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The 'rise of China' and the Sinosphere's evolving 'constitutive outside': mapping the mainland Chinese migrant woman in Singapore cinema

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ABSTRACT

This article maps representations of mainland Chinese migrant women in Singapore cinema from 1997 to 2025 to examine how the rise of China and the evolving Sinosphere have reshaped Singaporean identity, film practice, and regimes of representation. Drawing on ten feature films and their paratexts, we argue that the mainland Chinese migrant woman functions as a constitutive outside whose portrayals have shifted from caricatured outsider to sympathetic subject and, more recently, market-ready inclusion. Through a three-part periodisation, we trace continuities and ruptures in the negotiation of co-ethnic othering, realist empathy, and transnational incorporation. The first group comprises locally funded films that position PRC women as antagonistic outsiders, often characterised through stereotypes that are reproduced through co-ethnic yellowface and self-yellowface. The second group adopts a more observational realist mode, granting migrant women greater visibility while frequently mobilising them as vehicles for broader social critique. The third group foregrounds incorporation, where sympathetic representation and inclusivity respond to transnational market pressures and China's soft-power agendas while rearticulating difference in new political-economic and aesthetic forms. By situating these shifts within changing industrial conditions, this study provides the first systematic account of mainland Chinese migrant women in Singapore feature films and a critical lens on the gendered geopolitics of migration.

KEYWORDS

Rise of China; mainland Chinese migrant women; cinemas of the Sinosphere; Inter-Asia referencing; Singapore cinema; yellowface

Scholars have long argued that gendered geopolitics are mapped onto the bodies of mainland Chinese women in Sinophone public media (Shih 1998; Wong 2023). In Singapore, the Chinese migrant woman sits uneasily at the intersections of gender, ethnicity, and class, positioned as an outsider to mainstream society (Ang 2022). Her frequent representation as working-class enables a symbolic distinction between the 'model Singaporean' constructed under the state framework as middle-class, well-educated and socially adept, and the 'PRC Other', depicted as uncouth, dependent, or

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morally suspect. In addition to the working-class woman disproportionately mobilised as a cultural signifier of PRC difference, mainland Chinese women are also overrepresented in viral social media discourses about Sino-Singaporean socio-cultural-political ruptures (Ang 2016). Against this broader context, we ask two central questions: how has the figure of the mainland Chinese migrant woman been represented across nearly three decades of Singapore cinema, and how might we read these shifts as symptomatic of broader sociocultural and geopolitical reconfigurations?

Between the 1990s and 2020s, China's ascent has triggered geopolitical anxieties while reconfiguring cultural economies. The Chinese government's charm offensive of inviting people of Chinese descent around the world to participate in 'the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation' has fuelled state anxieties over the loyalties of Singaporean Chinese (Qin 2018; Tham 2025; K. Lim 2024; Wong and; J. H. Y. Tan 2025). Concurrently, the expansion of the film market and capital in China, new co-production incentives, circulation through festival and streaming circuits, and the consolidation of Chinese-owned or Chinese-facing platforms have altered the opportunity structures within which Singapore feature films are financed, cast, narrated, and distributed. In response to these shifts and the call to decolonising China in film studies (Ng 2025) and examining inter-Asian connections from minor perspectives (Fong 2026), we ask, how do countries in Southeast Asia, with Singapore in particular, engage with China on screen?

In this article, we offer a study of the representation of mainland Chinese migrant women in Singapore cinema from 1997 to 2025 as both an internal exploration of shifting national anxieties in Singapore society and an external vantage on China's global presence beyond PRC-centric film studies. We assemble and periodize a corpus of feature films and read these films alongside paratexts and industrial arrangements. Reading these representations within their industrial contexts clarifies how China's changing geopolitical status, media imperialism, and globalization are mediated rather than simply reflected: shifts in funding architectures, co-production incentives, and geopolitical relations provide the *conditions of possibility* (Laclau 1990, 161) that potentially reshape which stories can be told, by whom, and for whom. Our approach treats the figure of the migrant Chinese woman as a critical lens to examine how soft-power imaginaries, geopolitical anxieties, media imperialism, and globalisation are negotiated from a receiving node in Southeast Asia – Singapore – one that is diplomatically and economically intertwined with the PRC yet committed to local cultural policy goals (Fong and Lim 2025). Our two research questions are as follows:

- (1) How have mainland Chinese migrant women been represented in Singapore cinema and how have these representations evolved over time?
- (2) How do these representations register Singapore cinema's changing participation in transnational Chinese cinemas' networks and imaginaries?

Drawing on Laclau's (1990) theoretical premise of the 'impossibility of identity' – the idea that social identities are never final, always defined by what they exclude, open to continual rearticulation, and temporarily stabilized through hegemonic practices, this paper argues that the figure of the mainland Chinese migrant woman in Singapore cinema functions as what Laclau terms the 'constitutive outside' of Singaporean identity. While the historical repertoire of Singaporean films reveals shifting representations of

this figure, her movement from the excluded ‘other’ to an increasingly humanized and even idealized subject remains central to the ongoing construction and troubling of Singaporeanness. These transformations simultaneously constitute the boundaries of national identity – by delineating what it is not – and destabilizing them, exposing the contingency and fragility of that identity. Through these filmic representations, the mainland Chinese woman emerges as a figure that is both necessary and threatening: indispensable to the production of Singaporean identity yet continually unsettling its imagined coherence.

Crucially, this study is the first stocktake of Singapore feature films featuring mainland Chinese migrant women characters from 1997 to 2025. We provide a loose categorization of representational shifts and specify how Singapore cinema’s links to Chinese-language circuits have reconfigured over time. The question of what constitutes a national cinema is necessarily limiting (Higson 2000), further complicated by the porous boundaries between the national and the transnational in Singapore cinema’s history across different levels from text to policy to financing (Fong and Lim 2025). For instance, while the InfoComm Media Development Authority of Singapore lists that there have been 120 Singaporean films made since 1991 (Infocomm Media Development Authority 2025), these include films produced by Singapore-based companies but whose settings, stories and characters have little to do with Singapore. Following Higbee and Lim’s (2010) ‘critical transnationalism’ approach to interrogate ‘the tensions and dialogic relationship between national and transnational ... [in a way] attentive to questions of postcoloniality, politics and power’ (2010: 18), we take ‘Singapore cinema’ to refer to films set in Singapore and featuring Singaporean citizens and residents, including migrants, regardless of the director’s nationality or ancestry. Within this smaller corpus, we focus on ten feature films that feature the Chinese migrant woman and have been socioculturally significant in the studied period. Many were screened at international film festivals, won awards, and received popular and/or critical acclaim.

Finally, rather than framing the corpus in terms of ‘phases’, we adopt the term ‘group’ to emphasise continuities across the period under examination. This choice resists the developmental teleology implied by ‘phase’, and allows us to foreground how persistent thematic concerns coexist with more recent ruptures in the cinematic representation of Chinese migrant women. The next section situates our study within two broad bodies of literature, followed by three analytic sections that examine this ‘constitutive outside’ figure.

Situating the mainland Chinese migrant woman figure in Singapore cinema

Our mapping of the representation of mainland Chinese migrant women in Singapore cinema is broadly situated within two bodies of literature – the work on Singapore New Wave cinema; and on representations of PRC women in Sinophone media more broadly. In this section, we clarify how our study engages both literatures and outline our approach.

Recent scholarship increasingly examines migration as central to Singapore cinema. Notable contributions include Michelle Ho’s (2015) analysis of domestic labour in Anthony Chen’s *Ilo Ilo* (2013); Jerrine Tan’s (2023) exploration of the ‘fungibility’ of migrant low-wage labour in Yeo Siew Hua’s *A Land Imagined* (2018); Joshua Tan’s

(2025) reading of diasporic Chinese women in Boo Junfeng's *Sandcastle* (2010) and K. Rajagopal's *A Yellow Bird* (2016). While these film-specific studies are invaluable, they are necessarily limited. Mapping representations of mainland Chinese migrant women across Singapore cinema (1997–2025), this essay traces how shifts in representation reflect the responses of Singapore cinema to internal and external pressures. Situated alongside broader mappings of genre (Knee 2020), character and abjection (Chua and Wong 2012), aesthetics (Sim, Mukherjee, and Paramaditha 2024) and nationhood (Lim 2018) in Singapore cinema, this article is distinguished by its emphasis on reading changing representations of the mainland Chinese migrant woman figure as a lens to understanding inter-Asian geopolitics and transnational cinematic links.

Longitudinal mapping raises questions of corpus definition. The period under study corresponds to the widely acknowledged revival of contemporary postcolonial Singapore cinema, commonly labelled the 'Singapore New Wave' (Fong and Ng 2020). A growing consensus holds that this wave brought sustained public interrogation of national identity, culture, and belonging to the screen (Lim 2007). As Edna Lim (2018) argues, these films often perform '(an)other Singapore', foregrounding those typically excluded from statist imaginaries of affluent, happy Singaporeans. Much of this scholarship centres socially marginalised figures that serve as political critique of Singapore society – what Chua and Wong (2012) call the 'abject'. As our mapping shows, the mainland Chinese migrant woman frequently features as marginalised 'Other' in these films.

However, our study extends beyond classic 'new wave' cinema. As Olivia Khoo (2006) notes, many Singaporean films thematising marginality adopt arthouse aesthetics and social-realist conventions for festival audiences. Khoo (p.143) contends this tendency portray a particular Asian regional vernacular modernity to audiences for whom these Asian films remain foreign, therefore reinforcing ideas around Asia's 'third-worldism'. Fong and Ng (2020) caution that rigid 'new wave' boundaries are inadequate for a small-nation cinema with uneven revival trajectories, multiple pathways to festival recognition, and porous national/transnational boundaries. Following Liew and Teo (2017) and Fong and Ng (2020) in problematising the 'new wave' template that privileges specific transnational industrial routes, we include both popular/commercial and arthouse films to avoid binary classification; this allows us to trace representational shifts across the full spectrum of production contexts in which Singapore cinema negotiates migration, gender, and geopolitics.

Other than expanding scholarship on Singapore cinema, we engage with debates on the representation of mainland Chinese women in Sinophone media more broadly. Scholarship on the representation of Chinese women in Sinophone media has long centred Hong Kong and Taiwan (e.g. Chang 2001; Leung and Lau 1994; Shih 1998; Wong 2023). Shih (1998) identified recurring caricatures of mainland Chinese women in popular media – the highly exoticized prostitute (*beimei*) heavily associated with hypersexuality and greed; the eroticized mistress of Taiwanese men (*dalumei*); and the 'mainland cousin' (*biaojie*), whose femininity connotes backwardness and lacking refinement. As Chang (2001, 41) observes, these representations symbolically contrast the imagined mainland Other against a modern national self. Subsequent scholarship has theorized the Chinese sex-worker figure as performing critical symbolic labour: articulating the aesthetic of the global postcolonial city (Cheah 2010); queering the geographical and ideological borders of Chineseness (Wong 2018); and critiquing the ethos of capitalist

aspiration in contemporary Hong Kong (Wong 2023). Together, these works provide a crucial backdrop for considering how Singapore cinema participates in, reframes, or resists these inter-Asian imaginaries of Chineseness, gender, and modernity.

Importantly, Singapore cinema occupies a distinctive position within the ‘cinemas of the Sinosphere’ (Berry 2021), operating in the tension between its diasporic Chinese framework and its Malay and Southeast Asian affiliations (Liew and Teo 2017). From this marginal perspective, it continually negotiates its inclusion in, and exclusion from, the broader Sinosphere (Fong and Lim 2025; Ng 2020). Extending Berry’s (2021) call to examine how the globalization of PRC cinema shapes other film cultures, we read cinematic representations as responses to industrial and geopolitical developments, particularly as PRC capital, labour pipelines, and platform ecologies increasingly become structuring conditions of production.

Through the figure of the new Chinese female migrant, we explore how Singapore cinema reflects, refracts, and contests China’s expanding global presence, probing the broader implications of its rise from the perspective of Southeast Asia. Through close analysis of the Chinese female migrant figure, we demonstrate how gender, labour and transnational mobility are articulated within a regional mediascape structured by uneven access to capital and visibility. This approach situates Singapore cinema not as a peripheral participant in the Sinosphere, but as a critical vantage point for interrogating how global hierarchies of culture, technology and power are negotiated on the ground.

Group 1: building a national cinema through *co-ethnic* and *self-yellowface*

A recurring feature of Singaporean films that represent the Chinese migrant woman is their negotiation of co-ethnic relations and geopolitical anxieties: ‘China’ is repeatedly feminised as a destabilising presence that must be tamed, contained, or assimilated (Ng 2025). Focusing on *12 Storeys* (Khoo 1997), *Singapore Dreaming* (Goh and Woo 2006) and *Lulu the Movie* (Chong 2016), this section examines these films as sites where national identity is produced through processes of othering, not only by caricaturing the PRC female Other but also by making that caricature legible through performance and style.

Terrie Wong (2022) argues that co-ethnic yellowface in *Crazy Rich Asians* stems from intra-Asian ambivalence, i.e. the desire for Asian-Asian visibility coupled with a refusal to be the ‘perpetual foreigner’ which produces parodic, denigrating portrayals of proximate Others. In Singapore, co-ethnic yellowface is localised as intra-ethnic differentiation: Chinese migrant women in this group are often played by non-mainland actors (e.g. Taiwanese Quan Yi Fong in *12 Storeys*, Singaporean Michelle Chong in *Lulu*), who use stylised vocal mannerisms, costume and affect to signal ‘PRC-ness’. Crucially, when a mainland performer like Xu Jiali reproduces similar markers in *Singapore Dreaming*, we argue that the performance constitutes *self-yellowface*. By internalizing and performing the caricatured tropes of her own group, the migrant woman becomes simultaneously visible and safely contained within a recognizable stereotype.

Although similar tropes circulated in Hong Kong (for example the film series *Her Fatal Ways*) and Taiwan (see Shih 1998), Singapore’s iteration is distinctive. Intra-ethnic hostility operates alongside a state-managed multiculturalism that institutionalises difference, producing stereotypes of PRC women as gaudy, unhygienic, or morally suspect

(Ang 2022). Even where later films (*Singapore Dreaming*, *Lulu*) gesture toward nuance, they frequently revert to tropes, reaffirming the boundaries of the ‘model Singaporean’. These films therefore participate in a regional discourse that feminises and stigmatises mainland Chinese women as the constitutive outside to encode anxieties specifically bound up with Singapore’s demography, class hierarchies and nation-building imperatives.

However, these three films also occupy a distinct production horizon from the internationally oriented arthouse cohort. Few Singaporean features can afford to target purely domestic audiences, but *12 Storeys*, *Singapore Dreaming* and *Lulu* differ markedly from New Wave arthouse works. They are locally financed, feature predominantly local casts, and were conceived with domestic reception in mind. *12 Storeys* arrived at the outset of the local revival and helped re-establish a national cinematic identity (Chua and Yeo 2003); *Singapore Dreaming*, which exceeded box-office expectations, was explicitly motivated by a desire to tell ordinary Singaporeans’ stories (Manabat 2007); and *Lulu*, emerging from popular television, was read by critics and its director as primarily a local vehicle (Yong 2016; *The Insider*, 2014). These films illuminate how nation-building imaginaries and internal anxieties about migration and social mobility are performed on screen, a discursive field where cinematic style, casting and humour coalesce with sociological accounts of mainland Chinese migration to negotiate who counts as Singaporean.

A dark yet elegiac portrayal of Singaporean domestic malaise, Eric Khoo’s *12 Storeys* comprises three vignettes about families in the same HDB block whose lives rarely intersect. Most striking is the relationship between the Ah Gu (Jack Neo), a working-class Singaporean hawker, and Lily, his glamorous and materialistic mainland Chinese wife. Having been misled into believing her husband enjoys middle-class affluence, Lily discovers his modest circumstances in a government flat, which causes constant conflict. Lily is not merely a character-type but a racially and economically encoded sign, crystallising anxieties about gender, class, and migration in late-twentieth-century Singapore. The figure of the ‘mainland woman’ is mobilised less for ethnographic depth than as a discursive marker that signals respectable femininity and projects social insecurities onto a racialised Other.

As a constitutive outside, anxieties about the Chinese migrant woman are made explicit in an adjacent vignette involving San San and her elderly mother. When the mother criticises her daughter’s appearance by remarking that ‘even women from mainland China use makeup’, Lily becomes the comparative yardstick through which local femininity is disciplined. The insult is immediately followed by Lily’s first appearance through a camera which Chua and Yeo (2003, 120) describe as voyeuristic. Khoo’s treatment shows limited sympathy, objectifying Lily through fragmented close-ups of her bathing body (thighs, shoulders, chest), in contrast with medium shots of her fully clothed husband watching television. Juxtaposing Lily’s diegetic bathing noises with a titillating women’s undergarment commercial and a state pronatalist advertisement on television, Khoo highlights Ah Gu’s frustration with a barren marriage. *12 Storeys* thereby panders to popular stereotypes of the PRC woman as the mercenary temptress, blamed for exploiting gullible Singaporean men, often older, working-class, sexually frustrated but undesirable, and easily duped, whose pursuit of sexual gratification ends in humiliation and loss. Khoo thus encodes the mainland Chinese bride as a threatening

sexualised object, projecting broader anxieties about gender, class, and nationhood onto her body.

If *12 Storeys* encodes the constitutive other – the Chinese migrant woman – as a racialised threat to domestic stability, *Singapore Dreaming* focuses on the nation's ideological construction of success. The film critiques the state's definition of the 'Singapore Success Story', showing how working-class families struggle within a system that prizes material success (Lim 2025). While the Chinese migrant woman appears fleetingly as an unnamed beer hostess (played by Mainland actress Xu Jiali), her exchange with CK, a weary Singaporean insurance agent, provides a sharp critique of meritocracy. Drinking alone, CK despairs of the rat race, but the hostess reminds him that Singaporeans enjoy comforts unimaginable to mainland Chinese. What follows is a dialogue about foreclosed aspirations: CK once longed to be a musician, she a fashion designer. Whereas CK has capitulated to a job he despises for pragmatism, she frames her present labour as a necessary step toward a future dream. While Tan (2025, 77) argues that the migrant woman functions here as a moral compass that unsettles the nation's self-image, we emphasise how this corrective is strikingly ambivalent. As Liu (2014, 1228) observes, PRC migrants have 'created anxieties and discontent' among Singaporeans and are readily stigmatised as burdens on the social fabric. As a constitutive outside, the hostess both resists and embodies that stigma: she challenges CK's provincial self-pity from a transnational vantage but immediately reinscribes tropes of mercenariness when she demands a \$100 note.

The Chinese beer hostess's performative contradiction, of offering ethical counsel and then signalling monetary self-interest, is a form of self-yellowface: the migrant woman performs the very stereotype (transactional, accessible for money) that co-ethnic yellowface caricatures for legibility and survival within the host society. The effect is double-edged: her speech unsettles the nation's triumphalist narrative about success, yet her final demand underscores the very commodification and moralising tropes about Chinese migrant women that justify exclusion. As a constitutive outside, her performance, albeit self-yellowface, destabilizes CK's nationalist complacency while simultaneously confirming the popular stereotype, producing a political ambivalence that is at once subversive and complicit. Notably, the \$100 segment is removed from Singapore's streaming platform, MeWatch. This censorship raises questions about what is deemed as appropriate representations of migrant Chinese women in Singapore cinema.

A spin-off from the Singapore television comedy series *The Noose* (2007–2015), Chong's *Lulu the Movie* extends the caricature of the tacky, unsophisticated 'PRC woman' into a feature-length narrative. Director Chong, a Singaporean Chinese also starring as the protagonist, performs a co-ethnic yellowface by exploiting traits stereotypically associated with Chinese migrant women. The film charts Lulu's transformation from a poorly dressed, broken-English-speaking Chinese migrant to a cosmopolitan fashionista and global celebrity. While she initially arrives in Singapore in pursuit of a wealthy online lover only to be disappointed, she gradually negotiates the host society through a series of precarious jobs, from KTV hostess to waitress and kindergarten English teacher. Significantly, her most crucial role is as a KTV hostess, a trope saturated with Sinophobic and class anxieties about Chinese migrant women. The film plays heavily on stereotypes associated with PRC visitors (petty theft, bad manners, broken English), only to later subvert them by allowing Lulu to rise above humiliation and class

exclusion. A key turning point emerges at a French restaurant when she is mocked for her Chinglish and mistaken for the ‘respectable’ Singapore counterpart Sonia (her love interest’s girlfriend, also played by Chong) who speaks perfect English. Sheng-mei Ma (2020, 11) argues Chinglish is a ‘ventriloquizing’ tool where Anglo-American writers project their own fantasies of the ‘Orient’ onto Chinese characters, i.e. a performance ‘of, for, by the (white) people’. Chong’s co-ethnic yellowface performance of Lulu’s Chinglish is of, for, by Singaporeans, tied to constructions of racialised and linguistic hierarchy. It thereby embodies the anxieties of postcolonial Singapore which policies Lulu’s speech deviation from the ‘norm’ of Singapore standard English (exemplified by Sonia’s), which prevents her social integration and mobility. Yet this moment of classist and Sinophobic rejection prompts Lulu’s self-acceptance and eventual reinvention.

Crucially, Lulu’s drive for success departs from the familiar trope of the Chinese female migrant as gold-digger or social climber who seeks upward mobility through marriage. Instead, her achievements derive from her own labour, adaptability, and performative self-fashioning, even if framed in comedic excess. The film thus oscillates between reproducing and problematising xenophobic caricatures of PRC women by allowing the constitutive outside to emerge as an autonomous agent of neoliberal success. When asked about Lulu’s characterisation in an interview, Chong maintained that the caricature was created with ‘good intentions’, while acknowledging her uncertainty whether the film would receive a mainland Chinese release. Chong’s sugarcoating of Lulu as ‘stereotype’ who is ‘not evil or mean’ (Jaipragas 2016) justifies her co-ethnic yellowface performance for a domestic audience. This gesture thus reflects broader tensions in Singapore’s national cinema: the Chinese migrant woman as a constitutive outside remains an object of ridicule and desire, even when she achieves neoliberal success in the host society.

Group 2: performing humanism and social realism in international co-productions and film festivals

In this section, we examine a group of films with a different industry profile compared to the previous group – four international co-productions made for exhibition on the global festival circuit, embodying Singapore cinema’s outward-looking strategy since the late 2000s (Fong and Lim 2025, 180). *Pleasure Factory* (Uekrongtham 2007), a co-production between Spicy Apple Films (Singapore), Fortissimo Films (the Netherlands) and InnoForm Media (Singapore), screened at major international festivals including Cannes and Busan. *Sandcastle* (Boo 2010), a Singapore–Dutch co-production, marked Singapore’s first entry into Cannes’ International Critics’ Week and went on to screen at Toronto, Busan, Vancouver, and London, winning Best Feature Film, Best Director, and the NETPAC Jury Award at the Vietnam International Film Festival. French–Singapore co-production *A Yellow Bird* (Rajagopal 2016) premiered at the 55th Critics’ Week in Cannes and later screened at Busan and Hamburg. *A Land Imagined* (Yeo 2018), co-produced by Akanga Film Asia, Films de Force Majeure, mm2 Entertainment, and Volya Film and supported by multiple international funding bodies circulated widely across festivals such as Locarno, Rotterdam, London and Hong Kong, winning the Golden Leopard, Best Picture and the Firebird Award for Young Cinema. These films’

transnational funding structures and festival-oriented circuits shape the representation of the migrant Chinese woman for global arthouse audiences.

Thematically, these works sustain certain continuities in their portrayal of migrant Chinese women. *Pleasure Factory*, *A Yellow Bird*, and *A Land Imagined* all feature Chinese migrant women involved in sex work, while *Sandcastle*'s Ying functions as a catalyst for the male protagonist's sexual and political awakening. However, what distinguishes this group from the previous is their imperative for verisimilitude and social realism through the casting of Chinese nationals instead of co-ethnic yellowface performance. This group draws more explicitly on social-realist traditions, often prized in international film festivals, employing restrained, observational styles that foreground precarious labour, migrant journeys and moral ambiguity.

While these films appear more humanistic, extending sympathy toward migrant experiences in keeping with social realism's emphasis on embodied, lived realities, their migrant Chinese women characters often operate as narrative instruments, carrying broader reflections on Singaporean nationhood and the limits of official multicultural ideals. In other words, they do not probe deep into their subjectivities (Tan 2025, 74). Critically, eschewing overt co-ethnic yellowface does not necessarily mean that migrant female subjectivity is fully realised. Instead, we question whether the Chinese migrant women characters serve more as plot devices than as fully fleshed-out characters.

Pleasure Factory weaves together three parallel narratives set in Geylang, Singapore's red-light district. One strand follows two young men – Jonathan (Loo Zihan) and Kiat (Katashi Chen) – whose ambiguous relationship unsettles heteronormative boundaries. Jonathan, revealed to be a heterosexual virgin, is encouraged by Kiat to visit Geylang to 'prove' his manhood. There, Jonathan chooses a sex worker (Xu'er) from China, who is portrayed with unusual tenderness and care. Their encounter, marked by intimacy and mutual concern, ends with Jonathan's promise to return to her. For him, this experience ostensibly affirms a heterosexual identity (Chua and Wong 2012), while Kiat is left emotionally devastated. Even though the portrayal of the sex worker may be 'graceful and sympathetic' (Tan 2025, 77), she remains constitutive outside who serves as a narrative instrument. Even the documentary-style insertions, in which she speaks of her childhood and life in China, gesture toward her humanity only to reframe it within Jonathan's moral and sexual awakening. This is pitched against the insertion of an intimate sex scene between Jonathan and Kiat. It is unclear whether this sequence is a flashback to an actual incident or Kiat's sexual fantasy. In either case, the ambiguity highlights Kiat's struggle with his own queer desires and his attempt to disavow same-sex intimacy through Jonathan's ritual of heterosexual initiation. Within this framing, the Chinese migrant woman functions less as an autonomous character than as a symbolic vehicle through which Singaporean men seek to rehabilitate heteronormativity and reaffirm masculinity. Her role as the constitutive outside is crucial in restoring a sense of normative order, even as the tenderness of her depiction partially unsettles the exploitative potentialities of the encounter.

Sandcastle centres on En (Joshua Tan)'s coming-of-age and political awakening through his relationship with Ying (Bobbi Chen), a newly arrived Chinese migrant student. En's sexual awakening with Ying coincides with his discovery of a repressed familial and national history: his father's involvement in leftist, China-inspired political activism, which led to exile and the erasure of that past from Singapore's public memory.

The film stages the mother's hostility toward Ying as indicative of a broader social anxiety about the Chinese Other. As constitutive outside, Ying threatens the respectable, middle-class life the mother has constructed – her dating a state-aligned army colonel who is En's prospective stepfather; leading a school choir in singing patriotic songs – as an attempt to bury the family's connections with Singapore's leftist past. However, Ying's facilitation of En's exploration of his father's letters rupture En's mother's investment in a selective historical amnesia that affirms founding prime minister Lee Kuan Yew's official historiography (Lee 1998). Yet Ying herself is never afforded a fuller character study. She is more a narrative instrument for En's sexual and political awakening than a subject with interiority. The film's affective power thus lies less in Ying's own story and her humanity than in what she catalyses as a constitutive outside. She enables En's rediscovery of political consciousness and an interrogation of national forgetting even if it avoids generating Sinophobic sentiment (Tan 2025).

A Yellow Bird centres on Siva (Sivakumar Palakrishnan), a marginalised Singaporean Indian who first encounters Chen Chen (Huang Lu), an undocumented sex worker from China, while both are hired as mourners at funeral processions. When a verbally abusive sex client assaults Chen Chen, Siva intervenes; she then takes him on as a protector, and he comes to work in a makeshift, open-air arrangement in the forest where sex is transacted for as little as US\$14 to 20. Alongside *Sandcastle*, while *A Yellow Bird* engage with national anxieties about Chinese migrant women not dissimilar to films from the first group, they go further by intervening in discourses of national belonging. 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'. (Tan 2025, 71), thereby speaking to a wider experience of racial marginality and the limits of state multiculturalism in Singapore. However, as Tan (2025, 89) noted, *A Yellow Bird* is ultimately a Singaporean story that misses the opportunity to develop Chen Chen's diasporic subjectivity.

A dystopian neo-noir detective story set on a construction site in Singapore, *A Land Imagined* similarly features migrant Chinese character, Mindy (Luna Kwok), who works at the cybercafe for insomniac male patrons and moonlights as a sex worker. According to the director, Mindy

bridges the two male worlds of the police investigation and the construction work. In order for Lok [the detective played by Peter Yu] to access Wang's [the missing worker played by Liu Xiaoyi] world and find out about his past, he has to go past Mindy who is a kind of gatekeeper. (Voelcker 2018)

Despite the more nuanced portrayal that challenges the sex worker stereotype, Yeo also sees Mindy's character as a narrative device that links the two narrative trajectories in the film. Furthermore, in one of the film's most striking scenes set on a beach of reclaimed sand, Mindy shares her utopian vision of a world without visas, borders, and with true freedom. It is through Mindy that the film articulates profound questions about land, sovereignty, and belonging. While we concur that these films indeed open narrative space for cross-ethnic reflection and solidarities that unsettle official accounts of national cohesion (Tan 2025), they continue to render migrant women as indistinct figures on the periphery or instrumentalising their journeys as the ethical scaffolding for Singaporean self-reckoning.

In addition, the limited character development of these characters despite the higher social and cultural capital that mainland actresses such as Huang Lu and Luna Kwok possess on the international film festival circuit compared to their film counterparts is striking. Both performers circulate widely within the global art-house network, symbolising a form of cosmopolitan legitimacy for transnational cinema, yet this symbolic visibility masks a deeper asymmetry. Their bodies – racialised, gendered, and marked as ‘authentically Chinese’ – lend the films a veneer of realism. However, their roles remain instrumental – designed to catalyse the male protagonist’s moral or emotional journey rather than to embody full subjectivity of their own. In this sense, their on-screen presence could be read as exploitative, as their identities are often instrumentalised to authenticate the films’ vision instead of expressing their own. This demonstrates how migrant Chinese women, despite their cultural visibility, are deployed in these films as plot mechanisms, revealing the limits of inclusion within transnational film discourses.

Group 3: the ‘rise of China’ and Singapore cinema as ‘cinemas of the Sinosphere’

In this section, we examine the shift toward more sympathetic and favourable portrayals of Chinese women in more recent films, all performed by Chinese nationals. Rapid Chinese economic growth over the last few decades has enhanced social mobility for many women, who now benefit from expanded educational, financial, travelling and migration opportunities; post-2022 cinema arguably reflects these changing socio-economic realities. The three films discussed in this group, *Ajoomma* (He 2022), *Reunion Dinner* (Ong 2022) and *I Not Stupid 3* (Neo 2024) address the emergence of a globally mobile Chinese middle class by depicting Chinese and Singaporean women as socio-economic peers (Ng 2025).

More critically, we argue that the constitutive outside now contributes to China’s transnational project of external propaganda. Xi Jinping’s 2013 call to ‘tell China’s story well’ (*Xinhua News* 2013) codifies an expectation that Party-state media and quasi-private actors deploy cultural production abroad to enhance China’s international discourse power (China Media Project 2021). The expansion and diversification of the Chinese film market have also altered production and distribution incentives (Fong and Lim 2025). Two Singapore films in this group participate in this project of storytelling through explicit collaboration with Chinese partners and depicting migrant Chinese women favourably, which enable them to travel comfortably across PRC markets. Rather than adhering to the stylistic and narrative conventions of auteur arthouse cinema, these films are also oriented toward a regional audience shaped by – and increasingly dependent on – the Chinese market. As mainland Chinese audiences grow more discerning and vocal (often critiquing ethnic stereotyping on platforms such as Douban), directors and producers are likelier to avoid reductive depictions of Chinese migrant women. This invites further consideration of how this group of films participates in what Berry terms the ‘cinemas of the Sinosphere’ (2021) – a constellation of film practices produced under the gravitational pull of the PRC’s cultural and market power that increasingly shape the circulation and aesthetics of cinema.

As the first Singapore–South Korea co-production, *Ajoomma*’s festival itinerary – from Busan to Hong Kong and the Golden Horse Awards – reveals a clear focus on

regional circulation rather than the Euro-American arthouse circuit. Anthony Chen, the film's producer, stated hope for the film's outreach in mainland China (Souw 2022), further underscoring Singapore cinema's growing alignment with the cultural and market gravity of the Sinosphere. In the film, a middle-aged Singaporean widow (Hong Huifang) travels to South Korea and forms an ephemeral friendship with a mainland Chinese mother and daughter, a fleeting encounter that temporarily equalises Singaporean and Chinese women as fellow travellers and unsettles the hierarchies that typically structure their cinematic representation. Yet this parity is conditional and spatially bounded: it flourishes in the liminal space of travel and dissolves once the protagonist returns home. The mother-daughter pair also sharpens the widow's solitude, exposing the emotional void created by her son's failed promise to accompany her. As constitutive outside to the Singaporean female subject, the mainland women enable the protagonist to negotiate her own lack and desire for familial companionship; even when depicted with relative class advantage, they nonetheless emphasise the fragility of co-ethnic solidarity.

The production decisions made by the team behind *I Not Stupid 3* signals an even more explicit alignment with the mainland Chinese market. Jack Neo's decision to collaborate with two Singapore-based mainland Chinese writers and to cast mainland Chinese actors in the leading roles, coupled with the strategic scheduling of the film's release during the PRC school holiday season (Lee 2023), does more than chase a lucrative market: they signal an attentive alignment with mainland narrative sensibilities and distribution logics. Read in this light, these production choices resonate with Xi Jinping's injunction that cultural producers 'meticulously and properly conduct external propaganda . . . creat[e] new concepts, new categories and new expressions that integrate the Chinese and the foreign, telling China's story well, communicating China's voice well', (Xinhua News 2013). Whether intentionally or pragmatically, the film thus participates in a broader project of China-facing storytelling.

The film departs from the franchise's earlier Singapore-centric moral satire to centre a sympathetic mainland Chinese woman as its primary protagonist. Wen Ting (Hu Jing), a middle-class migrant who abandons a stable accountancy career and comfortable life in Shanghai to relocate to Singapore and assume primary caregiving responsibility for her twelve-year-old son (Zhou Yuchen), becomes the film's emotional and ethical centre. This instalment is the first in the *I Not Stupid* series to foreground a mainland Chinese character, signalling a shift in identification and address. Wen's relatively more composed approach to parenting is set against the anxious competitiveness of Sophia (Jae Liew), a paradigmatic Singaporean 'tiger mum', whose disciplinary zeal, material incentives and readiness to invoke parental authority expose the moral limits of Singaporean middle-class pedagogy. By positioning Wen as the film's moral counterpoint, the film reconfigures earlier depictions of Chinese migrants from marginal outsiders into respectable, empathetic subjects deserving of identification. At the same time, the film stages Wen within a network of affluent new Chinese migrant women, whose collective visibility through measured consumption, intensive education strategies and parental styles perform belonging and cosmopolitan respectability rather than precarity. Yet, Wen remains ambivalently placed. Sophia's hostility culminates in a false accusation that Wen is working illegally, precipitating emotional harm to both children and forcing the two mothers

into a reckoning ending in reconciliation and a reprioritisation of their sons' well-being over academic achievement. This trajectory both humanises Wen and underscores how her mainland identity functions as a constitutive outside to Singaporean middle-class identity: despite her socioeconomic capital and embodied competence, she is still vulnerable to co-ethnic prejudice. The film thus exposes how anxieties about mainland Chinese competitiveness are displaced onto proximate others, and how the coherence of the Singaporean meritocratic self-image depends in part on delineating and disavowing a similar yet marked Other. However, the film's optimistic conclusion in which Wen and Sophia reconcile as their sons forge a stronger bond, uncannily responds to Xi's call to build a 'community of common destiny', embodying the impulse to 'tell China's story well'.

The middle-class, white-collar Chinese woman also finds expression in *Reunion Dinner*, a Singapore-China co-production. As an investor, iQiyi – a major Chinese video-on-demand platform – was heavily involved in the scripting process of the film. According to the film's director, the script went through 17 rounds of edits with the mainland Chinese team at iQiyi before commencing production (K. S. Ong, pers. comm., April 7, 2023), pointing to the Chinese platform's direct involvement in the design of the Chinese migrant woman character to facilitate easier access to the lucrative mainland Chinese market. In the film, Chaoyang, a Singaporean advertising executive, and his fiancée Zihong (Cya Liu), a composed, filial and professionally successful mainland migrant, prepare to formalise their relationship during Chinese New Year. Zihong's poise and moral steadiness are set in stark relief against Chaoyang's insecurity, his shame about his working-class origins and his emotionally evasive performance of a 'proper' family during a corporate livestream. When Chaoyang's staged reunion unravels, Zihong emerges as the narrative's moral and emotional anchor, a figure of transnational modernity the film invites viewers to admire. Read relationally, her character normalises the mainland Chinese woman as an assimilable ideal while exposing the anxieties of the Singapore middle-class in contemporary Singaporean society.

Overall, these films reflect a discernible shift toward depicting mainland Chinese women as middle-class figures endowed with greater narrative complexity and interiority. This narrative and representational shift resonates with 'cinemas of the Sinosphere' – cultural productions shaped by the expanding influence of the People's Republic of China's media economy and soft-power aspirations (Berry 2021). Within this framework, these films may be read as part of Singapore's growing orientation toward Sinophone co-production and market integration within the PRC's regional media networks. Their sympathetic alignment with mainland Chinese female characters played by Chinese nationals, thus, not only reflects shifting co-ethnic hierarchies in Singapore cinema but also suggests a strategic recalibration toward the Chinese-language and mainland Chinese market.

Conclusion: the migrant Chinese woman as Singapore's 'constitutive outside'

Across three broad clusters of films, the representation of mainland Chinese women in Singapore cinema reveals an evolving but persistent dynamic of othering and incorporation through which Singaporean identity defines, tests, and ultimately rearticulates itself.

Drawing on Laclau's concept of the *constitutive outside*, this paper traces how the Chinese woman figure moves from caricatured other to sympathetic subject yet remains central to the contingent production of Singaporean identity.

The first group of locally funded and domestically targeted films depicts the mainland Chinese woman as the antagonistic exterior through which a coherent sense of the national self is produced. These films rely heavily on caricature, portraying the PRC woman as coarse, mercenary, or sexually opportunistic, against which Singaporean civility, restraint, and cosmopolitanism are affirmed. The constitutive outside operates here through processes of othering, but also through the more ambivalent mechanism of co-ethnic and self-yellowface. This performative doubling is significant. It not only externalises the mainland Chinese woman as a stereotype but also internalises her within the Singaporean imaginary as a *manageable Other*. By staging 'Chineseness' as a set of visible, performable traits, these films produce the PRC woman as a foil that stabilises local Chinese identity as both ethnically continuous and morally superior. The ridicule and moral panic attached to the PRC female migrant thus conceal the dependence of local identity upon the very difference it seeks to repudiate.

The second group of films appears, at first glance, to move beyond such caricature. Distinguished by their restrained, observational style, the mainland Chinese woman continues to function as vehicles for broader social commentary rather than the focus of sustained interior exploration. Their lives and bodies carry allegorical weight, standing in for reflections on Singaporean nationhood, the contradictions of multiculturalism, and the anxieties of global capitalism. The constitutive outside has not disappeared; it has been aestheticized. These films, by extending empathy toward migrant women, acknowledge the moral limits of Singapore's multicultural ideals but stop short of ceding full subjectivity to them. The mainland woman's presence continues to expose the radical contingency of national identity, to borrow Laclau's phrase – its dependence on figures who can simultaneously embody critique and containment. In these films, sympathy coexists with subordination; humanism becomes another mode of managing difference.

The third group of films marks a discursive shift from exclusion to inclusion. Here, the mainland Chinese woman is no longer an outsider but a middle-class protagonist, endowed with increased emotional complexity, professional agency, and moral stability. This reorientation of the Chinese woman's image coincides with Singapore's growing integration into the Sinophone media economy, where the PRC market shapes both aesthetic and moral registers. In this context, the constitutive outside is not expelled but assimilated. The PRC woman becomes an idealised subject whose inclusion secures access to capital and legitimacy within the Sinosphere. Yet, as Laclau warns, every inclusion is also a form of containment: incorporation serves to stabilise identity only temporarily, masking the antagonism that remains at its core. Xi's injunction on 'the great struggle of the Chinese people' can be reframed as a universal dream of peace, development, cooperation and win-win outcomes – a rhetoric embedded in concepts such as a 'community of common destiny for mankind' (Xu 2020). These seemingly affirmative portrayals, while humanising, also reveal the instrumental logic of transnational co-production where empathy aligns with market expansion and soft-power diplomacy.

Across these trajectories, the mainland Chinese woman remains the hinge around which Singaporean identity is articulated and rearticulated. Whether demonised, humanised or idealised, she continues to function as a constitutive outside – a necessary figure

through whom the boundaries of the local are drawn, tested, and unsettled. From co-ethnic or self-yellowface performance to realist empathy to market incorporation, the Chinese woman's cinematic presence materialises what Laclau calls 'the radical contingency of the social' (1990, p.183): the impossibility of identity ever achieving closure. What begins as exclusion evolves into incorporation, but incorporation does not erase antagonism; it merely reconfigures it within new political-economic and aesthetic terms. The sympathetic visibility of the mainland Chinese woman in contemporary Singapore cinema thus signals not the erasure of difference but its rearticulation within the logic of China's soft power and market pragmatism – an inclusion that remains, paradoxically, a mode of containment.

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