

Mediating Self and Nation: Diasporic Chinese Women in the “Singapore New Wave”

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Abstract

Popular narratives of “rising China” in Southeast Asia—embodied in the figures of new Chinese migrants in the region—do not account for the messy, multidirectional effects of new migrations and the questions they pose about seemingly “settled” national cultures and identities. Focusing on the representations of Chinese migrant women in two recent films set in Singapore—*Sandcastle* (2010), directed by Boo Junfeng, and *A Yellow Bird* (2016), directed by K. Rajagopal—I foreground how Singaporean directors use the figure of the diasporic Chinese woman as a powerful heuristic into the complex dynamics of historical memory, gender, class, and race in contemporary Singapore. Not simply a foreign *Other* to be assimilated into the multicultural nation, the Chinese woman serves as a guide to wayward Singaporeans, uncovering histories and memories repressed by the radical ruptures of postcolonial nationalism. In this way, intra-Asian diasporas mediate renewed understandings of self and nation in Singapore while revealing the possibilities for—and limitations of—broader humanist solidarities.

Keywords: Singapore, Chinese diaspora, global China, migration, film

Introduction

One of the most visible international signs of China's Reform-era marketization reforms and growing embeddedness in global capitalist networks has been a new wave of Chinese immigrants.¹ In Southeast Asia, the home of sizable ethnic Chinese communities long settled through prior generations, the influx of fresh waves of Chinese migrants (*xinyimin*) has produced new intra-Chinese anxieties surrounding language, cultural identity, and the negotiation of regional ethnic minority status.² The complexities of this negotiation, however, have been largely overshadowed by sensationalist headlines foregrounding the Chinese migrants as the *Other*—from their cultural and linguistic differences, to more recent allegations of complicity with the offshoring of Chinese state capital, and even threats of espionage as proxies of the Chinese Communist Party.

Such metanarratives, which situate these issues within the context of China's ascendancy as a global power, however, rarely attend to the messiness of the everyday encounters between the Chinese settlers and the new migrants.³ As a growing body of social scientific and anthropological research has found, recent Chinese migration has both stimulated hostility and resentment and prompted a diversified reconfiguration of cultural identities among the resident Chinese settlers.⁴ Far from simply producing a surge of anti-Sinicism, these intra-Chinese reactions range from re-Sinicization (Sinicization) to new practices or cultural repertoires. These reactions demarcate what geographer Elaine Ho describes as fraternity (claims to membership) and alterity (social difference) in local contexts.⁵ In some cases, there have even been overt governmental attempts to leverage the human resources of these new migrations specifically from the People's Republic of China (PRC) to support various cultural agendas. In Singapore, for instance—where state-led multiculturalism relies on the continued existence of Chinese-language news media and “mother tongue” language learning in schools (meaning Mandarin for the ethnic Chinese majority population)—an entire contingent of Chinese migrant professionals, especially journalists and Mandarin-language teachers, has been recruited to inculcate the tenets of Singaporean multiculturalism among its next generation of

citizens.⁶

This paper is an attempt to think through how cinematic representations of the new Chinese migrations in Southeast Asia may be made analytically useful in shedding new light on seemingly settled national cultures and identities. Focusing on the representations of Chinese migrant women in two recent films set in the ethnic-Chinese majority state of Singapore—*Sandcastle* (2010), directed by Boo Junfeng, and *A Yellow Bird* (2016), directed by K. Rajagopal—I argue that both films use the figure of the diasporic Chinese women as a powerful heuristic into the complex dynamics of Singaporean historical memory, gender, class, and race. In doing so, these films critique narratives of belonging and ethnic assimilation in the multicultural nation, while offering some possibilities for alternative sites where new solidarities might emerge.

Released in the 2010s, both films have assumed central positions in what film scholars have described as a Singaporean New Wave of locally produced films dealing with the themes of national identity and belonging.⁷ This is partly because in the 2010s in Singapore, there occurred a period of intense public antagonism surrounding population growth, increased migration, and a rising cost of living. At this time, migrants from mainland China were cast in gendered and racialized public discourse as a threatening Other.⁸ Both *Sandcastle* and *A Yellow Bird* subvert these popular tropes by casting diasporic women as companions and guides to wayward Singaporean citizens, mediating renewed understandings of self and nation, while laying bare the possibilities and limitations for broader human solidarities. Here, I use “diasporic” rather than alternate terms to describe the communities of overseas Chinese, drawing on Stuart Hall’s strategy for problematizing the multicultural nation, and the work of Adam McKeown in foregrounding long-distance connections and networks which resist the homogenizing effects of nation-state paradigms of assimilation.⁹

Similarly, if histories of Singapore’s path “from colonial port to sovereign state” have stressed the assimilation of colonial-era émigré Chinese into the multicultural nation, the presence of the diasporic Chinese woman as a supporting character shows little interest in or

capacity for assimilation as an exemplary citizenship.¹⁰ Instead, she undertakes the symbolic work of uncovering histories and identities repressed by the dominant ideologies of multiculturalism and national development. Thus, by bringing to the fore generational trauma and the cleavages of race and class in Singapore, she evokes the ambivalence and melancholia that characterize the postcolonial nation-building project.

As a byproduct of Cold War-era anti-communism and the essentialist conflation of ethnic Chinese communities with China-centered nationalisms, academic scholarship on the Chinese diaspora tends to reject the concept of the “diaspora” as a framework while privileging the notions of equal citizenship, local loyalties, and the possibilities of assimilation into new nation-states. Whereas writings on the diaspora within Jewish studies or indeed within Black British cultural studies have used the concept of the diaspora as an analytical tool to critique the failures of nationalism and multiculturalism, scholars of Chinese diaspora have for a long time associated this “naming” with the legacies of the Cold War and, indeed, the recent rising specter of global China.¹¹ In this way, scholars of quite different intellectual trajectories such as the historian Wang Gungwu and the literary theorist Shu-Mei Shih have converged in repudiating the concept of the diaspora as a category of analysis in order to reject the hegemony of Chinese state power and influence over a pan-ethnic Chinese coalition, even as they have productively staked out new terrains for researching Chinese or Sinophone cultures and identities beyond the Chinese state.¹² In response, the historian Shelly Chan has foregrounded the temporalities of specific “diaspora moments” in modern Chinese history—junctures where connections with the Chinese subjects’ putative homelands take place—to argue for diaspora as a generative force shaping modern China.¹³ Els Van Dongen and Hong Liu have likewise argued that the historical experience of Chinese migration in Southeast Asia is a useful case for approaching the “changing meanings of diaspora,” as different waves of “Chinese” migrants have navigated shifting geopolitics, the nature of connections with the “homeland,” and the various Chinese state regimes.¹⁴

Here, I build on this scholarship by demonstrating how diasporas

also undertake the symbolic work of mediating new connections to the “local”—and not simply through the concept of assimilation. Rather, the presence of the diasporic in these New Wave films haunts more triumphalist narratives of the multicultural nation in order to produce renewed self-understandings—as well as an acknowledgement of their unsettled place within the nation, among citizens. French philosopher Jacques Derrida famously invoked the haunting specter of Marxism as a critique of the “End of History” thesis and of capitalist triumphalism following the collapse of the Soviet Union. Here, I propose to extend Derrida’s concept of “haunting” to understand how certain Singaporean New Wave films have deployed the familiar figure of the diasporic Chinese woman, to revisit and reopen the “settled” notions of citizenship in the multicultural nation, particularly as a critique of state multiculturalism in the postcolonial nation-building project.¹⁵ Indeed, this “unsettling” implicates both Singapore’s ethnic Chinese majority as well as its ethnic minorities. For the Chinese majority, it is the specter of the repressed histories of Chinese student activism in the 1950s which haunts the more culturalist notions of “Chineseness” popularized by the Singapore state since the 1980s; for Singapore’s Malay and Indian minorities—who have recently organized under the banner of “brownness”—it is the broader context of racial marginality and the failures of state multiculturalism to account for the messiness of their lived realities.¹⁶

This paper will proceed in two parts. The first section sketches in some of the historical debates surrounding the cultural politics of “Chineseness” in 1980s and 1990s Singapore, before introducing the hitherto under-examined filmic depictions of diasporic Chinese women in the Singapore New Wave. Following this introductory section, I will discuss Boo Junfeng’s *Sandcastle* and K. Rajagopal’s *Yellow Bird*, paying close attention to how the figure of the diasporic Chinese woman foregrounds certain “erasures” at the core of postcolonial Singapore’s vision of multiculturalism—the Chinese/leftist student activist movements of the 1950s and 60s (stigmatized as China-oriented communists) and the foreclosure of inter-ethnic, class-based solidarity in a society highly stratified along the lines of race and class.

It is worth noting at the outset that although diasporic Chinese women feature centrally in both films, they do not—as a separate body of Hong Kong films have done by placing mainland Northern Chinese protagonists in Hong Kong—recast their selves “through the eyes of the Mainland Other,” nor do they blur the boundaries between China and Singapore. This is in part because they seek to present a critique from *within*.¹⁷ Neither are they located within the category of what Lingzhen Wang calls “Chinese women’s cinema,” where women filmmakers and directors themselves negotiate gendered identities in cinematic representation; these are films made by men, chiefly concerned with the struggles of Singaporean male protagonists.¹⁸ In this sense, these Singapore New Wave films, while critiquing the linearity of assimilating diasporas into the multicultural nation, remain tethered to questions of national history and identity which do not sufficiently probe the gendered, diasporic subjectivities of this supporting cast of “foreign” Chinese women.

“New” (Chinese) Migrations, Debating Diaspora, and the “Singapore New Wave”

The issues of Singapore’s “Chineseness” and of the new Chinese immigration to Singapore present themselves as separate but closely linked phenomena. A colonial port city on the southernmost tip of the Malayan peninsula, colonial-era Singapore (1819–1959) saw accelerating migration from South China, a migration which resulted in a unique “Chinese majority” demographic.¹⁹ After seceding from the Federation of Malaysia to become an independent nation, the Singapore state deliberately assuaged all primordial definitions of Chineseness as well as allegations of loyalty to the PRC.²⁰ This has been enshrined in the well-known constitutional recognition of multiculturalism organized around the ethnic categories of Chinese, Malay, Indian, and Others (CMIO), with a slew of policies supporting inter-ethnic mixing through public housing, and the use of English as a common lingua franca.²¹ At the same time, a national “Speak Mandarin Campaign,” which was inaugurated in 1979, a short-lived introduction of Confucian studies

into the national curriculum in the mid-1980s, and the propagation of Confucian and Asian values into Singapore's political governance gave rise to suggestions that the other minorities were being "left out of an increasingly Chinese Singapore," causing heated debates over Chinese privilege in the ethnic-Chinese majority state.²²

This context is essential to understanding the ambivalent local responses to the influx of Chinese immigrants as part of Singapore's liberal immigration policies since the 1990s. Adopted to solve the labor shortage problem caused by a low fertility rate and accommodate the increasing need for foreign labor in the areas of construction and domestic work in particular, a liberal immigration policy sought out fresh migrants from China (*xinyimin*), and this category of worker soon emerged as the second largest, surpassed only by the pool of migrants from neighboring Malaysia.²³ Against this backdrop, criticisms emerged of the government's official position of continuing its colonial-era racial "balance" through an ethnically determined immigration policy in order to retain the 76.8 per cent ethnic Chinese majority—which some critics argue undermined the multicultural idealism on which the Republic of Singapore was ostensibly founded.²⁴ In a highly stratified immigration policy context, which divided along class and gender lines, wealthy and skilled immigrants were encouraged to take up permanent residency, while low-skilled labor were admitted only on limited-term work visas. Amidst a rising tide of foreign female domestic workers, Chinese women were strictly banned, perhaps because of the purported "cultural proximity" of Chinese migrant women to ethnic Chinese Singaporeans.²⁵ As scholars like Hong Liu and Sylvia Ang have suggested, rhetorical gestures in local news media (especially the Chinese-language *lianhe zaobao*) to a common "Chinese" cultural heritage have been largely ineffective in shaping local Singaporeans' affections for the new diaspora. Instead, these encounters have produced xenophobic backlash, resulting from fears over competition for jobs and public resources, suspicion concerning the new migrants' possible political allegiances to China, and even more mundane incidents of social and cultural difference experienced in everyday settings.²⁶

It was therefore perhaps unsurprising that the figure of the new

Chinese immigrant (*xinyimin*) was to feature pervasively as a character within the Singapore New Wave.²⁷ Supported by a new government body—the Singapore Film Commission—founded in 1998 to support local filmmaking, this generation of work has become synonymous with the work of ethnic Chinese Singaporean male *auteurs* like Eric Khoo and Royston Tan as well as the more commercially successful Jack Neo.²⁸ While debates exist over possible continuities between the Singapore New Wave and the Malay language films in the late-colonial and decolonization period (1940s–60s), and thorny questions surround the boundaries of a Malayan or Singaporean national film canon, there is now scholarly consensus that the central focus of the Singapore New Wave has brought the public questioning of Singaporean national identity, culture, and belonging to the big screen. As film scholar Edna Lim has written, this has entailed performing (an)other Singapore: this Singapore is populated with those “other” Singaporeans usually excluded from statist accounts of “affluent, happy Singaporeans.” This population includes a disproportionate representation of “obvious types like prostitutes, gangsters, convicts and juvenile delinquents who hover on the fringes of mainstream society.”²⁹ Perhaps the best known film within this cinematic canon of depicting the “discontented and troubled” Singaporean is Anthony Chen’s *Ilo Ilo*, which won the Camera d’Or at Cannes in 2013.³⁰ *Ilo Ilo* is the story of a Singaporean family struggling through the 1997 Asian Financial Crisis as told through the lens of their Filipino domestic worker. Despite its biting social critique, the film was celebrated locally, mostly for winning international recognition of Singapore cinema.³¹ Other “abject” protagonists—whom Chua Beng Huat and Meisen Wong describe as lowly in position, condition, or status or even as degraded—include the elderly urban poor, poorly educated workers in low-skill service jobs, streetwalkers and sex workers.³²

However, a no less important figure, albeit one that has received less comment, is that of the Chinese migrant woman. Featured often in a supporting role, a reflection to some extent of her secondary position in Singaporean society, the diasporic Chinese woman is regularly used to critique the official narratives of Singaporean multiculturalism, while at the same time to enable the Singaporean male protagonist to gain

a renewed understanding of himself. Although the stereotype of the uncouth, materialistic Chinese migrant woman as a foreign threat and *Other* exists, this filmic caricature is arguably an outlier.³³ In most of these films, in contrast, the spectral presence of the Chinese migrant woman emerges less as a threat to be assimilated and more as a guide to those citizens who have become immersed in state developmentalist ideologies—and who have thus lost their way. For instance, in Woo Yen Yen and Colin Goh's *Singapore Dreaming* (2005), there is a striking scene toward the end of the film where C.K., a Singaporean Chinese insurance agent who is frustrated over his tense marital relationship and his failed career, encounters a Chinese beer hostess, clearly from mainland China, who tenderly comforts him. Far from initiating a sexual liaison as C.K. expects, the hostess instead proves to be an unexpected source of wisdom and counsel to the disillusioned and disheartened Singaporean Chinese man at a moment of existential crisis, laying bare the “cruel optimism” of the consumerist, capitalist fantasy that is the Singapore Dream.³⁴ Far from the sexual advances that C.K.—and perhaps the audience—expects her to offer, the hostess instead provides him timely guidance, which he subsequently conveys to his wife in a renewed sense of marital affirmation. What is more, even filmic depictions of mainland Chinese sex workers in Singapore, such as Ekachai Uekrongtham's *Pleasure Factory* (2007), tend to be graceful and sympathetic. Figuring what Chua and Wong describe as the “abject” in Singapore New Wave films, the filmic sex worker is shown as someone who interacts with her customers with care, concern and intimacy. In this sense, she is almost akin to a mother-figure, guiding the heterosexual Chinese Singaporean virgin toward his sexual initiation.³⁵

More recently, Yeo Siew Hwa's award-winning *A Land Imagined* (2017) has been subject to multiple readings concerning the convergence of its themes of citizen/migrant, land/sea, and sovereignty/nation. However, critics have largely overlooked the role of the fiercely defiant migrant Chinese woman Mindy (played by Chinese actress Luna Kwok/Guo Yue), who is a notable presence in the otherwise male-dominated cybercafe and land reclamation site where the film is set.³⁶ With little attempt made to pander to the “nationalist” gaze, Mindy longs to be

anywhere but in Singapore.³⁷ She moonlights as a sex worker giving handjobs to insomniac male patrons at the cybercafe; but in a moving and contemplative scene on a beach of reclaimed sand, she also voices her utopian dreaming of a world without visas, borders, and aspirations for “true freedom.” Mindy’s observations spur the investigation of the death of a construction worker, and it is through her character that the penetrating questions which have come to characterize the film’s meditations on land, sovereignty, and belonging are voiced. Thus, although critics such as Jerrine Tan have noted the film’s assertions of empathy through embodiment by merging the characters of the subaltern and elite men—a missing construction worker and the “local” policeman searching for him—the role of companionship in the form of the Chinese woman in the entire process has been overlooked.³⁸

Multiple Diasporas, Temporalities, and Intra-Chinese Encounters in Boo Junfeng’s *Sandcastle*

Sandcastle, the first feature-length film by filmmaker Boo Junfeng, emerged amidst widespread public debates surrounding Singapore’s historiography, memory, and the complexities of inter-generational division in the 2000s.³⁹ Released in 2010, amidst a wave of interventions concerning the historiography of the Malayan left in the 1950s, *Sandcastle* was an attempt by a generation of younger Singaporeans to make sense of this repressed history by means of a film set in Singapore in 2000.⁴⁰ Here, I propose to read *Sandcastle* not simply as a meditation on the processes of intergenerational history and memory, but also as a reflection on the generative possibilities in the encounters between the two groups that geographer Elaine Ho identifies as the “old Chinese diaspora” and the “new Chinese diaspora” in Singapore.

The central plot device in *Sandcastle* concerns the efforts of a Singaporean Chinese teenager, Tan Xiang En (En) to explore his father’s involvement in the 1956 Chinese school protest movements in Singapore. While living in his grandparents’ home, En, through a chance encounter, gains access to fragments of his father’s past as an activist and discovers that his father was subsequently detained and exiled in Malaysia.⁴¹

While his grandmother and mother refuse to reveal anything about that buried history, En is able to speak to the one sympathetic interlocutor, his grandfather, who briefly explains the context of the 1956 student movements and provides access to his father's photographic negatives. After his grandfather's sudden death, En turns to his father's photos and letters in order to recreate a world which have hitherto been opaque to him. Crucially, the process of discovery is in turn mediated by En's romance with his neighbor Ying, a new mainland Chinese immigrant in Singapore, who becomes his companion amidst a period of estrangement from his mother. Ying helps by translating the letters, identifying his parents in the images, and arguably facilitating En's renewed understanding and appreciation of his multiple layers of identity and belonging.

The release of *Sandcastle* in Singapore in 2010 was contemporaneous with a moment of expanded conversations over the role of the Left and of Chinese school student activists in the process of Malayan decolonization. There is now an extensive historiography surrounding the "localization" of the Chinese diaspora in postwar Malaya and Singapore, the role of Chinese school students in anticolonial movements, and the extent to which such left-leaning activism was co-opted by the Malayan Communist Party and other ideological forces, including democratic socialism, ethnic Chinese nationalism, and communal and nationalist aspirations.⁴² However, the question of whose voices should be privileged in this "memory activism" is an open one. In an essay based on an interview with the filmmaker Boo Junfeng on the occasion of the film's release, historians Lim Cheng Tju and Lysa Hong note that its privileging of the voice of the 18-year-old En (and of the 26-year-old filmmaker), has led to limited attempts to access and represent the voices of the elderly activists who lived through that history.⁴³ As Lim and Hong argue, this is reflected in the disconnect between the young En's "liberation" and his mother's complete assimilation into Singaporean patriotism. Portrayed in the film as an ex-leftist student activist who has completely repudiated and buried her Chinese/activist past, En's mother converts to Christianity, dates an Army colonel who is charged with organizing the National Day Parade, and leads a school choir singing

patriotic songs in the Western classical genre. Critiquing the film's focus on En rather than his mother, Lim and Hong note the inability of a younger generation of Singaporeans to sympathize with the "wounds inflicted by the political system on En's mother and her generation," and to help the process of healing or reconciliation. Similar critiques by members of the Chinese-educated intelligentsia have also been leveled against the generation of younger Anglophone Singaporeans, whose lack of personal access to the older generation of Chinese-educated activists is one limitation of their work.⁴⁴ Boo himself noted in an interview the difficulties his generation of English-educated Singaporeans face in reading Chinese characters or in finding resources to reach out to the elderly Chinese-speaking communities with whom connection requires both time and patience.⁴⁵ However, as scholars Loh Kah Seng and Kenneth Paul Tan note, despite the simplification of the historical narratives of educational and anti-colonial politics that is inevitable in a feature film, *Sandcastle's* interventions are less concerned with these historiographical debates than they are focused on foregrounding the agency of a younger generation faced with historical amnesia. Indeed, both En's discoveries and his mother's decisions to bring up her son in PAP-controlled Singapore reflect their respective agency and decisions in navigating questions of identity and belonging in different political contexts.⁴⁶

The relationship between En and Ying, however, is obscured by debates that center exclusively on this multi-generational trauma within the Singaporean family.⁴⁷ Beyond the boundaries of this three-generational family—arguably director Boo Junfeng's microcosm for the "Singapore Story"—Ying, the new immigrant from mainland China, is a central but overlooked presence. Played by amateur actress Bobbi Chen, who was in real life herself a new Chinese migrant in Singapore, Ying enables En's discoveries and the subsequent reconstruction of his parents' past, by translating his father's letters and identifying his parents in the old photographs from the 1950s retrieved on En's desktop. A male voice speaking in Mandarin is used when reciting En's father's letters, but it could well be Ying speaking, since it is she who literally translates and reads the letters for En since he is unable to read the traditional Chinese

characters or appreciate his father's calligraphy. While not explicitly stated, it is perhaps also En's growing affections for Ying which compels him to counter his mother's disparaging, racist comments denigrating the hygienic practices of Chinese immigrants from the PRC, retorting that "aren't we all from China" originally.⁴⁸ Notably, En's journey of self-discovery and his search for historical answers to his questions are also commensurate with his sexual awakening. The audience is introduced to En early in the film as he masturbates to pornography in his bedroom, while also spying on his neighbor Ying through the blinds of his bedroom window, which looks directly into the block to her flat. While she first appears in the film through the lens of En's voyeurism, Ying is far from a simple object of sexual desire.⁴⁹ Rather, she periodically emerges as his companion and guide along his journey of discovery, especially during the moments of fractured relationships within En's biological family.

As a new immigrant from the People's Republic of China, Ying is living in a similarly tense relationship with an aggressive father, who is heard but not seen in the film. At twenty-one, she is slightly older than En; and she is chastised by her own father for having had to repeat three years of school because of her emigration to Singapore. That she is residing in a Housing Development Board (HDB) flat with her father, suggests that rather than being an elite student immigrant on a government scholarship designed to attract "foreign talent," especially from the PRC, her journey to Singapore was made possible through other immigration pathways. Her identity as an over-age student also evokes memories of the 1950s Chinese middle school activists of En's parents' generation, who were also in their twenties as a result of having their education delayed during World War II. And yet the struggles of Singapore's decolonization are largely alien to her, as her awkward reading of an account of Singapore's colonial history and the legacies of colonial-era Chinese emigration attest. Nevertheless, Ying's reluctance or inability to identify with this longstanding legacy of Chinese emigration and student activism in Singapore does not prevent her from helping En uncover aspects of his personal history.⁵⁰ Unlike En's mother and grandmother who constantly urge him to forget the past and to close

the album of history, Ying approaches this history with keen eagerness, freedom, and freshness, helping to decipher the linguistic complexities that would otherwise leave him baffled.

As Boo notes in an interview with Singaporean author and activist Ng Yi-Sheng, the film deals with the issue of time not simply through the trope of a generational divide, but also with the idea of new immigrants and old immigrants—the idea that Chinese Singaporeans are essentially all immigrants.⁵¹ Thus, although historians Lim and Hong critique the film for overlooking the “real social tension and mistrust between the local Chinese, and the recent PRC immigrants in Singapore,” this arguably misses the point that director Boo makes in casting Ying as a recent immigrant from China. It is this figure of the new Chinese diaspora in 1990s Singapore who functions as a bridge between two central moments in histories of the Chinese diaspora—the 1950s and 1990s.

Among scholars of the Chinese diaspora, a disproportionate amount of attention has been given to the 1950s, particularly the politics surrounding the process of decolonization, the ongoing Cold War in Southeast Asia, and the issue about whether or not the ethnic Chinese communities scattered across the region would be able to assimilate into the emerging postcolonial nations. For instance, Wang Gungwu—the doyen of Chinese diaspora or “Chinese overseas” studies, came of age as an intellectual in 1950s Malaya and Singapore as a firm believer in the idea of a multicultural Malayan nation. Subsequently, Wang famously rejected the term “diaspora” due to its perceived Sinocentric overtures and associations with primordial notions of Chineseness and of loyalty to the Chinese state. If the 1950s was characterized by the Cold War-era anticommunism, anti-Sinitism in Southeast Asia, and the assimilation of diasporas into the nation-building project, by the 1990s a new wave of scholarship—led by Wang himself—began to recover the Chinese diaspora as a productive site of analysis.⁵² Following the work of historian Shelly Chan, the temporal convergence between the 1950s and 1990s can be regarded as a relationship between two “diaspora moments,” where homeland claims are being made—albeit vis-a-vis Singapore rather than China.⁵³ As director Boo has noted, for practical

reasons of generational continuity, the latest possible setting for the film had to be in the 1990s. This is because otherwise it would not be biologically possible for a boy to have a father who was a student activist in the 1950s. However, I propose that this juxtaposition of the 1950s and 1990s in *Sandcastle*, also points toward a convergence in the discursive politics surrounding the Chinese diaspora at each moment. If the Chinese school student activists of the 1950s were cast by (post)colonial elites as communalists and ethnic Chinese chauvinists—and thus as threats to the official policy of “state multiculturalism”⁵⁴—the logic of 1990s globalization, which stimulated anxieties over immigration and anti-foreign sentiment, also produced the new conditions of possibility for connecting with repressed pasts. Although scholars have noted the Singapore state’s failed efforts in importing elite diasporic Chinese interlocutors to re-produce “Chineseness” (alongside a short-lived Confucian revivalist effort in Singapore), the new Chinese immigrants and their messy encounters with prior Chinese settlers arguably also help seemingly settled “local” communities to revisit intimate pasts and perhaps create renewed self-understandings.⁵⁵

Indeed, if we center the figure of Ying within the broader transformations of the People’s Republic of China and of new migrations in the Reform-era, there are further lines of dialogue to be explored between the “Singapore New Wave” and the arguably much better studied “Sixth Generation” Chinese filmmakers like Jia Zhangke and Lou Ye. These latter film-makers have explored the Reform-era marketization reforms and the attendant economic and cultural transformations of a new generation in China, including how they have approached questions of memory, identity, and diaspora.⁵⁶ In this regard, there are fascinating parallels between the figure of Ying in *Sandcastle*, and the character of Mia, a diasporic Hong Kong-Canadian Chinese teacher in Australia, who is featured in the mainland Chinese director Jia Zhangke’s acclaimed *Mountains May Depart*.⁵⁷ In the film’s final sequence, Chinese Australian teenager Dollar’s struggles to reconnect with his estranged mother in China and his Chinese identity are partially mediated by his relationship with Mia—his Chinese language teacher and lover—who ultimately leads the estranged young man’s reconnection to his mother

tongue, motherland China, and his biological mother.⁵⁸ The mainland Chinese filmmaker Jia has noted that the mass migration of portions of the Chinese middle class since the Reform Era of the 1980s and 90s has created “a rupture in the family and individual, especially in children.” Thus, Jia’s remarks about and his sympathies with mainland Chinese émigré children (like Ying in *Sandcastle*), orphaned by their loss of cultural identity and language, are paralleled by those ethnic Chinese who experienced similar cultural erasures during Singapore’s nation-building decades earlier.⁵⁹ Admittedly, in *Sandcastle*, Ying is hardly a “mother figure” in the Freudian sense, nor does she claim to replace the affection—and the transmission of historical knowledge—that En is denied by his mother and grandmother. In the end, Boo’s *Sandcastle* does not adequately develop Ying’s character with sufficient complexity to reveal the parallel transformations brought about by China in the 1980s and 1990s or to reflect on similar crises of identity for Ying and her generation of Chinese immigrants in Singapore during the same period. Nevertheless, there is a sense of tenderness and maturity which accompanies her interactions with En; their companionship also gestures toward the possibilities of solidarity amidst the intra-Chinese tension in Singapore, collectively imagining alternative futures through a reckoning with the past. Critics of Singapore’s “Chinese-Indian-Malay-Others (CMIO)” model of ethnic classification have rightly noted that there is little similarity in the diverse groups labeled as “Chinese,” which would apply to both local Chinese-Singaporeans like En and to 1990s new immigrants from China like Ying. And yet, far from simply producing anti-China and anti-foreign sentiment, the intra-Chinese encounters depicted in *Sandcastle* are generative, evidencing the multiplicities of Chineseness which refuse to conform to government labels. Ultimately, perhaps the point is that such struggles are less associated with culturalist definitions of Chineseness and much more with a universal aspiration for connection and community during a moment of transition.

Possibilities and Limitations of Inter-Ethnic Solidarity

In the middle of K. Rajagopal’s *A Yellow Bird* there is an extended

wide-angle scene when Chen Chen and Siva, the two protagonists, are by a lake. The landscape is tranquil, with Siva lovingly washing his bicycle, while Chen looks on pensively, smoking a cigarette. Bathing in the evening sun, Chen playfully comments that Siva is treating his battered bicycle like a motorcycle, and this shared moment is one of the few scenes resembling fraternity and companionship between these unexpected companions.⁶⁰ In a film otherwise dominated by close-up shots of crowded, dark spaces, filled with simmering resentment and outbursts of rage, the tenderness between the protagonists, albeit fleeting, is a striking counterpoint to the dimly-lit claustrophobic spaces. While Siva's total estrangement from multiple familial relationships—he has suffered rejection by his ex-girlfriend, his mother, and his wife—are the core of the film's depiction of the social alienation of the racialized, poor minority in Singapore, it is significant that the one relationship which carries a semblance of reciprocity in Siva's largely loveless social world is his brief encounter with the undocumented Chinese migrant sex worker, Chen Chen. Relegated to the margins of society following his failed attempts to reconnect with his family upon release from prison, this Singaporean-Indian ex-convict shares a brief romance with Chen in what sociologist Laavanya Kathiravelu describes as an "impossible union—stratified by race, language and nationality," yet brought together by a common position of marginality in Singapore.⁶¹ Like En in *Sandcastle*, Siva is searching for his estranged wife and daughter, both of whom have been deliberately separated from him by the state bureaucracy; and in this search process during which he experiences multiple rejections, Siva finds a fleeting companion in this diasporic Chinese woman.

Despite its international profile (as a Singaporean-French collaboration supported by the Singapore Film Commission) and its recognition at the International Critics Week at the Cannes Film Festival, *A Yellow Bird* (2016) has received relatively little public attention in Singapore,⁶² and attracted less attention in academic scholarship than it deserves.⁶³ What scholarship exists has suggested that the film should be situated within the ongoing conversation about the representation of Indian minority community in Singapore—in terms of what director K. Rajagopal describes as the dangerous racism "simmering under the skin,"

which surfaces unexpectedly at various junctures.⁶⁴ Additionally, as Rajagopal has noted, the overall marginalization of Indian Singaporeans in public life and the limited presence of the Tamil language—one of the nation’s four official national languages—in mainstream media representations of Singapore make it his “moral responsibility” as an Indian Singaporean director to reflect the diverse and multi-racial society that is Singapore today.

As a dramatized Singaporean tale of extreme misfortune, *A Yellow Bird* traces the journey of the Indian-Singaporean ex-convict Siva upon his release from prison, as he navigates a frustrating state bureaucracy and uncaring family, in search of his elusive estranged wife and daughter. This tale is also a roundabout critique of the Singapore state’s well-known “family-oriented social policies,” as Siva is rejected by both family and government, spending his time first doing menial work as a mourner in Chinese funeral processions, and then working as a dishwasher in a Chinese-owned coffee shop.⁶⁵ In addition to reflecting the complex ethnic diversity and racial hierarchies in Singapore, the specter of new Chinese migration into Singapore and its attendant inter-racial tensions is ever-present, as evidenced by Siva and his mother’s being cruelly displaced from the only bedroom in their miniscule flat by some male tenants from mainland China, a brutish masculine encounter which produces a series of violent flare-ups in their overcrowded and dimly-lit corridor. And yet, as film scholar Gerald Sim argues, Siva’s misdirected aggression targeting these Chinese migrant tenants should not be read simple as an “irresistible metaphor for actual hostilities that arose from the Sinicization of retail spaces and public soundscapes” in Singapore. Rather, considering his solidarities with and seeming affection for the mainland Chinese migrant sex worker Chen Chen—which even inspires Siva’s self-sacrificial giving when she suddenly loses her stash of money—the audience is led to question the conditions of possibility for inter-ethnic communal solidarity on the margins, and of the ability of these communities to resist various levels of exploitation under global capitalism.⁶⁶

On the surface, the character of Chen Chen does not negate the stereotype of the new Chinese migrant as uncouth, mercenary, and loyal

to China; she is simply seeking money to remit to her family in China. Throughout the film, the persistence of racist tropes like the “Black Devil” purveyed by the other mainland Chinese male characters remind the viewer of a chasm between these *Others* in Singapore—mainland Chinese migrants and Indian Singaporean minorities—which is not easily bridged. Nonetheless, Chen’s growing recognition of—and even semblance of affection for—a similarly marginalized Singaporean shows how extreme desperation can produce a range of responses and some unlikely alliances. The convergence of interests between Siva and Chen and their paralleled loves for their daughters, however distant, problematizes the notion of a merely instrumentalist, transactional alliance between two companions in search of material gain. Frustrated at the shortage of money from Siva’s under-remunerated work, Chen turns to sex work, under the supervision of a violent mainland Chinese pimp at a shoreline encampment, while enlisting the homeless Siva to join her as her “protector” in order to solicit funds from a clientele with a penchant for not paying. Given their lack of ability to communicate and the absence of dialogue, it is wholly uncertain how much they understand each other; for instance, when questioned, Chen is unable to answer if he is a Singaporean “local” or a “foreigner.”

Nevertheless, despite their lack of mutual understanding, parallels between the characters do emerge for the audience, in the form of their shared aspirations for family and intimacy and in their painful longing for reunion with their daughters: Chen’s living in China, while Siva’s is inaccessible to him, her whereabouts unknown in Singapore. Whereas Siva’s sporadic outbursts of rage punctuate an otherwise stoic demeanor, Chen’s defiant front is interspersed with admissions of vulnerability, often only revealed in Siva’s presence. In a particularly moving scene following her long-distance phone call home, Chen tries to confide in Siva her hopes and aspirations for her daughter. Her extended monologue in Mandarin is met only with a knowing silence from Siva, a dynamic which characterizes their dialogues while reflecting their desperate need for companionship—“You understand what I’m saying? I just need to talk to someone.” In this way, there are transactional aspects of the relationship, just as there are semblances of reciprocity. Siva may

not understand the full terms of his agreement with Chen, but he accepts the paltry 10 percent he is offered, possibly out of a sense of something more than simply monetary benefit; he sources money from his mother's home ostensibly to share with her when she loses her stash of cash; the depiction of their physical intimacy is markedly different from the mechanical and methodical sexual liaisons Chen has with her customers.

One striking feature about the plot of *Yellow Bird*, which mirrors *Sandcastle*, is in the Singaporean protagonist's journey of self-discovery, which leads to questioning and reckoning with his national identity. While En's indebtedness to Ying in the latter case is undisputed, the question of whose assistance or companionship it is better to accept is more complex for Siva. On the surface, it is the ethnic Indian Singaporean female clerk working at the government office, Pavani, who clandestinely provides him the information he needs. As the film unfolds, Pavani—a similarly marginalized, timid, and diminutive bureaucrat—experiences a growing physical attraction for Siva. This mutual recognition is evidenced early on when they speak Tamil outside their “official” meeting times and emerge also in their personal interactions that move beyond the callous and unfeeling bureaucracy led by the ethnic Chinese boss in charge of Siva's “rehabilitation,” Mr. Leng. It is Pavani who, toward the end of the film, freely offers the important information—and indeed, herself and her home to Siva—in a gesture of openness and intimacy. However, Siva rebuffs her advances and surprisingly chooses to bring his daughter back to the humid, damp, and dark encampment that Chen Chen has introduced to him. The viewer is left to ponder the startling reality of why Siva rejects Pavani but accepts Chen's companionship, especially given Siva's impoverishment and the prospect of material comfort in Pavani's home. Perhaps one reason is his distrust of the state and its representatives, particularly the “familialist state” logic, which sociologist Youyenn Teo critiques as drawing on culturalist tropes to legitimate anti-welfare policies.⁶⁷ However, I propose that the director's agenda is to problematize the broad trope of ethnic tensions between the Chinese migrants and the non-Chinese Singaporeans and to stake out the possibilities of such inter-ethnic solidarities occupying the margins meaningfully. Indeed, if popular debates have cast the Chinese migrant

position in Singapore as ranging from indifference to ethnocentrism vis-a-vis the non-Chinese communities, *A Yellow Bird* presents an alternative vision through a fictionalized instance of solidarity achieved through shared oppression.⁶⁸ That this union is short-lived perhaps points to the necessity of broader structural interventions in creating the conditions of possibility for their recognition.

Director K. Rajagopal's successful casting of the renowned mainland Chinese actress Huang Lu as Chen Chen is also a significant decision—one that connects to the “Sixth Generation Chinese Film” and the question of class—and, to a lesser extent, gender—which dominate them.⁶⁹ Huang is familiar to mainland Chinese audiences through her striking performances in critical films such as *Blind Mountain* (2007) and *Blind Massage* (2011), in which she deals with the experiences of gendered violence and social marginalization in Reform-era China.⁷⁰ Thus, while the character of Chen Chen also stands at the intersection of broader human mobilities—both domestic and international—produced by China's embrace of marketization and capitalism in the Reform Era, *A Yellow Bird*, by limiting itself to telling a Singaporean story, does not go far enough in excavating Chen's diasporic subjectivity to reveal the transnational networks of labor within which she is embedded.⁷¹

Conclusion

The contemporary prominence of “global China” has again thrust new Chinese migrants and settlers to the forefront of great power politics. This essay has drawn on the filmic depictions of diasporic Chinese women in two Singaporean New Wave films, to initiate a dialogue with a broader community of scholars on the issues of Asian migration and diaspora.⁷² As I have argued, diasporas are never merely collections of outsiders that requires assimilation into the multicultural nation, but in fact make visible cleavages within the nation, buried or repressed by developmentalist ideologies and nationalist histories. Far from simply reproducing tropes which affirm their permanent foreign resident status or their eventual successful assimilation, these two films show diasporic women mediate renewed understandings of self and nation

among male Singaporean protagonists, while pointing toward the generative possibilities and limitations in such unexpected alliances and relationships. In *Sandcastle*, Ying facilitates the self-actualization of En, a Chinese Singaporean teenager, as he comes to a renewed understanding of his family, nation, and self-identity. In *A Yellow Bird*, Chen Chen's relationship with Siva is cut short by her eventual arrest by the police and deportation back to China, reflecting the limits of such an informal alliance and perhaps gesturing toward the inevitable predicament of Siva himself at the hands of a ruthless and uncaring state.

As Singaporean cinema, both films offer powerful reminders of the repressed past. In Stuart Hall's words, these films bring the nation's "dysfunctions to the forefront."⁷³ And yet in their critique of the multicultural nation, they fall short in more fully interrogating both the diasporic lens into Singapore and the complexities of the women themselves in their negotiations of self and identity. In other words, unlike other filmmakers who have deliberately foregrounded the vantage points of diasporic women protagonists to invoke "sameness" or mutuality between two seemingly binary sites (such as Hong Kong and Northern China), these Singaporean New Wave films do not try to tell parallel stories about China but rather remain rooted within national debates in Singapore.⁷⁴ The analysis presented here is less a critique than an appeal for new intellectual orientations since the diverse identities of these diasporic characters are obviously worthy of careful analysis, even within the confines of "national cinema."

Notes

¹ Over the past decade, these conversations have produced bestsellers such as Howard French, *China's Second Continent: How a Million Migrants Are Building a New Empire in Africa* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2014), and Sebastian Strangio, *In the Dragon's Shadow: Southeast Asia in the Chinese Century* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2020).

² Leo Suryadinata and Benjamin Loh, eds., *Rising China and New Chinese Migrants in Southeast Asia* (Singapore: ISEAS Publishing, 2022), 4–5.

³ Enze Han, *The Ripple Effect: China's Complex Presence in Southeast Asia* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2024), 115–39. As Han argues, some of the most significant consequences of state-led initiatives were often unintended or occurred through the initiative of external actors.

⁴ Sylvia Ang, *Contesting Chineseness: Nationality, Class, Gender and New Chinese Migrants* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2022), 97.

⁵ Elaine Ho, *Citizens in Motion: Emigration, Immigration, and Re-Migration across China's Borders* (Palo Alto: Stanford University Press, 2019), 2.

⁶ This practice has not been without controversy, especially in light of more recent allegations of Chinese state influence through this Singapore-based Chinese language broadsheet which enjoys a wide readership in the People's Republic of China. See Shibani Mahtani, "In Singapore, loud echoes of Beijing's positions generate anxiety," *The Washington Post*, July 5, 2023; Boon Chong Eng, "A Study of New Chinese Immigrants, Media and Government in Lianhe Zaobao (2005–2014)" (B.A. thesis, Nanyang Technological University, 2016). For the perspective of a retired newspaper editor on the staffing of Chinese-language journalists, see Lim Jim Khoo, "Oral History, National Archives of Singapore," Reel 3 of 4, June 30, 2022. Lianhe Zaobao 100th Anniversary Oral History Project, Accession Number E001141, accessed November 18, 2024, https://www.nas.gov.sg/archivesonline/oral_history_interviews/record-details/55651ef0-63ff-11ee-b6e2-0050569c7836.

⁷ On the "Singapore New Wave," see Siao Yuong Fong and How Wee Ng, "Unpacking the 'Singapore New Wave,'" *Asian Cinema* 31, no. 1 (2020): 3–15. See also, in the same issue of *Asian Cinema*, How Wee Ng's interviews with directors Boo Junfeng and K. Rajagopal, whom he identifies as representatives of this genre of film.

⁸ A separate body of writing by social scientists and Singapore-based think tanks has attempted to understand and ameliorate rising anti-immigrant sentiment in Singapore, especially in the wake of a 2013 Population White Paper projecting a population of 6.9 million by 2030, supplemented by "foreign talent," including a non-resident population of 2.9 million or 3.1 million. See for instance, Matthew Matthews, Melvin Tay, Teo Kay Kay, "Integral: A Report on Social Integration in Singapore for the 10th Anniversary of the National Integration Council," *Institute of Policy Studies, National University of Singapore*, 2020, accessed October 10, 2024, <https://www.mccy>.

gov.sg/-/media/NIC/NIC-Integral-Report.pdf.

⁹ Stuart Hall, “Thinking the Diaspora: Home Thoughts from Abroad,” *Essential Essays*, Volume 2: *Identity and Diaspora*, ed. David Morely (Durham: Duke University Press, 2019); Adam McKeown, “Conceptualizing Chinese Diasporas, 1842–1949,” in *The Chinese Diaspora in the Pacific*, ed. Anthony Reid (London: Routledge, 2008).

¹⁰ Ien Ang and Jon Stratton, “The Singapore Way of Multiculturalism: Western Concepts/Asian Cultures,” *SOJOURN: Journal of Social Issues in Southeast Asia* 10, no. 1 (1995): 65–89.

¹¹ Wang Gungwu, “The Problems with (Chinese) Diaspora: An Interview with Wang Gungwu,” in *Diasporic Chinese Ventures: The Life and Work of Wang Gungwu*, eds. Gregor Benton and Hong Liu (London: Routledge, 2004), 49–60.

¹² Shu-mei Shih, “Against Diaspora: The Sinophone as Places of Cultural Production,” in *Global Chinese Literature*, eds. Jing Tsu and David Der-wei Wang (Leiden: Brill, 2010), 29–48.

¹³ Shelly Chan, *Diaspora’s Homeland: Modern China in the Age of Global Migration* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2018), 10.

¹⁴ Els Van Dongen and Hong Liu, “The Changing Meanings of Diaspora: The Chinese in Southeast Asia,” in *Routledge Handbook of Asian Migrations*, eds. G. Liu-Farrer and Brenda Yeoh (Abingdon: Routledge, 2018), 33–47.

¹⁵ Beng Huat Chua, “Being Chinese under Official Multiculturalism in Singapore,” *Asian Ethnicity* 10, no. 3 (2009): 239–50.

¹⁶ Kristian-Marc James Paul, Mysara Alraju, and Myle Yan Tay eds., *Brown is Redacted: Reflecting on Race in Singapore* (Singapore: Ethos Books, 2022), 2.

¹⁷ Wendy Gan, *Fruit Chan’s Durian Durian* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2005). The incorporation of Hong Kong into the People’s Republic of China in 1997 was an occasion for public art and film to problematize the boundaries of Hong Kong. The works of filmmaker Fruit Chan, for instance, situate a North China woman in Hong Kong to visualize and enact the political slogan of “One Country, Two Systems” in everyday life.

¹⁸ Lingzhen Wang, ed. *Chinese Women’s Cinema: Transnational Contexts* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011).

¹⁹ This state-defined term “Chinese” is admittedly problematic, as it homogenizes a polyglot group of various South China dialect groups, despite their shared written script. Hence, as sociologist Chua Beng Huat argues, the ethnic signifier “Chinese” in Singapore is delimited by shared language. Chua, “Being Chinese,” 245.

²⁰ Wen-Qing Ngoei, “The United States and the ‘Chinese Problem’ of Southeast Asia,” *Diplomatic History* 45, no. 2 (2021): 240–52; for a restatement of this official government position more recently, see Lee Hsien-Loong, “The Endangered Asian Century: America, China, and the Perils of Confrontation,” *Foreign Affairs* 99, no. 4 (2020).

²¹ Ho, 54.

²² Eugene K.B. Tan, "Re-Engaging Chineseness: Political, Economic, and Cultural Imperatives of Nation-Building in Singapore," *China Quarterly* 175 (2003): 751–4; see also Cherian George, *Singapore: The Air-Conditioned Nation: Essays on the Politics of Comfort and Control, 1990–2000* (Singapore: Landmark Books, 2000), 162.

²³ Hong Liu, "The new Chinese diaspora in globalizing Singapore," *Melbourne Asia Review* 8, 2021, accessed November 24, 2024, <https://www.melbourneasiareview.edu.au/the-new-chinese-diaspora-in-a-globalising-singapore/>. As Liu notes, although Singapore's foreign talent policy was not officially aimed at China, the nation became a major source of migration (second only to Malaysia) by the early 1990s for a variety of reasons—including the relaxation of China's emigration controls as well as cultural and geographical proximity.

²⁴ Mark R. Frost, "An Unsettled Majority: Immigration and the Racial 'Balance' in Multicultural Singapore," *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* 47, no. 16 (2020): 3729–51.

²⁵ Ho, 56.

²⁶ Hong Liu. "Beyond co-ethnicity: the politics of differentiating and integrating new immigrants in Singapore," *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 37, no. 7 (2014): 1125–238, accessed February 24, 2025, <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/01419870.2014.892630>; Elaine Lynn-Ee Ho and Laavanya Kathiravelu. "More than race: a comparative analysis of 'new' Indian and Chinese migration in Singapore," *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 45, no. 4 (2022) 636–55. The general public resentment toward immigrant issues has seen a significant uptick since the 2010s—from the ruling PAP's poor performance in the 2011 election to public protest surrounding a 2013 Population White Paper, which charted plans for population growth (including through immigration)—trends that are still stimulating intense debates a decade later.

²⁷ This push by the state was commensurate with the state's vision for Singapore as a "global city" for the Arts in Southeast Asia. Stephen Ortmann, "Singapore: The Politics of Inventing National Identity," *Journal of Current Southeast Asian Affairs* 28, no. 4 (2009): 23–46; Fong and Ng, 3.

²⁸ See Kam Tan and Jeremy Fernando, "The 'Singapore' in Singapore Cinema?" in *The Cinema of Small Nations*, eds. Mette Hjort and Duncan J. Petrie (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2007), 127–43.

²⁹ Edna Lim, *Celluloid Singapore: Cinema, Performance and the National* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2018), 139–40. In Lim's survey of 44 Singapore films made between 1995 and 2008, only seven do not feature characters who are social rejects, have absent parents, or are loan sharks, prostitutes, gangsters, teenage delinquents, or disabled. See also Beng Huat Chua and Meisen Wong, "Aesthetics of the Pathetic: The Portrayal of the abject in Singaporean Cinema," *Access: Contemporary Issues in Education* 31, no. 2 (2012): 138–47.

³⁰ Lim, 168.

³¹ Kai Khiun Liew and Stephen Teo, eds., *Singapore Cinema: New Perspectives* (New York: Routledge, 2017); see also, Lim, 168, and Catherine Gomes, "Maid-in-Singapore: representing and consuming foreign domestic workers in Singapore cinema," *Asian Ethnicity* 12, no. 2 (2011): 141–54. Other notable examples of depictions of foreign domestic workers as supporting characters who facilitate the development of Singaporean protagonists include *Gone Shopping* and *Singapore Dreaming*. The exception may be *The Maid* (2005) by Kelvin Tong, although local media reportage largely overlooked its social critique of the real-life predicaments of violence and horror faced by foreign domestic workers in Singapore.

³² Chua and Wong, "Aesthetics of the Pathetic," 141.

³³ In an otherwise nuanced account of life in Singapore's public housing flats, Eric Khoo's *Twelve Storeys* falls short in presenting the "Chinese Bride" as a flattened materialistic and unloving caricature. *Twelve Storeys*, directed by Eric Khoo (Singapore: Zhao Wei Films, 1997).

³⁴ *Singapore Dreaming*, directed by Colin Goh and Yen Yen Woo (Singapore: 5C Films, 2006); Jamie Coates, "The Cruel Optimism of Mobility: Aspiration, Belonging, and the 'Good Life' among Transnational Chinese Migrants in Tokyo," *positions* 27, no. 3 (2019): 469–97.

³⁵ Chua and Wong, "Aesthetics of the Pathetic," 141.

³⁶ Jerrine Tan, "Between Land Reclamation and Labor, Empathy and Asian New Wave Film: Fungibility in Yeo Siew Hua's *A Land Imagined*," *Wasafari* 38, no. 4 (2023): 6–16.

³⁷ John Lui, "Movie review: Award-winning Singapore film *A Land Imagined* tackles issues of ethics and identity," *The Straits Times*, December 4, 2021, accessed October 14, 2024, <https://www.straitstimes.com/lifestyle/entertainment/movie-review-award-winning-singapore-film-a-land-imagined-tackles-issues-of>.

³⁸ Tan, "Fungibility in Yeo Siew Hua's *A Land Imagined*," 10.

³⁹ *Sandcastle*, directed by Boo Junfeng (Singapore: Zhao Wei Films, 2010).

⁴⁰ Sin-Kiong Wong, "Subversion or Protest? Singapore Chinese Student Movements in the 1950s," *American Journal of Chinese Studies* 11, no. 2 (2004): 181–204.

⁴¹ Kah Seng Loh and Kenneth Paul Tan, "Convergence and Slippage between Film and History: Reviewing *Invisible City*, *Zahari's 17 Years* and *Sandcastle*," in *Singapore Cinema: New Perspectives*, eds. Liew Kai Khiun and Stephen Teo (Oxon: Routledge, 2017), 40.

⁴² Tan Jing Quee, Tan Kok Chiang, and Hong Lysa eds., *The May 13 Generation: The Chinese Middle Schools Students Movement and Singapore Politics in the 1950s* (Petaling Jaya: SIRD, 2011); P.J. Thum, *Nationalism and Decolonization in Singapore: The Malayan Generation, 1953–1963* (New York: Routledge, 2024).

⁴³ Lim Cheng Tju and Hong Lysa, "The Shifting Sands of Time: Boo Junfeng's

Sandcastle as Filmic History,” *s/pores journal*, December 2010, accessed Feb 28, 2025, <https://s-pores.com/2010/12/sandcastle/>.

⁴⁴ See for instance, a more recent critique by historian Lee Guan Kin on Kelvin Tong’s 1979: *A Year of No Significance*, which deals with the closure of Chinese-medium schools in Singapore. Lee Guan Kin, “A Year of No Significance—a ‘Scar Film’ filled with Sadness [李元瑾：“无关紧要的一年”——充满灰悲色彩的伤痕电影],” *Lianhe Zaobao*, December 22, 2022.

⁴⁵ Jennifer Lew, “Undiscovered Spaces: An Interview with Boo Junfeng,” *BiblioAsia*, April 2011, accessed October 10, 2024, <https://biblioasia.nlb.gov.sg/vol-7/issue-1/apr-2011/boo-junfeng-undiscovered-space/>.

⁴⁶ Loh and Tan, 46.

⁴⁷ See Show Ying Xin, “The Film *Sandcastle*’s Revelations,” 电影《沙城》的启示, April 18, 2012, accessed February 24, 2024, <https://www.orientaldaily.com.my/news/longmen/2012/04/18/59393>.

⁴⁸ Ng Yi-Sheng, interview with Boo Junfeng, “Boo Junfeng on the memoirs of SANDCASTLE,” *Civic Life: Tiong Bahru*, July 2, 2011, accessed February 24, 2025, <https://civiclifetiongbahru.wordpress.com/2011/07/02/boo-junfeng-on-the-memories-of-sandcastle/>.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.* Director Boo Junfeng notes in an interview with Ng Yi-Sheng: “We needed a girl like that for En to have his sexual awakening.” The more interesting connection and parallel between En’s sex life and his historical research, however, is arguably noted through the trusty presence of his clunky desktop, initially a repository of pornography that he brings to his grandparents’ home for a two-week stay, which increasingly functions as a storehouse of memories and a site of archival preservation of historic images.

⁵⁰ See Lim and Hong.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*

⁵² Gungwu Wang, *Community and Nation: Essays on Southeast Asia and the Chinese* (Singapore: Heinemann Asia, 1980); Gungwu Wang and Wang Ling-Chi, *The Chinese Diaspora: Selected Essays*, Volumes 1 and 2 (Singapore: Times Academic Press, 1992).

⁵³ Shelly Chan, “The Case for Diaspora: A Temporal Approach to the Chinese Experience,” *Journal of Asian Studies* 74, no. 1 (2014): 107–28.

⁵⁴ Chua, “Being Chinese under Official Multiculturalism,” 240.

⁵⁵ Eddie Kuo, “Confucianism as Political Discourse in Singapore: The Case of an Incomplete Revitalization Movement,” Department of Sociology, National University of Singapore Working Papers Series, 1992.

⁵⁶ Wei Nie, “The Generation, Transformation, and Dissipation of the ‘Sixth Generation’ Cinema in China: The Entropy Change of a Concept,” *Journal of Chinese Film Studies* 1, no. 2 (2021).

⁵⁷ *Mountains May Depart*, directed by Jia Zhangke (Shanghai: Xstream Pictures and

Shanghai Film Group, MK2, 2015).

⁵⁸ For this point, I am indebted to the insights of cultural studies scholar and film critic Calvin Hui. Calvin Hui, “A Desire for Hong Kong: Hong Kong Popular Cultures in Jia Zhangke’s Cinema,” paper presented at the Transnational Turns and the Future of China Studies: A UCSC Workshop, Santa Cruz, California, May 12, 2023.

⁵⁹ Aliza Ma, “Interview: Jia Zhang-ke.” *Film Comment*, January 4, 2016, accessed February 24, 2025, <https://www.filmcomment.com/blog/interview-jia-zhang-ke-mountains-may-depart/>.

⁶⁰ *A Yellow Bird*, directed by K. Rajagopal (Singapore: Angka Film Productions, 2016).

⁶¹ Laavanya Kathiravelu, “A Yellow Bird [film],” *The Asia Pacific Journal of Anthropology* 19, no. 1 (2018), accessed February 28, 2025, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14442213.2017.1321174>.

⁶² Ibid.

⁶³ Gerald Sim, “Looking Out and On the Move: Aesthetics of Infrastructure in Recent Singapore Cinema,” in *The Routledge Companion to Asian Cinemas*, eds. Zhen Zhang, et al. (New York: Routledge, 2024), 202–10.

⁶⁴ How Wee Ng, “Interview: K. Rajagopal on making films for and on the ethnic minority in Singapore,” *Asian Cinema* 31, no. 1 (2020): 139–42.

⁶⁵ Youyenn Teo, “Support for Deserving Families: Inventing the Anti-welfare Familialist State in Singapore,” *Social Politics: International Studies in Gender, State & Society* 20, no. 3 (2013): 387–406.

⁶⁶ Sim, 207.

⁶⁷ Teo, 387.

⁶⁸ The most memorable incident in the past decade was the social movement, “Cook A Pot of Curry,” arising in response to a Chinese migrant’s public outburst against his ethnic Indian neighbors’ culinary culture. The incident stimulated widespread debate on multiculturalism and migration in Singapore, including a well-known play by local playwright Alfian Sa’at. Corrie Tan, “Theatre Review: Cook A Pot of Curry Just Warm but Still Good,” *The Straits Times*, January 20, 2016. Alfian Sa’at, *Cook A Pot of Curry*, SG Theatre Archive, Unpublished Scripts, 2013, accessed February 28, 2025, <https://www.centre42.sg/archive/unpublished-scripts/2296/cook-a-pot-of-curry-2013/#>.

⁶⁹ On the popular Chinese movie review site, *Douban*, a number of Chinese viewers have commented that they found the film specifically because of their interest in watching Huang Lu.

⁷⁰ “Huang Lu: The Actress who Least Resembles a Star [黄璐：最不像明星的女演员],” *The Paper* (澎湃新闻), March 23, 2021, accessed October 10, 2024, https://m.thepaper.cn/newsDetail_forward_11837220.

⁷¹ Lidan Hu, “Becoming Modern: Stories of Rural Women in Chinese Women’s Cinema,” *Communication and Critical/Cultural Studies* 19, no. 3 (2022): 310–24. For a

discussion of women migrant workers and “disposable labor” in the Singapore context, see Yang Wei, “Gendering Migration in Asia: A Case Study of Chinese Female Migrant Workers in Singapore” (PhD diss., Nanyang Technological University, 2021).

⁷² The corpus of social scientific and ethnographic research on new Chinese migrants (*xinyimin*) in the global South, especially Southeast Asia, has grown commensurate with the migration and accelerated transnational mobilities since the 1990s. For an overview of “Global China” scholarship, see Ching Kwan Lee, “Global China at 20: Why, How and So What?” *The China Quarterly* 250 (2022): 313–31. Also see Wei.

⁷³ Stuart Hall, *Familiar Stranger: A Life between Two Islands*, ed. Bill Schwarz (Durham: Duke University Press, 2017), 171.

⁷⁴ Gan, 2.

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