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SINGAPORE GAYS GO TO WEST HOLLYWOOD:
ON DOING RESEARCH ON
MINORITY REPRESENTATION IN SINGAPORE

Tan See Kam and Michael Lee
School of Communication Studies
Nanyang Technological University, Singapore

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Singapore Gays Go to West Hollywood: On Doing Research on Minority Representation in Singapore

Tan See Kam & Michael Lee

ABSTRACT

Singapore, gays, and the internet: As the subjects of our study, we approach them with caution and trepidation. Our reason is simple: none of the subjects falls within the primary area of our academic specialisation/interest: communication research that has an affinity for film and cultural studies approaches to media, culture and society. From the outset then, we must stress that our resultant observations are at best provisional, possibly subject to revisions.

Nonetheless, our preliminary study on the relationship between the three subjects is a worthwhile one: it endeavours to augment current research with regards to identity politics and new media technologies. The idea for this study came out of the numerous informal discussions we had with Prof. Holaday who convenes this mini-conference for the purpose of facilitating a general and yet specific forum for "rethinking communication and media research in Asia" in the context of "Media, Practice and Antagonisms." From our discussions, it became apparent that an area in mainstream communication and media research needed to be addressed, that is, its particular disinterest, even indifference, in studying critically the relation between the internet and minority groups such as gays. The questions which we would pursue include: How and why do Singapore gays use the internet? What can it do for them? Constituting the primary focus of our research, these questions, together with our attempt to answer them, thus represent an intervention to mainstream research that has glossed over the diversity of media users. In this way, our paper contributes to the "rethinking" imperative of the conference theme.

Our qualification would not be complete without acknowledging a debt to the insights of the postcolonial critic Gayatri Spivak, who addresses with verve the question she poses in the title of her influential essay, "Can the Subaltern Speak?" In her essay, the
subaltern in question is the *sati*, the Hindu widow who, according to Hindu traditions, must immolate herself on the funeral pyre of her husband. The *sati* has not direct relevance to our paper, but Spivak's concept of the subaltern has: it provides us an analogy for theorising gays as a minority group. Our particular label in no way implies that gays as a subaltern group in Singapore is synonymous with the subalternisation of Singapore gays. The latter idea carries the connotation of a minority people who wallows helplessly in a state of perpetual victimisation. The former concept rejects this connotation, but raises the question which Spivak asks in relation to the *sati* as subaltern: Can the subaltern speak? Like Spivak's, our answer would be negative. This does not mean that gays as a subaltern group has no voice(s), however. They do, but it is not our primary concern here to map that voice(s). Besides it would be arrogant to assert that we could speak for Singapore cyber-gays. In this way, our study hopes to understand the cyber-gay culture, à la Singapore, and its implications for (Asian) media researchers.
Singapore Gays go to WestHollywood: On Doing Research on Minority Representation in Singapore

By Tan See Kam and Michael Lee

Without the internet, I would still be a scared little boy in my room, alone and depress. Coming out online has helped me become truly passionate and I have begun to live.1

Introduction

On the evening of Friday, December 11th, 1998, SM Lee Kuan Yew gave a "live" interview on CNN International.2 The host, Mr. Riz Khan, fielded questions for his guest, using the telephone and email. As the interview was televised "live", SM Lee's response to the questions fielded had to be spontaneous: he had no forewarning of what the questions might be.

The questions were mostly posed by viewers in the Southeast Asian region (including Singapore), though some came from Hong Kong, South Korea, and United Arab Emirates as well. No provisions were made for follow-up questions. From Khan's anecdotes, it was also apparent that viewers from as far as Latin America tuned in to the once-off half-hour programme.

Of all the questions, the one most pertinent to our paper was delivered by an unnamed viewer who phoned in. The viewer began by expressing his admiration for the SM as a political leader. Then he make a pronouncement, "I am a gay man in Singapore", adding that he was "out" to his family and at work. Finally he said emphatically, "I do not feel that my country has acknowledged my presence". This preamble pathed the way for his question: "As we move into a more tolerant millennium," he asked the SM, "what do you think is the future for gay people in Singapore, if there is a future at all?"

SM Lee fidgeted in his chair briefly as he composed a response. "Well," he said tactfully, "It's not a matter which I can decide or any government can decide." He then continued in a seemingly nonchalant tone:

It's a question of what a society considers acceptable. And as you know, Singaporeans are by and large a very conservative, orthodox society, a very, I would say, completely different from, say, the United States and I don't think an aggressive gay rights movement would help [sic]. But what we are doing as a government is to leave people to live their own lives so long as they don't impinge on other people. I mean, we don't harass anybody.

The following day, The New Paper reported the "gay-question episode", first framing it as a news highlight in the front cover page, and then giving details of the occurrence inside. As far as we know, another local paper -- The Sunday Times -- also recounted the "episode". Two days later on Tuesday, TCS-5 broadcast the CNN/SM Lee interview. For two or three days prior to the "repeat" telecast, TCS-5 compiled a promotional trailer, and aired it from time to time. An excerpt from the "episode" was amongst the trailer's highlights. In all instances, "objective" reporting -- that which one might associate with print journalism and broadcast interview -- appeared to have prevailed on the matter.

SM Lee's carefully worded response amounted to "fair comment". It did not bear traces of moralist outrage and condemnation. Nor did it manifest explicit homophobia. Indeed SM Lee adopted a "realistic" viewpoint to a "sensitive" subject matter, his sense of realism deriving from a particular yet somewhat exact observation that "Singaporeans are by and large a very conservative, orthodox society" (sic). It is not clear what the SM meant by the term "Singaporeans" precisely, but his paradigm of "Singaporeans" would most probably exclude such citizens as the caller. This is suggested in his speech act which deployed a rhetorical strategy of distanciation. In a manner of speaking, this strategy psychically seeks a separation between the enouncer (SM Lee/"I") and the enoncee (the caller/"you"), thereby enabling an interactive communication that is characterised not by "intimate contact" but by the "comfort of distance". When SM Lee pointed out that the government generally did not "harass" its people but let them "live their own lives" so long as they (and their lifestyles) did not "impinge" on others, it is not clear if it could, or should, be read as a sign of "personal" acceptance, an indication of "official" tolerance, both, or neither. In any case, his insistence that homosexuality and its acceptability were a matter for the society, not the government (himself included), to determine was a surprisingly naive stand to take. It presumes that societal opinions and governmental positions were somewhat independent of each other, and at the same time, also precludes any discussion of the matter at the level of the individual,
society and state, as well as across the three. Can the presumption be indeed sustained? What are the implications of preclusions as such?
Gays and State Institutions

With these questions in mind, we shall examine, in the following pages, the relationship between gays and state institutions in the context of Singapore. In particular we will focus on the "place" of gays with regards to institutional authorities such as law, religion and media, those which Althusser has identified variously, in a different context, as Repressive and/or Ideological State Apparatuses. For Althusser these apparatuses are instrumental to the continued production of the existing conditions of production of a particular society, its social norms and cultural values included. He also maintained that both extant and perpetrating conditions of societal production serve dominant class interest. Although enlightening, Althusser's thesis is somewhat limited for our purpose here in that it does not take into account the question of family and sexual orientation in the construction of social and cultural values. Rather than rejecting it, we would like to extend it accordingly. We propose to do this not so much through a critical analysis of the family (per se), a social construct that is central to the Singapore national ideology, but more by examining -- though no less critically -- the ways by which the naturalisation of the said national ideological construct might be secured. In this respect we contend that state apparatuses -- law, religion, and media -- play a crucial role. They do so by perpetuating myths, beliefs and practices of heterosexual-normativity that are central to the national construction of the "family" as a legitimate social unit. Its legitimacy is, in turn, predicated on the construction of an inimical other which bears the name of "homosexual" (and its variants). In short, the construction of the heterosexual normative family would not have been possible without a simultaneous ideological manufacturing of a distinction between what "family" is (that is, it is heterosexual, therefore not homosexual) and what it is not (that is, it is not homosexual, therefore heterosexual). At the same time, the state apparatuses enable the firm separation of the two, a process akin to the "divide and rule" dictum which allows for the celebration of the former as "normal" and "natural", and the denigration of the latter as "abnormal" and "unnatural". In this way, homosexuals -- whose constructions have ranged from abnormality (for example, "they do not have "normal" sex") and monstrosity ("they are freaks") to the pitiful ("they know not what they do") and the psychotic ("they prey on children") -- are rendered to the margins of society, thereby conferring upon them the status of a marginal people (as opposed to a perceived majority). Labels as such augment the national ideology of heterosexual normativity; the maintenance of which, at the level of the individual and the state, is the function of the state apparatuses whose task it is to enforce the socially

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constructed distinction between what the national ideology would encompass and what it
would not tolerate. Punishment is, then, meted to those who transgress the ideological boundary.

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It is not a crime \textit{per se} to be a homosexual in Singapore, but a practicing homosexual
-- that is, an adult who engages in homosex, even consensually and in private -- may be
charged, say, under penal codes 377 and 377(a), and if convicted, could be jailed for a term
of up to two years. The penal codes clearly make a differentiation between the "being" and
"act" of homosexuality. This gives rise to a paradox: Can a person be a homosexual without
"doing" homosex? Or to ask the paradox in another way: Which determines which -- the
"act" or the "being"? Nonetheless the law apparatus (or its agent) is empowered to punish the
"act", and to a certain extent, the "being" too, but only if s/he is convicted of having
performed the "act". From this, we can make three inferences:

1. that the law apparatus, as the penal codes evince, makes a social
discrimination along the line of sexual orientation and practices;
2. that it implicitly recognises that the "being" of homosexuality exists in
Singapore society; and
3. that, as long as this "being" does not transgress the letter of the law, s/he may
-- as SM Lee puts it -- live his/her own live, and expect no governmental
harassment.

The three inferences also point out the extent to which the law apparatus, through its
particular discrimination, can -- in this instance -- work to shore up the national ideology of
the heterosexual normative family.

As can be seen, the law apparatus has a discriminatory function. It also has a
regulatory function insofar as it serves as a tool for behavioural control at the level of the
individual and the social. In other words, rather than merely reflecting social and cultural
values of a particular society, it \textit{mediates} between the individual and the social to the extent
that it necessarily forces a convergence between governmental positions and societal views.
To illustrate: in the scheme of things in Singapore, the legitimacy of the any penal codes (or
the law apparatus) which govern and regulate social/societal behaviour can only be granted
by the government whose authority to govern is, in turn, conferred by the electorate. So
imbricated indeed is the relationship between the electorate, government, and society that it
cannot conceivably be characterised by the sort of mutual exclusion which SM Lee has
suggested with specific regards to the question of homosexuality and its acceptability in
Singapore. That is to say, governmental positions and societal views necessarily have a
symbiotic relationship.

In Singapore religious institutions can further augment the status quo of heterosexual
normativity, as exemplified by the stand taken by the local Anglican church against
homosexuality. The e-archive of WestHollywood has an e-account of a "real-life"
contestation between the authorities of a local Anglican church and its members on this
matter. On 30th August 1998, Andrew Lee Tuck Leong and friends staged a "silent protest"
against their church for its particular "fundamentalist and literalist approach to the
scriptures", one which has led an enforced proscription of homosexuality. According to Lee
and friends, this has resulted in a "wickedness of prejudice" towards bisexual, gay, lesbian
and transgendered persons, simply known as "queers". The protest did not (fortunately) take
the form of an "aggressive gay rights movement", United States style, as SM Lee might
imagine. It nonetheless indicated that the protesters were conversant with the politics of
gay/queer rights movements overseas, or even keen to connect with their international
cousins, when they unfurled a "pride flag" as a statement of their social/sexual (non-)identity,
and their concurrent renouncement of institutionalised "prejudice", "ignorance" and
"homophobia". In particular, the protest was directed at the Most Rev. Dr Moses Tay, the
Anglican bishop of Singapore, also the Archbishop of Southeast Asia, who, during the
Labeth XIII conference, was -- in the words of Lee -- "at the forefront of the conservative
group" which voted out a motion to invite gay and lesbian people to present their views on
the church and homosexuality. The group had done so with "violence and vehemence, and by
hurling abusive words which compared gays and lesbians to child-molesters and people who
practise bestiality."

Before we go on, we should point out that Singapore does not have a national
religion, and that Anglicanism is but one of the many religious practices sanctioned by the
state. Our recalling of the protest at St. Andrew's Cathedral highlights not only the local
Anglican church's stand against homosexuality, but also ponders on the potential of the

St. Andrew's Cathedral, Singapore" (e-page 1-11); "Demonstrating at the Cathedral Church of
Singapore -- A Personal Response" (e-page 1-6); and "An Open Letter to the Very Revd. John Tay" (e-
page 1-5). These three cyber-articles were all written by Andrew Lee Tuck Leong.
4Lee, "Demonstrating at the Cathedral Church of Singapore -- A Personal Response", e-page 1.
5Lee, "GLBT Demonstrating at St. Andrew's Cathedral, Singapore", e-page 1.

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church’s stance as an index to the widespread conservatism and orthodoxy of Singaporeans perceived by SM Lee. From this incident alone, we cannot make any conclusive remark as to whether the local Anglican position would make a representative barometer for public opinion on the matter. However, the fact that the protest did not attract any significant support that day -- "[T]here were just six of us," Lee wrote in his cyber-account -- would add to the notion (myth?) that, and in the words of SM Lee, "Singaporeans are by and large a very conservative, orthodox society" (sic). That the protest can also serve as an index to the isolated grassroot struggle against conservatism and orthodoxy should not be overlooked.

Whether the "silent protest" has sowed the seed for a "movement" for gay/queer rights (and others) in the future remains to be seen. For the moment, it would seem most unlikely given the fact that post-independent Singapore government has been inimical to any form of political movements that openly questions its authority. This notwithstanding, isolated cases of gay/queer activism have emerged from time to time, of which the protest at St. Andrew’s Cathedral is an example.

Interestingly, the proscription of homosexuality by the local Anglican authority -- like Penal Codes 733 and 733(a) -- rests on a similar dichotomisation of "being" and "act": "[W]hile Gold loves the sinner, He hates the sin," wrote the editor of the Cathedral Bulletin in the aftermath of the protest. 6 "This statement," Lee suggests in his e-account, "is often nothing but a sugar coated disguise for prejudice and homophobia," 7 thus demonstrating an instance of continued defiance beyond the church. Ultimately, the protest also shows that institutional authority, that which the church (and correspondingly the state) embodies, is by no mean absolute. Nor is it universally accepted. In other words, institutional authority may be questioned and challenged, and under certain circumstances, even overturned.

Gays and the Local Media

We could not ascertain if the protest at St. Andrew’s Cathedral had local media coverage. Probably not, we suspect, since the local media have traditionally avoided "sensitive issues". This would include "gay/queer voices". The CNN interview would appear to be an exception, but it is not since the "gay question" was incidental to the interview. Nevertheless, queers like the anonymous e-author of Yawning Bread, an e-column housed in WestHollywood, was elated by the "episode", going as far as calling it "a momentous

7 Cited, ibid.
event". He thus felt compelled to follow the SM's reply up with a letter to The Straits Times, a copy of which he sent to the SM for his information. In the letter, he wrote,

Mr. Lee's answer was encouraging to gay Singaporeans and all the more refreshing given that local media tend to leave the topic well alone or shy from the reasonable position taken by SM Lee. Given Singapore's political culture, it would require the SM to say what he said before the issue can be dealt with constructively.9

His subsequent hope for an "open ... discussion about homosexuality" that could give people an informed (as opposed to biased) knowledge on the subject was dashed when The Straits Times decided against carrying his letter. He did not mention in his e-account if SM Lee responded to his letter. In any case, he lodged his account of event and his letter in the growing e-archive of WestHollywood.

From this simple action, one can surmise the crucial role which the internet plays in the formation of a Singapore e-gay culture. Singaporean gays go to WestHollywood for many reasons, one of which is to surf, or to use William Gibson's lingo,10 "jack" about in its e-archive. Here, they can read and comment on the e-poems, e-short stories, e-articles which provide local perspectives on the issues that may affect them as gays. These e-items also raise awareness, and encourage a sense of solidarity. In short, the WestHollywood e-archive is more than an e-resource centre, it is an e-meeting place for like-minded people. Here they come together for e-fellowship. The WestHollywood e-archive is one of many cybersites which cater to Singapore cyber-gays. Others include gay web pages and personals, and online IRCs such as #GAM and #GSG, and electronic mail and newsgroups. Together they variously allow cyber-gays to do just about everything people do in real life: trade pleasantries, exchange knowledge and shopping tips, share emotional support, make plans, gossip, play games, organise parties, flirt, make friends, fall in love, find lovers and lose them, communicate ideas, engage in intellectual debates, as well as creating a little high art and plenty of idle talk. In this way the Singapore gay community(s) on the net and beyond comes into being, and links between its members forged virtually and actually.

That the Internet has played a crucial role in the emergence of the gay community(s) on the net and beyond is a central point made by Ng King Kang in his book, The Rainbow

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8"CNN: Mr Lee Kuan Yew and the Gay Question", e-page 1.
9"CNN: Mr Lee Kuan Yew and the Gay Question", e-page 2.
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Connection (1999), a pioneering study on the Internet and Singapore gay community. For him, as it is for us, this is in part due to the culture of the superinformation highway whose development the government has actively cultivated in recent years. (The internet was introduced in July 1997). It is also in part a result of the continued support from Singaporeans, especially the media-savvy teenagers and young adults, long after the novelty of the Internet has worn off.

In the above, we have listed many reasons why Singapore gays want to use the Internet. These reasons also tell us what the Internet can do for them. There is a further reason: the prevalent gay-unfriendly social and political environment which has disallowed gays (as opposed to their heterosexual counterparts) a collective public visibility, and which ironically has "driven" them to found a collective e-public visibility instead. The Straits Times's rejection of the letter by the author of the Yawning Bread e-column gives a hint of the extent of such an "unfriendly" environment may do. In many ways, it is telling of the "place" of gays (and their queer cousins), or more accurately, their "non-place" in the local media, a point which we will elaborate shortly. The alleged conservatism in Singapore society has often been assumed to be responsible for the societal non-acceptance of homosexuality, but as we have argued above, both the law and religious state apparatuses have worked towards maintaining a similar proscription.

State bureaucracies constitute another hurdle, as evinced by the failure of People Like Us (PLU) to register with the Registrar of Societies overseen by the Ministry of Home Affairs. Comprising ten Singapore citizens -- male and female, homosexual and heterosexual -- PLU had sought "to promote awareness and understanding of the issues and problems concerning gay, lesbian and bisexual persons", between late 1996 and mid-1997. Its subsequent appeals, going as high as the Prime Minister Office, also failed to get PLU properly registered. Instead it received a letter from the Registrar, insisting that PLU ceased all activities. No reasons were ever given. The lack of bureaucratic transparency, it would seem, also works to support the national ideology of heterosexual normativity.

Likewise the local media functions like an Althusserian ideological state apparatus. More often than not, the place of gays in the local media is characterised by their "non-place", a phenomenon arising from both their under-presentation and misrepresentation: the only newsworthy gays are "sexual perverts" who indulge in "acts of gross indecency" or "unnatural sex". For example, gays are "gross" and "scary", writes Nizam Ismail, after his

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stint as an "under-cover gay" to get the stories for a Berita Harian exclusive on gays and mak nyaks, or transvestites.13 By contrast, very seldom," notes Ng in his book, "do we read about the actual problems gays face, the family and societal pressure they are under, or the obstacles that they encounter when trying to search for their own identity."14

In his book, Ng also gives accounts of his interviews with several newspaper editors to clarify the particular journalistic slant. He reports that the editors usually deny journalistic biasness, maintaining that they take a "neutral" stance. "The negative bias is more perceived than real", retorts P.N. Balji, the editor of The New Paper.15 "We are merely reporting the facts just like any other news, nothing more and nothing less", assures Lim Jim Koon, the editor of LianHe ZaoBao. Meanwhile, his paper continues to rely on police cases for "gay" stories.16 Leslie Fong, the editor of The Straits Times, is not surprised that gays would find his paper less fair to them. It is only natural for them to feel this way, Fong tells Ng nonchalantly.17 We do not make "them out to be perfectly normal and acceptable", concedes Fong.18 Balji takes a slightly different tact. He "sides" with society, which he asserts is in no mood to accept gays, and regards them as "deviants and perverse".19 Or as Lim puts it, "the majority [of the Singapore populace] still cannot accept homosexuality as a normal social behaviour".20 Finally Fong's Freudian slip is particularly revealing: The Straits Times, he says, does not aim "to be ahead of the more traditional or conservative readers, who form the majority of Singapore's population."21 Here, homophobia finds an ally in economic rationalism.

A Textual Analysis of the Oh No Oh No News-Spread

12"People Like Us: Our Attempt to register has been rejected", in http://www.geocities/WestHollywood/3878/htm, e-page 2.
14Ng, The Rainbow Connection, page 27.
15Ng, The Rainbow Connection, page 31; my italics.
16Ng, The Rainbow Connection, page 29; my italics.
17Ng, The Rainbow Connection, page 30; my italics.
18Ng, The Rainbow Connection, page 30-31; my italics.
19Ng, The Rainbow Connection, page 31.
20Ng, the Rainbow Connection, page 29.
21Ng, The Rainbow Connection, page 30.
One word would aptly describe the local press’s attitude towards lesbians or lesbianism in Singapore: hostility; that is, if we take the news-spread featured in The New Paper on Sunday on May 16th, 1999 as a measuring stick.  

A reader’s anonymous letter to the paper’s Puberty column provided the catalyst for the spread. Entitled Oh No Oh No, the spread seeks to address the reader’s query (“Is my sister a lesbian?”), and takes this question as its theme (or excuse?) for investigating the lesbian culture here, perceived as – as the sub-headline suggests – “a growing problem”.  

The spread runs across two pages, or to be more precise, on pages six and seven. On page six, there is a lead article, written by Ernest Luis. It addresses the reader’s question and tracks the causes for the “growing problem”. It is also prompted by a plea: “My sister’s been seen with another girl. What should I do to help her?” Opposite that, on page seven, are two side-bars, presumably also written by Luis, and a Comment column by Shazalina Salim. Entitled “She’s my friend, but I don’t want to hear about it”, Salim’s commentary is accompanied by a mug-shot of herself. One side-bar describes lesbian role-types in terms of a dichotomy, or gender confusion – “How you can be sure: The Butch and Feminine roles”, so summarises the heading. The other proposes remedies for such confusion by advising, as its heading says, “Don’t preach. Show you care”. Finally two versions of a picture showing two women holding hands frame the two margins of the spread, which not incidentally is proffered as “News”.  

On the subject of lesbianism, the spread bears sign of journalistic objectivity in that it appears to accommodate a plethora of voices. Professional and expert opinions on the matter are sought. For this, Luis interviewed a family counsellor and a school principal. To give the spread more credibility, views from a lesbian and an ex-lesbian are included.  

The objective veneer, however, belies an immense sense of hostility towards lesbianism. The spread does it with a number of devices. The headline ironically says it all: in bold and shocking red, “Oh no Oh no” highlights a danger which warns against a growing lesbian culture in Singapore, not once but twice, thereby demanding action. One “Oh no”

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2 The teen is unnamed, but she had written to the Puberty column seeking an answer from the paper’s counsellor, Dr Lim Su Min.
3 Ernest Luis is a journalist for The New Paper on Sunday; he does not report for the weekday edition.
25 Shazalina Salim is an administration staff member of The New Paper. She sometimes contributes articles for publication in the paper.
26 The counsellor, Mr David Kan, is a programme director of the Family Life Centre. The principal is from a girl’s school and had declined to be named in the story.

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dramatises a sisterly concern: “Oh no! My sister’s been seen with another girl,” cries the concerned sister and asks, “What should I do to help her?” The other underscores a weary disdain, masked as a friendly complain: “Oh no! My friend goes on and on about her relationship with another girl...” Together the doubly-exclaimed “Oh no”-s point to the raison d’être for the spread: lesbianism and its growing problem.

Two of the “O”-s in the double exclamation have the form of the “male” symbol (♂). Interestingly, rather than pointing upwards, the arrow-heads tip downwards. This makes the “male” symbol not quite male. The downward tip alludes to the female symbol (♀), but with a difference since conventionally, the female symbol has a cross not an arrow-head. The peculiar play with the male and female symbols constructs lesbians as an oxymoron: they are both a man and a woman, and yet neither, as well as somewhat in-between the two categories. Occupying a gendered space characterised by “both-ness”, “neither-ness” and “in-between-ness”, lesbians are constructed as different from the “norm” but whose difference is, in this case, not a cause for celebrating sexual/gender heterogeneity. Instead, the difference is singled out as a “mistake.” This is by no means a subtle pronouncement. The two circles (which form part of the genderly ambivalent symbols) are like a viewfinder: together they locate “error” (the hands in embrace), and then having located it, zoom in for the kill. Alternatively, they are ways by which one might be reminded of the teacher who uses a red marker to highlight errors in an essay, for instance. Two “Oh no”-s. Two circles. Two hands holding. Two mistakes? Or is this a case of too much homophobia?

In any case, the circles take us to the margins where the hand-holding couple is found. They back-face the readers, as if avoiding their gaze. A heterosexist view of its inimical other can now be offered visually. Lesbians are constructed as shameless (“they hold hands in public”) and shameful (“they don’t dare to face us”). Not only that, they should be shamed, as the “Oh no Oh no” headline suggests. In contrast, Salim’s broad grin exudes virtuosity and magnanimity. She has nothing to hide: she looks back at the readers, unlike the lesbians in the margins whose faceless (and somewhat featureless) presence prevents them from returning gazes characterised by homophobic/heterosexist definitions. Such definitions abound in the “How can you be sure” side-bar which discourses on lesbian stereotypes. According to the side-bar, lesbians fall into two categories: the butch and the feminine. The box below summarises the distinctions, some of which are further drawn from Luis’s articles:

<table>
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<th>“Butch”/“male”</th>
<th>“Feminine”/“female”</th>
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Less these distinctions give a generalised overview of lesbianism. Luis supplements his spread with a Comment column by Salim, presumably chosen because of her youth and gender, as well as her (hetero)sexuality. Salim’s comment would appear to constitute a personal(ised) take to lesbianism when she relates her friendship with a lesbian friend. “We care for her,” Salim reassures her readers, adding: “[We also] respect her right to love anyone she pleases. Despite this, her concealed homophobia manifests itself when she feels compelled to “convince her [lesbian friend] that being straight is not as bad as she thinks.”

Overall the spread paints a condescending picture of lesbians in Singapore. Although lesbians may fall in love, it is not “real” unlike that experienced by heterosexuals. Their liberalism is a misguided one: they openly hold hands with girls, or hug and kiss girls. Rather than portrayed as sexually active, they are perceived as sexually perverted: They enjoy pornography from the Internet; take semi-nude pictures with girls in bed; or worst, go “all the way sexually”. They gossip and relate their sexual adventures over coffee. They are irrational and suicidal. They send “Sweetheart” messages to other girls, and plan for lesbian marriage. Finally they can be dangerous because they target married women.

In addition, Luis et al. also suggest some ludicrous causes for lesbianism. Prominent among them is girls from dysfunctional families, especially those who find no familial affection. This drives them to look for attention and affection in the “wrong places” (e.g. in a lesbian), or become trapped in the lesbian culture, “a rising trap of the ‘90s”, as the paper puts it. Having too many brothers, no brother, or no strong father figure may be causes too.
Having established some causes for lesbianism, Luis et al. then suggest its attendant problem ("a growing one") is reversible. Here her family can play an important role. It should not tell the lesbian in the family off. Show care for her, and help build confidence instead since most girls, the paper assures their family, "grow out" of their lesbian phase eventually. Make her realise that lesbian relationships are dysfunctional. As an ex-lesbian, Jenny, accounts, she was at first confused but fortunately her "female sexuality... kick[ed] in" in time. For this, she is grateful to her friends and sisters who helped her "recover".

In sum, the spread abides by mainstream concern ("it's a growing problem") and mainstream taste ("they can be corrected"). It seemingly provides a space to discuss taboo issues such as lesbianism. Yet mediated through the mainstream media (The New paper on Sunday as an index to the heterosexist-ideological apparatus), that which emerges is a homophobic voice. Poststructuralist critics may well argue that text has no "essential" meaning. Indeed, the spread in question has consolidated multiple "voices" that engender polysemic meanings and readings. But, as we have suggested, each of these pluralistic "voices" supports – individually and unanimously – the dominant ideologies, one facet of which is the exclusion, and the naturalisation of this exclusion, of the other in Singapore. Asphyxiated by heterosexism, the lesbian voice(s) is silenced and denied expression. Joey, an out lesbian, would appear to be an exception. Yet the choice is a curious one. Are there no well-adjusted lesbians in Singapore to the extent that Luis had to interview one from Australia (Joey, that is)? In doing so, is Luis insinuating that full-fledged lesbianism does not exist here? For him, it seems, only "passing phases" or "past" ones do; lesbianism has no future here.

This brings us back to the "gay-question episode" in the CNN/SM Lee interview discussed at the start of the paper. SM Lee suggested that "society", not he, may be able to determine the future ("if there is a future at all") of gay people in Singapore. Indeed, "society", represented in the news-spread through the myriad voices, has helped SM Lee answer the "gay question": "no future", so imply Luis et al. And so, to the gay caller, we say: (Oh no!) Singapore gays may not have the kind of future that they may be hoping for, at least not in the traditional media; but (Oh yes!) there is another type of future for gays here, an e-future, to be more precise, on the Internet. This is a "place" that would accommodate,

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Singapore Gays go to WestHollywood

celebrate and speak about – in the past, present and future tenses – their (homo)sexuality, less the hostility of the news-spread. And it’s only a mouse-click away.

Conclusion, or some concluding remarks

Tan See Kam & Michael Lee