

7 A queer journey home in *Solos*

Rethinking kinship in Sinophone Singapore

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Solos (2007), a feature film co-directed by rising Singaporean directors Loo Zihan and Kan Lume, explores two sets of non-normative relationships: a sexual relationship between a student and his teacher, and a troubled relationship between the student and his depressed mother. The mundane and dialogue-less narrative of the film focuses on representing the emotional distance between the characters and their individual yearning for intimacy, both physical and emotional. In general, reception to the film centered on discussions of the taboo student-teacher relationship, the film's gay theme, its explicit sex scenes, and its censorship issue in Singapore. This focus on controversial issues overlooked the significant narrative of the mother-son relationship in the film. As a result, this narrative thread in the film is pushed to the background.

To prevent the narrative from sinking into a transgressive one that dwells exclusively on the taboo subject of queer sexuality, or one that violates the piety of the family, this chapter attempts to establish a dialogue between the queer Singaporean identity and the kinship system through an active queer orientation: *Solos* suggests a rethinking of the relationship between queer identity and kinship in the Sinophone Singaporean society.¹ Instead of conceiving queer identity as a problem to the unity of the family unit, resigning it to the fate of a kinship outcast, or advocating its autonomy from the hetero-normal family order, *Solos* recuperates the troubled relationship between queer subjects and their families by suggesting the queering of the kinship system for a negotiable space of inhabitation. Such queering, in the form of negotiation, offers practices that could engender diverse forms of kinship structure.

Solos—the censorship controversy

Early March 2007, during an interview with the *Business Times* (Singapore), the Singapore International Film Festival director Philip Cheah shared his vision on the future of SIFF at this significant moment of its twentieth anniversary—to stay relevant in a globalized world. To Cheah, in order for the SIFF to stay relevant to a globalized world means to prevent the local from being consumed by the overpowering globalization in order to uncover the importance of the roles played by “the small, the intimate and the local” in the larger space of global politics. In practice,

this SIFF vision pledges the continuing pursuit of its founding agenda to nurture new talents, and borrowing Singapore Film Commission (SFC) director Man Shu Sam's words, to function as the window that “allows the film world outside to look into Singapore, and connects Singapore to film centres around the world.” The SIFF's twentieth anniversary endorsed its founding agenda to promote the Singapore film industry by accepting fifty-three films in the Best Singapore Short category and showcasing eight features by local filmmakers, including *Solos*, which was also a nominee for the Best Silver Screen Award for Asian Feature.

The SIFF's excitement and anticipation of this global and diverse vision that circumscribed its twentieth anniversary was soon clouded by the Board of Film Censors' (BFC) decision to cut scenes from two of its festival films: *Princess*, an animation from Danish director Anders Morgenthaler, and Kan Lume and Loo Zihan's *Solos*. The former, a feature about a priest's attempt to expunge his sister's past as a porn actress, includes a scene in which a woman garbed in a nun's habit is depicted in a sexually suggestive position. BFC took issue with a cross placed on the lower body of the woman by claiming that it was placed “in an objectionable way.”² The animation was given a R21 rating,³ which means, in order to stay in the festival screening, *Princess* has to edit out the religious-sensitive content in the abovementioned scene.

Solos, on the other hand, faced more cuts suggested by the BFC than *Princess*. To meet the R21 rating, *Solos* had to edit three scenes, which according to the BFC are “prolonged and explicit homosexual lovemaking scenes including scenes of oral sex and threesome sex.”⁴ The BFC situated this censorship issue with *Solos* ambiguously between its depictions of “explicit sex acts” and the theme of homosexuality. Though it is not hard to imagine how much homosexuality, a main theme in the film, has weighed in to the BFC's decision.

In response to the BFC's evaluation of *Solos*, Philip Cheah reasserts SIFF's beliefs in promoting “cinematic diversity in all its forms and subjects” and in showcasing films uncompromised by censorship guidelines. After the appeal to the BFC was rejected, the film directors (Loo Zihan and Kan Lume), the SIFF program director (Cheah), and the producer (Florence Ang) came to a common decision—to withdraw *Solos* from the film festival five days before its premiere. The film, however, remained a nominee of the Best Asian Feature.⁵ This decision is reached in order to uphold the SIFF's principle of screening exclusively uncut films for the preservation of the artistic integrity of all films. The withdrawal of *Solos* from the festival cast a strong criticism on the inflexible regulations monitored by the local censors.

The BFC justified its decision by emphasizing that “[f]ilms submitted for festivals are generally given more leeway in view of the limited screening and niche audience” but “[*Princess* and *Solos*] have, however, exceeded the leeway that is granted to festivals.” Hence, a resolution was suggested: to classify the films for viewing, with edits, for people aged twenty-one and above. Instead of clearing the cloud, over the entire censorship issue, this statement highlights the ambiguity underlying the BFC's take on sensitive topics such as nudity, sex and homosexuality.

In 2002, the Singapore Ministry of Information, Communications and Arts put together a committee to review and revise the existing set of censorship guidelines. A year later, Liu Thai Ker, Chairperson of the Censorship Review Committee (CRC) submitted a report with suggested revisions to the existing guidelines that the Ministry adopted. The CRC focused on three general factors to delineate the new guidelines: Singapore as a multiracial society, the impact of globalization, and the advancement of technology in the contemporary society.⁶ Diversity seems to be the common denominator on which the committee expounded to emphasize the makeup of Singapore as a harmonious and globally connected society. Such a society “weaves a rich tapestry of culture and traditions that brings life and vitality into the community” as it connects globally, and hence, “must accept a flow of ideas and influences from other countries and cultures,” “not just in the cultural and traditional sense, but also in ... lifestyles, values and aspirations.”⁷ To the CRC, the goal of putting together a set of new guidelines is to promote this lifestyle diversity as its core principle. To achieve a proper balance in respecting diverse viewpoints within the scope of the censorship guidelines, the CRC believes it is important to continue to “dialogue and interact, practicing the deft art of how and when to speak our mind, and learning to listen out for ideas that can bridge differences.”⁸ The CRC’s agenda was grounded in good intentions and appeared to be ideologically sound; unfortunately, when these guidelines are put into practice supervised by the BFC, controversies arise, such as the one with *Solos*. No clear processes such as a dialogue between the censorship regulators and the filmmakers were introduced to resolve the issue in the case of *Solos* “in ways that [would have minimized] divisions in [the] community, and [maximize] the common space” for both parties to pursue their “individual convictions, and to come together in joint efforts.”⁹ In their report, the CRC highlighted the subjective nature of censorship and urged regulators of the guidelines to maintain a “flexible and contextual” approach when implementing guidelines and to consult respective advisory committees when controversy arises. This advice from the CRC was not specifically heeded by the BFC in handling the censorship issue with *Solos*. Especially in the report, CRC pointed out that survey used to determine new censorship guidelines has shown that most participants did not object to any form of public access to non-exploitative context dealing with homosexuality.¹⁰ What is noteworthy is the censorship guidelines do contain a statement permitting the screening of films with non-exploitative homosexual themes or scenes at film festivals such as the SIFF. In fact, this particular guideline existed prior to the 2002–2003 revision of the guidelines. The BFC’s decision to censor three scenes in *Solos* was indeed a step backward toward making Singapore into a globally diverse society.

To further complicate the matter, second minister of the Singapore Ministry of Information, Communications and Arts, Vivian Balakrishnan sanctioned the BFC’s decision by arguing that though the Singaporean society was on its way to liberalization and globalization, its core structure remained traditional. Instead of directly addressing the controversy, he attempted to suppress any form of dialogue with the filmmakers by quoting Section 377A of the Singapore Penal

Code.¹¹ Interestingly, Balakrishnan’s public statement not only failed to suppress the controversy, it ended up raising another issue regarding homosexuality and its implications in Singaporean society. The Singapore Penal Code Section 377A criminalizes “gross indecency” between two men with a punishment of up to two years’ imprisonment.¹² In 2007, in response to the debate of whether to decriminalize homosexuality in Cabinet, Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong conceded that Singapore had to “maintain a balance between upholding a stable society with traditional, heterosexual family values and giving gays [*sic*] space to live their lives.”¹³ As a result, Section 377 (prohibition of anal and oral sex between consenting adult heterosexuals) was removed from the penal code but Section 377A (prohibition of sex between men) was preserved. Even though Prime Minister Lee affirmed that Section 377A will not be “proactively enforced” (instead of adopting Section 377A, a judge has an option of prosecuting an individual to a fine of up to 1,000 dollars, or a prison sentence of up to a month, or both, for the first offense), the preservation of Section 377A does not seem to serve any specific purpose, despite its discriminatory nature.¹⁴ Organizations such as, People Like Us (PLU), argued that the preservation of Section 377A “legitimizes homophobia” in Singapore society.¹⁵ This ambiguity in the government’s attitude toward homosexuality cast a direct impact on the BFC’s insistence on censoring scenes in *Solos* before its initial scheduled premiere at the SIFF.

With this background of the film, this chapter proceeds to offer an analysis of the film, focusing on a queer subject’s negotiation with the kinship structure in Sinophone Singapore. In conjunction with its core agenda to participate in the 2007 SIFF, the film depicts the teenage queer subject’s journey in exploring his sexuality toward an eventual navigation in the familial home space to negotiate for alternate kinship structures. Such negotiation should not be seen as an act of assimilation into the rigid patrilineal kinship system because the space of the family is a contact zone where cultures collide to create new forms. Change can only happen through initiating dialogue and negotiating exchange, not through mere resistance and revolt. The censorship issue *Solos* encountered at the 2007 SIFF is an outcome of the state’s paranoia over homosexuality, for seeing it as a threat to the institution of the patrilineal family.¹⁶ This chapter suggests that *Solos* offers a different way of viewing the relationship between homosexuality and Sinophone Singaporean society.

***Solos*: the journey home**

Although there have been a number of stumbling blocks along the journey to push for gay rights, activist groups such as PLU has been aggressive in advocating for their agenda. In an interview with *Time* magazine in 2003, Singapore’s Senior Minister Goh Chok Tong, then Prime Minister, discussed the new governmental policy on the employment of gay civil servants. He claimed that the policy would endorse the government’s welcoming attitude toward gay employees and applicants seeking politically sensitive positions, and it would prevent any form of discrimination toward them provided they declare their sexual orientation. This policy

is a big step forward for both the gay community and the government. Unfortunately, when asked about his thoughts on decriminalizing gay sexuality, Senior Minister Goh's response was that Section 377A is "more than just the criminal code. It's actually the values of the people."¹⁷ By this statement, he was suggesting that most Singaporeans saw homosexuality as criminal. The LGBT activists' effort in urging the government to repeal Section 377A was relentless. In 2007, LGBT activists mobilized supporters from both the LGBT community and its straight allies (a total of more than 2,000 people) to sign a petition to Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong, calling for the decriminalization of homosexuality.¹⁸ Though the government maintained its stance on the issue by preserving Section 377A, the activists' effort in highlighting the issue and making it into a parliamentary debate points to its immediacy. For once, the government took the needs of the gay and lesbian communities seriously. This minute success achieved by LGBT activists has shaped a possible path for the promotion of LGBT-related agendas in the future. Without these efforts and changes, there would not be a set of less-restrictive censorship law as described earlier in this chapter and *Solos* would not even be considered by the SIFF to begin with. It is in this climate I assert that *Solos* participates in this effort to strive for rights and equality for the gay community in Singapore. Not only does *Solos* attempt to bring forth the visibility of a queer identity in Sinophone Singapore, it adopts a critical position to engage with an essentialized notion of kinship that is patrilineal, oppressive, and limiting. Instead of displacing the queer subject outside the dominant culture, *Solos* brings the queer subject, literally and ideologically, back to the home space to disturb the stability of the kinship system, be it a state-generated mythic system or liberal family institution; and through this gesture, it creates a queering of the kinship system to spawn new forms of "normativities."

Set in contemporary Singapore, *Solos* explores the relationships among three individuals who are struggling to communicate and understand each other. The film begins with Boy (Loo Zihan) moving home to his family flat and having dinner with Mother (Goh Guat Kian) and Man (Lim Yu Beng), his lover. A flashback follows this opening scene to unfold the narrative that leads up to Boy's homecoming. Boy who is in love with Man, his teacher, decides to move in with him. Devastated by Boy's decision, Mother feels abandoned by her son, and, hence, falls into depression. Soon, the relationship between Boy and Man begins to fall apart. Boy fights his boredom when Man is at work by taking the role of a homemaker, cooking and cleaning for him. As Boy grows dissatisfied with his new life, he resorts to sexual escapades with strangers. On an occasion, Man returns home to find Boy in bed with a stranger. The trio ends up engaging in a threesome. This encounter turns out to be a negative experience for Man and Boy, jeopardizing their relationship. Around the same time, Man receives news of the death of a family member. The unfortunate passing of this family member reconciles Boy and Man; it also indirectly leads Boy back to Mother. Upon Boy's homecoming, the film concludes with a surreal scene in which Boy plays the violin for Mother on the ground floor corridor of their flat. This scene symbolizes the establishing of communication between mother and son.

The film's English title *Solos* adopts a plural form of the noun to imply the autonomous coexistence of the characters and the connection between the individuals and their actions. Each of the three characters yearns for a certain connection with one another, and attempts to orient himself/herself toward these yearnings and people within the space of his or her reach. In other words, while celebrating the autonomy of each individual and his actions as solo acts, the film, as directed by its title, advocates the solidarity of individual bodies as they navigate and reshape the kinship structure of the space they inhabit.

The opening scene of the film presents a semi-close-up of Mother tossing in bed trying to sleep. As the narrative unfolds, we learn that she suffers from depression and yearns for her son, Boy, to return home. Besides going about with her mundane daily activities, she writes post-its in Sinitic scripts and sticks them all over the refrigerator. The post-its are her reminder and plea for her son to come home for dinner. They symbolize a mother's love and desire to reconnect with her son. The loss of her son to Man is hinted as the source of her depression.

The film introduces Man and Boy in a teacher-student relationship, via an establishing shot immediately after the opening scene. A surreal re-creation of the classroom setting casts the two against an idealized image of nature (the rainforest) as backdrop. The teacher-student relationship is established with the student sitting poised at his desk, looking attentively at the teacher standing against a desk facing the student. By placing the social setting of an institution in nature, the narrative implies the possibility of breaking down the socially constructed relationship into one that is closer to nature and the instincts of the two individuals. This is the first scene of transgression in the film, in which an institutionalized relationship and structure is displaced from its common space to a space untainted by social rules. This displacement renders the sexual relationship between Boy and Man possible because, technically, once outside the school compound, the teacher-student relationship ceases to exist. However, this is not necessarily the case. Boy remains a student relative to Man's position as a teacher, particularly marked by his school uniform throughout the film, except when he is naked. His identity is marked by a Confucian tenet, "Once a teacher, forever a teacher." Hence, when the following scene establishes the sexual relationship between the two, a taboo determined by the standard of a patrilineal society that observes a Confucian ideal becomes apparent immediately. The taboo relationship violates kinship law because the teacher figure is also implicitly a father figure to the student. This social rule marks the relationship between Man and Boy as an incestuous one.

The scene after the opening credit is pivotal: the depressed mother removes her eye-patch, implying that she is able to see clearly again. Following this scene, Boy returns home as prompted by Man, who helps pack his suitcase. With Boy's homecoming, the trio—Mother, Boy, and Man—sit at the same table to enjoy dinner. Not until this same scene reappears toward the end of the film that we realize the film is a flashback of what has happened during the period when Boy left home to stay with Man.

Mother's life is filled with boredom and longing for her son. Besides cooking meal after meal and burning incense to pray to Chinese deities, Mother regresses to childlike and eccentric behavior, such as eating potato chips while riding a rocking horse. Even when Boy occasionally returns home for dinner, he does not communicate with her and leaves as soon as he finishes eating. Boy also neglects the filial piety by abandoning Mother for Man. Though he remains nonchalant toward Mother throughout the film and disregards the social structure of mentorship with Man, he is inevitably haunted by the social norms imposed upon him by a patrilineal kinship structure in Sinophone Singapore.

In another surreal scene, Boy dances with a crimson silk drape. The dance sequence symbolizes Boy's struggle between his individual desire and his relation to his family. The drape symbolizes blood tie in family relations. This sequence segues to another scene that depicts a fish in a forest, struggling to survive out of water. The fish functions as the metaphor for Boy's suffocation from his lack of freedom. It is also through this imagery of water that we realize Mother's desire—a desire to move freely in her own space instead of the government housing flat in which she is repressed by her social and familial position as a mother. Another source of Mother's depression is her guilt of failing as a maternal figure who, instead of nurturing and protecting her own child, has chosen to observe the ideology of the (paternal) government in order to support the coherence of a national body built upon the myth of a traditional kinship structure, a structure that preserves the proper name of the paternal signifier.

Boy's stay with Man is not exactly fulfilling; he feels bored most of the time. To occupy his free time, Boy replicates the family lifestyle familiar to him. He imitates his mother's role and cooks for Man. When this fails to inspire a stable relationship with Man, Boy begins to engage with anonymous sex which causes their relationship to suffer.

A turning point of the film occurs when Man loses a family member. The identity and background of the family member are not elaborated. Man and Boy's visits to the hospital and crematorium depict the loss at the diegetic level. Ironically, at this point of the relationships between Boy and Man, and Boy and Mother, loss functions as the reminder of a common experience between the trio. The loss, in the form of a death and mourning, brings about the potential and initiative among the trio to reconnect. This is a key moment in *Solos* in which the characters' orientations within the space of the family are evaluated, and a liveable and inhabitable space for the interconnected relationships among the characters begins to form.

Rethinking kinship as queering practice

In one of the early scenes in *Solos*, the depressed mother, while lamenting the loss of her son, activates a vacuuming robot. The vacuuming robot at work foreshadows and symbolizes the main characters' navigation within the home space in the film.

In *Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects, Others*, Sara Ahmed explores how lived experience, consciousness, object proximity, and habitual

actions shape bodies and worlds through social processes of orientation.¹⁹ Through her analysis of queer subjects and their relationship with the family, Ahmed argues that in order for bodies to feel stable and secure, they actively orient themselves to, and around, objects in the spaces they inhabit; hence, their subjecthood is created, altered, and transformed.

Familiarity is the affect of orientation that motivates bodies toward objects in a particular space. Ahmed suggests a link between the familiar and the familial by claiming the former as an outcome of inhabitation. Within the space of inhabitation, familiarity is produced to enable bodies to orient toward and grow accustomed to objects in the vicinity—the process of grasping the familiar makes bodies “feel at home” and, hence, establishes the familial.²⁰ The art of orientation lies in a body's active negotiation between the familiar and the unfamiliar. This active negotiation marks the agency of a body not just to inhabit a space but also to claim the space as home, and “to create new impressions, depending on which way we turn, which affects what is within reach.”²¹ Ahmed believes that kinship or the familial are contingent structures, not the Law; “folds and contours”²² are needed, and will evolve with new subjectivities and orientations. Space, when adopted through the movement of a body, gains meaning along with the evolving subjectivity of the body. If the body is always in motion and (re)orienting toward objects, it is also simultaneously disorienting away from objects, hence, reshaping or even departing from the space it inhabits. Both the movement of arrival and departure marks homing in their orientation toward objects in the space they inhabit.

Prior to his homecoming, Boy's desire in replicating a (queer) family lifestyle with Man leaves him with much frustration. His attempt to cook dinner for Man fails. Consequently, he opts for another form of expression to satisfy his desire: a sexual encounter with a stranger leads to an unhappy threesome between him, the teacher, and the stranger. As a result, the two disoriented individuals, Boy and Man, begin to stray from each other and from the common space of desire and sexual freedom. Boy's attempt to adopt either structure, the traditional family lifestyle or a liberal hedonistic lifestyle (often seen as a Western influence), fails because neither lifestyle places Boy at the core of his search of identity within the society he inhabits. Boy's homecoming is a turning point for his search of identity and place in the family. His departure from and arrival (in the form of a return) at home brings new and different experiences to his navigation in the home space, allowing him to re-establish a connection with his mother. This new relationship could not be realized without the acknowledgment of the contingency of the kinship system. It is the oscillation between orientation and disorientation that allows Boy to engage with the kinship structure to make the home space into an inhabitable one.

To work her theory of orientation gradually toward the study of queer phenomenology, Ahmed suggests a rethinking of the concept of inheritance. Instead of inheriting “likeness,” a prescriptive characteristic of kinship, Ahmed argues that proximities are the entry point to the space filled with objects toward which we orient ourselves in our contemporary time. By suggesting proximities

as what we inherit, Ahmed frees inheritance from biological implications of resemblance: inheritance does not define or limit the action of a body; the body chooses its direction according to its orientations and the proximities it inherits. The body as agent works on finding its way in the world through orientations toward and around objects. This agency and mobility of the body encourages the rethinking of the family and kinship.

In revealing the logic of our arrival and entry to a familiar and familial space jointly through inheritance and possession as a process rather than a given status, kinship system surfaces as contingent social relations that are defined and shaped by the movement of orienting bodies which in turn shapes bodies into a collective. What we inherit as objects become our possessions only after we orient ourselves toward them and convert them from the familiar to the familial. Through this logic we can rethink the structure of kinship without resorting to a prescriptive system which privileges heteronormativity.²³ The familiar and the familial are not given entities. Every body experiences orientation in order to produce the affect of the familiar and the familial. The familiar becomes the familial when the extension of a body toward and around objects is established; when the extension fails, disorientation happens. Hence, the space becomes unliveable or uninhabitable. When this happens, a body changes direction in search of a different space with objects of potential familiarity. The mobility of a body is what gives it agency to shape and be shaped by its surroundings and movements.

As the film concludes, the scene of the trio having dinner from the beginning of the film returns. This reiteration besides affirming the scene's significance to the overall narrative and theme, also symbolizes a newly established relationship between Mother, Son, and Man in the form of a family reunion. At this point, peace seems to permeate the tone of the film. Not depression, gay sexuality, or the unconventional relationship among the characters threatens the stability of their connections. This "family" scene is an outcome of the characters' (dis)orientations as bodies with other bodies when they extend themselves toward, away, or around other bodies as guided by their desires.

To rethink the kinship system, Ahmed directs us to her theory of queer phenomenology, an approach involving the orientation of bodies toward and around objects in order to inhabit and feel at home in the space. Because no space is always already liveable and inhabitable, a body experiences mixed degrees of orientation and disorientation in the process of finding its way to inhabit a familial space.²⁴

Even though Ahmed links disorientation to the affect of crisis that produces a shattering and unsettling feeling with the dependence of the body on the space it attempts to inhabit and its surrounding objects, the body is still the initiating party that extends and adopts the space, direction, and objects. This agency of the body enables it to manipulate orientation or disorientation into catalyst of its action toward finding its way. Orientation and disorientation are two sides of a coin marked differently by proximities and directions. To see "disorientation" as an ordinary, daily feeling, is not to normativize it and reduce its transgressive

power but to "make things queer" in order "to disturb the order of things."²⁵ If we see queer orientation as involving both the feeling of disorientation and a deviant act to disorient, then it could be a deviation from the heteronormative social order that is organized around a certain way of living that has been claimed to be natural. It could also be an orientation toward the same organized living space to disturb its stability, rearrange its objects (in Ahmed's term "furniture" in the familial space) to make it liveable for the queer subjects. Otherness, in this case, is the facilitator of queer orientation, a characteristic the (dis)orienting body embodies not merely as a projection of difference outside the body but a transgression and tool for negotiation. It is in this ability to negotiate and reshape social order that queer phenomenology is significant in establishing new "folds and contours" in an existing order.

With the family reunion dinner as the entry point, one potential new "normativity" is presented: not only is Mother able to see clearly, she leaves the restraining parameters of her Housing Development Board apartment for the first time in the film; Mother and Boy re-establish a mother-son relationship outside their government housing, which is under renovation. In the final scene, no words are exchanged between Mother and Boy. Boy plays the violin in an open courtyard while Mother moves peacefully toward him. It is also in this scene gay sexuality, identity, and queerness cease to appear as a threat to the kinship between Mother and Boy. The fact of whether Man remains in the equation of this new kinship can be read positively or negatively. What is more important is his intervention to bring Boy home to "disturb" and negotiate with the stability of a conventional kinship system for a dialogue between mother and son. This is a dialogue to construct a liveable space for queer sexuality within the family. In this sense, nothing is necessarily debunked but the furniture has been rearranged. As Ahmed says "[i]t is not up to queers to disorientate straights"; "[s]ome deviations involve acts of following, but use the 'points' for different effects."²⁶

To acknowledge the negotiating potential of queer orientation in rearranging the furniture within an existing social order is to recognize that being queer does not mean that his only alternative is to be an exile outside the familial space. Besides embracing "queer tables" to form new family structures in queer spaces, queer subjects can still "find room" within the existing familial space. This is possible because it is not the room or objects in the room that defines kinship; it is the orientation toward the objects in the room that decides the kinship structure and its contingency.²⁷ Ahmed adopts the imagery of furniture to exemplify how queer orientations reshape the kinship structure like how one rearranges the furniture at home to suit how one feels at home. By pointing out the familial space as the embodiment of a social order defined by how the space is structured, by objects such as a table, Ahmed suggests that the kinship structure can be misaligned and rearranged by the desire and movement of queer bodies. This idea of rearranging furniture seems more feasible in navigating to another space and around a full set of new and unfamiliar furniture.²⁸

All in all, Ahmed's queer phenomenology offers a practical way to engage with dominant and oppressive cultures by acknowledging the agency of

individual bodies and the capacity that results to disturb, negotiate, and even reshape socially naturalized structures such as the kinship system. By focusing on the relationship between bodies and objects, Ahmed suggests that bodies produce meanings by orienting toward and around objects in particular spaces. This is the process that creates a sense of belonging in the space of the familial, delineating a kinship structure, which is seemingly natural and biological but is in actuality constructed. Queer phenomenology reveals the constructiveness of kinship not necessarily to debunk the dominant cultures but to relocate or rearrange the rules of kinship to make it more inhabitable for marginal communities.

Ahmed's concepts of orientation, queering, otherness, and the orientations between bodies (not just between bodies and objects), can be seen as exemplary of the ways in which orientations disturb and revise an essentialized kinship system in the Sinophone culture of Singapore.

Creolizing queerness and queering kinship

Solos was originally scheduled to premiere at the SIFF on April 27, 2007. Upon review, the Singapore BFC passed the film with a R21 rating with three cuts in the film. The SIFF committee, in agreement with the producer, decided to remove the film from its premiere to preserve the integrity of the film as art. For both parties, to screen a censored version of the film is to compromise the aesthetic meaning of the work of art. This decision unfortunately invited assumptions from international media claiming that the film was banned in Singapore due to its scenes involving homosexual acts when the film was screened at numerous international festivals, including the Pusan International Film Festival, the Los Angeles American Film Institute Festival, the London Lesbian and Gay Film Festival, and the Torino Gay and Lesbian Film Festival.²⁹ Although this overemphasis on the theme of homosexuality as taboo brought the film to the attention of a broader audience on the one hand; on the other hand, it reinforced the problematic colonial discourse of the West as democratic, civilized, and liberating, while the East as backwards and restrictive, even though Singapore is one of the most developed nations in Asia. This discourse unfortunately elides the broader question of kinship in Sinophone Singapore as the film tries to explore through the relationship between Boy, Man, and Mother.

In "Asian Values, Family Values: Film Video, and Lesbian and Gay Identities," Chris Berry argues that the Asian gay identity as portrayed in Asian films from the 1990s is a product of hybridization. Berry affirms that the Asian gay identity is a model adopted from the West and transplanted into various Asian cultures in relation to their local specificities. In order to emphasize this link between Anglo-American and Asian gay identities, Berry reminds that this relation should not be regarded as establishing a fixed and naturalized binary opposite of Asian gay identity versus a Western gay identity. To break down this binary in the filmic representation of Asian gay identity, Berry suggests that we appropriate Edward Said's criticism on Orientalist thinking, and Homi Bhabha's mechanism of mimicry and hybridity³⁰ to understand the distinct characteristics

of Asian gay identity, one that was influenced by the West but has permutated into its own category of local specificities.

Though Berry's effort in highlighting the locality of the Asian gay identity is significant, it is hard not to pinpoint the problem of conceiving the Asian gay identity as a product of hybridity that can only surface as a local form by appropriating a Western model. While it is important not to deny the influence of Western gay identity on the conceptualization of an Asian counterpart, the notion of the West as a model for the rest to appropriate only further endorses the hierarchical structure of the colonial setting. In a sense, Berry's argument implies that for Asian gay subjects to counter oppressive "local and neo-colonial forces and discourses" they have to first imitate the West.

One point worth noting in Berry's essay is his analysis of the role of the family in shaping gay identity in Asian films from the 1990s. The two main ways in which gay identity are portrayed in these films in relation to the role of the family are: (1) as a problem to be solved, and, thus, a threat to the stability of the kinship networks in Asian cultures; and (2) as a factor of exclusion from the space of the family, forcing the gay subject into marginal spaces. These spaces are not necessarily spaces of alternative cultures, or spaces gay subjects inhabit at ease. They are often liminal spaces invisible to dominant cultural expressions.³¹ Asian films that cast gay identity as a family problem are often comedies or melodramas. The problem with gay identity as portrayed in such films lies in its disruptive potential as an identitarian orientation that threatens the structures of the traditional Asian family.³² *Solos* is a text that extends the conception of gay identity in Singapore beyond the family problem; alternatively, it makes the traditional Asian family the problem of (post)modern social relations.

In order not to adopt an easy criticism of Berry's pioneering work on Asian gay identity, it is important to bear in mind that Berry's essay focuses on both commercial and independent films produced in the 1990s. Filmic representation of gay identities of Asian characteristics in the twenty-first century has transformed with time and history, especially with the visibility of gay cultures of local specificities in different parts of Asia. While Berry's emphasis on the significant role of the local cultures in shaping the gay experience and identities in Asia cannot be overlooked, I nonetheless feel it is necessary to address two problems with his particular approach. First, as mentioned above, Berry's claim of Asian gay identity as a product of hybridization unfortunately reaffirms the colonial structure of the West versus the East. In a sense, the West is again conceived as the supplier of a theoretical framework while the East can only participate by providing its experience to conceptualize a structure, which can be claimed as local. This approach can be located in Berry's use of the term "Asian gay identity," a term in which "Asian" is designated as an adjective modifying a seemingly fuller and more stable category—"gay identity." Second, by assuming the singularity of "Asian gay identity," Berry seems to contradict his advocacy for preserving the significance of local specificities. The marriage between the East and the West under the theoretical concept of hybridity strives for uniformity rather than diversity. In Berry's conception, "Asian gay identity," a regional

category, conflates different local experience and histories into one uniform representation. Not only does he employ examples from different Asian countries, he also categorizes works by Asian diaspora under the general concept without problematizing the identity politics of the diaspora.

To conceptualize the productive exchange between gay identities in the East and the West, creolization, instead of hybridization, seems more appropriate. Creolization, similar to Ahmed's queer phenomenology focuses on experience, relations, and becoming to embrace the mutability of identity. To rethink gay identities in Asia so as to endorse Berry's agenda to break down the East versus West binary of gay identity construction, creolization helps avoid the pitfalls of Berry's argument, which is strongly grounded in the hierarchical makeup of the hybrid product of identity.

French writer, poet, and literary critic Édouard Glissant's *Caribbean Discourses* defines creolization as a process of identity construction that resists the colonial legacy which privileges filiation and genesis. By rejecting filiation, creolization facilitates "the mingling of experience" and enables an individual or a community to engage with its lived experience to value the process of being.³³ Creolization, as a process of being and becoming, disavows the myth of racial origin and essentialized identities, providing an individual, a community, or a people the creative energy to engage in cultural productions not directly filtered through racial hierarchy. What Glissant sees in creolization is beyond a simple appreciation of lived experience and being. He emphasizes that cultural transformation in the process of creolization guides us "into something different, into a new set of possibilities ... becoming transformed 'into another people' and entering 'the constantly shifting and variable process of creolization (of relationship, or relativity).'"³⁴ In this sense, creolization encompasses Ahmed's queer phenomenology as an approach to reshuffle the kinship structure in our contemporary time.

Creolization embodies a human desire for diversity and "a cross-cultural relationship, without universalist transcendence." "Diversity needs the presence of peoples, no longer as objects to be swallowed up, but with the intention of creating a new relation."³⁵ Creolization encourages man to be the creative agent of its own identity construction, individual or collective. Invoking Deleuze and Guattari's concept of the rhizome, Glissant suggests a different concept of rootedness, one that de-territorializes and articulates simultaneously,³⁶ one that maintains the idea of rootedness through chaotic relations yet "challenges that of a totalitarian root."³⁷ Diversity described under the process of creolization encourages interaction, exchange, and transformation among cultures within a rhizomatic whole. This process curbs assimilation and resists political discourse of racial containment.

Even though Shu-mei Shih does not engage directly with Glissant's work in her *Visuality and Identity: Sinophone Articulations across the Pacific*, her proposition for the academic field of Sinophone studies resonates well with the complex structures of Glissant's theory of creolization and relations. In a way, creolization offers Sinophone studies an approach "to rethink the relationship

between roots and routes by questioning the conceptions of roots as ancestral rather than place-based, or routes as wandering or homelessness rather than a more mobile conception of homeness."³⁸ Also, by expounding on the geopolitical navigation of homeness and the home space, Sinophone studies deconstructs the myth of origin and the sentimentality of homelessness to facilitate a subject's regrounding to its local engagements in a particular time and space. The agency Shih sees in a subject to choose its degrees of commitments to the characteristics of the local implies the subject's active participation in navigating its familiarity with the geopolitical space which it practices toward possessing as home. This potential in the Sinophone no doubt could benefit from Ahmed's theory of queer phenomenology in queering essentialist concepts of belonging and identity politics such as "Chineseness," the "Chinese," and the "Chinese diaspora." If Shih's Sinophone is an approach which advocates a critical position that disavows nationalist and imperialist influences, and one that opens up, rather than closes in, to different organizing concepts to understand the complexities of histories and cultures, then the interdisciplinary field can draw on a diverse range of concepts and studies such as creolization, gender studies, to examine cultures and histories of distinct localities. Hence, the Sinophone opens up avenues for this chapter to engage with a reading of one branch of Sinophone cultures that offers insights to the rethinking of a kinship system. The multidirectional critiques the Sinophone adopts offers Sinophone subjects to deconstruct essentialist concepts while maintaining a degree of self-criticism to avoid reproducing oppressive system, and also to create a space for interaction and negotiation between an array of cultures. *Solos* is one such expressive moment is a Sinophone culture that appropriates visual images to rethink the positionality of queer subjects within the familial space.

Conclusion

Solos offers a critical position against the lingering presence of a patrilineal kinship structure in an "incomplete" Sinophone family marked by the absence of a biological father figure, the failure of a mother in her traditional role in the family, and a son's disavowal of the filial piety by abandoning his mother for an "incestuous" relationship with his teacher, who also fails to play the role of the surrogate father expected of him in his mentor-mentee relationship with the boy. These relationships between the characters are deemed abnormal by the standard of the traditional family structure. The failure and absence of the paternal signifier render the awakenings of the main characters possible in the film. By queering the seemingly omnipotent power of the patrilineal and its defining influence on the characteristics of the kinship structure of this particular society, Mother's eye recovers from partial blindness, Boy returns home without necessarily compromising his desire, and Man forms a new relationship with Mother and Boy.

This rethinking and reshaping of a kinship system in contemporary Singapore seems possible mainly in a fictional narrative. The paternal signifier in Sinophone Singapore can hardly be disavowed, for it has long been absorbed into the

state power of governance. However, can the film disavow the paternal authority with its status as art? It has indeed questioned this authority by saying no to the censorship board and by withdrawing from the premiere at the 2007 SIFF. Art becomes art when it assumes political power by working against the grains of the social norm and hegemonic regulations.

The film's haunting presence appears in two ways. First, it served to queer the festival; though the premiere was canceled, the film remained as a nominee for best feature and was screened for the judging committee. Its presence loomed in Singapore with the debate on censorship and freedom of expression of subjects such as gay sexuality and identity during the period of the festival. Second, the film's queering effect "returns" to permeate the nation-state with news of its successful ventures into the international film festival circuits. What enhances the presence of this second haunting is the explosion of internet traffic of media circulation, be it Netflix or illegal downloads. Not to mention that the film is also accessible to anyone, including Singaporeans, in DVD format.

By bringing together new conceptual ideas and practices of potential kinship structures, this chapter suggests that in a society of postcolonial and global characteristics, a Sinophone culture can actively adopt a critical position of duality to rethink social relations binding traditions, developments, individual, and collective identities. As a Sinophone expression, *Solos* is critical both of traditional standards of familial (outdated) obligations and also of the indulgent in the Western notion of freedom and individualism. Instead of pitching its position against or with tradition or Western influence, *Solos* offers its narrative as a dialogue (in absence of words) to bring together the productive by way of the concept of creolization. This is, in Ahmed's words, the rearranging of furniture. It is through the production and endorsement of lived experience within the home space that queer subjects acquire agency to negotiate for new forms of kinship structure, forms that embrace a diverse array of "normativities." This facilitates the "homecoming" of the queer subjects by disabling the monopolizing and marginalizing power of a homogeneous patrilineal kinship structure.

Notes

- 1 The term Sinophone does not in any sense imply monolingualism. Shu-mei Shih in her recent conception of the term argues that the Sinophone includes communities that practice Sinitic languages including not just Mandarin, but a wide variety of Chinese dialects. Singapore is one example of such Sinophone societies. By downplaying the influence of spoken languages over the linguistic identity of the film, *Solos* takes the form of a silence film. However, the film hints that Boy's family is Sinophone as evidenced by the Chinese characters written by Mother on the post-it notes she has left for Boy on the refrigerator. For details on the concept of the Sinophone, please refer to Shu-mei Shih, *Visuality and Identity: Sinophone Articulations across the Pacific* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007) and "Against Diaspora: The Sinophone as Places of Cultural Production," in *Global Chinese Literature: Critical Essays*, ed. by Jing Tsu and David Der-wei Wang (Boston, MA: Brill, 2010), 29–48.

- 2 The BFC guidelines prohibit any content that "deemed to undermine public order, national security and/or stability will be disallowed for all ratings." See "Board of Film Censors Film Classification Guidelines," Media Development Authority (MDA), www.mda.gov.sg/Documents/PDF/FilmClassificationGuidelines_Final2010.pdf, accessed December 10, 2010.
- 3 R21 means "restricted 21," a film rating classification that restricts artistic films with sexual, violent, and homosexual content to adults twenty-one years old and above.
- 4 "Princess is Out; Danish Animated Film Princess will not be Shown at the Singapore International Film Festival and Sexually Explicit Solos Faces Cuts," *Straits Times*, April 16, 2007.
- 5 "Singapore Film pulled from Festival over Gay Sex," *Agence France-Presse*, April 20, 2007.
- 6 "MICA Speech by Mr. David T E Lim 13 April 2002," Media Development Authority (MDA), http://mda.gov.sg/Documents/PDF/Public/public_Consultation%20with%20Committees_MICASpeech2002.pdf, accessed December 10, 2010.
- 7 Ibid.
- 8 Ibid.
- 9 Ibid.
- 10 Ibid.
- 11 "Singapore Film pulled from Festival over Gay Sex."
- 12 "Singapore's Penal Code," last modified January 18, 2004, www.plu.sg/main/facts_07.htm.
- 13 "Traditional Values Rule but with Space for Gays," *Straits Times*, October 24, 2007.
- 14 Ibid.
- 15 "On the Prosecution of Mr. Tan Eng Hong under Section 377A and the Challenge to the Law's Constitutionally," last modified September 27, 2010, www.plu.sg/society/?p=169.
- 16 Russell Heng points out that the Singapore government holds the views that "the institution of the family is under threat from trends such as teenage pregnancy and notions such as radical feminism and the legitimization of 'sexual deviance'" and by "[r]ecognizing the individual rights of homosexuals would, therefore, have to be weighed against the responsibility of respecting the moral standards of the larger society." See "Tiptoe Out of the Closet: The Before and After of the Increasingly Visible Gay Community in Singapore," *Journal of Homosexuality* 40, no. 3 (2001): 88. This kind of discourse places the queer subjects in the opposite spectrum of the kinship system, setting them in constant exile with no appropriate agency to establish dialogue for establishing newer forms of kinship.
- 17 For details, see "Extract of PM Goh Chok Tong's Interview with *Time Magazine*," www.yawningbread.org/apdx_2003/imp-116.htm, accessed June 15, 2011.
- 18 See Kenneth Chan, "Gay Sexuality in Singaporean Chinese Popular Culture: Where Have All the Boys Gone?" *China Information* XXII, no. 2 (2008): 305–29.
- 19 Sara Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects, Others* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2006), 2.
- 20 Ibid., 7.
- 21 Ibid., 7–8.
- 22 Ibid., 11.
- 23 Ibid., 125–6.
- 24 Ibid., 157.
- 25 Ibid., 162.
- 26 Ibid., 177.
- 27 Ibid., 176.
- 28 Ibid., 177.
- 29 *Solos* premiered in the 12th Pusan International Film Festival in Busan, South Korea. It has traveled around the world to different international film festivals, including AFI

- Festival in Los Angeles, Sydney Mardi Gras Film Festival, London Lesbian and Gay Film Festival. *Solos* won the Best First Feature Award at Torino GLFF in Italy.
- 30 See Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (New York: Routledge, 1994), 121–31, 145–74.
- 31 Chris Berry, “Asian Values, Family Values,” *Journal of Homosexuality* 40, no. 3 (2001): 213.
- 32 Ibid., 215. Also see Chris Berry, “Happy Alone?” *Journal of Homosexuality* 39, no. 3 (2000): 187–200; “Sexual DisOrientations: Homosexual Rights, East Asian Films, and Postmodern Postnationalism,” in *In the Pursuit of Contemporary East Asian Culture*, ed. Xiaobing Tang and Stephen Snyder (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1996), 157–82.
- 33 Édouard Glissant, *Caribbean Discourse: Selected Essays*, trans. J. Michael Dash (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 1999), 14.
- 34 Ibid., 15.
- 35 Ibid., 98.
- 36 Édouard Glissant, *Poetics of Relation*, trans. Betsy Wing (Michigan: University of Michigan Press, 1997), 67–9.
- 37 Ibid., 11.
- 38 Shih, *Visuality and Identity*, 189.

Part V

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