junn in the camp of those who worship and kneel to the white people. Consequently, Junn reacts irascibly and

emphasizes that his father is a complete Chinese, thereby distancing herself from those whom she resents. All in all, instead of presenting rigid and ardent messages, this short conversation presents a very dynamic and fluid picture. Although eventually Junn displays anger at Kai's question, her response actually adds complexity and uncertainty to the question of race here.

The short exchange becomes even more interesting when it is placed into the large context. Before this confrontation, Junn constantly corrects Kai's influent and accented Chinese, thereby demonstrating her dissatisfaction at her only child being influenced by the white society. She is unhappy with any mispronounced intonation. Besides, she insists that she is able to communicate with the English man, even though she could not speak English. (It is also noteworthy that Junn consistently addresses her son as Kai in Chinese, while Chinese people normally use the full name. That a woman should insist that her deceased husband, who is half-French, is a *complete* Chinese while using the western way to address her only son is surprising. It is possible to argue that Junn has made significant compromises during her stay in England, but she is still clinging strongly to her Asianness. Another possible explanation is that this is unintentional. Hong Khaou himself is born in England and describes himself as Westernized; chances are that he has been addressed by his first name throughout his life. Consequently, he might not notice the inconsistency here.) Therefore, Junn's relationship with the white hegemony is varied; she is alternately dismissive, critical, flattered, admiring and resentful.

Now I will turn my attention to how masculinity is portrayed here. As I have mentioned earlier, the discussion of masculinity becomes more defined in a sexual context, and I will also study masculinity against sexuality here. In *Lilting*, Richard and

Kai have two bedroom scenes, both of which are flashbacks. In these scenes, both men are naked; they lie and converse about how to deal with Junn. There are gentle and intimate caresses and kisses, but there is no indication that they are leading to more active sexual activities, such as penetration. The first one appears right after Richard makes the arrangement with Van, who is going to translate for Junn and Alan. This scene is divided into two parts. The first part is apparently imaginary; Richard watches Kai with deep sadness in his eyes, then they hug each other. There is a freeze frame and the camera zooms in. Subsequently, the second part of the scene, which is from Richard's memory, begins, though the sadness seems to linger in Richard's eyes. They first banter about a scent that Kai smells on the street; then, Richard suggests that they should invite Junn for Dim Sum, while playing with Kai's nipple. Kai answers that Junn will not admit that he is good at Chinese cooking, because no one will be good enough for her only child. At this point, Richard climbs on top of Kai and they start to kiss each other affectionately. Then Kai narrates the consequences of inviting Junn, such as Richard's having to stay in the spare room and pretending to be his friend. Richard suggests that Kai should come out to his mother, so that Junn could live with them and Kai does not need to feel guilty about putting his mother in sheltered accommodation. To this suggestion, Kai simply answers, "Stop doing that."

The second bedroom scene occurs after Junn has a fight with Alan, because she suggests that they talk about what they do not like about each other. This scene begins with Richard pulling a hair off Kai's nipple (afterwards, he puts the hair into his mouth). This time, Kai tells Richard that he is going to invite Junn to their house in order to come out to her. He tried to do so yesterday, but lost courage in the end. However, Richard is

obviously pleased by Kai's making this attempt. He asks Kai whether this is true, and Kai answers that he has already issued the invitation. Then, Kai suggests that Richard should leave the house and take a walk while he talks with his mother. They joke about this being romantic, but afterwards Kai closes his eyes and Richard turns his face away. Kai then again expresses his concerns about Junn's reaction, and says that Richard probably has to live at a hotel, if Junn does not accept the situation. Kai feels increasingly nervous and puts Richard's foot against his chest, so that Richard could feel his tremor. After Richard reassures Kai, the camera stays on his eyes. The deep sadness returns and tears are welling up. Present and past are merging, and with a shaking voice, Richard says to Kai, who is obviously his imagination now, "Smell my armpit again. I miss it when you do that." Kai's expression becomes wooden and lifeless, and Richard covers his face as he succumbs to tears. At this moment, the doorbell rings and Junn and Van arrive.

These two scenes portray the relationship between Richard and Kai in an interesting way. First of all, both scenes are shot from the perspective of Richard's. When the camera stays on Kai, we see Kai from Richard's angle. However, when the camera moves onto Richard, it does not follow Kai's point of view; instead, we see Richard from the perspective of a third person. The close-ups suggest that Richard occupies the center of the frame, even when he is being looked at. During the interview with *The Moveable Fest*, Hong Khaou talks about how the bedroom scenes were made: "[we] played it from Richard's perspective, from Kai's, and then from both. We decided to stay with Richard because it was he who was grieving" (Stephen Saito). That the camera focuses more on Richard's perception could probably be explained by the fact that these two scenes are a mixture of reality and fiction; Richard is trying to reconstruct the intimacy with Kai with

details from the past as well as his imagination. Kai, in contrast, straddles reality and illusion. Nevertheless, there is no doubt that he is granted much more agency and subjectivity in both cases.

This impression is enhanced by the initiative that Richard takes in their cuddling. When Richard and Kai are engaging in intimate activities, it is always he who makes the first move: touching, kissing, caressing. He even pulls a hair off Kai's nipple at the beginning of the second scene. This scene also starts with Kai lying on the bed and Richard sitting across him. This position allows Richard a vantage point that is traditionally associated with power and dominance. Although no sexual intercourse occurs, it is Richard who climbs on *top* of Kai. However, at the end of the second scene, there is one frame that resembles sexual penetration. After Kai talks about his insecurities and anxieties, he says to Richard, "feel this". As both are naked in bed and have been intimate throughout the conversation, the audience might be led into thinking that Kai asks Richard to feel his erection. However, as the camera moves downward from Kai's face, we find out that Kai puts Richard's foot against his chest, so that Richard could feel his tremor. Subsequently, the camera moves away and includes both actors within the frame. Therefore, we see Kai and Richard sitting across each other, with Richard lifting his leg and pointing it against Kai's chest; his leg is not unlike an erect penis that is penetrating Kai. If we return to the top/bottom dynamics that have been discussed by Richard Fung and Nguyen Hoang Tan, then we might argue that this position is symbolic and implies that Richard is the top in this relationship; hence, more powerful and more masculine.



Lilting. Dir. Hong Khaou. 2014.

However, this impression is contradicted by the dialogues in both scenes. Although Richard is more active and the camera grants him more subjectivity, he is assigned to a secondary position in the conversation. This fact is significant, when we remember that the conversations, which are reconstructed by Richard, are partially fictitious. Although at the beginning Richard exchanges words with Kai on an equal basis, very soon he concedes the initiative to Kai, when Kai starts to talk about his mother. In the first scene, he makes that suggestion that they invite Junn to visit them for dinner, so that he could impress her with his Dim Sum. To this suggestion, Kai answers rather cavalierly, saying that Junn will not be impressed, as she would not consider anyone good enough for her single child. When Richard lies in disappointment, Kai jokingly implies that he shares his mother's opinion: Richard is not good enough for him and need "try harder." Then Kai describes the consequences of Junn's visit, namely that Richard must stay in the spare room and pretend to be his friend. To these Richard is rather resigned. Then, Richard again suggests that Kai come out to his mother, so that she could live with them. Kai's

response remains cold and impersonal, “Stop doing that”. At these words, Richard hides his face away in disappointment and pain.

In the second scene, the same conversation pattern is repeated. They start with a little banter; when the conversation touches upon Kai’s relationship with his mother, Richard becomes very passive and timid. Again, Kai tells Richards that Junn resents him. This time, Kai is determined to invite Junn over so that he would come out to her. This information obviously delights Richard, but he again is hurt when Kai still insists that Richard should leave the house during the visit. This sense of exclusion causes Richard a lot of pain, which is compounded, when Kai, again jokingly, indicates that Richard needs to stay at a hotel, should Junn decide not to accept the situation. When Richard says “you two are so alike”, his desperation at his own difference as well as powerless could not be clearer.

Therefore, in these two conversations, it is Kai who occupies the dominant role. The conversation is almost always centered on him, and he solely determines its direction as well as tone. Richard could only make tentative suggestions and passively respond to Kai’s answers, as if a stronger stance would irrevocably banish him from the Kai and Junn’s world. As a matter of fact, Kai seems to derive a sadistic pleasure from Richard’s misery, as he tirelessly describes that Richard must leave, if Junn is not fine with this situation. To Kai’s flaunting of power, Richard responds in resignation; he dares not challenge him.

Consequently, these two bedroom scenes portray a very dynamic relationship between Richard and Kai. While the camera allows Richard more agency and he is more physically active, Kai dominates the conversation. There is no doubt that power is

unevenly distributed, but it would be difficult to say which one has more power. As a matter of fact, it makes much more sense to resort to Michel Foucault's conception of power and suggest that power flows from one person to the other. Neither Richard nor Kai wields and exploits it; they are no more than the conduits. By the same logic, as a desirable and coveted quality, masculinity flows between the two. It attaches to neither. It is fundamentally futile to attempt to capture it. *Lilting* does not want to construct an Asian masculinity that is powerful, respectable and formidable; instead, it tries to establish Asian male as an equally qualified conduit.

This conclusion is corroborated by two other aspects in *Lilting*. On the one hand, it presents a kind of mutual assimilation, which makes the facile flow of power more feasible. Mutual assimilation is not that common in films that deal with intercultural communication. Usually, the emphasis is placed on one side: how the minority tries to assimilate or refuses to assimilate, or how the majority perceives the minority. In *Better Luck Tomorrow*, for example, we see a group of Asian high school students try to negotiate their identity within the white community. They distance themselves from their Asianness, and their white classmates either exclude them or exhibit a lukewarm interest in their race. In other words, we can only see Asians interact with white people, but not the other way around.

This is hardly the case in *Lilting*. On the one hand, we have Kai and Vann, two second-generation immigrants. They have grown up in England and are very much westernized. Kai does not even speak fluent Chinese. They adopt western values (such as the unquestioning acceptance of homosexuality), and, throughout the whole film, they demonstrate no particular preference for, or even interest in, Chinese culture. They have

largely assimilated themselves into the English society. On the other hand, we have Richard, who has been deeply influenced by the Chinese culture. In many places, he stresses that he is good at Chinese cooking, and even Junn approves of it. Furthermore, Richard actually leans more toward the Chinese family structure than Kai. When Kai places Junn in the retirement home, it is Richard who constantly suggests that Junn should come to live with them, even though he knows that Junn resents him and his relationship with Kai would collapse, if Junn is not fine with the situation. As a matter of fact, Richard shows a more genuine and affectionate interest in Junn than anyone. Vann never develops an attachment to Junn, even though they are both Chinese and speak the same language. She involves herself in the whole situation as a hired interpreter. She once intrudes herself into the conversation (something an interpreter should not do), because she thinks that Junn is not appreciative of the efforts that Richard has been making. She confronts and criticizes Junn severely and causes a serious outburst on the latter's part. The sympathy that she shows for Junn's situation (bereaved of her only son, incarcerated in the retirement home and stranded in a foreign culture) is minimal. As for Kai, there is no denying that he is devoted to his mother, but he gives the impression that he is merely performing the duty of a filial son. The strongest evidence is that, oppressed by Junn's loss of memory, he sends her to the retirement home against her wishes. Besides, he often forgets to bring the CD that Junn likes. His insistent refusal to come out to Junn is also subject to many interpretations, as Junn is well aware that he has an intimate friend, with whom he shares the house. It is possible that he is exploiting this situation to distance himself from his mother: if he comes out to Junn and Junn accepts his homosexuality, then he has no excuse to not live with her.

In contrast to Vann and Kai, Richard is really committed to Junn's well-being. When, in an attempt to assuage his own conscience, Kai rationalizes that the retirement home he selects has the same décor from half-a-century ago and, therefore, is very suitable for his mother, Richard points out that Junn is not English and the retirement home is unlikely to have the Cambodian décor with which she is familiar. When Kai is still alive, Richard prompts him several times to invite Junn to their house. After Kai passes away, he pays for the accommodation fees at the upper-scale retirement home. He hires Vann to translate for Junn and Alan, with the hope that Junn would eventually warm up to him and come to live with him. As a matter of fact, Dan Callahan considers this plot highly implausible, claiming that “ [it's] very hard to know why Richard, a young man, would want his dead lover's disapproving mother to move in with him.” At the end of this film, when Junn comes to his house, she is surprised that Richard fries bacon with chopsticks. At that moment, Richard remarks that he could not even imagine frying bacon with anything else. Therefore, as a white man living in England, Richard has voluntarily assimilated himself into the Asian culture, even though the Asian young people in this film have sufficiently whitened themselves.

Another thing worth noting in this film is the ambiguous labeling. It is difficult to categorize the individuals as well as the relationship in *Lilting*. While most of the critics agree that *Lilting* is a gay film, which is a reasonable assessment, as the whole story originates in Kai's decision to put his mother's in the retirement home because of his relationship with Richard, even homosexuality is an instable category. First and foremost, the director does not really try to cultivate their *gayness*. Neither Kai nor Richard exhibits any cultural clichés that are associated with homosexuality. Aside from the bedroom

scenes, there is no trace whatsoever that suggests that they are in any sense marginalized or differentialized. They do not socialize with gay friends, neither do their experience microaggressions from other people (though, during their conversation, Richard once mentions that they constantly come out to other people). As a matter of fact, the whole storyline would not be changed, if Richard is not a gay man, but a woman that Junn does not like. Furthermore, as the story progresses and Vann becomes increasingly involved in the relationship between Richard and Junn, we can see that a visible intimacy develops between the two. Vann's intrusion and criticism of Junn, which I have mentioned above, could result from the affection that she feels for Richard. Actually, after this minor quarrel, Junn asks Vann whether they are a couple. To this question, Vann stutters that she and Richard are only friends. When Richard asks her whether she corrects Junn, Vann jokes that she has told Junn that he is gay. Vann's awkward reaction to both Junn and Richard seems to suggest that she is perceiving their relationship from a new angle. When they are planning for the dinner that Junn and Alan are to have, the two walk together arm in arm, bickering like lover birds. At the very end of this film, when Junn narrates her sense of solitude on Christmas Eve when everything, including tree leaves, stands still and she feels the need to move (hence the title *Lilting*), as the camera slowly moves around the room we see the characters from the film dancing slowly in couples: Richard and Vann, Junn and Alan, Junn and Kai, and Richard and Kai. That Richard and Vann should be dancing together in this scene indicates that, at this point, their relationship has become very serious, much beyond a normal friendship or employer-employee relationship.

The other aspect is the confusion of labeling. As I have mentioned above, gayness should have been a cornerstone of the whole film, but it is still being gradually undercut. In actual fact, almost all the identities are presented as fluid and porous concepts in this film. As a result, it is next to impossible to label any of the characters in *Lilting*. Junn, a traditional Chinese woman who refuses to adapt to the English culture for over twenty-nine years, explicitly states that she is only *having fun* with Alan, whereas Alan, a white man that develops an interest in Asian woman, behaves passively when he is with Junn and specifically asks Vann for sexual enhancement pills when he thinks that he might have sex with Junn after their dinner. In actual fact, we do not know whether Alan and Junn, or Richard and Kai for that matter, have ever engaged in sexual intercourse throughout the film. Sexuality is an attribute; on different occasions, the characters could have different forms of sexuality to different degrees. It does not enter their identity, and, consequently, does not decide the power that the characters have or how they are perceived in society. That each character's subjectivity is not constrained by their social identities indicates that they serve as smooth conduits for the exchange of power, masculinity, or any other quality.

In summary, *Lilting* presents a very unique strategy to reconstruct Asian masculinity, or even simply masculinity. In this film, masculinity is not envisioned to be a coveted quality that attaches to other attributes (most conspicuously, race.) Rather, it flows from character to character, and this is made possible by the porousness of the familiar categories: race, sexuality, etc. As a matter of fact, it could be argued that the film does not even acknowledge masculinity as a trait that is desirable, because it is not in anyway linked with power, prestige or even social acceptance. How little the director

actually addresses masculinity suggests that, together with race, it is redefined in *Lilting*. If masculinity were considered from this perspective, then the dilemma in which Asian male finds himself evaporates. Whereas Hamamoto and Nguyen argue that we should not use the standards established by the white hegemony to judge whether a man is a man, Hong suggests that we should not judge a male by how manly he is according to basically any standards. The conspicuous silence on masculinity in *Lilting* constitutes the fourth strategy.

CHAPTER VII

CONCLUSION

In this thesis, I have first described the conundrum that Asian males face in the west in terms of gender and sexuality. Subsequently, I examine various films made by Asian filmmakers (most of them are of a pornographic nature) and argue that three major strategies can be discerned: the assimilationistic strategy, the segregationistic strategy, and the integrationistic strategy. I contend that all three strategies have their inherent flaws and, as a result, could not provide an adequate solution. Then, I proceed to a close reading of *Lilting*, an independent film made by Hong Khaou. In this film, I discover a new approach to the problem, namely the dynamic strategy. This strategy views masculinity as a fluid quality that does not attach to race, or other fixed identities. By not treating manliness as the yardstick of a male's worth, it encourages us to think out of the box. The dynamic strategy, to my mind, offers a superior solution to the issue of emasculation and effeminization faced by Asian males.

It cannot be denied that this thesis suffers from various defects. First and foremost, the scope of the films that it has studied is rather limited; consequently, the picture that it tries to paint is far from comprehensive. It is imaginable that some Asian filmmakers have adopted other strategies. In addition, this thesis does not include the films by filmmakers of other races in the discussion. For example, African or Latino filmmakers might adopt a very different approach, when they are trying to negotiate with the hegemonic standards of masculinity (although the problems that they encounter are drastically different from those encountered by Asian males). Furthermore, the films that have been investigated are chosen from a variety of genres: independent film, mainstream

gay pornography, independent straight and gay pornography (both of which are made as political statements), etc. Consequently, the differences between the strategies could partially result from the differences between genres. As a result, the conclusion reached in this thesis would have been strengthened, had each genre been more exhaustively studied. This is a direction that future scholars should adopt. Last but not least, it is lamentable that the author could not study mainstream Western films (or even mainstream independent Western films), as no such films address the issue of Asian masculinity. Although, with the development of Chinese cinema market, more and more Asian characters appear in mainstream Western films, these characters are mostly one-dimensional. More often than not, they serve as token characters (comparable to Ben in *Better Luck Tomorrow*), which exist to please the potential Asian audiences. Although these roles are portrayed from a positive perspective, such as Li Bingbing's role in *Transformer IV*, they lack depth and complexity. It is the author's genuine hope that Asian male actors could obtain more roles that are comparable to Rinko Kikuchi's in *Babel* in mainstream Western films. The examination of such representations will significantly add to the discussion of how Asian males, or males of color in general, should negotiate their masculinity and identity in the white hegemony of masculinity.

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