



Pulling Faces

Feature 35mm 100min.

Budget

US\$800,000
(HK\$6,240,000)

Producer

KUROIWA Hisami

Tentative Cast

Richard NG, Rebecca PAN,
LIM Kay Tong, Lucan JODOGNE

Production Company

Media Space, Inc.

HAF Goals

Co-producers, Sales agents, Pre-sales, Funds

■ Introduction ■

Eastern-oriented Wong Yong and Western-oriented Henry are middle-aged brothers who represent the two faces of Singapore. They fight over everything, from how to raise children to how to prepare for their mother's death – and drive their families crazy. As the Chinese New Year reunion approaches, who will be smiling and who will still be pulling faces? A humorous family drama in the vein of Ang Lee's *Eat, Drink, Man, Woman* and Mike Leigh's *Life is Sweet*, *Pulling Faces* reflects on different facets of Singaporean society.

■ Director ■

Sandi TAN graduated in Film Studies from the University of Kent at Canterbury, UK in 1994. She became a film critic for Singapore's largest daily, *The Straits Times*, at the age of 21. She then went on to gain an MFA in Film at Columbia University, USA in 2000. Her first short *Moveable Feast* (1996) won Best Short Film at Singapore IFF, and went on to screen at Clermont-Ferrand, Museum of Modern Art, NY, and was acquired by Europe's Arte Channel. Her second 48min short *Scratch* (1998) was made as part of a groundbreaking TV series in Singapore. Her most recent short *Gourmet Baby* (2001) premiered at the New York Film Festival, was chosen as the Opening Night short at Singapore IFF 2002 and screened at over 30 festivals, including Clermont-Ferrand. *Pulling Faces* will be her first feature.

■ Producer ■

KUROIWA Hisami holds a BA in English and American Literature and took Cinema Studies at the Tisch School of New York University. The Founder and President of Media Space, a New York-based film development, financing and production company, she also distributes films in the US and Japan, and has worked as a consultant for Asian American IFF, Kobe IFF and Tokyo IFF.

Her production and financing credits include: Sara Driver's *When Pigs Fly* (1993), Hal Hartley's *Flirt* (1993), Wayne Wang's *Smoke* (1995), *Blue in the Face* (1995, with Paul Auster), Sean Mathius' *Bent* (1997), Jonathan Nossiter's *Sunday* (1997), Frank Grow's *Love God* (1997), Tom Kalin's *Urban Legend* and Meng Ong's *Miss Wonton* (2001).

She is currently in pre-production on *Fusong*, a narrative feature to be directed by Joan Chen. Her development slate includes: the narrative feature *Some Prefer Nettle* by Ken Yunome and *Tuberville*, a documentary about the photographer Deborah Turbeville.

■ Production Company ■

Media Space, Inc. was founded in New York in 1984 by Kuroiwa Hisami. The company has been active in the development and production of feature,

documentary as well as HD films (notably Tom Kalin's *Urban Legend*, with Sony, in association with Killer Film, shown in Rotterdam Film Festival).

Current projects in pre-production or development are: Joan Chen's *Fusong*, based on the novel *The Lost Daughter of Happiness* by Yan Geling; *Broken* by Ken Yunome (*Island, Alicia*, un certain regard, Cannes 1998), *Some Prefer Nettle*, based on Tanizaki Junichiro's novel, directed by Ken Yunome, and script by Tonino Guerra, Yves Seban, and Ken Yunome. The project was invited to Pusan in 2003. Also in development with Andrej Parekh and Sophie Barth on *Mareas* (tentative title); *Recalling, Retelling: Life about Theresa Cha* by Woo Cho.

Media Space, Inc. has an impressive distribution list of films from Japan to US and vice versa. Among these are: Ishii Sogo's *Angel Dust* (1994), Fukasaku Kinji's *Black Lizard* (1968), Derek Jarman's *Caravaggio* (1986), Lars Von Trier's *Elements of Crime* (1984), John Sayles' *Brother from Another Planet* (1984), Spike Lee's *Joe's Bed-Side Barbershop: We Cut Heads* (1983), Ang Lee's *Pushing Hands* (1990), *The Wedding Banquet* (1994), *Eat, Drink, Man, Woman* (1994), Wayne Wang's *Live Is Cheap, but Toilet Paper is Expensive* (1989), Pedro Almodovar's *What Have I Done to Deserve This?* (1984), *Dark Habits* (1983), *Women on the Verge of Nervous Breakdown* (1988), Mira Nair's *Salaam Bombay* (1988), Todd Haynes' *Poison* (1991) and *Safe* (1995), Hou Hsiao Hsien's *Boys from Feng Kui* (1983), *Summer at Grandpa* (1984) and Tom Kalin's *Swoon* (1992).

■ Synopsis ■

Wong Yong, a depressed vender of Cantonese Opera tapes in the market, lights up in the evenings when he plays the erhu with a traditional Chinese orchestra. At home, his daughter Ying's collection of photographic film and wife Yuen Leng's collection of ice cream overwhelm their old fridge, and it finally breaks down.

Meanwhile, Wong Yong's brother and Westernized nemesis, Henry, has his own problems. He is an English teacher with no sense of humor. He devotes himself to grooming his daughters, Amy, 9, and Angel, 7, for Harvard medical school. His wife Esther, also a schoolteacher, thinks the key to saving their marriage is conceiving a baby boy, and she plots it in secret.

As the Chinese New Year approaches, Wong Yong and his feisty mother bicker over preparations for the annual reunion dinner. All she wants is for her three sons and their families to come together, and to have an auspicious spot at her temple's mausoleum. It offends Henry when he learns of this – to him, planning for death is a morbid Eastern habit. Without consulting anyone, he cancels the reserved spot.

While Wong Yong's financial woes continue, orchestra practice has lost its magic – his rheumatic arm keeps him from staying in tune, and he quits. Defeated, he goes off in search of a cheap secondhand fridge. Henry is feeling no better – his youngest brother Bernard, a successful businessman, shows up at his school in a fancy new BMW. He takes Henry out for a drive, making Henry feel even worse about his own ordinariness.

Wong Yong's wife Yuen Leng retreats further into her ice cream obsession, culminating in an ice cream crime-spree at the supermarket, while Ying's obsessive buying of cinema-related items on eBay puts her into debt. Things reach a fever pitch when Wong Yong discovers that the spot in the mausoleum he had reserved for his mother has been cancelled by Henry.

A trio of film students decide to make a documentary about Wong Yong's love of Chinese Opera. He is overjoyed with the honor, but keeps it a secret. Henry also keeps a secret – though banned from Wong Yong's home, he visits Yuen Leng one afternoon to remind her of her younger, happier days and that she can leave the miserable Wong Yong anytime.

Days before the reunion, Yuen Leng packs up to leave, but changes her mind. The fickle students cancel their project at the last minute. Wong Yong is stunned by how swiftly his moment of glory evaporated. Financially broken, Ying sells off her film equipment at her father's market.

Henry becomes alienated from his baby-obsessed wife and their increasingly assertive young daughters. His long-delayed dreams of vacationing in Europe seem farther and farther away. He punishes his daughters and breaks down in front of Esther for the first time. Shockingly, she shows no sympathy.

An expensive new refrigerator arrives at Wong Yong's home. His family is overjoyed thinking that he had bought it. When he denies it, they assume it is a gift from Bernard.

At the reunion dinner, old tensions exist and new ones emerge. Sibling rivalry is meshed with an unspoken battle of class and values: Eastern versus Western, traditional versus modern. Wong Yong's new fridge becomes a catalyst for a fundamental shake-up in family relations.

In another part of the city, Ying finally talks to the Chinese-American boy she's attracted to and finds out – to her innocent surprise – that he is ambivalent about being American. He hands her a video camera and encourages her to find beauty and humor in seemingly boring events. Finally, Henry reveals that he had bought the new fridge. Violated, Wong Yong severs all ties with Henry, carts the brand new fridge out of his apartment and leaves it in the rain to rust.

■ Director's Statement ■

"Disneyland with a Death Penalty"

This nickname given to Singapore by American novelist William Gibson

has stuck like a thorn in its side. But the truth always hurts – Singapore is a tiny island-state where government advice and instruction is inescapable.

Singapore is a country constantly in flux. It is the true center of the modern world – encompassing the woes and the desires of both old insular Asia and the new globalized world.

There hasn't been a film that addresses Singapore's unique dilemma with detail and humor, as Ang Lee's *Eat Drink Man Woman* and Mike Leigh's *Life Is Sweet* have done with Taiwan and England, making a culture come alive by dramatizing the conflicts between its different facets. I have long wanted to make a film that would describe it coherently, and with a sense of humor that says: "This is what Singapore is about." I am confident that – though rooted in the specific details of one country – it is a universal story about a family splintered by different value systems. I imagine that people from various cultures will identify with elements of the film.

The Air-conditioned Nation

I aim to capture Singapore's unique hot and cold phenomenon on film. Most Singaporeans spend their days indoors, hidden in air-conditioned rooms, creating a nation of people who feel alien to the tropical world outside. The visual disconnect between the outside world (tropical and fertile) and the artificial world of the indoors (air-conditioned and sterile) is something that shapes the Singapore way of life and yet has never been captured on film. This disconnect with the environment also explains why Singaporeans have such a hard time communicating with each other – nothing ever feels natural.

It is significant that a refrigerator breaks down at the beginning of the story. In the heat of Singapore, when a fridge breaks down, tempers flare and decay sets in fast. In Singapore, where a carton of milk rots in two hours, fridges are socio-economic indicators, like cars or clothes. By choosing not to buy a new fridge, Wong Yong stands by his old-fashioned beliefs.

Music and Food, Love and Hate

The score will fuse Eastern nuance into Western melody. Music features prominently in the life of the main character – Wong Yong plays the erhu (a Chinese lute) and listens to classic Shanghainese songs from the 1930s. Many older Singaporeans regard these nostalgic songs as artifacts from a superior Chinese past – ironically, those songs were heavily influenced by American big-band music. As always, it is this lively debate between East and West that creates the vibrant culture of Singapore. Music will play both divider and unifier in the film. The score should have the tempo of a good-humored tango between two cultures and two brothers.

As in my short film *Gourmet Baby* where a middle-aged man bonds with his seven-year-old niece over fine cuisine, uptight Singaporeans only loosen up and forget their differences during mealtime. This is why the drive towards the Chinese New Year dinner in *Pulling Faces* has even greater significance than a typical reunion in other cultures – it is a rare moment of truce created by food. But sometimes, even a good feast is not enough.

Contact: Media Space, Inc.

718 Broadway, 2b New York, New York, USA

Postal Code: 10003

Tel:+1-212-475-4488 Fax:+1-212-475-6947

E-mail: hkuroiwa1900@aol.com, sanditan@earthlink.net

Website: <http://www.sanditan.com>