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Reframing Masculinity through Independent Cinema: Portrayals of Asian American Masculinity in *Spa Night*, *The Tiger Hunter*, and *Gook*

Junghyuk Davis Park



Abstract: This paper examines how the films *Spa Night* (2016), *The Tiger Hunter* (2016), and *Gook* (2017) showcase a burgeoning diversity of ways Asian Americans can express masculinity. More specifically, the paper will delve into the depictions of strength through marginalized masculinity in *Spa Night*, resistance against remasculinization narratives in *The Tiger Hunter*, and toughness through soft masculinity in *Gook*. The aforementioned films are placed in analytical conversation with academic theories within the disciplines of Asian American Studies, Gender Studies, and Film Studies to highlight how each film's respective characters demonstrate the described forms of progressive masculinity. In doing so, the films expose how cinema has historically shaped the public's understanding of Asian American masculinity and uncover how a recent group of independent films from the Asian American film movement has showcased the variety of ways in which masculinity can be conceptualized and represented by Asian Americans to challenge traditional conceptions of gender.

Keywords: Masculinity, Asian American, *Spa Night*, *The Tiger Hunter*, *Gook*

1. Introduction

As a concept, masculinity is generally understood as a set of socially-constructed and gendered behavioral practices that is constantly changing but customarily associated with men (Cooper 2002, 46; Gardiner 2002, 2; Jung 2011, 25). By extension, hegemonic masculinity is defined as the form of masculinity that acquires cultural and ideological salience during a particular sociohistorical context and primarily focuses on the behaviors that align with the dominant ideology of a given group (Chan 2000, 372). Presently in the United States, the behavioral traits that generally exemplify hegemonic masculinity include displays of toughness, assertiveness, courage, and bravery through exhibitions of heterosexuality, emotional restrictiveness, aggression, and violence (Chen 1996, 62; Lu and Wong 2013, 345-354). Many scholars argue that media has played a large role in influencing the current perception of hegemonic masculinity (Parish 2003, 153; Walzem 2007, 1). More specifically, they argue that mainstream Hollywood films have played a particularly pivotal role in both constructing and perpetuating how the American public understands masculinity (Peberdy 2011, 19). These scholars also note that Asian Americans, in particular, have been subject to notable marginalization at the hands of mainstream Hollywood film outlets through unrepresentative cinematic depictions based upon stereotypes associated with Yellow Peril and Model Minority Myth narratives (Paner 2018, 3).

Throughout the past century, portrayals of Asian American men—and by extension, Asian American masculinity—in Hollywood cinema have often been riddled with stereotypes, role limitations, or a lack of representation altogether (Parish 2003, 153). However, strides have been made in recent years to increase the number of Asian American-centered roles in widely publicized productions. For instance, recent films such as *Crazy Rich Asians* (2018) have been heralded by the public for their all-Asian casts and placement of masculine Asian American characters in the leading roles of major Hollywood productions (Ut-Seong 2018,

393). Yet, despite these advancements, several media scholars remain skeptical over these films' accuracy in representing the nuances of masculinity for Asian Americans (Wong 2020, 5; Zhao 2019, 1). More specifically, while scholars have extensively delved into the depictions of Asian American masculinity within film outlets such as Bollywood and mainstream Hollywood cinema, there remains a lack of discussion regarding the lesser-known cinematic movements that have quietly made waves in advancing the depictions of Asian American masculinity on film (Cohan and Hark 1993, 123; Rajan 2006, 1099). One such movement, an independent arm of the Asian American film movement, consists of a group of independent filmmakers who have worked over the past several decades to highlight Asian American perspectives and lived experiences through the medium of film (Butters 2014, 4; Tajima-Peña 1991, 11; Hu and Pham 2017, 117). However, unlike their mainstream counterparts, many of the movement's films have gone largely unnoticed and undiscussed—by both scholars and the viewing public alike—as a result of the films' limited theatrical releases. This paper will analyze three of the aforementioned movement's more recent films—*Spa Night*, *The Tiger Hunter*, and *Gook*—that progressively redefine the diversity of ways in which Asian Americans perform masculinity through characters' depictions of marginalized masculinity, resistance to remasculinization, and soft masculinity, respectively.

2. Historical Background

A. Feminization of Early Asian American Immigrants

Since the arrival of the first wave of Asian immigrants into the U.S. in the mid-1800s for labor, Asian American men have been feminized for their supposed failure to live up to a more generalized form of Euro-American, hegemonic masculinity (Lu and Wong 2013, 347). For instance, upon the completion of the Transcontinental Railroad in the mid-19th century, early Chinese American immigrants who had worked

as a labor source for the railroad's construction began moving into developing towns in search of replacement work (Chen 1996, 57-59). However, upon their arrival into these towns, they were subsequently relegated to working in industries stereotypically deemed to be feminine at the time such as laundry and food service because of Euro-American fears that Asian Americans would steal jobs away from the Euro-American workforce during periods of economic hardship. Historically, these sentiments were further exacerbated by anti-miscegenation laws that prevented mixed marriages between Asian American men and Euro-American women, immigration policies that prohibited Asian immigrant laborers from bringing their spouses and families to America, and legislation that established racial quotas to limit the influx of Asian immigrants such as the Immigration Act of 1924 (Lowe 1996, 181). Many of the U.S. government's exclusionary policies would remain unaltered until the passage of the McCarran-Walter Act of 1952 which repealed previous exclusionary legislation for Asian immigrants. But until then, restrictive legal policies and Euro-American economic fears fueled the unjustified denigration of Asian American men for their supposed failure to find marital partners and perform traditionally masculine work (Kartosen 2008, 13). Thus, it is clear that the historical feminization of Asian American men in the U.S. was the result of a complex history of xenophobic sentiments and legislation.

B. Portrayals of Asian American Masculinity in Mainstream Hollywood Cinema

Throughout the 20th century, Asian American men were either misrepresented based on unjust stereotypes or absent altogether as positive role models on the silver screen. During this time, film as a cultural medium quickly developed from a novel form of entertainment to a widely popularized staple of American culture. However, because of production companies' lack of faith in Asian Americans' profitability as leading men, the majority of male Asian American representation in

Hollywood films was limited to martial arts experts, wise elderly sages, gawky sideshow nerds, dangerous foreigners, and whitewashed actors in yellowface as evidenced by Wang Lung in *The Good Earth* (1937), Colonel Saito in *The Bridge on the River Kwai* (1957), Lee in *Enter the Dragon* (1973), Long Duk Dong in *Sixteen Candles* (1984), Mr. Miyagi in *The Karate Kid* (1984), and Chon Wang in *Shanghai Noon* (2000) (Chan 2000, 371; Parish 2003, 151). As several scholars have noted, such films have greatly shaped the way society has viewed Asian Americans throughout the past century (Hoang 2014, 81; Paner 2018, 3). From the aforementioned films, it is evident that for the better part of the last century, Asian American masculinity has largely been defined by mainstream Hollywood production companies (Shek 2006, 383). However, these Hollywood film outlets constructed Asian American masculinity based on unrepresentative stereotypes linked to mid-19th century Yellow Peril narratives and ongoing Model Minority Myth descriptions which wrongfully paint Asian Americans as a monolithic group of primitively dangerous foreigners and submissive overachievers, respectively (Paner 2018, 5). As a result, as Hollywood production companies continued developing their Euro-American dashing leading men and over-the-top action heroes, Asian American masculinity largely became excluded from predominant discussions of hegemonic masculinity (Chan 2000, 371). Given this history of exclusionary cinematic depictions, greater acknowledgement must be given to the filmmakers and cinematic movements actively working to construct greater diversity in the portrayals of Asian American masculinity on film.

C. Masculinity and the Asian American Film Movement

The Asian American film movement produces films aimed at highlighting the diversity of perspectives and lived experiences within Asian American communities. Beginning as a cultural arm of the Asian American social movement in the early 1970s, the Asian American film movement has since grown to include nonprofit media organizations such

as Visual Communications and Asian CineVision as well as independent filmmakers such as Robert Nakamura, Renee Tajima-Peña, Arthur Dong, Wayne Wang, Spencer Nakasako, Grace Lee, Tadashi Nakamura, Justin Lin, Duc Nguyen, P.J. Raval, and H.P. Mendoza (Tajima-Peña 2014, 95). Films produced in the movement include: Wayne Wang's *Chan is Missing* (1982) and its multifaceted examination of the Chinese American identity; Spencer Nakasako's *Kelly Loves Tony* (1998) and its intimate portrait of the gendered expectations of parenthood in Iu Mien culture; and Justin Lin's *Better Luck Tomorrow* (2002) and its deconstruction of the Model Minority Myth. However, one influence that has received less recognition is the role that several films from the movement's most recent decade have played in diversifying depictions of Asian American masculinity on the silver screen. These films—Andrew Ahn's *Spa Night*, Lena Khan's *The Tiger Hunter*, and Justin Chon's *Gook*—have served as beacons of hope by showcasing how strength, toughness, and bravery traditionally associated with masculinity can be expressed in a variety of forms by Asian American individuals.

3. Film 1: *Spa Night* (2016) – Strength in Marginalized Masculinity

Andrew Ahn's *Spa Night* follows the plights of a Korean American teenager, David (Joe Seo), as he juggles working at a Korean spa to assist his low-income parents after they are forced to sell their family restaurant while beginning to question his sexuality after discovering illicit gay sex amongst the spa's male patrons (Ahn 2016). As is the case with many independent films, *Spa Night* opened at the Sundance Film Festival to critical acclaim but has largely gone unnoticed by the public afterwards due to its limited theatrical release. Nevertheless, *Spa Night* introduces viewers to a powerful pair of characters—David and Soyoung (Haerry Kim)—that demonstrate how Asian American individuals can present strength and resiliency through marginalized masculinity.

A. Marginalized Masculinity

“Marginalized masculinity,” a term coined by Robert Connell, describes a form of masculinity constructed from the relationship between dominant and subordinate groups in society (Chan 2000, 372). While some scholars may argue that marginalization often leads to subordination and weakness, the concept of marginalized masculinity highlights how marginalized social groups can exhibit strength by confronting and overcoming the dominant norms of their society. In *Spa Night*, marginalized masculinity can be applied as an analytical tool to better understand how two of the film’s primary characters, David and Soyoung, exemplify the strength generally associated with masculinity through their resiliency in the face of marginalization.

B. Character: David

David, the film’s primary protagonist, serves as a quintessential example to which marginalized lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ+) Asian American individuals can exhibit strength through marginalized masculinity. Firstly, by deliberately placing David—a non-heteronormative Korean American—at the heart of his film, Ahn actively criticizes the ill-informed notion of a “world of heterosexuals” which describes heterosexuality as the default norm for all individuals in a society (Cooper 2002, 46). Historically, LGBTQ+ individuals have often been marginalized and left out of dominant discussions of masculinity for their lack of adherence to heteronormative standards (Huynh 2019, 64). As a result, cinematic masculinity performed by LGBTQ+ individuals has often been either treated as a special case instead of simply another valid form of masculinity or constructed to paint non-heterosexual individuals as less than human—let alone less of a man (Fejes 2000, 113). Throughout the film, David expresses a noticeable level of cognitive dissonance from this social marginalization as a non-heterosexual Korean American attempting to further understand his sexuality and confronts

the expectations of the conservative Korean American society around him.

For instance, when David attends a family friend's college party, he immediately attracts the romantic attention of several female party attendees (Ahn 2016). However, as indicated by Seo's deliberately reserved performance, David remains uncomfortable throughout the encounter as he finds himself in an internal tug-of-war between his desire to uphold the traditional heterosexual values of the Korean American society around him and his own burgeoning homosexuality. This internal conflict arises from David occupying a multifaceted or intersectional state that requires him to abide by numerous societal expectations simultaneously. These concurrently stressful expectations include feeling as though he needs to hide his non-heteronormative sexual orientation from his heterosexual peers as well as the financial burden of his family's low socioeconomic status. Additionally, in a process described by scholar Long T. Bui, David feels as though he is a "homosexual deviant" due to his lack of adherence to heteronormative masculinity standards and believes that the only way to express his true identity as a homosexual Korean American male is to not only come out of the closet but also simultaneously dismantle the societal restrictions that have constructed the metaphorical closet in the first place (Bui 2014, 129; Cooper 2002, 46). In other words, while a Euro-American male may simply need to divulge his non-heteronormative gender identity within a relatively more fluid set of European social norms, Korean Americans such as David must both bravely come out of the closet and actively demolish the conservative Korean social standards that have established these expectations.

This dissonance culminates in a scene in which David sits alone in the relative safety of the spa's backroom after realizing that he has not met the academic and gender-related expectations of his parents (Ahn 2016). However, even in the spa room that he feels is one of the few places he can escape society's expectations, David remains convinced he cannot avoid the internal stressor of negotiating his numerous identities and proceeds to harm himself with one of the spa's washcloths. In the scene,

David grimaces as he painfully attempts to scrape the skin off of his leg; however, it soon becomes clear that David is attempting to remove an aspect of himself that is beyond skin deep. As a result, the scene serves as a stark reminder of how narrowly defined representations of hegemonic masculinity that exclude marginalized groups, such as LGBTQ+ Asian Americans, have a damaging impact on the individuals subject to them. By not straying away from such gravely realistic scenes, Ahn presents to his audience the psychological and physical harm that restrictive standards of masculinity can inflict upon individuals who supposedly do not meet the limited set of expectations imposed upon them. However, David's perseverance in confronting a strictly heteronormative Korean American society with his newly acknowledged gender identity serves as a prime example to viewers of how the strength and bravery traditionally associated with masculinity can be exhibited by marginalized individuals (Chan 2000, 372; Hoang 2014, 13). In doing so, David's expression of marginalized masculinity defiantly places pressure on the heteronormative boundaries of hegemonic masculinity that have pervaded throughout cinema's history. In the case of *Spa Night*, this form of marginalized masculinity highlights the unique ways in which complex, multifaceted LGBTQ+ Asian American characters and individuals can exhibit masculinity while challenging the traditional notions of it. Hence, Ahn's decision to focus *Spa Night* on David and his experiences in navigating his newly-discovered gender identity in a traditional Korean American society is both a direct challenge to heterosexual norms and a statement on how individuals marginalized by hegemonic expectations remain masculine through exhibitions of marginalized masculinity.

C. Character: Soyoung

Yet, David is not, by far, the only character that Ahn presents to his audience as an exemplifier of previously unrecognized displays of masculinity. David's mother, Soyoung, also demonstrates to the audience how women who courageously challenge the traditional concept of a pa-

triarchal nuclear family exhibit their own form of marginalized strength.

For instance, after the family is forced to sell their small business restaurant and her husband subsequently experiences difficulty finding work, Soyoung begins to display many traits normally associated with a masculine family patriarch. One way in which Soyoung does so is by taking on a job as a waitress, effectively becoming the family's primary source of income during a time of economic hardship (Ahn 2016). During this time, Soyoung—rather than her husband—serves as the family's main representative at social gatherings. However, it is not until a scene in which the family sits in the living room watching television that Soyoung's patriarchy-challenging strength becomes undeniably clear.

In this scene, Ahn frames the family in a low-angle shot so that David and his father, Jin (Youn Ho Cho), are sitting low to the ground while Soyoung sits calmly above them. A debate ensues between Soyoung and Jin over whether the popular Korean music idols on television can be considered attractive and masculine. Not only does this discourse underscore how the nature of masculinity differs across geographic regions—in this case between South Korea and the U.S.—but it also highlights how masculinity can vary across different gendered perspectives as well. Additionally, this discussion hints to viewers the exchange of gender roles that has occurred within David's family. At this point in the film, Soyoung has fully completed her role transformation into the true matriarch of the family—a transition evidenced by the way Ahn blocks the scene, placing Soyoung clearly at the top of the frame. By employing this composition, Ahn challenges the traditional notion that strength and power are limited to patriarchs and instead presents a character, Soyoung, who exemplifies a counter-hegemonic form of matriarchal strength. Soyoung's transformation reinterprets the strength traditionally associated with patriarchy as a socially-constructed set of behavioral norms capable of also being exhibited by women (Cooper 2002, 46; Lu and Wong 2013, 345). In doing so, Soyoung is portrayed as a strong, resilient individual who not only proves more than capable of shouldering the responsibility of supporting her family, but also demonstrates how tenacity in the face

of marginalization can be exhibited by resisting conventional narratives of masculinity. In other words, rather than simply adopting a different form of masculinity, Soyoung's character in *Spa Night* defiantly challenges the binary schema of gender that hegemonic masculinity is founded upon by deconstructing the over-simplistic notion that masculinity and femininity unquestionably equate to power and weakness, respectively.

David and Soyoung both expand upon the “ambisexual model of masculinity” and extend traditional notions of masculinity to Asian American homosexual men and heterosexual women by collectively challenging the heteronormative and patriarchal undertones of hegemonic masculinity altogether (Chan 2000, 386). Moreover, each character broadens the viewing public's understanding of how resiliency and strength can be performed—as well as which individuals are capable of performing it. In doing so, David and Soyoung serve as harbingers of progress toward a more representative future in the cinematic depictions of Asian American masculinity and strength by not simply reiterating the narrow pre-existing boundaries of the past. Instead, Ahn uses these characters to foster a genuine sense of empathetic acceptance in viewers to the diverse array of ways in which Asian American individuals can exhibit their own form of strength by persisting through marginalized hardship and challenging the antiquated patriarchal notion of masculinity equating to strength in its entirety.

4. Film 2: *The Tiger Hunter* (2016) – Resistance of Remasculinization Narratives

Lena Khan's *The Tiger Hunter* follows Sami (Danny Pudi), an Indian American man, on a journey of self-discovery as he moves from his hometown village in India to the U.S. in search of professional success as an engineer (Khan 2016). By doing so, he hopes to win over his childhood sweetheart, Ruby (Karen David), and live up to the legacy of his late tiger hunter father, Azeem (Kay Kay Menon). Premiering at the Los Angeles Asian Pacific Film Festival, *The Tiger Hunter* introduces audien-

ces to Azeem and Sami, a father-son pairing that challenges the hegemonic remasculinization narratives of the past by uncovering the ways in which Asian Americans have possessed their own form of masculinity all along.

A. Remasculinization

As defined by author Sabrina Qiong Yu, “remasculinization” describes the process by which individuals reclaim masculinity thought to have been previously lost (Yu 2012, 10). The term has previously been used to detail how Hong Kong action stars such as Bruce Lee, Jackie Chan, and Jet Li have restored the masculinity of the Asian American body through their work in mainstream Hollywood martial arts films. However, the term fails to acknowledge the power dynamics present in allowing external forces, Hollywood production companies, to unjustifiably determine that Asian American men have been emasculated in the first place. Additionally, proponents of remasculinization often also fail to recognize the diverse ways in which masculinity can be performed by a cultural mosaic of individuals. Fortunately, *The Tiger Hunter* serves as a prime example of a film that challenges this notion of remasculinization by depicting a pair of characters, Azeem and Sami, whose collective character arc challenges traditional forms of masculinity perpetuated by mainstream Hollywood cinema and unearths the variety of ways in which Asian Americans have exhibited masculinity in their own unique way.

B. Characters: Azeem and Sami

When speaking of representations of masculinity in *The Tiger Hunter*, it is important to first discuss the relationship between Sami and his father, Azeem. As the film’s titular tiger hunter, Azeem serves as the film’s most overt evocation of traditional hegemonic masculinity, as well as the limitations of it. As a tiger hunter, family patriarch, and heterosexual spouse and father, Azeem epitomizes the image of a traditionally

masculine individual promoted as a part of the mythic concept of a heterosexual nuclear family with a masculine patriarch at its head (Cooper 2002, 49). However, Khan immediately challenges this mythically-constructed image of a masculine father from the moment Azeem steps foot into the film's storyline.

Azeem's introduction occurs in a flashback narrated by the film's protagonist, Sami, which presents the marksman wielding a rifle—a traditionally phallic symbol—and hunting tigers in Sami's home village (Khan 2016). Here, as well as throughout the film, Khan uses a dim sepia color filter in all of Azeem's scenes to not only delineate between Sami's childhood flashbacks and the present-day events of the film's plot line, but also subconsciously remind viewers that the memories presented are the product of a youthful Sami's imagination. In essence, Khan's usage of the color filter effectively foreshadows Sami's eventual realization that his father was not the mythically masculine tiger hunter that Sami remembered him to be.

Prior to coming to this realization, Sami ventures off to America in search of success as an engineer to win over Ruby before her military general father marries her off to a wealthier suitor (Khan 2016). In the process, Sami finds himself on numerous occasions striving to be like his father by adopting several ambitions associated with his father's traditional form of masculinity: career-related advancements and a heterosexual female romantic partner (Wilcox 2011, 62). Unfortunately, he instead encounters brutal hardship in America. Yet, it is here—when Sami's faith in his ability to meet his father's expectations is at its lowest—that his mother, Huma (Shalini Vatsa), informs him over the phone that much of what Sami remembered about his father was merely a product of his skewed imagination (Khan 2016). In reality, the mythically masculine father Sami remembers was beloved in his village community not for his ability to effectively use a rifle to hunt tigers—of which he only ever killed one—but rather his consistent desire to care and sacrifice for the villagers in their times of need. In the film, it is only after coming to this realization that Sami's career and romantic prospects with Ruby begin to improve. More

importantly, however, Sami acts as a fitting embodiment of the countless Asian American boys who grew up idolizing the many heteronormative leading men and action heroes perpetuated in mainstream Hollywood cinema. Just as Sami's view of his father as an overtly masculine tiger hunter was the product of myth and imagination, many traditional forms of hegemonic masculinity created and emphasized by characters like Azeem are largely grounded upon a mythic notion of masculinity imagined and constructed by mainstream Hollywood production companies as opposed to being grounded in reality.

As a result, Sami's relationship with his father exposes an issue present at the heart of remasculinization narratives: the erroneous assumption that the hegemonic forms of masculinity promoted by mainstream Hollywood's action heroes, patriarchal leading men, and tiger hunters are the only ways to achieve manhood. When applied to *The Tiger Hunter* specifically, an analysis focused on remasculinization would have mistakenly deemed Sami unmasculine at the end of the film by traditional Hollywood standards for neither attaining nor actively striving for the hegemonic ideals of Azeem's constructed image of hegemonic masculinity. Instead, through Azeem and Sami's collective character arc, Khan urges viewers to resist this over-simplistic narrative of masculinity grounded in Hollywood's history of gender binaries, which depicts masculinity as strength and femininity as weakness. In essence, both characters' developments throughout the film advocate for the audience to acknowledge the alternative form of heroism that Sami adopts by recognizing how Azeem was indeed a respected individual by being a beloved man that sacrificed for his peers. In doing so, the audience—like Sami—resists the hegemonic undertones of remasculinization narratives that perpetuate traditional masculinity and instead raise awareness towards how Asian Americans such as Azeem and Sami were already heroic through their maturity and selfless sacrifice.

Therefore, Khan's feature-length directorial debut, *The Tiger Hunter*, serves as a refreshing reminder about how excessive emphasis on Asian American remasculinization narratives can promote hegemonic

forms of masculinity constructed by Hollywood cinema outlets. Khan's film exposes viewers to the previously unrecognized ways in which Asian Americans have historically displayed maturity and heroism through meaningful compassion.

5. Film 3: *Gook* (2017) – Toughness through Soft Masculinity

Justin Chon's *Gook* tells the fictional story of a pair of Korean American brothers, Daniel (David So) and Eli (Justin Chon), who own a shoe shop in Paramount, California and befriend an African American girl, Kamilla (Simone Baker), during the tumultuous 1992 Los Angeles riots (Chon 2017). In the context of masculinity, the film's protagonists, Daniel and Eli, each demonstrate to audiences how Asian Americans can showcase the toughness traditionally associated with masculinity by alternatively expressing their emotional vulnerability through soft masculinity.

A. Soft Masculinity

Originally coined by author Sun Jung as a method of explaining the masculinity exhibited by popular music idols and television drama actors in South Korea and Japan, "soft masculinity" is now often employed as a counterargument to the traditional notions of American hegemonic masculinity that defines a masculine individual as one that is uncaring, emotionally restrictive, and muscular in physique (Jung 2011, 71). Instead, soft masculinity reinterprets the toughness associated with masculinity by underscoring the figurative strength that can be discovered through a display of emotional openness and vulnerability which collectively challenge the binary conception of masculinity as an existing opposition to femininity. In *Gook*, the story's leading protagonists, Daniel and Eli, effectively serve as important reminders of both the physical and psychological harm that can come from traditional forms of hegemonic masculinity and the toughness Asian Americans can still exhibit

through performances of soft masculinity.

B. Character: Daniel

The first of the brothers in *Gook*, Daniel, serves as a clear example of the physical and psychological damage inflicted upon Asian American individuals by the limited ways that hegemonic masculinity is performed and the maturity that is demonstrated through an acceptance of soft masculinity. Early on in the film, Daniel exhibits many of the traits associated with traditional forms of hegemonic masculinity including heterosexual flirtation with female customers, physical intimidation of neighboring shop owners, and verbal confrontation of local gang members with abundant profanity.

In one such confrontational scene, Daniel is shown being forcibly pulled out of a car and attacked by a group of men amidst the developing 1992 riots in Los Angeles (Chon 2017). Although confronted verbally and physically by the attackers, Daniel's initial reaction to the assault is to remain silent as he takes on the beating. Here, Chon employs a low-to-the-ground, medium shot so that viewers are close enough to vicariously feel the pain inflicted upon a teary-eyed Daniel but not so close that they feel as though they can do anything more than be a witness to the act. By doing so, Chon visually conveys to the audience the damage that violent forms of silent masculinity have on individuals subject to them. Yet, this performance of emotionally restrained silence persists when Daniel returns to the shoe store and attempts to remain quiet on the matter whenever Eli inquires about how Daniel obtained his newfound scars and bruises (Chon 2017). Here, Daniel's silence epitomizes the problematic concept that in order to be masculine under hegemonic standards, one must be emotionally closed-off to exhibit toughness in moments of danger (Lu and Wong 2013, 345). On the surface, the unadorned, conversational dialogue shared by the two brothers in their family car indicates that Daniel is unscathed from the attack; yet, the chiaroscuro lighting employed in the scene calls viewers' attention to the contrast between

the calmness of the brothers' dialogue and the pained expressions visible on each brother's face, indicating that both have been harmed by the events of the day. Acting as a means by which viewers gain a glimpse into the internal emotions experienced by the film's protagonists during a moment of literal and figurative darkness, the lighting scheme makes it clear to viewers that the brothers are indeed experiencing both physical and emotional pain. This pain arises from not only Daniel and Eli's injuries but also their inability to express their anguish due to the emotional restrictiveness that they were likely taught as the only way to exemplify toughness growing up. It is only when Daniel bravely exhibits soft masculinity by finally opening up at the end of the scene to discuss the realities of what happened to him earlier that day that he truly begins to appear as a mature, grown individual in the eyes of the audience. As a result, it becomes clear that the true violence inflicted upon Daniel that day lays grounded in how emotionally restrictive forms of hegemonic masculinity harmfully perpetuate the notion that silence is the only way to exhibit strength.

C. Character: Eli

Similarly, Daniel's brother, Eli, also serves as an example of how an admission of emotional vulnerability can be its own form of soft masculinity. This exhibition of soft masculinity is most evidently seen during Eli's final confrontation with Keith (Curtiss Cook Jr.)—the abusive older brother of Kamilla—at the end of the film. The scene opens with Keith dejectedly sitting down in a hospital corridor after beating himself up repeatedly over potentially causing his sister's death in an accidental shooting at Eli's shoe shop (Chon 2017). However, rather than violently confronting Keith for his mistake, an exhausted Eli instead chooses to approach Keith so that he can console and remind Keith that there are more important realities to place their focus on such as praying for Kamilla's survival. Although not customarily associated with traditional views of hegemonic masculinity, Eli here showcases a form of soft

masculinity through the courage necessary to profess his vulnerability amidst a dire situation (Shimizu 2012, 33). In this scene, Keith acts as a representation of hyperbolic performances of hegemonic masculinity grounded in violence while Eli depicts a manifestation of its soft counterpart. By placing both forms of masculinity in conversation with one another, Chon unveils not only how hyperbolically violent performances of masculinity have detrimental effects on communities subject to them, but also how alternative forms, such as soft masculinity, can provide healthier alternatives to the hyper violent forms of the past (Sandell 1996, 23). Thus, through Keith's physical pain and Eli's demonstration of mature emotional vulnerability, the audience comes to the realization that the courage and toughness traditionally associated with masculinity can just as respectably be expressed through the strength required to admit and confront one's vulnerability amid adversity.

As a result, *Gook* provides viewers with two characters, Daniel and Eli, whose cinematic portrayals serve as quintessential examples of the physical, mental, and emotional harm that come from violently hyperbolic forms of hegemonic masculinity as well as how vulnerability and bravery in the face of violence can be its own form of strength.

6. Conclusion

Since the advent of film as a medium, Asian Americans have been misrepresented on the silver screen as gross caricatures based upon ill-informed stereotypes. More specifically, cinematic depictions of Asian American masculinity throughout the past century have frequently been based upon perpetuations of Asian American feminization dictated largely by mainstream Hollywood film outlets and Euro-American men. As a result, Asian American masculinity has largely been marginalized or misrepresented altogether in the history of film. However, a recent wave of independent films out of the Asian American film movement has resisted these Hollywood-constructed narratives of hegemonic masculinity. Three of these films—*Spa Night*, *The Tiger Hunter*, and *Gook*—introduce

viewers to a diverse cast of characters that embody an equally diverse array of masculine performances.

In *Spa Night*, director Andrew Ahn presents viewers with David and Soyoung, a Korean American son and mother who collectively deconstruct traditional notions of hegemonic masculinity by demonstrating how marginalized Asian American individuals can exhibit a form of strength in the face of hardship by challenging heteronormative and patriarchal notions of masculinity and gender. In *The Tiger Hunter*, director Lena Khan introduces audiences to Azeem and Sami, an Indian American father-son duo, whose combined character arc challenges traditional forms of hegemonic masculinity perpetuated by mainstream Hollywood cinema and instead provides viewers with an example of how Asian Americans can achieve manhood through compassion and heroic self-sacrifice. Lastly, in *Gook*, director Justin Chon depicts Daniel and Eli, a pair of Korean American brothers that reveal both the harm that comes from the hyperbolically violent forms of traditional masculinity and the strength within in the courageous admission of emotional vulnerability.

The portrayals of Asian American masculinity in cinema will undeniably continue to change in the decades to come as the Asian American community gains increased representation in mainstream cinema; however, as outlined in this paper, several independent films out of the Asian American film movement effectively serve as beacons of hope for a future in cinema that, unlike the past, depicts a variety of ways in which Asian Americans can exhibit masculinity. Thus, it will be just as important in the meantime for filmmakers, academic scholars, and the general movie-going public alike to recognize and raise awareness of these progressive films; because, as evidenced by the trio of films discussed in this paper, these are the filmmakers who are actively working to not only increase Asian American representation on the silver screen, but also to challenge conventional expressions of gender and masculinity altogether by showcasing what Asian Americans have to offer the world of cinema.

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