

One Brief Smutty Moment *When Singapore Opened Up To Mandarin Soft Porn*

by

Rajendra S. Sisodia

On July 1, 1991, a new movie rating system, with G, PG and—for the first time—R ratings went into effect in Singapore. Three Mandarin “soft-porn” movies from Hong Kong opened simultaneously — “Erotic Nights,” “Stooges in Tokyo” (*Cheeky look into Business Trips of sorts!*) and “Erotic Ghost Story” (*Explicitly Erotic! Undoubtedly Sensational!*). Coming next: “The Holy Virgin and the Evil Dead” (*A Horror film with girls galore; Strictly for Adults enjoyment only; with Miss Hong Kong*). The David Lynch film “Wild at Heart” also opened at the same time.

What ensued was a veritable “orgy” of pent-up demand and masses yearning to breathe free. Just about every theater in town was showing these movies (actually 46 out of 55), and long lines were everywhere. Advance ticket sales were booming. Even movie theaters showing “normal” movies such as “Edward Scissorhands” and “Robin Hood” held special midnight screenings of the R-rated movies. Malaysian youth were crossing the border at Johor Baru in unprecedented numbers to partake in the previously forbidden fruit. The movies were all in Mandarin, but that did not prevent non-Mandarin speakers from flocking to them. Asked how he could understand the movie, one responded, “Action needs no language.” A passionate letter writer to the *Straits Times* put it thus: “We prefer smut to art and that is all there is to it.”

The newspaper carried daily, breathless briefings on the movies, and showed pictures of long lines with people hiding their faces. People were sneaking away from offices and classrooms, and lying to their spouses about their destination. Emerging squinting from the theaters, the audiences, mostly older men with a fair sprinkling of women and couples, were sheepish—and somewhat disappointed. Apparently, the action was less than enthralling, and reality had failed to live up to the almost palpating expectations.

Anxious to learn the truth, and purely in my capacity as an objective, dispassionate reporter, I went to see “Erotic Nights.” Ticket prices had been adjusted (in other words, raised) for these movies. The theater was packed to capacity for a mid-afternoon show. I was pleasantly surprised to find the movie subtitled; I had expected to have to grapple with the intricacies of Mandarin body language. The subtitling in the movie, as with many Mandarin shows on Singapore TV, had the unfortunate effect of turning it into a comedy for all non-Mandarin speakers:

“You have the figures, so why not go for it?” (to an attractive woman, on the advisability of posing nude for a movie of “artistic merit”)

“Looking trouble? You find it!”

“And my lady is you. All care is about you now.”

“I’m painful! Give me any medicine, OK?”

“He’s so concern me!”

“Gold prize is a gold medal made by pure gold.”

“Don’t try to set a variance between us.”

“Truth! Truth!”

“Though you’re as ugly as before, now you’re the idol of me.”

The movie was actually a pleasant surprise, perhaps because I was anticipating a horrendous, slapdash affair. All the lead figures had very non-Asiatic features, something that seems to reflect the conceptualization of physical beauty in more Western terms. It was about a charismatic artist named John (also called Jean and Chun during the movie), who mesmerizes and seduces three women (all close friends), one after the other. The sex scenes were really quite mild; there was frontal nudity for the women, but nothing really explicit. Instead, there was a great deal of rather frenetic gasping and quivering. One of the girls was Ann (also called Yan Yan), whose father, named Casanova, was a philanderer dressed in white suits. The second girl was a determined actress who was determined to sleep her way to fame and fortune. After our artist “liberated” her, she shackled up with an elderly movie producer, known only as Proprietor, who promised to cast her in a movie called “The Temptation of Lisa.” She assured her friends that Proprietor has nothing but good intentions; indeed, he had told her to “Go to Europe, get some brand names, open boutique.” The third girl was a spectacled “plain Jane” type who, of course, soon got transformed by our John into a lascivious creature of ravishing beauty.

A brooding Modern painter, John was given to experimenting with well-known modern art techniques, such as using frogs dipped in paint to create his abstract paintings. Another favorite technique was to pour paint all over the body of a girl, and then have her writhe all over a large canvas while he flung further strategic quantities of paint on her. Soon, John too became overcome with the urge to express himself and threw himself down on the canvas. Repeatedly emptying entire cans of paint over himself and his lover, John achieved a rather efficient blending of his two primary pursuits. The next day, he displayed his handiwork at an art gallery, to the accompaniment of knowing glances with and among the three friends.

As we shuffled out of the theater, faces cast down to avert the bright sun and smirks of walkers-by, I marveled at the new-found openness in Singapore society. In this haven of private enterprise, Mandarin soft-porn today would perhaps lead to juke boxes, satellite dishes, private radio and TV stations and an independent press in the near future.

Alas, Singaporeans were soon to be denied the continuation of such pleasures. A strong puritanical streak, never far below the surface in Singapore, soon surfaced. After all, this is a country in which magazines like *Cosmopolitan* (let alone *Playboy* or *Penthouse*) are banned. A few months later, after an election in which the ruling party lost a few seats and saw a small dip in its share of the popular vote, the government reinstated its ban on R-rated movies. As the expression goes, “One brief, shining moment...”