



*"Basic Cultural Values and the Tightly Knit Asian Family System... Have Enabled Us to Achieve What We Have": An Examination of the Portrayal of Families in Singapore Films*

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# ***“Basic Cultural Values and The Tightly Knit Asian Family System...Have Enabled Us to Achieve What We Have” (Lee Kuan Yew, 1972): An Examination of the Portrayal of Families in Singapore Films***

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## **Abstract**

The stereotypical nuclear Singaporean-Chinese family unit: a strict ‘Tiger Mum’, a busy and disinterested Father and their stressed-out Children. These are familiar archetypes of the family that we often see portrayed in popular Singaporean films, particularly exaggerated in mainstream ones. Though this portrayal may not accurately capture the diversity of family sizes and structures here, it clearly resonates with a majority of Singaporeans. In our research paper, we explore how accurate these stereotypes really are, the ways that they are employed in film to either build upon established tropes or to subvert them, and consequently the desirability of such stereotypes in our construction of a modern national identity. We will be examining three popular local films, namely *Ilo Ilo*, *I Not Stupid Too* and *Singapore Dreaming* to elucidate the aforementioned points.

In the production of this paper, we based much of our primary research on interviews with local Film and Sociology Professors about current archetypes of the Singaporean family in terms of what they constitute and how accurately they portray Singaporean society in general, and implications on our national identity.

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# Introduction

## 1.1 Popularity of local films

Film in Singapore is a unique platform connecting Singaporeans from all walks of life, drawing us together through that unique blend of familiar voices, social messages, and culture-specific jokes that we understand and relate to. Our national identity and voice is thus undeniably tied to local films.

One aspect of this identity, family, is a common theme across films. In particular, there seems to be a specific, middle-class, public-housed, Singaporean-Chinese family which filmmakers across genres are interested in portraying, which we will examine.

### 1.1.1 *Ilo Ilo* (2013)

Premiering at the 2013 Cannes Film Festival, *Ilo Ilo* was the first Singaporean feature film to be awarded the Caméra d'Or Award. With another 6 nominations at the Golden Horse Film and Festival Awards, of which it was awarded 4, *Ilo Ilo* has established itself as one of Singapore's top performing films solely through accolades alone. Its \$1.2 million success at the box office also speaks for itself, achieving the dual-pronged impact of both critical acclaim and significant earnings. The film is a sincere and bittersweet portrayal of Singaporean familial relationships; set during the Asian Financial Crisis, money is a central concern of the characters, even as they each have unique struggles.

### 1.1.2 *I Not Stupid Too* (2006)

*I Not Stupid Too*, Singapore's second-highest grossing movie, is well-loved by the domestic audience (CNA, 2006). On the international stage, it was showcased at the Cannes Film Festival, and was also nominated for Best Asian Film at the Hong Kong Film Awards. (Straits Times, 2006) Critics praised it for its moving portrayal of issues close to the hearts of Singaporean teenagers, "present[ing] a candid portrait of Singaporean society at odds with its stereotypically squeaky clean image" (South China Morning Post, 2006).

### 1.1.3 *Singapore Dreaming* (2006)

*Singapore Dreaming* was highly successful, being the first Singaporean film to have won an IFFPA-recognised international feature film award. (Straits Times, 2006) Within the first week of its release, it managed to reach fifth place in the local box office. A high approval rating from audiences and critics alike, the film clearly shows that some level of social reality and relatability has been achieved. (Humphreys, N., 2006)

# The archetypal Singaporean-Chinese family - both in terms of its individual members, and the unit as a whole

## 2.1 The Mother

According to author Amy Chua, who coined the term “Tiger Mum”, tiger mothers, typically Chinese, are characterised by their authoritarian parenting style in demanding perfection from their children (Cochrane, K., 2014). This is reflected locally, as a 2006 NTU study found that a majority (51.6%) of Chinese adolescents reported perceptions of their mothers having an authoritarian parenting style, highest among the other races. This stereotype is so relatable to domestic Chinese audiences that a local Chinese drama series called “Tiger Mum” (2015), whose titular figure is such a parent, was consistently watched by more than 1 million local viewers every episode (Lianhe Wanbao, 2015). This is perhaps due to how in Confucian societies, parental “strictness” and “control” are equated with positive characteristics like parental concern, caring or involvement (Chao, 1994; Lau & Cheung, 1987).

In *Ilo Ilo*, the mother, Hwee Leng is perpetually stressed and impatient with her son. Her speech is clipped and often annoyed, her tone either complaining or disapproving, with a stark lack of positive comments. She shows relatively little facial expression, as though a barely-controlled mask underneath which annoyance is brewing, and we rarely see her smile, such that she portrays a stern demeanor lacking warmth.



Figure 1: Hwee Leng's disgruntled expression while teaching her son Chinese (*Ilo Ilo*)

Interestingly, the actress playing Hwee Leng in *Ilo Ilo*, Yeo Yann Yann, plays an almost identical role in *Singapore Dreaming* as Mei, often speaking in an annoyed and clipped manner as well, and similarly chides her husband for his financial position, suggesting a degree of homogeneity in the portrayal of women in middle-income, Singaporean-Chinese family films.

In *I Not Stupid Too*, the film opens with a sequence that underscores such tiger-mothering: we first hear a voiceover from one of the protagonists', Jerry, lamenting that *"I am not stupid at all. I get Band 1 for every subject. But my mother rarely praises me, and even scolds me regularly, asking "Why didn't you score higher?"*<sup>1</sup>, highlighting the unforgiving, perfectionistic expectations of Jerry's mother.

Then, Jerry's mother chastises her older son, Tom, even after he wins a national prize for "Champion Blogger", for writing his blog instead of improving his school essays, saying that it is "shameful" that he only scored 65 marks for his last essay. Next, when she comes home and sees her son using his phone, she confronts him for not showering immediately after school, with a tight, close-up shot between them both emphasising her threatening gaze and thus, her harsh parenting style.



Figure 2: Karen's aggressive confrontation with her elder son Tom (*I Not Stupid Too*)

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<sup>1</sup> “我一点也不笨，我每科的成绩都拿 Band 1，可是我的妈妈却很少称赞我，还常常骂我，为什么不再拿高一点的分数呢？”

## 2.2 The Father

In these films, and in typical Asian entertainment, the father is stereotypically portrayed as being more concerned with his career than intimately caring for the well-being of his children. (Quon, V., 2018) This is largely true in Singapore, given how the Singaporean-Chinese father is typically still the higher earner of the family (Hing, A.Y., 2013). One study found that 59.1% of fathers in Singapore experienced “dad guilt”, most commonly because of “not having enough time for my children due to work”. (Leow, C., 2020) This is also seen in other Asian countries where fathers are aware of their shortcomings as fathers, but feel a lack of the necessary tools to address their familial issues, due to entrenched social attitudes discouraging emotional expression by men (Quon, V., 2018). A majority of fathers are therefore relatively uninvolved in their children’s everyday lives, as gender expectations and economic concerns limit their roles to simply providing for the family’s basic financial needs.

The films generally portray this stereotype critically, often positing that fathers ought to do more. In *I Not Stupid Too*, one of the fathers, Steven, is engrossed in his white-collar job, pushing the responsibility of caring for his children to his wife, causing his son Tom to resent him. However, his character arc ends with his decision to prioritise his children above receiving a promotion, suggesting that fathers ought to do more for their children. Similarly, in *Ilo Ilo*, the father, Teck, is largely uninvolved in the central plot of the conflict between his wife, Hwee Leng, his son, Jiale, and foreign domestic worker Terry. Teck is characterised by his anxiety over keeping his job as the main breadwinner given the context of the financial crisis, wilfully detached as a father and husband despite receiving complaints from the school about Jiale, and Hwee Leng’s concern over Jiale’s unusual attachment to Terry. When he subsequently loses his first job, his detachment to the family is portrayed visually through his choice to avoid his family and smoke outside the house, creating a palpable distance between himself and his family. This also implies a recognition of guilt precisely for his inability to fulfil this role of the breadwinner, suggesting that the recognisable, defined role of the father within the Singaporean family is that of the financial provider, rather than being a caring, involved father.



Figure 3: Teck smoking outside the house after losing his job, spatially distant from the family (*Ilo Ilo*)

In contrast, *Singapore Dreaming* portrays the challenges of the father in maintaining his role as the primary breadwinner. One of the main characters, CK, is persistently derided by his wife, Mei's family for not earning enough money. Mei tells him to "work harder", even calling him a "loser" out of anger, even though he genuinely does work hard. This represents the moral dilemma of the expectations of men, especially in relation to their economic worth. This represents an underlying mindset that the worth of men, specifically as husbands is defined by their economic output because it is an indication of how hard they work (Holter, Ø. G., 1997).

Ultimately, even as the films engage with the stereotype of the uninvolved breadwinner for a father, they also criticise this type. The expectations of men are thus expanded from financial provision to their caring for their children or trying the best they can for their families' sake.

Another stereotype of fathers is that they resort to corporal punishment to discipline their children. In Singapore, 78% of parents carry out physical discipline at home with fathers being more likely to support these methods in schools as well (41% of fathers, as opposed to 29% of mothers) (Ho, K., 2019). This is because many parents today were themselves subject to such harsh methods of discipline, and thus believe that some types of misbehaviour warrants caning or hitting. The common belief behind this type of parenting is that hitting a child will allow the parent to reassert their authority through fear, immediately correcting their behaviour. This is often associated with the notion that it is for the child's own good, shown through popular euphemisms like "a loving smack". (CNA, 2020)

*I Not Stupid Too* examines the impact of corporal punishment when it is taken to extremes, exploring violence in discipline through the hostile relationship between Chengcai and his father. In portraying how Chengcai frequently gets into fights, the film attempts to reflect the reality of such dynamics, given that physically abused children tend to act violently (Hunter, R.S et al, 1979). Yet, rather than condemning this method of discipline, the film instead downplays its impact on Chengcai by redeeming his father with a particularly intense scene showing him fighting to overturn Chengcai's expulsion from school, even sustaining injuries - portraying him as a hero and humanising him. Later, in his emotional plea for his son to forgive his poor parenting, not having 'known any better', he is almost infantilised. On the other hand, when Chengcai was reluctant to visit his father in the hospital, it was framed as though his filial respect for his father should outweigh his own aversion to his father, and he was shamed by the other characters for not doing so initially. In this way, many hugely commercially successful films, most of which are Neo's, tend to follow a similar pattern of critiquing local issues (in this case, borderline-abusive parenting), but because of the propensity for happy endings, Neo tends to "let the system off the hook" (Teo, S., et al, 2017). Thus, this mainstream film skims over the possibly problematic way Singaporeans view parenting and the role our culture plays in that. The audience is largely expected to accept at face value that even if parents do not fulfill their roles, they are still loving. The focus is shifted more towards the emotional impact of showing abusive parents' love, rather than the negative impacts they have on their child, ultimately preserving the status quo. This is linked to how fathers are aware of their flaws but often lack the tools to become a better parent (Quon, V., 2018).



*Figure 4: Chengcai's father sustained major injuries after the aforementioned fight (I Not Stupid Too)*

### **2.3 The Child**

In Singaporean family films, children are typically portrayed as acquiescent, accepting the harsh parenting of the aforementioned 'tiger mum'. On a global scale, children in Singapore are well-known as the most stressed students in the world (OECD, 2015). They are



expected to excel in both academics as well as extra-curricular enrichment activities, often imposed by parents. Academically-driven and disciplined, their narratives in local films often revolve around the need to excel, and the internal and external pressures imposed on them, namely from parents and societal expectations respectively. In a five-year study on primary school children in Singapore, researchers from the National University of Singapore (NUS) found that children with intrusive parents had a higher tendency to be overly critical of themselves and this tendency increased over the years. Children in the study who demonstrated high levels of self-criticism were also reported to have elevated depression or anxiety symptoms. (NUS, 2016)

In *Ilo Ilo*, Jiale, the child of the family, gets himself into trouble and even into fights. At the same time, his parents are preoccupied with family finances, leaving him to his own devices, causing and perpetuating his misbehaviour. As the film progresses, his parents appear less frequently, shrinking in significance to him as he spends more time with Terry. Juxtaposing Terry and Jiale's parents, Terry exemplifies the emotional connection that Singaporean children require but often lack in their growing years.

Similarly, *I Not Stupid Too* deals with the situation where the child is subject to strained parent-child relationships, providing two case studies of different familial structures. In terms of family stability and the sanctity of the "regular" family unit, the Yeo family live in an average, well-off household, in comparison to Chengcai who lives in a more dysfunctional household, raised by a single, ex-convict father who verbally and physically abuses him. However, the relative stability of the Yeo family does not necessarily indicate better parenting. The disinterested parents are dismissive of Jerry's love for the performing arts, leading Jerry to resorting to stealing money to "buy an hour of time" just so his parents will willingly watch his performance. This exemplifies how parental disengagement may have potentially harming effects on a child and his future.

Even in *Singapore Dreaming*, the adult children feel a need to please their parents through their success. The spoilt son, Seng is made sympathetic by his exclamations of how "whatever I did was never enough for Dad". Despite being supported in his education financially, he was unable to graduate, showing that parental expectations broke him down rather than built him up for success. The fact that he speaks of it as an adult exemplifies its enduring impact.

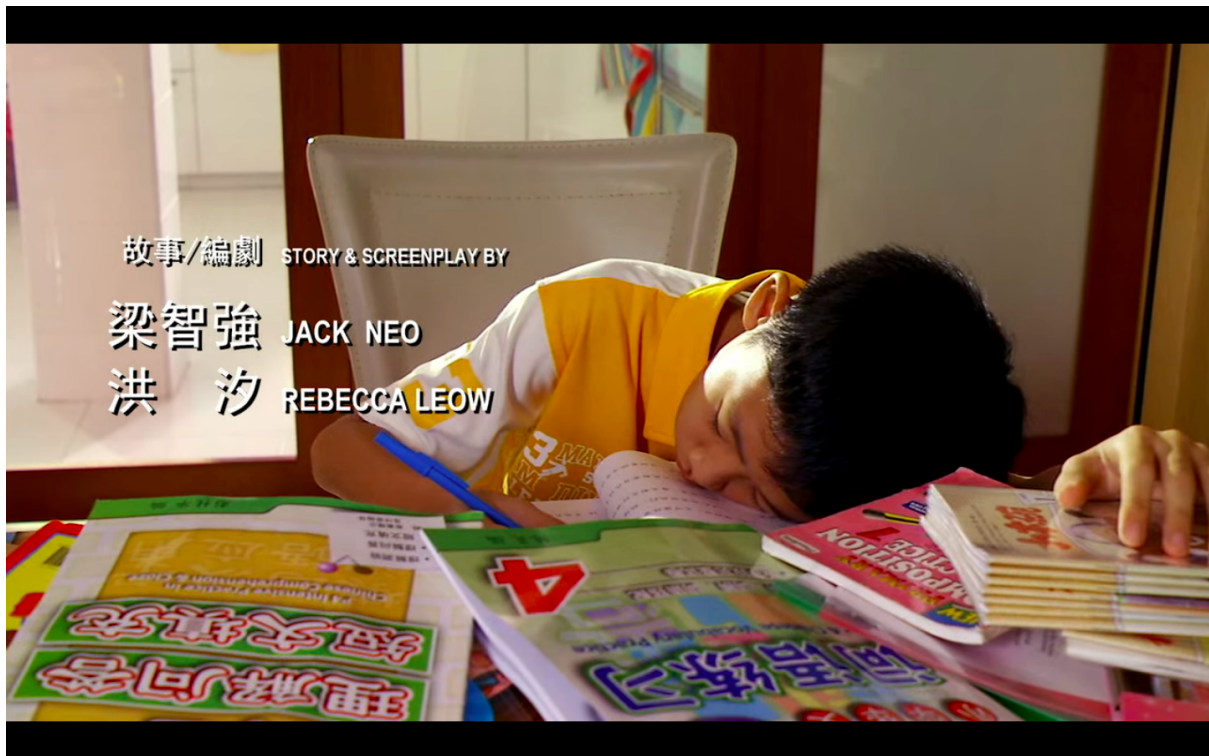


Figure 4: Jerry overwhelmed from assessment book practices (*I Not Stupid Too*)

## 2.4 The Family Unit

The successful formation of a family is often portrayed in the media as an indicator of economic success, given the pressures to attain financial stability in order to settle down and start a family. (Neo, M., 2019) Economic survival seems to be central to the family's concerns, something that all members understand, and seem to stay together for.

The role marriage plays in acting as a pull factor for the starting of the family unit is especially pertinent to an expensive city like Singapore (Hoffman, W., 2019). Given the restrictions on home ownership for singles, marriage is seen as a financially pragmatic way to ensure greater liveability in Singapore, as it allows Singaporean couples to make long-term investments such as having children and buying a home. (Neo, M., 2019 | Straughan, 2011)

However, *Ilo Ilo* challenges the idea of marriage and stable housing as a pillar of family unity. When Terry is forced to leave because of the family's inability to keep hiring her due to the Asian Financial Crisis, the family unity remains intact on the surface, seeming to survive the ordeal, but in reality it is incomplete. After Terry leaves, there is markedly lesser dialogue and speech as compared to before, and the tone is melancholy. Despite still retaining their house and continuing to live together as a family, the family members seem further apart than before Terry and the Asian Financial Crisis. Hence, the film challenges the notion that these institutions - marriage, housing, children - are pillars for family unity.



Figure 5: Terry and Jiale's bond, Hwee Leng's angry jealousy, Teck's complete disengagement. (*Ilo Ilo*)

Additionally, much of the familial tensions, plot development and themes in the films stem from the significance of money in the Singaporean family unit. In *Ilo Ilo*, even Jiale is embroiled in his family's financial concerns when he desperately uses his savings to purchase lottery tickets in an attempt to win enough money to keep Terry employed. Similarly in *I Not Stupid Too*, Jerry comically turns to shoplifting in an absurd bid to "buy" an hour of his parents' time, hoping that this way, they would be willing to attend his school concert, highlighting his awareness of how pre-occupied his parents are with the family's finances. This significance of the economic narrative is especially evident in *Singapore Dreaming*, where monetary concerns dominate the concerns of each family member throughout the film. In the wake of the father's death, his children squabble over their shares of his inheritance. When Mei spends time with their forlorn mother, Seng accuses her of just "trying to get money from mom", aptly summing up the lack of trust and emotional bonds between the siblings, brought out by their financial concerns.

## **Influence of the films on our national identity**

### **3.1 How These Films Promote A Specific National Identity**

The influence of these films can be attributed to their relatability to national audiences; by using the motif of common spaces to evoke familiarity in the majority of audiences, they inevitably promote the acceptance of certain shared narratives and highlight national concerns (SGN, 2020). Common spaces which are examined include HDB buildings and hawker centres, connecting the audience with common experiences that they do not often think about to point out national problems. This may explain why scenes in *Ilo Ilo*, like that of Teck smoking in the stairwell, feel so intensely familiar to local audiences, or in *Singapore Dreaming*, when the father figure, Poh Huat complains about the lack of cleanliness in HDB

elevators. This familiar experience is brought out when his son-in-law urinates in the elevator in a semi-humorous scene to express his displeasure with Poh Huat's mockery of his income level. The scene mocks Poh Huat's complaints about such behaviour being typical of people "who live in public housing" as they "have no social graces" belies a deeper sense of disgust at having to live in a HDB flat, and thus his own lack of satisfaction with his social class and inability to climb the income ladder. Thus, these films influence our sense of nationhood by evoking familiarity in archetypes and concerns, confirming our national narratives.



Figure 6: CK, after having urinated in a HDB elevator (*Singapore Dreaming*)

### 3.2 The National Identity Presented in These Three Films

The films confirm that Singapore is a highly financially-concerned and work-focused society, even as our government promotes family ties over conflicting work demands, with the Families for Life Council chairman "acknowledg[ing] that Singaporean parents face the challenge of juggling work and family... but... there is no shortcut and parents would need to set aside time for family". (ST, 2020) Thus, the films highlight the tension between striving for economic success and closeness to family.

In contrast, the government's direction in the late 1980s to "provide an ideological alternative to [materialism] and a new basis for a stronger national identity" focused on "so-called Asian values" as a driver of success (Ortmann, S., 2009). Importantly, one such value was "family as the basic unit of society", which would enable "a harmonious society that [was] collectively working to achieve prosperity for Singapore as a whole" (Singapore

Government 1991). Instead, the films oppose the two priorities of economic success and family unity against each other, arguably presenting a more holistic picture of our national identity than the government-endorsed identity - a survey found that 83% of Singaporeans agree that 'materialism' is a key feature of national identity (Ortmann, S., 2009) 'Materialism' implies an overt focus on wealth at the expense of other things, such as meaningful emotional bonds, thus contradicting the government-endorsed narrative and supporting the films'.

The films feature Singlish and, to a certain extent, dialects, which was a triumph for more honest representation, given the state's censoring of dialects and Singlish in order to show a more polished view of Singapore. (Lim, J., 2018) This was done through policies like the 1979 Speak Mandarin Campaign and the 2000 Speak Good English Movement, that aimed to homogenise and 'refine' the Singaporean linguistic landscape, such that Singaporeans were easily understandable and appealed to international actors, partially for the purposes of business. This speaks to the predominance of economic concerns over a concrete sense of national identity, where the use of Singlish and dialects are now seen as lower-class and undesirable by many, even as it is one of the signifiers of a national identity, a blending of English, along with words from various Chinese dialects, Malay and Indian languages. (Menon, M., 2020)

## Conclusion

From the study of these films in the local context, we have found that overall, these films uphold and reflect certain stereotypes of Singaporean-Chinese families in order to resonate with audiences, though filmmakers do also attempt to criticise them. While we might not necessarily be influenced by things we see on screen in terms of lifestyle choices, films "normalise" these practices (Slater, interview, 12 May 2021). "Constantly seeing the images of these archetypes and relating them to [one's] family might make [one] less predisposed to questioning their validity. In fact, it may be the opposite."

Therefore, as audience members, there is a need to critically question these tropes in terms of how desirable it is to see them in real life. If the portrayal is reductive, where the characters are given little depth outside of the tropes, or where only one type of narrative is observed across the board, it is likely a tired stereotype rather than a truthful depiction of a certain aspect of Singaporean culture, and thus should be challenged. To do so, there is a need for more nuanced storytelling by younger filmmakers about their own diverse, unconventional family dynamics. (Slater, interview, 12 May 2021). A good example of a film that does this is *Ilo Ilo*, which though reflecting the stereotypes, also attempts to criticise them. Strikingly, this film was strategically made to be showcased at international film festivals rather than for commercial success, and thus perhaps experienced more freedom to criticise the average Singaporean-Chinese family (Slater, interview, 12 May 2021). Thus, both society and the government need to encourage young people to be open with sharing

their stories with the local audience, who also could be more open with consuming a more varied type of films.

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