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‘Too subordinate to be hegemonic, too misogynistic to be subordinate’: Exploring Nice Guy masculinity and the male gaze in Taiwanese cinema

Wit, Aimée de

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**‘Too subordinate to be hegemonic, too misogynistic to be subordinate’:
Exploring Nice Guy masculinity and the male gaze in Taiwanese cinema**

Aimée de Wit

Student number: 1775820

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Supervision by prof. dr. M. van Crevel

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1. Introduction

According to Judith Butler (1990), “gender is an identity tenuously constituted in time, instituted in an exterior space through a *stylized repetition of acts*” (140). They criticize the traditionally accepted distinction between sex as biologically constructed and gender as culturally constructed. They claim that it’s impossible to construct a singular universal category of ‘woman’ or ‘man’ because they hinge on a multitude of factors (ethnicity, class, sexuality). Rather, gender is constituted through repetition and collection of certain behaviors; gender is a performance. And in movies, there only is performance.

My interest lies in how media – and movies specifically – construct these ideas of gender. According to Song Hwee Lim (2022), cinema has the ability to convey political and cultural values, such as notions of gender. Just like children mimic behavior they see around them, society mimics the cultural automatisms that are fed to them through media and film in particular. It is therefore crucial to lay these gendered codes bare. According to Alberti (2013), the performance of gender within film “always maintain[s] the subversive potential to remind us of the constructedness of these categories precisely through their recourse to exaggeration and comedy.” (19). That is why comedic genres – such as the romantic comedy – are so useful in recognizing these social patterns, because style of comedy often hinges on the parodic. And according to Butler (1999, 175), parody exposes the assumed stabilities of these gender conventions.

Within gender discourse, the construction of masculinity is often-overlooked, since the masculine is often synonymous with the default. Academic research on combining masculinity and movies is not a novel idea, but in the Chinese context these studies have focused mainly on action movies, superhero movies, nationalist movies etc. However thought-provoking these studies might be, they mostly contain overt displays of hyper-masculinity. What I am more interested in, is the more covert and subtle type of masculinity in romantic comedies. Since the emergence of the romantic comedy in China, Taiwan and Hong Kong, this ‘soft’ masculinity is prevalent in its main- and side characters. They embody more traditionally feminine qualities. Their supposedly new feminist rendering pose an alternative to the long-established macho norm. But this type of masculinity is not necessarily new in the Chinese context, and its roots go back centuries into the premodern era.

In this thesis, I will focus on one of these types of masculinity: The Nice Guy. In romantic comedies, this is one of most common archetypes for the male protagonists or love interests (Nesbø 2021). In my preliminary research, I found that the Nice Guy was not only a reoccurring character trope in Hollywood movies but it was also a dominant type in Taiwanese romantic comedies. Not to confuse with ‘a nice guy’, the Nice Guy is a cinematic archetype that perpetuates harmful behavior, especially towards women. This archetype is intriguing because of the conflicting aspects of masculinity it carries. On the surface, the Nice Guy seems to reject dominant normative masculinity, but upon further inspection it becomes clear that he emulates these exact traits and behaviors that he seemingly dislikes. Liebler (2015) is one of the studies that show that these cinematic images influence peoples’ sense of identity and societal expectations.

I will analyze The Nice Guy in four Taiwanese romantic comedies: Leehom Wang’s *Love in Disguise* (恋爱通告), Donnie Lai Cheun-Yu’s *Campus Confidential* (爱情无全顺), Chin-Lin Chiang’s *Café, Waiting, Love* (等一個人咖啡) and Chu Yen-Ping’s *My Geeky Nerdy Buddies* (大宅男). Although the genre of the romantic comedy is predominantly geared towards women – often referred to as ‘chick flicks’ – a quick google search shows that most of them are made by men. Now, of course, this doesn’t necessarily mean that men can only write from the perspective of men – the ‘male gaze’, if you will – but it is interesting to look at how this influences constructions of masculinity. I will argue that the Nice Guy archetype especially thrives within the context of the ‘male gaze’, and that its existence is perhaps even dependent on it. The male gaze is a feminist film theory coined by Laura Mulvey (1975), where she argues that all movies made in a patriarchal society center the male perspective and perpetuate gender hierarchy where men are dominant over women. Female characters under the male gaze function as (often sexualized) objects for the viewer and the male protagonist. She argues that there is an inherent power imbalance present in this male gaze (Mulvey 1975, 837). Although her theory mainly focuses on female characters, the male gaze influences male characters as well. The lengths to which the Nice Guy character goes to get what he wants, and his problematic behavior that is excused and often concealed by a romantic narrative, speaks to the director in part but mostly to the patriarchal context in which these cultural codes are accepted. The way that the male characters communicate with each other, with their love interests, how they cope with insecurities, fears, desires and overcome challenges reveals a lot about masculinity in that context. My research analyzes the Nice Guy

and the male gaze in these four Taiwanese romantic comedies. I will illustrate my arguments through character studies, narrative themes and cinematic conventions.

Naturally, there are a lot of factors at play here and I will therefore not take these examples and my analysis as any form of universal truths about masculinity. I merely carry out specific character studies based on characters from these four movies with the aim of illustrating the image of the Nice Guy in a Taiwanese context. I also do not believe that masculinity is something exclusive to male bodies. But in the framework of this thesis my focus is on the male presenting characters because the Nice Guy trope is specific to these binary gender conventions.

1.1.1 Literature Review – Chinese Hegemonic Masculinity

The essence of the Nice Guy lies in the fact that he poses an (alleged) alternative to hegemonic masculinity. In order to understand how he deviates from this, the concept of (Chinese) hegemonic masculinity needs to be defined first. In this section, I give a brief definition of the general concept of hegemonic masculinity and introduce the topic of masculinities in a Chinese context. I also include a discussion of masculinity in premodern China because throughout the thesis I include similarities between the current Nice Guy and previous masculinity types. In the premodern context, I refer to Chinese masculinity, but in the modern context I distinctly refer to Taiwanese masculinity.

Hegemonic masculinity is a core concept within gender studies that assumes the existence of multiple types of masculinities, where one of them serves as the norm (Connell and Messerschmidt 2005). Even though hegemonic masculinity traits are embodied by only a small group of men, it does function as a norm for all men. It refers to certain masculine values and behaviors that are deemed dominant, and justifies the patriarchal subordination of women and alternative modes of being a man. In the western context, this type of masculinity that other types have long been compared to consist of alpha macho traits (Connell and Messerschmidt 2005). But according to a 2013 research that looked at magazine advertisements, hegemonic masculinity has evolved to contain more gentle traits of masculinity (Tan 2013). Both in Taiwan and in the U.S., hegemonic masculinity currently emulates a form of “refined and sophisticated” masculinity. This type places importance on someone who is intellectual, cultured, well-mannered, confident, reliable, and gives of a mature impression (Tan 2013, 239). This consequently translates to a display of material wealth as well as new beauty and fashion standards. The ideal man should be able to dress

very well (either in formal wear or in preppy style), have a classy and clean look, and have a successful career. This shift has placed a focus on mental rather than physical qualities, which is in line with premodern notions of Chinese masculinity (Tan 2013, 246).

Most prominent in this academic discourse surrounding premodern Chinese masculinity is Kam Louie (2002; 2011). He recognizes the *wen-wu* pair as the foundational masculinity ideal for men throughout Chinese history, where *wen* 文 stands for literary and cultural attainment while *wu* 武 stands for martial accomplishment. He emphasizes the importance for cultural and historical context when discussing this topic, which is why he uses terms that are indigenous to Chinese culture. Louie is the first to point out and utilize the *wen-wu* dyad as an essential analytical tool for approaching masculinity. This dichotomy can function in various ways, most notably by signifying the distinction between mental and physical attainments. These attainments mainly refer to ideal values that are embodied by successes in the public domain, which mainly entailed passing the civil service examinations (*wen*) or attaining a high position in the military (*wu*). Therefore, because men are the only ones that have access to the public domain, the *wen-wu* dyad doesn't apply to women, unless they cross dress (Louie 2002, 83).

Throughout Chinese history, *wen* and *wu* have influenced all aspects of life such as criminal law, social order, education, as well as determining what an ideal man should be. At various points in time, the ideal man either possessed both *wen* and *wu* in perfect balance or one of them to the highest degree (Louie 2002, 11). In earlier times *wu* was valued highest. But gradually, especially with the rise of Confucianism, the importance of education and moral virtue increased and *wen* values were deemed superior over *wu* (Louie 2002, 17). Education, which characterizes *wen*, is one of the pillars of Confucianism and Confucius himself is regarded as the 'god of *wen*'. Both *wen* and *wu* have multiple heroes, icons and personifications. Generally speaking, the *wen* heroes serve as a model for the elite man, while *wu* heroes are there for the masses (which were poor and low to middle class) (Louie 2002, 43).

In art and literature many examples of such heroes are portrayed. I already mentioned Confucius but another notable personification of the *wen* ideal is the *caizi* ('scholar') figure in the *caizi jiaren* ('scholar-beauty' genre). This type of romantic novel rose in popularity in the late Ming dynasty and remained well-known all throughout the Qing dynasty. Just like the modern day romantic comedy portrays a certain type of masculinity, these premodern characters embodied masculine ideals of the time. In these stories, a handsome, gifted and

youthful man falls in love with an equally gifted and beautiful woman. It's clear that their love is of the purest kind and they express this through the exchange of poems. They overcome obstacles and in the end the scholar has fulfilled his full potential by passing the civil service examinations and winning the woman (McMahon, 105). Physically, this *wen* man is characterized by his youthful look: he is slender and has soft features, described as possessing 'female beauty'. These *wen* characteristics will come back later when I analyze the Nice Guy and its antagonist.

Similar to premodern Chinese masculinities, modern iterations are also varied. But still, some prevalent ideals can still be identified amongst the middle- and elite class. Overall, hegemonic masculinity encapsulates the notion of 'outstanding accomplishment' or *chenggong*, no matter in what field (Liu 2019). In order to lead a happy life and be a good man, one needs to be successful. This led the way for new masculine heroes such as: athletes, rockstars and wealthy businessmen. Moreover, the new mature masculinities of the modern era are characterized by virtue of responsibility and ability. The first refers to a feeling of responsibility towards one's family and country and the latter signifies the ability to earn enough money to take care of them (Wong 2020, 9). Brownell (2002, 363) describes manhood as a process, not a state of being, where this ability is eventually mastered. Moreover, this is achieved through competition with other men (Brownell 2002, 364).

Money is another keyword in modern masculinities. After 1980, economic consumption was being pushed by the government (Brownell 2002, 363). Being able to possess material wealth and show it off has become essential to being a 'real man' (Wong 2020, 130; Song and Hird 2014, 12). Being able to afford nice things signals that this is a man who is able to take care of his wife. In a dating context, a type of 'romantic consumerism' has taken shape, where young men are expected to buy flowers for their partner, take them out to dinner, buy them gifts etc. (Song and Hird 2014, 26). In short, the ideal masculine type is that of the successful metropolitan business-man who shows his wealth through good taste or *pinwei* (Song and Hird 2014, 12).

Apart from this wealthy boyfriend, other youthful embodiments have recently arisen from internet culture, where new identities take shape all the time (Song and Hird 2014). One of the most common terms is the *zhainan*. He is a socially awkward young man who prefers to stay inside and behind his computer all day, avoiding social interaction as much as possible. In pop culture, the *zhainan* is portrayed countless times as a typical Nice Guy. In this thesis, two of the Nice Guys included are *zhainans*. I will also make a connection between him and the historical figure of the *wen* scholar, who is similar in his soft features

and tender nature (Song and Hird 2014, 10). I don't regard these historical connections to be directly causally related, but I do think there is value in showing historical incarnations that may have influenced present day images of manhood.

1.1.2 Literature Review – Feminist Film Theory

An important aspect in gender and sexuality studies is 'the look' and 'the gaze'. I will unpack this concept and how it is intermeshed with other concepts such as visual culture, fear of castration and masculinity.

People learn to look through the lens of one's cultural upbringing and eventually through the media and (visual) culture. This act of 'looking' is part of a social structure and consequently demonstrates itself differently for different people. 'The look' is always relational and is also defined by Jean-Paul Sartre (1943) as 'being-seen-by-the-Other' (290). In discussing these masculinities, I will also refer to femininity and how the female and male characters relate to each other, because gender is a relational concept.

Sartre (1943) writes: "I am fixing the people whom I see into objects; I am in relation to them as the Other is in relation to me. In looking at them I measure my power. But if the Other sees them and sees me, then my look loses its power; it cannot transform those people into objects *for the Other* since they already are the objects of his look" (290). Here Sartre articulates his relation with the people he is looking at, as well as the Other who is also in control of its own look. By looking at these people, he turns them into objects, thus only seeing representations of the actual people. Moreover, an 'object' by definition has no agency and is unable to return the look. This citation is relevant because it acknowledges a crucial factor of 'the look' that leads the way to 'the gaze'; it establishes the operation of power through different patterns of looking. Through looking, one establishes its power over the object. But the fact that one is able to look at all times, also means that the look can be returned. The power of looking thus coincides with a vulnerability.

I have already briefly mentioned 'the gaze'. Distinct from the verb 'to gaze', 'the gaze' as a concept symbolizes an overall power structure that no one person has control over. The gaze is the scopic regime that controls and sanctions looks as a part of a political structure. A common narrative within this discourse is that men are often in charge of 'the gaze' while women are its object. At the core of this male gaze lies 'the fear of castration', a term introduced by Freud, meaning the constant fear of losing power. 'Castration' stems from the symbolic penis of patriarchal power, or 'phallic power'. To lose this power is thus

compared to being castrated. Bryson (1993, 231) points out that this anxiety lies at the core of the construction of masculinity. Masculinity is a masquerade that disavows the inherent vulnerability of phallic power.

Laura Mulvey's article analyzes this epistemological tradition in narrative cinema and coins it: 'the male gaze'. She writes: "Thus the woman as icon, displayed for the gaze and enjoyment of men, the active controllers of the look, always threatens to evoke the anxiety it originally signified. The male unconscious has two avenues of escape from this castration anxiety: (...) or else complete disavowal of castration by the substitution of a fetish object or turning the represented figure into a fetish so that it becomes reassuring instead rather than dangerous" (Mulvey 1975, 840). Mulvey confirms men's fear of castration and argues that this is embedded in the construction of women as an eroticized object in movies. Women's lack of penis evokes this anxiety and is therefore ignored by turning the woman into a fetishized object. Thus, due to men's castration anxiety, cinematic codes create the male gaze wherein male characters are always active and in control and women's 'to-be-looked-at-ness' is turned into a voyeuristic spectacle (Mulvey 1975, 843). I will argue that the interplay of these cinematic conventions and the narrative construction of the Nice Guy together perpetuate patriarchal ideology.

1.2 Methodology

The research design consists of analyzing four Taiwanese romantic comedies from the past 15 years. I choose Taiwan as the socio-geographical context because its arguably the most progressive (compared to Hong Kong and mainland China) in regards to human rights and specifically gender equality. I anticipate that that this will ensure more conceptual space and an unrestricted perspective on gender and sexuality in these films.

The options for romantic comedies were limited, therefore it seems like romantic comedies are not as popular in Taiwan (or Hong Kong and mainland China) as they are in Hollywood, but the material is sufficient for carrying out the project. In picking these movies I avoided movies set in high school and/or overlapping with the sci-fi genre because I want to analyze a form of masculinity that is rooted in mature and realistic circumstances. I picked the following movies to illustrate the Nice Guy trope in Taiwanese romantic comedies: Leehom Wang's *Love in Disguise* (恋爱通告), Donnie Lai Cheun-Yu's *Campus Confidential* (爱情无

全顺), Chin-Lin Chiang's *Café, Waiting, Love* (等一個人咖啡) and Chu Yen-Ping's *My Geeky Nerdy Buddies* (大宅男).

The following discussions are my readings and personal interpretations of what I see on screen. I will use a combination of sources, some are from 'western' scholars who write about gender studies in general, some are specified towards the Asian/Chinese/Taiwanese context. Because the research about Nice Guy movie trope is scarce, as well as discourse about feminist film theory in Taiwanese cinema, I had to make do with the sources at hand. On a final note, these movies are geared towards a Taiwanese and Chinese audience (women specifically) and I will not attempt to speak for them. Moreover, I am aware of my position as a person who grew up in the global north and I acknowledge how this has and continues to tint my views, but I can also not disregard this. Perhaps my role as an outsider grants me with the ability to have a unique reading of the content I analyze in this thesis.

2. The Taiwanese Nice Guy

The Nice Guy is a common trope in film, especially in the romantic comedy genre. He exists on a spectrum, going from the least to the most extreme. But there are a few common traits that all of its iterations possess. What mainly characterizes him is that he poses an alternative to hegemonic masculinity. He deviates from these dominant male traits and interests, such as being social, professionally, romantically (and sexually) successful. Physically he is not conventionally attractive, he doesn't have a sense of style, looks a bit on the skinny side, and often wears glasses. He either falls into the (best) friend archetype or the nerd archetype. But what is most interesting about him is that even though he seems to pose an alternative to hegemonic masculinity, in reality he actually possesses many of these traits that are considered to be traditionally masculine. Indeed, his whole identity is actually based on trying to achieve or emulate that exact form of masculinity that he claims to dislike, often in order to get the girl.

Even though across the spectrum of Nice Guys there are clearly common traits, they differ in how far they are willing to go to get what they want. In his most extreme form, the Nice Guy manipulates, lies, and disguises himself in order to 'trick' his love interest. This behavior is excused because he does it out of love and he is ultimately framed as 'a good guy'. The romanticization of his obsession and concealment of the harm this does to women is typical for the male gaze, where male dominance is naturalized through the cinematic conventions (Mulvey 1975, 841).

This thesis is divided in chapters based on overarching themes. Each thematic chapter can include examples from some or all of the four movies. Every chapter highlights a different aspect of the Nice Guy masculinity and covers how this relates to hegemonic masculinity and/or plays into the male gaze. I start with the softer Nice Guy traits covered in chapter 2.1 titled ‘The quest for love’. This chapter focuses on the Nice Guy whose only focus is his one true love. This is followed by the more serious and oftentimes problematic types of masculinity portrayed in chapter 2.2 titled ‘The quest for manhood’. The essence of this type of Nice Guy lies in what the female love interest represents. Whereas chapter 2.1 highlights Nice Guys whose defining quality is the quest for love, this particular Nice Guy ultimately wants to be affirmed in his manhood. It is in this chapter where the cinematic conventions of the male gaze are most palpable and play hand in hand with the Nice Guy archetype.

2.1 The quest for love

The following chapter analyses three Nice Guys: the goofy A Tuo from *Café, Waiting, Love*, popstar Du Ming-han from *Love in Disguise* and student A Zhai from *My Geeky Nerdy Buddies*. They are not as toxic as the Nice Guys from the next chapter, but they still perpetuate harmful behavior towards women in various subtle ways. These types of Nice Guys keep pursuing a girl out of love, and in the case of Ming-han he goes to extremes to get to know her. He does enact problematic behavior but he is still somewhat redeemable because ultimately he just wants his love interest to be happy, even if she doesn’t end up with him.

2.1.1 Romanticization

The following character studies of Nice Guys show us that true love conquers all. Even if it’s one-sided love. The protagonists would do anything for the girl they like, except leave her alone. I argue that this typical trait of the Nice Guy thrives within the context of the male gaze, where all the cinematic conventions are set up in his favor. Moreover, Mulvey (1975) evokes Freud’s theory of the fear of castration as the catalyst for the male gaze. I argue that this anxiety leads these Nice Guys to behave in the way they do.

Mulvey describes a typical aspect of the male gaze, where the protagonist falls in love with a woman after just having laid eyes on her. He hasn’t actually talked to her, and therefore falls in love “with a perfect image of female beauty and mystery” (Mulvey 1975, 842). Nice Guys similarly fall for someone that they barely or do not know at all. They are merely mesmerized by her beauty and feel like they know her based on her physical

appearance. Popstar Du Ming-han serves as an example. When he is driven home in his limousine after a concert, the vehicle almost accidentally crashes into someone on the road. They've stopped just in time, and everyone steps out of the limousine to check if the person on the road is alright. The person that they've almost hit is Song Xiao-Qing, who plays the guzheng. She immediately checks if her instrument still works so she starts playing right then and there. Ming-han steps out of the car and when he sees and hears her, he is transported into another world, seeing visions of butterflies. He is immediately infatuated with her. He then works out a master plan and finds out at which conservatory she studies. He decides to attend the school undercover, in order to be close to her and get to know her. Throughout the movie, they become friends and start making music together. All this time she doesn't recognize him as the popstar he is and it is only at the end of the movie that she finds out. When she finds out she is mad at first, but then she comes to terms with the fact that she actually also did fall for him. Disguising yourself to be someone else is clearly problematic, even stalker-like behavior. This type of 'stalking for love' is a common trope, especially in Hollywood films especially (Pop Culture Detective 2018). In the trope, this invasive behavior is portrayed as something harmless, even endearing and romantic. Du Ming-han's approach is clearly problematic, but it is excused in the name of love.

Besides falling head over heels for a girl they barely know, Nice Guys put their love interests on a pedestal. The female love interests in these movies are granted an almost untouchable, angel-like status. A Zhai of *My Geeky Nerdy Buddies* even refers to his crush Ya Ling as a 'goddess'. When she is introduced in the beginning of the movie, he narrates: "I knew that she would be *my* goddess" (00:09:18). He thinks she is the most beautiful 'thing' anyone has ever seen. They finally get to know each other a bit better when they end up hanging out the whole evening after a big party. Ya Ling is upset because she found out her boyfriend is cheating on her, and she's drinking heavily to cope with that. At some point they sit down, she is crying and venting while resting her head on A Zhai's shoulder. He does not console or comfort her. Rather, he says she is so beautiful and he couldn't be happier than being with her right now (00:30:51). She is crying and clearly in a terrible mental state, but all he can say is how happy being with her makes *him* feel. Rather than really being able to listen to her, he illustrates the Nice Guy's hyper fixation on female beauty. In doing so, he is romanticizing her agony rather than seeing her as a human being with complex emotions. Moreover, the Nice Guy sees her as a woman first and foremost, and an attractive one at that (Nesbø 2021, 28). Putting women on a pedestal enables the reduction of female characters to their beauty, which is a staple of the male gaze (Mulvey 1975, 837). Romanticizing or even

fetishizing female pain is an extension of that and speaks to men's ultimate fear of castration. Because in order to counter this fear, the female body – which signifies castration – has to be fetishized (Mulvey 1975, 840). Mulvey (1975) borrows Freud's notion of 'scopophilia' (pleasure in looking) and coins the term 'fetishistic scopophilia' where the male gaze "builds up the physical beauty of the object, transforming it into something satisfying in itself" (840). Turning female pain into spectacle doesn't merely happen on a narrative level (through A Zhai's gaze), but also extra-diegetically, because the viewer's gaze is aligned with that of the male protagonist (Mulvey 1975, 838). Throughout Ya Ling's entire emotional breakdown, she remains posed and attractive. Even the way she cries is beautiful; no smudged make-up, loud noises, or dripping snot. Just a few singular perfect teardrops trickle down her face.

2.1.2. Counterbalancing fragility

These Nice Guys are all lacking in something, whether it's a personality flaw or they've been made a laughing stock in their community. But their choice of love does help in countering this marginalization. A-Tuo in *Café, Waiting, Love* is a roller skating, bikini wearing, lettuce carrying goofy guy. Most of these accessories are because he has lost bets and that was the price he had to pay. People call him weird and even a pervert because of this. His masculinity is called into question even more severely when people find out that his girlfriend left him for another girl. There is a scene where he and his friends run into his ex's new girlfriend at a café. When his friends realize that this is the 'dyke' that his ex-girlfriend left him for, he is extensively made fun of. His friends find it all hilarious and publically call out insults like: "his dick has no effect on his rival", which is met with loud laughter (00:09:43). He is metaphorically castrated; his dick holds no power over a lesbian. The link between castration and masculinity is not exclusive to western discourse. Martin Huang (2006, 21-28) writes about the historian Sima Qian and how he was castrated (instead of receiving the death penalty) so he could finish his father's work. Even though being castrated was seen as the ultimate form of emasculation, ultimately he was affirmed in his masculinity even more because of his *wen* attainments and moral superiority (Song and Hird 2014, 53). This sentiment lives on throughout the discussion about the Taiwanese Nice Guy, because even though his masculinity is fragile, he ultimately is reaffirmed in his masculinity through his enactment of superior virtue. These virtues include loyalty, honesty and humility – all traits that A Tuo from *Café, Waiting, Love* possesses. And this moral superiority is a sign of a true

gentleman (*junzi*), according to Confucius (Louie 2002). A Tuo's virtuous personality is ultimately what redeems him.

The female protagonist Si-ying overhears the spectacle and immediately steps in and tells his friends that they should be ashamed of themselves (00:10:05). Her dominance impresses him and since that moment he wants to pursue her. He instantly falls for her although it's not necessarily because of her appearance, but rather for her assertive personality. Ahmed (2014, 162) writes that people are attracted to individuals that represent something that they feel they lack. Perhaps it is because of his emasculated social status that he wants to be with her. A Nice Guy, who isn't a 'manly man', could therefore 'choose' a masculine woman in order to increase one's own masculinity (Nesbø 2021, 31).

Just like A Tuo is attracted to a woman who emulates qualities that he lacks, Du Ming-han of *Love in Disguise* is also seeking for a part of him that is missing. And he finds this in Xiao-Qing. Ming-han is sensitive and especially passionate about music. But he is also quite an angry man. As is shown in the beginning sequence of the movie, Ming-han struggles with anger issues. This is demonstrated by him attacking a paparazzo who asks him a question about his love life (00:02:55). Nesbø (2021) writes that one of the symptoms of toxic masculinity of the Nice Guy is that "he puts the burden of men's emotional fulfillment on women" (30). That rings true in the case of Ming-han as well, because every time he hears Xiao-Qing play music, he is teleported into a magical vision of them, surrounded by butterflies. He is only truly at peace when he hears her music or plays music with her, unable to create this tranquility for himself.

A Tuo is quite assertive in his approach. His funny, cheeky charm is quite disarming as a viewer but Si-Ying doesn't like him one bit at first. Because Si-Ying stood up for him, A Tuo wants to take her out as a thank you. But Si-Ying is not interested, she thinks he is a weirdo, so she rejects him, and even says there is nothing she wants less. Nonetheless, A Tuo keeps pursuing her and threatens to tell her crush that she likes him. Of course, she doesn't want her crush to know that, so she finally agrees to go out with him. The problem here is that a Nice Guy can never take no for an answer (Nesbø 2021). He thinks he knows what's best, and that if she only gave him a chance, she will eventually like him. But he doesn't acknowledge her agency and independence, and instead, chooses to reject her ability to choose for herself.

A Tuo is friendly and supportive, but he does constantly tell her that he likes her. The American Nice Guy that Nesbø (2021) analyses is not very open about his emotions. The only emotion that is being shown in her case studies is that of anger. But the Taiwanese Nice Guy

isn't afraid of vulnerability. Especially Du Ming-han (*Love in Disguise*) and A Tuo (*Café, Waiting, Love*) are quite upfront about their feelings. But even though being open about one's feelings is an admirable trait, when the love interest is vocal about the feeling not being mutual, they keep pursuing her and tell her about how they feel. When she says she doesn't like him back, he keeps saying that he trusts that she eventually will. Again, the Nice Guy thinks that he knows best. And in typical Nice Guy fashion, he keeps pursuing her until he eventually wears down her defenses and she actually does fall for him.

Even though A Tuo, A Zhai and Du Ming-han partake in problematic behavior, they are ultimately defined by their hopeless romantic nature; they would do anything for the girl they like.

2.2 The quest for manhood

Whereas the focus of the previous iteration of the Nice Guy was on his true love and how he would do anything to be with her, for this Nice Guy, there is more at stake. This time, getting the girl is equivalent to attaining a certain social status that he feels will solidify his masculinity. The Nice Guy generally doesn't have a lot going on for himself. On the surface, all his focus is on the woman he likes, loves even. He doesn't really know her but he believes her to be the ideal woman and his one true love. If only she would notice him. If only he was successful enough, handsome enough, manly enough. If only people would look beyond his geeky exterior and recognize the real man that was inside of him all along. And herein lies the essence of this version of the Nice Guy; 'getting the girl' symbolizes achieving a certain manliness that he longs for which he feels he lacks. The Nice Guy trope makes use of the sexist notion that a woman is something to be 'had'. The Nice Guy also believes that women only want this one type of man. And rather than embracing otherness, he strives to fit into this mold of hegemonic masculinity. Brownell (2002, 363) describes manhood as a process, and the Nice Guy romcom is ultimately a coming of age movie where the protagonist fully grows into the hegemonic masculinity he claims to hate.

2.2.1 The meaning of the 'Chads'

The Nice Guy lives in a binary world where individuals are either cool and handsome or unpopular and ugly. In her dissertation on *The Nice Guy*, Nesbø (2021) calls the antithesis of *The Nice Guy* 'Chad'. She utilizes Chad as the embodiment of hegemonic masculinity. Chad represents everything that *The Nice Guy* lacks and that he therefore strives to be. Whereas

Nesbø's Chad represents an older mode of western hegemonic masculinity that refers to the traditional alpha macho man, the current Chad in the recent Taiwanese context represents the 'refined and sophisticated' kind of hegemonic masculinity I discussed above. Therefore, I believe 'Chad' can still function all the same; as the antithesis of the Taiwanese Nice Guy.

The most important thing that Chad has and The Nice Guy doesn't, is that Chad has (sexual) relationships with women. In all these four movies, the love interest is either crushing on or dating a Chad. The Nice Guy generally instantly dislikes him because of this. But even though the Nice Guy hates Chad he is still obsessed with being like him because he believes that girls only like Chads. And although his goal first and foremost is to 'get the girl', I argue that what's even more important to him is what this girl represents. Mulvey (1975) quotes Budd Boetticher, saying: "What counts is what the heroine provokes, or rather what she represents. She is the one, or rather the love or fear she inspires in the hero, or else the concern he feels for her, who makes him act the way he does. In herself the woman has not the slightest importance." (837). In order to acquire the love interest's desire, the Nice Guy has to achieve success on a professional, social, and sexual level. The Chad in *Campus Confidential* is popular and multi-talented, the Chad in *My Geeky, Nerdy Buddies* is a wealthy businessman. These Chads are desirable by women precisely because of their respective success. The Nice Guy is therefore obsessed with the masculinity that these Chads embody and they see them as examples of what they feel they should be. Brownell (2002, 363) similarly describes manhood as a process of achieving a level of mastery in a certain area. The geeks in these movies are on a conquest to becoming the mature and sophisticated men that they want to be, the girl is ultimately the prize for this achievement.

The Chads in these movies also emulate the historical *wen* values of superior intelligence and cultural talent (Louie 2002). Especially the antagonist in *Love in Disguise* is the embodiment of *wen*. He is intellectually and musically gifted, and is recognized for this by the whole campus. He has achieved mastery in the musical field. Everyone looks to him for his advice and is generally well-liked. He fits perfectly into the 'refined and sophisticated' type of masculinity, which Tan (2013, 246) already established to be similar to previous *wen* masculinity.

The geeks in *My Geeky, Nerdy Buddies* are hyper focused on the fact that these Chads have girlfriends because they have houses and cars (00:07:13). They think that because they lack these material luxuries, they have nothing to offer a woman. Through displays of wealth they want to show women that they can be taken care of. They assume that women want and *need* to be taken care of, which shows their shallow view of women. And the movie itself

doesn't reject this misogynistic assumption either. Instead, the movies reestablish women's dependence on men by making the love interest emotionally and financially dependent on the Nice Guy or the Chad. In doing so, the male gaze strokes the male ego and reassures his value in heterosexual relationships (Mulvey 1975, 837). For instance, in *My Geeky Nerdy Buddies*, it is revealed halfway through that Ya Ling had stayed in a relationship with the designated Chad because he is able to financially support her family, despite him cheating on her. There is apparently no room (or interest) for a storyline where she finds a job for herself and is financially (and emotionally) independent. Rather, the Nice Guy A Zhai offers to pay for her sisters' surgery himself.

In general, the Nice Guy wants to save the girl he likes. He wants to save her from her current situation and mostly from her Chad that she is dating currently. Because he sees Chad for what he truly is, a bad guy. He sees Chad either using her for her popularity or her body, and he wants to 'rescue' her from this situation. But what he doesn't see is that he does the exact same thing. He thinks that he likes her for who she truly is but he doesn't know her anymore than her boyfriend does (he probably knows her even less than him). The truth is, the Nice Guy falls for her looks and fills in the rest of her personality to match her physical beauty.

This savior behavior shows the Nice Guy and the Chad as two sides of the same coin. Both want to take care of 'their woman' and disregard her independence in this (to be fair, she also ignores her own ability to be independent). This need to take care of her makes him feel valued in his masculinity. This echoes the fairytale trope of the 'damsel in distress', where men's empowerment often comes from female disempowerment (Curtis 2015). Nesbø (2021) writes "This is what makes the character trope so dangerous; they seem to promote a feminist rendering of a male character, but they are in actuality just as threatening, if not more, than the typical Chad character. Nice Guys hide and put on a mask to get what they want, while Chad is explicit in his wishes" (5).

But what ultimately makes the audience root for the Nice Guy is the fact that he morally is a better guy than Chad. The notion that superiority of moral virtue is a desirable trait for men goes back to the Confucian image of the *junzi*; he is the ultimate manly man or gentleman because of his morality and loyalty (Louie 2002). Similarly, the humility and friendliness of the Nice Guy poses a welcome alternative to the narcissistic, bragging Chad.

2.2.2 Victimhood of the obsessed geek

Campus Confidential and *My Geeky, Nerdy Buddies* provides us with the more extreme versions of the Nice Guy. In these two movies, the Nice Guys are ‘geeks’ or *zhainans*. Among Chinese netizens the word has been more frequently used over the years and it refers to a “socially awkward young man who secludes himself in his home all day indulging in anime, computer games, and Web networking.” (Song and Hird 2014, 79). These movies came out around the time Song and Hird published their book *Men and Masculinities in Contemporary China*. In the book, they researched popular masculinity types in the online space and *zhainan* was one of the most prominent types. The word *zhainan* became popular in Taiwanese media from 2005 (Song and Hird 2014, 82) onwards. Song and Hird describe how the word became an emblem of a new ideal lifestyle, influenced by new forms of technology that allowed young urban people to stay inside. The *zhainan* is also characterized by a certain degree of obsession (for games, for instance) which is seen as a desirable trait (Song and Hird 2014, 92). The obsessive nature of the *zhainan* links back to older ideas about purity as a signifier for moral superiority (Song and Hird 2014, 26). Because to be obsessed with something (or someone) is to completely surrender oneself to passion and sentiment. And this idealistic, single-minded type of love is an admirable sign of a pure, child-like nature (Song 2004, 96).

The *zhainan* of *Campus Confidential*, Lucky Wu, seems to be a harmless, awkward, introverted geek throughout most of the movie. Because of an age-old campus legend, Lucky Wu (the geek) and Kiki (the most popular girl) are fated to fall in love. The legend goes that if the campus lake dries up, the two people that fall in the lake together are destined to be together. Of course, Lucky Wu and Kiki fall into the lake at the same time just when the lake dried up and after the incident, they seem to constantly run in to each other. She tries to fight it as much as she can, even locking herself in her room the entire day as a means to avoid him. But their fate is inescapable, and she falls out of the window, falling directly onto Wu’s lap. She even interviews other couples that have gotten married because of the legend, trying to find a way to undo her fate. But eventually, she falls for his quirky, sweet nature and they start dating. But then, towards the end of the movie, the plot twist reveals that Lucky Wu orchestrated the whole ordeal. He created an entire drainage system to dry up the lake, fabricated the whole legend, and hired actors to play couples who got married because of the legend. He said that if she didn’t believe it was fate, she would have never even given him a chance. After a few minutes in movie of her being mad at him (mainly sad actually), she forgives him. In the final scene, they are together and he has become a professor at the university. He has clearly had a make-over because he looks conventionally attractive now

(image set 1). The moral of the story? No matter how creepy and stalker-like your behavior, you did it out of love and therefore it is forgiven (even romantic). The Nice Guy wins again. He finally got the girl, the professional success, and good looks. In his happy ending lies “his claim to hegemonic masculinity” (Allan 2020, 57).



Image set 1. Lucky Wu (*Campus Confidential*) during the film vs. in the ending scene.

His insecurity about his identity as a geek, as an outsider on campus (and in society) shouldn't excuse his toxic behavior. By fabricating the entire story about the legend and orchestrating the whole thing, making her believe it was fate, he takes away her right to choose. Consent requires knowing the whole truth and being clear on a person's intention. And in this case, Kiki cannot actually consent to being in a relationship with him (even being physical with him) because he has manipulated her. But despite this he still sees himself as someone who lacks control, who is a victim. This renders it impossible for him to see the error of his ways. He even makes her feel guilty after he comes clean. In his 'apology' he mainly focuses on his victimhood, and how she never would have noticed him otherwise, making her feel sorry for him. Because he is showing his sensitivity, pulling on the heartstrings, she sympathizes with him. By focusing on his marginalization and how real his feelings for her are, his toxic behavior is neutralized.

The *zhainans* believe that they are lowest on the food pyramid. They feel like they are the weakest group of individuals in their communities. All that they see is their victimhood. According to Kimmel (2017), “white man's anger comes from the potent fusion of two sentiments: entitlement and a sense of victimization” (14-17). Even though his comment is situated in the world of racialized tensions during the Trump presidency in the US and

specifies white men, the sentiment still rings true in the context of the Taiwanese geek masculinity. These marginalized men feel wronged by women (who don't want them), by Chads (who have what they want) and by society at large (because it doesn't take them seriously). Kimmel also mentions entitlement as a foundational sentiment for men's frustration. In the context of *Campus Confidential* and *My Geeky, Nerdy Buddies*, these geeks clearly feel a sense of entitlement towards the women they like. They feel like they are good guys (unlike Chads) and are therefore deserving of women's desire. They believe that their rejection is merely situational and has nothing to do with who they are as people, they are just not in the right physical and financial conditions to be noticed by pretty women. They don't actually have to change anything personality wise, if only they land good jobs, they will be noticed eventually.

But there is a clear lack of responsibility here. Their sense of victimization and entitlement diverts the 'blame' for their situation away from themselves. This is not at all to say that people who are marginalized are in that position because of something they did. But I do believe that in this case, the geeks who see themselves as nothing but victims and are waiting until their turn to be sexually engaged with women, can't see past their entitlement. Rather, they exert power over women by sexualizing them; talking about their bodies, staring at their bodies, and fantasizing about sexual acts with them. They even take advantage of them when they are in vulnerable positions. For instance, when Ya Ling of *My Geeky Nerdy Buddies* finds out her boyfriend cheated on her, she is upset and drowns her sadness with alcohol. The protagonist A Zhai keeps her company during the evening, where they bond and she opens up about her boyfriend troubles. At the end of the night, he brings her back to her hotel room where she passes out on the bed. The next day, A Zhai's friends ask him all kinds of uncouth questions about his night; if she was 'shaved downstairs', what her bra size is and if he slept with her (00:31:40). He says he didn't because she was intoxicated. His friends jokingly say that that was his only chance, that he should have slept with her when she was asleep (00:32:39). In other words, his friends joke that he should have raped her. Because they are aware that women don't want to sleep with them, so the only way to 'get laid' is apparently by forcing it on them while unconscious. Even though A Zhai is supposed to be a good guy, he doesn't say anything to counter their gross comments. Moreover, we later find out that even though he didn't take sexual advantage of Ya Ling, he did take a selfie of the two of them lying on the bed (while she was unconscious) as 'proof' of their night together.

Because of the geeks' sense of power loss due to their victim status, they don't realize that they do actually have power simply because they are men. And in some cases, they exert

this power in harmful ways towards women. They do this either through rape (even though A Zhai didn't do it, his friends made it clear that they would have), by taking a picture of a woman in bed when she is passed out, or by sexually objectifying them. Perhaps it is precisely because they feel like a victim and feel this lack of a manly identity, that they (unconsciously) want to assert this power over women.

2.2.3 Too subordinate to be hegemonic, too misogynistic to be subordinate

Even though the geeks of *My Geeky, Nerdy Buddies* and *Campus Confidential* are marginalized, they still clearly partake in patriarchal behavior. One of the ways is through objectifying and sexualizing the women they like (as well as the ones they don't).

In her TEDxYouth Talk, dr. Caroline Heldman (2013) defines sexual objectification as “The process of representing or treating a person like a sex object, one that serves another’s sexual pleasure” (1:09). Even though the geeks themselves are ridiculed because of their looks, they still evaluate women based on their bodies. Xiao Ying (A Zhai’s friend) from *My Geeky, Nerdy Buddies* serves as an example. He is conventionally unattractive like his other friends, but besides that he is also bigger than them, keep this in mind. Xiao Ying likes this girl, A Mei, he first sees her in yoga class and is mesmerized by her beauty. When the viewer is first introduced to her we are immediately thrown into a dream sequence where A Mei stares right at us, dressed in only a bra and short shorts, seducing us with her sensual body movements and hair flips (00:14:42). It is clear that she’s a hot person and that Xiao Ying likes her for that reason alone, because when he talks about her he only focuses on her physical features. He makes her into an object, one where sexual availability and attraction stands at the forefront. In doing so, he reaffirms his masculinity. Van Alphen (1992, 169) points out that this objectifying gaze is masculine in itself because of the inherent power imbalance. To fix someone as an object therefore solidifies the dominance of the active objectifier. In a patriarchal society, this active agent is always a man, who’s position is deemed neutral and objective. Mackinnon (1987) writes that “Objectivity is the epistemological stance of which objectification is the social process, of which male dominance is the politics, the acted out social practice. That is, to look at the world objectively is to objectify it” (50).

This scene clearly objectifies her, highlighting her body before we have even heard her speak. But I do want to note that even though an object is gazed upon, this doesn't exclude the possibility that there can be power in that submission. Being naked or vulnerable can certainly

evoke a sense of pride (Goddard 2000, 25). There are many instances in film where women feel a sense of empowerment in sexualization. Nussbaum (1995, 271), who is a defender of positive objectification, argues that it all depends on the context and the nature of the relationship. In this particular movie, A Mei's character lacks a complex, layered personality with clear ambition and agency. I believe this is a requirement in the distinction between being objectified and feeling empowered. Right now, there is no full-fledged human being behind this body to even feel empowered. She is reduced to a body alone. Nussbaum (1995) defines negative objectification as reducing a human being to a mere 'thing', a tool for the objectifiers purpose, which is what is happening here. Moreover, when A Mei is seductively moving around on her yoga mat in Xiao Ying's fantasy, she's not only dancing for him. She is simultaneously seducing the viewer. Mulvey (1975, 838) acknowledges this phenomenon as inherent in the male gaze where the function for the woman on screen is two-fold: she serves as an erotic spectacle both within the story and for the viewer as well. There's a clear difference here in being desirable (male gaze) and embracing one's own desire (empowerment).



Image set 2. The cartoonized retelling of A Zhai's parents (*My Geeky Nerdy Buddies*)

I want to illustrate the point of sexualization even further. All female characters, no matter their role, are first and foremost sexualized bodies. Even when they're mothers. At one point in *My Geeky Nerdy Buddies*, A Zhai tells the story of how his parents met (00:16:25-00:18:36). The entire story centers the sexualization of the mother, both how it's illustrated as well as the content matter. A Zhai's story is supplemented by a cartoon, I believe that this is to create an even bigger distance between him and the story he is telling (image set 2). A Zhai's father had a rare disease and the only medication was human milk, so when a woman nearby just had an abortion, her breast milk production was still active. The father asked her to drink from her breast, and she agreed. From then on he drank her breastmilk every day, straight from the breast. The way it is drawn and the way he tells this story is uncomfortable to say the least. It doesn't seem like this is someone talking about his parents because of the cartoon caricatures the story in a sexualized way. He describes his own mother like a sexy cow and even his father makes a similar observation when his mother passes away. Because he no longer has any breast milk to drink he starts working in a "world of breasts", meaning working with milk cows.

My Geeky Nerdy Buddies' Xiao Ying always complains that no girl ever likes him but then at one party, a girl walks up to him. She hands him a handwritten note asking him if he wants to go out with her, and he rudely rejects her (00:20:47-00:21:43). But why? Didn't he want a girl to like him? Well, he apparently only wants a skinny pretty girl to like him, preferable specifically A Mei. It seems like he doesn't like this woman from the party because she is also a bigger person, wears glasses and has similarly conventionally unattractiveness features. Instead of being able to empathize with her and at least having a conversation with her, he just disregards her. Throughout the movie she pops up here and there, trying to talk to Xiao Ying but he is constantly rude to her (image 3). His ideology is not completely unlike that of the 'incel' (involuntary celebratory). The incel type of masculinity is part of a similar realm of alternative masculinity, but has a much more violent nature. Incels are a lot more extreme than Nice Guys but they do serve as an example for the misogynistic logic here. Incels are individuals that stem from online communities and are defined by not having sexual



Image 3. The girl is reading out loud what Xiao Ying wrote to her as response to her asking him out.

relations with women, despite desiring it. They carry deeply misogynistic, racist, and homophobic beliefs and feel a strong sense of self-pity and entitlement (Ging 2019). There is a strong overlap with white, male supremacy groups and many mass shootings in the US have done by men who share these sentiments (Kelly and Aunspach 2020, 146). Researchers have accurately described this online community as “too subordinate to be hegemonic and too misogynistic to be subordinate” (Halpin 2002, Ging 2019). Halpin (2002) notes how these men weaponize their marginalization to legitimize violence against women. Although much less severe, Xiao Ying similarly feels a strong sense of self-pity about how he is still a virgin and without a girlfriend. But he has problematic views towards women and he is unable to reflect on how that might affect his ability to find a partner. Instead of wondering what he can do to become a better person, he treats this other girl just as terribly as he is treated by society.

This male gaze is clearly not only palpable within the narrative of the story; how the male protagonists speak of and treat women. But the workings of the male gaze are also evident in extra-diegetically where the woman on screen is also portrayed in a way that allows the viewer to (sexually) objectify her. The female characters are either very pretty and therefore desirable, or they are ‘ugly’ and undesirable. This binary thinking similar to the

Chad vs. The Nice Guy is also visible in the female characters: desirable vs. undesirable women.

2.2.4 Sissyphobia and virginity

The feeling of unmanliness and victimization culminates itself in the ultimate form of emasculation: being penetrated. This happens in the following sequence (00:55:10-00:56:19). One of the geeks wants to go to sex party in a sauna because he wants to get laid. He ends up going by himself and meets a pretty girl there. Due to a miscommunication, he goes to the pool thinking she will be there waiting for him. To his surprise, instead of the pretty girl, he happens upon a big, buff man, who then sexually intimidates him. He wants to get out of the situation but before he can escape the man grabs and rapes him. The scene is cartoonized in order for it to not be too graphic, but it is clear that the sexual act was not consensual and very traumatizing for the victim. But regardless, the scene is played to ridicule this act of emasculation. This trope is very common in film and television, especially in comedies. Youtuber Pop Culture Detective (2019) researched the trope of ‘playing men’s sexual assault for laughs’ and compiled a list of 374 movies that include the trope (Letterboxd). Especially the ‘prison rape joke’ is a common gag that ridicules male sexual abuse.



Image 4. Sauna sexual assault played for laughs

But why is such a serious thing being trivialized? To be penetrated is to be dominated, and nothing is scarier to men than to be dominated, to be castrated of one’s (phallic) power. The idea that being penetrated equals being dominated is a known phenomenon in psychosexual and gender research. Dyer (1982) writes: “It is clear that castration can only be

a threat to men, and more probable that it is the taboo of male anal eroticism that causes masculine-defined men to construct penetrating as frightening (...)” (66). The feeling of the loss of power as a geek in a Chad society is symbolized by this scene. Moreover, as the object of the rapists’ gaze, the geek is made into a sexualized object, which is an unbearable burden for men according to Mulvey (1975, 838), since men are supposed to be representatives of power. Dyer writes that “this does violence to the codes of who looks and who is looked at (and how), and some attempt is instinctively made to counteract this violation” (63). Whereas Dyer applies this to the male pin up looking back at the spectator in such a way that re-establishes his dominance, this can also be applied to this particular rape scene. I argue that the emasculating position of the male character is immediately neutralized by framing it as a comedic cartoon, which is a clear tell of the male gaze. Steve Neale (1983, 12) also adds to this by noting how the male struggle can be turned into pure spectacle to divert the attention from the man as object of eroticized looking. Moreover, when the man is eroticized, he is consequently feminized, which is a man’s greatest fear (Neale 1983, 14).

Song (2022) writes about the contemporary Chinese man and his growing fear for being seen as a ‘sissy’ (sissyphobia). This fear of femininity leads to the need to distance oneself from femininity by ridiculing feminine behavior. The geek friend group constantly makes sexist jokes. McCann (2010) writes that “humor can create a sense of cohesion by creating a gendered ‘other’ that becomes the antithesis of the masculinity that men are expected to embody, and against which each man can measure how successful his embodiment is” (15). When a woman yells at a taxi, they laughingly mimic her by making chicken sounds. They also constantly police each other’s masculinity, keeping each other in check. It is clearly very important for them to not appear feminine and/or gay, perhaps as a way to not further weaken their societal position. Kimmel (2012) writes: “Homophobia is more than the irrational fear of homosexuals, more than the fear that we might (mistakenly) be perceived as gay. It is these, of course, but it is also something deeper. Homophobia is the fear of other men – that other men will unmask us, emasculate us, reveals to us and the world that we do not measure up, are not real men” (Kimmel 2012, 8). Therefore, in order to protect themselves from being seen as feminine and risking even further marginalization, the geeks apparently feel the need to act in more traditionally masculine ways.

According to the geeks themselves, part of their marginalized status stems from them being virgins. They are obsessed with losing this virginity because they regard it as something that should be lost as soon as possible. Allan (2020) describes if a man is beyond a ‘normal age’ and still a virgin, he becomes a laughing stock and victim of ridicule, especially in media

(55). He recalls other scholars such as Fleming and Davis (2018) who discuss how virginity signifies a lack of manhood, and this can only be corrected by partaking in the ‘manly act’ of sex (Allan 2020, 63). But the task to lose it proves to be more difficult than imagined. Nevertheless, the geeks’ masculinity is at times still affirmed through some phallic focused scenes. In a particular scene in *Campus Confidential*, Kiki has just fallen out of the window on top of Lucky Wu. She had just accidentally smeared some glue on her face and because of the way she lands on Lucky Wu, her face is now temporarily glued to Lucky Wu’s groin. In panic, they go to the doctor’s office. When the doctors try to free Kiki from this unfortunate location, Lucky Wu gets an erection (00:33:36). As Allan (2020, 65) argues, the penis can become the “symbolic embodiment of the man himself” that comes to signify that even though he is not having sex, he is definitely able to and desires it (greatly). This is what Lucky Wu’s boner signals to the viewer, that even though he lacks masculinity as a virgin, he makes up for it in his desire for women, which is masculine in itself. So, even though the protagonists being virgins somewhat challenges normative notions of hegemonic masculinity, they are ultimately affirmed in their masculinity through this proof of sexual potency. Allan (2020) writes that this narrative “despite being about a male virgin, never challenges or allows a critique of masculinity; instead, the hero’s masculinity is always affirmed by way of the penis/phallus” (68).

3. Conclusion

The Taiwanese Nice Guy provides an opportunity to take a closer look at gender identity. Due to its conflicting nature, the Nice Guy trope illustrates the tensions between hegemonic masculinity and alternative modes of masculinity. Rather than embracing otherness, the Nice Guy generally strives to fit into the mold of hegemonic masculinity. In the Taiwanese context hegemonic masculinity entails a ‘sophisticated and refined’ type of masculinity, which emulates success and intellectual superiority.

The Nice Guy trope does not consist of a singular archetype, rather, it entails various embodiments. In *Love in Disguise*, Du Ming-han illustrates the hopeless romantic side of the Nice Guy. He disguises himself to get closer to his love interest. He is passionate about music and supports his friends wherever he can. A Tuo from *Café, Waiting, Love* is goofy, funny and wants to be close to his love interest. These two figures won’t take no for answer, they

manipulate, conceal their identity or simply keep pursuing their crush despite being rejected. What connects them is that their ultimate goal is the pursuit of love.

The geeks from *My Geeky Nerdy Buddies* and *Campus Confidential* seek a different kind of purpose. On the surface, these Nice Guys seem to pose an alternative to hegemonic masculinity because they have not acquired any success, wealth, or mastery of any kind. The outcome of this lack of achievement leads them to be socially and sexually inadequate. And this lack of one's own (gender) identity leads them to strive to be like the Chad. If only they were like him, the girl that they like will return their feelings. But even though they differ from the Chads of their world, they are actually still perpetuating patriarchal ideology. They do this in two ways; through being obsessed with the masculinity that the Chad's emulate and through exercising power over women. The latter coincides with the patriarchal conventions of the male gaze. Mulvey (1975) has argued that the protagonists' gaze aligns with the patriarchal gaze of the audience, leading to women on screen merely serving an aesthetic purpose and functioning as a tool to drive the protagonist's journey forward rather than having her own story or complex personality. Their value is linked to men and their desire for them. According to Mulvey (1975) the woman on screen constantly evokes men's fear of castration (since she has no penis). The only way to counter this fear and to render it harmless is by fetishizing this phallus-less body. Even when they are in emotional pain, the Nice Guy romanticizes her. It is within this framework of the male gaze that Nice Guys can behave in the way they do and still receive their happy ending afterwards. After all they've done, they are still portrayed as 'nice guys'.

I have illustrated how some remnants of the *wen-wu* dyad still remain. Nevertheless, there is no direct link between what was deemed the ideal masculinity in premodern times and what is considered to be hegemonic masculinity now. Rather, aspects of *wen* masculinity are scattered over the opposing masculinities of the Chad and the Nice Guy. On the one hand, the Chad emulates the intellectual and professional success of the *wen* attainments. On the other hand, the Nice Guy's charm often stems from his (seemingly) superior sense of *junzi*-like morality but he is also similar to the *wen* masculinity of the scholar who's increasingly marginalized image was being portrayed as youthful, frail and immature. The latter is especially the case for the *zhainans*, who's virginal youthfulness has yet to mature.

Ultimately, the Taiwanese Nice Guys and their antagonists analyzed in this thesis illustrate some of the present masculine ideals and the anxiety men experience when they don't fit into this mold of hegemonic masculinity.

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