CHAPTER SIX

THE TRAGEDY OF THE HEARTLANDS IN THE FILMS OF ERIC KHOO

The DVD release of Eric Khoo’s feature film *Be with Me* (2005) comes in packaging that features a quote from *Time Magazine* critic Bryan Walsh, who describes the film’s director as “Singapore’s most talented filmmaker.” Born in 1965 into one of Singapore’s wealthiest families, Khoo was immersed in the world of cinema from an early age. He attended The City Art Institute in Sydney, Australia, where he studied cinematography. Starting out with short films, he directed *When the Magic Dies* (1985), *Barbie Digs Joe* (1990), *August* (1991), *Carcass* (1992), *Symphony 92.4 FM* (1993), *Pain* (1994), *Home Video* (2000), and *No Day Off* (2005), some of which were screened at international festivals where they received awards. He also directed numerous music videos, television commercials, and an episode (“Sex, Lies and …”) of the television series *Drive* (1998).

As an executive producer running his own production firm, Zhao Wei Films, Khoo worked on Royston Tan’s *15* (2003), *4:30* (2006), and *881* (2007), and Toh Hai Leong’s *Zombie Dog* (2004); more commercially oriented films such as the Jack Neo vehicle *Liang Po Po: The Movie* (1999), *Stories about Love* (2000), and *One Leg Kicking* (2001) (which Khoo also co-directed); and made-for-television miniseries *Drive* and *Seventh Month* (2004).

Khoo is perhaps best-known for his three critically acclaimed feature films *Mee Pok Man* (1995), *12 Storeys* (1997), and *Be with Me*, all of which have been screened at major international festivals. *Mee Pok Man* won festival awards not only in Singapore, but also in Fukuoka and Pusan. *12 Storeys* won the Golden Maile Award for Best Picture at the 17th Hawai’i International Film Festival and two awards at the 10th Singapore International Film Festival. It was also the first Singapore film officially to be invited to participate at the Cannes Film Festival. *Be with Me* played as the opening film of the Directors’ Fortnight at the Cannes Film Festival and has received very positive reviews from international critics: *New York Times* critic Manohla Dargis, for instance, even admitted that she
“was in tears by the end, which is fairly rare” (Zhao Wei Films n.d.). While his films have earned international recognition, Khoo has also been honored by the state for his role in the local arts community: He received the National Arts Council’s Young Artist Award for film in 1997 and the Singapore Youth Award (Individual) in 1999 in recognition of his dedication to filmmaking and his contributions to society. In 2007, he was awarded the prestigious Cultural Medallion. Khoo also sits on the National Arts Council’s resource panel for film. In 1998, he was profiled by Asiaweek as one of 25 exceptional Asian trendmakers for his influence on film and television. A year after, Asiaweek listed him as one of the leaders for the millennium. Khoo does not regard himself as a “leader of local cinema,” but has nevertheless been very supportive of budding local filmmakers with potential, mainly through his Zhao Wei Films (Yong 2005). Royston Tan, for instance, has clearly benefited from Khoo’s encouragement, tutelage, and ability to raise funds (Yong 2005).

Khoo’s depiction of the spiritually empty and ultimately tragic lives of the working class (with the notable exception of his life-affirming *Be with Me*) contrasts sharply with Jack Neo’s comically anarchic and seriously didactic portrayals of the heartlands. Media scholars Tan See Kam, Michael Lee, and Annette Aw argue that,

> [a]s critique, [Khoo’s] films represent a growing awareness among the current generation of independent filmmakers about the need to provide alternative ways of ‘seeing’ the nation-state. (Tan, Lee, and Aw 2003)

Although most of Khoo’s films present hard-hitting critiques of an alienating and despiritualized Singapore produced, administered, and celebrated by an authoritarian, technocratic, and materialistic state, it is clear that these critically acclaimed art-house films also present the state with an internationally branded, and therefore potentially lucrative, resource for building the ‘renaissance city,’ a global arts hub that is attractive to foreign talent and expected to be at the center of Singapore’s new creative economy. The state’s essentially economic ambitions, in turn, create new conditions of possibility through which Khoo can shepherd his art and social criticism safely, find more nuanced ways of expressing them, and