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New Immigrant: On the First Locally Produced Film in Singapore and Malaya¹

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Abstract

Based on historical evidence from a large number of newspapers from the 1920s, this article disputes the assertion of the international academic circle that the film *Xin Ke* was never released. The article demonstrates the historical significance of *Xin Ke* and establishes its status as the first Singaporean-Malayan film. This article also makes several important contributions to our understanding of *Xin Ke* and its creators. First, it describes the origins of, and public response to, the Nanyang Liu Bei-jin Film Company. Second, it examines the moving and tragic life of Liu Bei-jin, the former Namchow mechanic who became the film company's head and who later left Singapore and Malaya to fight in the Chinese War of Resistance against Japan. Third, it describes the *Xin Ke* production team and the film's reception. It investigates the problems that the film confronted at the time of its production, including censorship imposed by the British colonial government during the 1920s. Fourth, it discusses the oscillation found in *Xin Ke's* screenplay between the Nanyang and Chinese styles of literature and art. Finally, it examines the manner in which the film addressed the disputes between the two major Chinese communities in Nanyang, namely, the 'Xin Ke' (new immigrants) and the Peranakan (Straits Chinese).

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Was *New Immigrant* ever released?

It has long been a truth universally acknowledged that the first local film in Singapore was the Malay film *Laila Majnun*, produced and directed by Indian director B. S. Rajhans in 1933. Uhde and Uhde make this claim in *Latent Images: Film in Singapore* (2000, 3) and reaffirm it in the book's second edition (2011, 16-22). This book offers the most detailed historical account of 'professional research on Singaporean film' so far (Wei 2011, 83) and is authored by a couple who spent years studying Malay films. Although the Uhdes have significantly contributed to our understanding of Malay films in Singapore, their study of Singapore's Chinese-language films before 1965 is flawed and ill-informed. In particular, they deny that the Chinese-language film *New Immigrant* was the first film ever to be produced in Singapore.²

This omission must be redressed, as it severely circumscribes the book's understanding and definition of a Chinese-language film. Cinematic researchers tend to overemphasise the origin of the history of a particular film industry, regarding it as the height, rather than the beginning, of a slow development. Underestimating the importance of later contributions and variations, this overemphasis on the origin is questionable. This article tries to avoid this common mistake. However, because Malay is the national language of Singapore and Malaysia, historians of Singaporean and Malaysian films take it for granted that the production of Malay film marks the starting point of Singaporean and Malaysian film history. As a result, studies of early Singaporean and Malaysian films have primarily resolved around Malay films, despite the multilingualism that informs the cinematic industry in Singapore and Malaya. Exactly what

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language was used in the first local film plays a central role in shaping our understanding of a film history. Wrongly recognized as a pioneer, Malay films unduly prejudice and disproportionately infiltrate historical accounts of Singaporean and Malaysian cinema. Uhde and Uhde (2011) insist that the first Singaporean film is the Malay film *Laila Majnun*, thus establishing Malay-language film as the core research topic of their book. Films in other languages are touched upon at best tangentially. In particular, their book pays insufficient attention to Chinese-language films. As noted by other scholars, *Latent Images* ‘focuses on the analysis of Malay film, whereas it mentions very few of the Chinese-language films produced by the Shaw Brothers, Cathay Company, and Kong Ngee Company. The relationship between Hong Kong film and the Singapore-Malayan market is also barely mentioned’ (Wei 2011, 84). As a result, early Chinese-language films have been marginalized in Singaporean and Malaysian film history. The first edition of *Latent Images* (2000) ignores locally produced Chinese-language films prior to 1959. This edition features an appendix that catalogues all films produced in Singapore between 1933 and 1959. But it does not include any Chinese-language film. Most items in the catalogue are Malay films (Uhde and Uhde 2000, 224-228). The second edition makes some useful revision, not least by adding to its appendix some Chinese-language films produced prior to 1950. Nevertheless, *New Immigrant* (1927) is described as ‘release unconfirmed’ (Uhde and Uhde 2011, 299).

Evidence of the release of *New Immigrant* and the film’s fortunes

Many Chinese scholars in Singapore believe that prior to the release of the Malay film *Laila Majnun*, there existed an important Chinese-language film, *New Immigrant*, produced in approximately 1926-27 (Wang 1990, 11; Xu 2010, 40). In the 1970s, folk historian Fang Hsiu

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organized and published the script of *New Immigrant*, articles written by the producer Liu Bei-jin (hereafter Liu), the director Guo Chao-wen (hereafter Guo), and the film's actors and some of the film's earliest review in the *Encyclopedia of Modern Mahua Chinese Literature*. These documents were originally published in 1926–27 in *The Sin Kuo Min Press*. At that time, Liu independently established the Nanyang Liu Bei-jin Homemade Film Company (*Nanyang Liu Bei-jin Zizhi Yingpian Gongsi*) with no external financial support. The word 'homemade' ('Zizhi') in the company's name implied a determination to work independently of commercial interest and government interference. A company prospectus declared, 'Making profits is not our goal. Instead, we hope to transform local customs and to promote the pride, happiness, and prosperity of overseas Chinese communities' (Nanyang Liu Bei-jin Homemade Film Company 1926). In his article in *The Sin Kuo Min Press*, Liu stated:

The film is a good weapon to increase the wisdom of the general public. There are no profits to be made. I am not a big capitalist. Why did I start this career in the first place? Because when I was in China, I realized that my fellow countrymen did not understand the situation here, and I felt obliged to change that.

Unlike other profit-oriented film companies, Liu's attempted to inform people in mainland China of the circumstances of Chinese people in Nanyang. Liu invited the director Guo Chao-wen from Shanghai, who would hold the roles of director, cinematographer, and producer of *New Immigrant*. In addition, Guo served as the company's business manager. Previously, Guo was the cinematographer of the Shanghai Union (Netherlands Aquarius 1926). He was born in Guangdong Province (Guo 1926). Guo (1926) wrote, 'We were the first film production company in Nanyang. Thus, we

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boldly stated that our film company is a supreme art institution and that we hope to cooperate frequently with our compatriots in the motherland so that they can thoroughly understand the life of overseas Chinese'. This statement suggests that when the company was founded, its owner and director hoped that *New Immigrant* would eventually enter the Chinese market, and that through this film, the mainland Chinese could understand the circumstances of the Nanyang Chinese. Guo did not exaggerate when he characterized the film production company as 'a supreme art institution' (Guo 1926). The company was also a 'film school'. In fact, the news media used the phrase 'the film school of the Liu Bei-jin Film Company' (Netherlands Aquarius 1926) when reporting the firm's opening day. The office of the company was at Katong, not far from the Sea View Hotel (Netherlands Aquarius 1926). Liu's film school advertised widely to recruit actors, and the response was highly enthusiastic. There were 'a total of 250 candidate actors, and only ten were selected as the first batch of trainees' (Mei 1927). The selected actors attended classes every evening and reporters from *The Sin Kuo Min Press* were invited to visit the studio. According to them:

The company's studio is located in Katong. The place is quiet and very spacious. In addition to all sorts of offices, the darkroom, and the dressing room, there is open space in the front and the back for future development. We also know that the company is understaffed at the moment. It will soon start its second recruitment process. The script for their second production is not yet set, and the company is now soliciting new scripts. (Reporter 1926).

Unfortunately, these historical data have long been underestimated. The Uhdes dismisses them as ‘rumors’ (Uhde and Uhde 2011, 18) and argue that *New Immigrant* remained ‘unreleased’ (7). According to *The Sin Kuo Min Press*, *New Immigrant* was expected to be officially released at the end of February 1927. Because the Uhdes could not find any reports or advertisements regarding *New Immigrant* after February 19, 1927, they concluded that the film was abandoned before its scheduled debut. In fact, *The Sin Kuo Min Press* did publish advertisements for *New Immigrant* after February 19, 1927. For example, on March 1, 1927, an advertisement appeared on behalf of the Nanyang Liu Bei-jin Homemade Film Company that read: ‘Our company’s first production *Xin Ke* has now been approved by the local government. It will make its debut at the seaside Great Bell Tower Victoria Theater on March 4 at 8p.m. Complimentary tickets have been sent out but we regret that we do not have enough of them for everyone wishing to attend. We cordially invite writers and artists to visit at the advertised time’ (Nanyang Liu Bei-jin Film Homemade Co. 1927b). This courteously phrased advertisement appeared again in *The Sin Kuo Min Press* on March 2, 1927 (page 10) and March 3, 1927 (page 24). Thus, Uhde and Uhde’s conclusion regarding *New Immigrant* seems mistaken.

Uhde and Uhde also refer to the following material from the *Nanyang Annual* in 1951 to support their contention that the film was abandoned: ‘the film was **scrapped** because its technique was so poor that it was felt the movie would be unable to command any audience’ (2011,18) (emphasis added).

Liu Bei-jin, an overseas Chinese, founded the Liu Bei-jin Film Company and started filming in Singapore in approximately 1927. The company’s first film *New Immigrant* **failed to attract viewers (buneng jiaozuo)** and was finally closed.

Despite this misfortune, this company is a trail-blazer in the local film industry.

(Yu 1951, 199) (emphasis added).

According to the *Modern Chinese Dictionary*, ‘buneng jiaozuo’ means ‘failing to attract viewers’ (Language Institute of the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, 689). Uhde and Uhde (2011) misunderstood ‘buneng jiaozuo’ and translated it as ‘scrapped’. This error resulted in the subsequent misunderstanding that *New Immigrant* was eventually jettisoned before it made any impact on the public imagination.

In addition, the Uhdes ignore the discussion of *New Immigrant* in the popular Chinese tabloids. Two popular Chinese-language tabloids, *Manwu Luo* and *Leisure Bell*, published criticism and discussion regarding *New Immigrant*.

Manwu Luo published two short reports concerning *New Immigrant* under the name ‘Netherlands Aquarius’. In addition, the tabloid published a viewer’s critique under the name ‘Microscope’. ‘Microscope’ claimed to have watched the film on the night of March 4, 1927 in the Singapore Victoria Theater. In the critique, the author claimed that *New Immigrant* was the ‘first production’ of the Liu Bei-jin Film Company (Microscope 1927). Although the author was dissatisfied with *New Immigrant* with respect to its realism and language, the author carefully documented that the theater was well-attended and that the audience was ‘mostly women’ (Microscope 1927). In the theatre, there were people in the aisles selling a special edition of the *New Immigrant* script that cost 20 cents. This special edition of the script originally included a total of nine issues. However, the seventh, eighth, and ninth issues were unable to pass the British government’s censorship and could not be sold. The original version of *New Immigrant* also had a total of nine issues. Similarly, because the seventh, eighth, and ninth issues were

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banned by the Review Board, only the first six issues were released that night. That is, *New Immigrant* did make its debut publically. Although a third of the film was banned, the audience did manage to view two two-thirds of the film's original content.

Similarly, *Leisure Bell* published a series of accounts and reflections written by Chen Xuepu, the screenwriter of *New Immigrant*. Chen believed that the British colonial government was too strict in its censorship and lacked transparency. He demanded that the British colonial government should issue 'a public ordinance' (Chen 1927b), one that could enable the filmmakers to understand why their film was banned and how to avoid this unwelcome penalty. Additionally, *Leisure Bell* published an article by Dr. Hu Suan. Dr. Hu observes:

Singapore's Chinese-language films must pass the censorship of the Singapore Inspection Bureau before they can be release. This same rule applies to all films, Chinese-language or otherwise, in the Federated Malay States and British-ruled states. There is only one person in charge of this censorship. Because of the generous assistance from a celebrity, Chinese-language films need to be additionally inspected by the Secretary for Chinese Affairs. There are approximately two inspections per week...Inspections are cancelled on big holidays and often cancelled because the inspection official has special commitments. Therefore, on average, only four films can undergo the required censorship process per month (Hu Suan 1927).

Obviously, the power of censorship was concentrated on one officer only. This practice was highly inefficient because it did not follow the rule of law. The author implied that Chinese-language films fared badly in Singaporean theaters and blame the Singapore inspection bureau

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for the general lack of Chinese-language films in the early twentieth century. *New Immigrant* apparently fell victim to this notorious censorship. Disappointment at the institutional barrier easily translated into a pessimistic account of the cinematic future in Nanyang. There were three common reasons why it was impossible to produce films in Nanyang. First, there was no beautiful scenery in Nanyang. Second, it was not easy to find talents in Nanyang. Third, films produced in Nanyang were often banned by the colonial government (Chen 1927b). Chen strongly disputed the first and the second reasons. He believed that Nanyang had pleasant scenery. Although it may be difficult to find a good cinematographer, this problem could be solved through the introduction of talents from China. Chen had some wise words to say about the censorship problem. He suggested that the film industry ‘is a great promoter of foreign trade. Well-developed, it could benefit the colonial economy and thus deserved careful protection from the government’ (Chen 1927b). Chen refuted the general consensus that the apparent failure of *New Immigrant* bespoke a bleak cinematic future in Nanyang:

We cannot extrapolate the potential of film industry in Nanyang from the misfortune of one film. ... Likewise, we should not dismiss [Liu] as a hopeless failure simply because one of his films is unsuccessful. His company might have been closed for other reasons. This is his personal affair. On the contrary, the poor reception of his film has something to do with the future of local artistic fashion. This is a public concern. (Chen 1927b)

Chen Xuepu’s comment reveals an important fact: although the production of *New Immigrant* had a rough and difficult beginning, it undoubtedly made a public debut. The film’s existence cannot be denied simply because it was not favourably reviewed. Nor should we conclude from the misfortune of one film that it is impossible to produce a Chinese film in Nanyang. In addition,

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Chen suggested that the reason for the ultimate failure of the Liu Bei-jin Film Company was the ‘lack of talent’ (Chen 1927a). Furthermore, Chen attributed the blame largely to Guo Chao-wen. He argued that Guo rashly assumed the triple responsibilities of director, manager, and cinematographer and was unable to perform the basic duties of these positions. Chen maintained that Guo did not take his manager job seriously and worked sloppily and unsystematically. Moreover, the shooting time was not arranged wisely. All these factors combined to cause the company’s downfall. To some extent, Chen’s accusations reflect conflicts between Guo and him during the film’s preparation. The staff list for *New Immigrant* published in *The Sin Kuo Min Press* did not include the name Chen Xuepu. However, Chen claims to be the original screenwriter for *New Immigrant*:

I wrote the script. It was initially designed as a culture film comprising twelve parts. They took the liberty to change my original script. The part that they did not understand was deleted. The part that was difficult to perform was deleted. A large proportion of the section on Nanyang customs was also altered or excised. There were only nine issues left after the modification. The true meaning of the original drama was completely lost. (Chen 1927a)

New Immigrant’s original staff list had only one screenwriter, Liu Bei-jin. As the company’s owner, it seems unlikely that Liu could finish the script alone.³ Liu once explained that he encountered four difficult issues while filming in Nanyang: the selection of scripts, the difficulty of finding actresses, the travel and accommodation of actors, and the time-consuming importation of filming equipment from abroad. In his view, the third and the fourth issues were simply technical and were later resolved. For example, ‘the film printer purchased in France’ (Ah 1927) was shipped to Singapore in December 1926. The second obstacle was eventually

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overcome when several ‘women defied traditional social expectations and applied for the job’ (Liu 1926). According to Liu, the most difficult problem was how to select a film script properly. This problem was obviously related to the fact that Liu, officially the screenwriter for *New Immigrant*, could not complete the script single-handedly. Thus, Chen Xuepu offered his help. According to Chen, the script for *New Immigrant* was originally titled ‘Nan Guo You Fang’ (‘Southern Secluded Flower’). Guo Chao-wen opposed the original title and argued that the meaning of the words was too obscure and inaccessible for the general public. The film was renamed *New Immigrant* and then changed to ‘Xin Lai Ke’ in the final stage (Chen 1927b).

Sharing Liu’s and Guo’s ideas, Chen believed that filmmaking should be understood not simply as a lucrative career but as ‘a form of art informed by cultural and social concerns, more specifically, a social educational method...’ (Chen 1927c). This belief in the social responsibilities of the cinematic industry explains why, for Chen, film-making in Nanyang is indispensable. The word ‘Nanyang’ recurred frequently in Chen’s works. Chen specified at the end of one article that ‘Nanyang’ referred to the Malay Peninsula’ (Chen 1927a). He particularly identified a ‘purely Nanyang-style film’ (Chen 1927c) as the primary goal of Nanyang film-making industry:

Nanyang is an important commercial port of the Indian Ocean. It has rich resources and a mild climate. It is home to a variety of different ethnic groups who actively interact with each other. They assimilate different ideologies, habits, and customs in a unique way. Cultural and ethnic diversity in Nanyang provides a wealth of information for potential film-makers. For example, a grand Nanyang film can be extracted from local mining industry fisheries, and aboriginals. (Chen 1927c)

This proposal was a response to the call for ‘Nanyang-style literature and art’ by the Singapore-Malayan Chinese newspapers in the latter half of the 1920s. Many Singapore-Malayan literary historians describe this period as the ‘Nanyang style budding and advocating period’ (Yeo Song-nian 2001, 33-83). It was during this period that many Singapore-Malayan Chinese writers reflected on and discussed how to establish a ‘Nanyang-style literature and art’ as opposed to ‘Chinese literature and art’. The conflict between Chen Xuepu and Guo Chao-wen can be better understood in this historical milieu. While the former is enthusiastic about ‘Nanyang-style literature and art’, the latter is more inclined to understand *New Immigrant* in the context of the May Fourth New Culture Movement of ‘Chinese literature and art.’ Chen blamed Guo for rashly depriving the script of *New Immigrant* of all the episodes describing Nanyang customs. In contrast, Guo criticized Nanyang Chinese culture, not least by comparing it unfavourably with the standards of ‘Chinese literature and art’ established by the May Fourth New Culture Movement:

Ancient tradition die hard in [Nanyang]. Idol worship, for instance, is about to be extinct in China. But this practice remains prevalent here. While abandoning superstition is considered to be the responsibility of young people, this modern idea is unheard of in this place. There are plenty of other bad customs in this society, which cannot be rectified overnight. If we can incorporate into our films these dark and dodgy elements of Nanyang society, we can persuade Nanyang Chinese people to reform and improve themselves. I seriously wish to demonstrate that Chinese people can be well-mannered and civilised! (Guo 1926)

Guo implicitly acknowledged that he was not familiar with local Nanyang culture: ‘I am a new immigrant from Shanghai and have been living in this place for less than ten months’ (Guo 1926).

Because he joined the production of *New Immigrant* after a short sojourn in Nanyang, Guo had not sufficiently acquainted himself with the culture and traditions of the Nanyang Chinese and could only superficially associate Nanyang culture with simple symbols. ‘Our fellow countrymen in the motherland have only heard as the names of oak, coconut, and durian. They have not seen the real objects. Therefore, we included these things in the film to satisfy their hope to see them!’ (Guo 1926). For Guo, oaks, coconuts, and durians symbolized Nanyang, and the film's purpose was to satisfy the curiosity of the mainland Chinese for Nanyang customs and scenery. From Chen Xue-Pu’s perspective, Nanyang style goes beyond these symbols and should be more attuned to the culture of all the local ethnic groups. More importantly, *New Immigrant* should focus more on fulfilling the yearning of the Nanyang ethnic groups for a Nanyang style and less on satisfying the exotic expectations of the mainland Chinese.

The completion of *New Immigrant* was reported and celebrated in newspapers. ‘Featuring interesting stories and new subject matters, this film is characterized by a quintessential Nanyang style and therefore marks a new era in the film industry. It covers a wide range of social phenomena calculated to entertain, impress, shock and even grieve the audience. This film can be so engrossing that the audience may forget to blink their eyes. The scenery is grand, and the make-up is appropriate [...]’ (Nanyang Liu Bei-jin Homemade Film Company 1927). This comment suggests that when *New Immigrant* was finally presented to a Nanyang audience, it deliberately accentuated its ‘Nanyang style’ as a selling point. The film also featured dances by various ethnic groups, including Western ballroom dances, fashionable dances, Chinese traditional costume dances, and Malay dances. The film was praised by the audience as ‘stunning and dazzling from the start to the end’ (Dong 1927). Colleagues who wished to support Liu Bei-jin’s film career published articles in the press. These articles discussed the film’s dance and

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music, the color and design of the costumes, and the hope that the viewers would understand the film as ‘a new and advanced art’ (Meng 1927). Other articles directly expressed the hope that *New Immigrant*’s audience would be ‘a group of experienced filmgoers’ (Gu 1927). These comments indicate a high expectation of the audience: they should possess a certain ability to appreciate art. On July 20, 1926, the Liu Bei-jin Homemade Film Company announced in the press that the film should be treated as the ‘crystal of art’ (Nanyang Liu Bei-jin Homemade Film Company 1926). The company identified four main goals: ‘exposing social evils, enlightening local communities, promoting oriental art and culture, and cultivating national pride’ (Nanyang Liu Bei-jin Homemade Film Company 1926). Therefore, it seems that *New Immigrant* distances itself from ordinary profit-oriented films and champions a more serious cultural ambition, one that typically characterises an independent art-oriented film industry.

Liu Bei-Jin and his story

In the 1950s, Yin Han wrote a long article titled ‘Chinese-language film in Malaya’. The article was serialized in the best-selling film magazine *Kong Ngee Movie Pictorial* in Singapore and Malaya. The author observed that *New Immigrant* was ‘released’ and ‘is the first local Nanyang production found among Malayan Chinese-language films...’ (Yin 1950). Furthermore, the author recalled that the producer Liu Bei-jin was a wealthy businessman in Muar, Malaya. ‘[Y]oung and handsome, [Liu] has traveled extensively to the motherland and witnessed the booming Shanghai film industry. After returning to Malaya, he was the first to promote local film production’ (Yin 1950). The article confirms that Liu’s film carried a certain degree of cultural significance in the 1950s and was far from obscure.

At the end of the 20th century, Liu Bei-jin's son, Liu Guo-sheng, described his father's bitter life. Liu Bei-jin was born in Muar Johor, Malaya on April 23, 1902. His ancestors could be traced back to Huyang Yongchun in Fujian province, China. He was the second son of the founder of the Muar Chung Hwa high school, Liu Zhu-hou, and the cousin of the father of the famous Singaporean painter Liu Kang. Very well-educated, he had a good command of six languages, including English, Chinese, Malay, French, Thai, and Burmese (Tay 2013a). During Liu's schooldays, he made a very powerful friend: the prince of the Malaya Johor hereditary monarchy, who later became sultan. This experience with the Johor royal family was represented in *New Immigrant*. I shall come back to this point with more details later.

In 1937, Japan invaded China and occupied all its seaports in two years' time. The new Burma Road became the only channel through which international supplies could reach the Chinese mainland. This road was bumpy and steep, and there was a serious shortage of skilled drivers and mechanics. The Kuomintang Chongqing government representative, Soong Tsu-liang, asked Tan Kah-kee, the chairman of the Singapore Overseas Chinese Relief Fund Committee, for assistance (Tan 1979, 85). In response, Tan recruited 3,000 overseas Chinese mechanics in Nanyang, organised them into ten groups (Lin 1994, 365) and dispatched them to take up stations along the Burma Road. Like many other patriotic Nanyang youth, on March 27, 1939, Liu Bei-jin generously donated his money and resolutely left his family and children to join the Nanyang overseas Chinese mechanics heading for Burma. Additionally, he acted as the chief of the third installment of the Nanyang overseas Chinese mechanics and led a total of 594 of them to the Burma Road (Lin 1994, 301) in an effort to support the anti-Japanese armed forces of the Kuomintang government. Liu Bei-jin was appointed the leader of the overseas Chinese pioneer battalion and, together with other Nanyang Chinese mechanics, undertook the arduous, urgent

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task of transporting military materials. Liu Guo-sheng claimed that his father was praised by Tan Kah-kee and Chiang Kai-shek (Tay 2013a). On the Burma Road, Liu and other mechanics ‘[fought] against the enemy planes in the air, against the treacherous road conditions, and against the malignant malaria, maintaining the life line for the War of Resistance against Japan with their lives and blood...’ (Tay 2013a). This life was very tough. In his Namchow memoirs, Tan Kah-kee recorded that ‘the equipment in each station that I visited was in extremely poor shape probably because of overuse. The overseas mechanics that I encountered were mostly pale, sick, and tearful. It was painfully heartbreaking to look at them...’ (Tan 1979, 85). Tan Kah-kee repeatedly informed Chiang Kai-shek that serious corruption and embezzlement threatened to cripple the transportation system of the southwest Burma Road. The Kuomintang Government, however, paid little attention to these warnings. In addition, Chiang Kai-shek received a report from the southwest transportation general manager Gu Shu-li, claiming that, according to the Singapore Consul General, ‘*Nanyang Siang Pau* is the official newspaper of Tan Kah-kee’s organization, and it now appears to have leftist [tendencies]...’ (Lin 1994, 361). It appears that the ideological conflict between Tan Kah-kee and Chiang Kai-shek, a result of their different political agendas, made the life of many Nanyang Chinese mechanics even worse.

The Chinese civil war broke out immediately after World War II. Liu Bei-jin required an official approval to return to Nanyang, but that approval never came. He was stranded in Yunnan and refused to participate in the civil war. Witnessing the evils of the Kuomintang army and government during the War of Resistance against Japan, Liu bluntly criticized ‘the corrupt morality of the Kuomintang officials. He was arrested by the Kuomintang authorities as a suspected underground Communist Party member and was inhumanely tortured...’ (Tay 2013b). Liu was placed in the Kunming prison until the People's Liberation Army of the Communist

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Party entered Yunnan. By the time he left the prison, he was very ill. He poignantly regretted that he missed ‘the opportunity to return [to Nanyang] and [was obliged] to stay on the mainland’ (Tay 2013b).

Unfortunately, Liu’s misfortune continued in the new Communist China. During the revolutionary early 1950s, when China was preoccupied with attacking the ‘three evils’ and the ‘five vices’, Liu was accused of being ‘a counter-revolutionary element left by the Kuomintang’ (Tay 2013b). As a result, he fell victim to the dictatorship of the proletariat. Liu lost his freedom of speech and was subjected to forced labor on a daily basis. In 1956, he desperately missed his family, wife, and children in Nanyang and ‘... [applied] to all levels of leadership requesting to return to Nanyang... This natural longing was misinterpreted. He was accused of being a counter-revolutionary spy who maintained illicit connections with a foreign country...’ (Tay 2013b). Liu was denounced as a right-wing reactionary and was incarcerated in the Chongqing Songshan prison farm. He died in prison in 1959. Thirty years later, in May 1989, the Chinese government finally acknowledged the history of the Nanyang Chinese mechanics who returned to China and fought in the War of Resistance against Japan. In 1991, in response to his son’s public appeal, the Chongqing Public Security Bureau belatedly recognized the contribution of Liu Bei-jin to China and admitted that Liu Bei-jin’s suffering in the labor camp was undeserved and unjustifiable (Huang 2013).

If Liu Bei-jin’s life was cruelly misrepresented, his reputation unjustly tarnished, his film suffered a similar misfortune. This seems to confirm a cultural assumption that Nanyang is a place promising permanent alienation and misunderstanding, an assumption implicit in Liu’s film *New Immigrant*. In 1927, one reviewer of *New Immigrant* compared immigrants in Nanyang to Li Ling in the Han Dynasty, who famously lamented his forced estrangement from his

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motherland: ‘In life, they are people of the other world, and in death, they are ghosts of foreign countries’ (Chun 1927). Shortly after it was produced, *New Immigrant* faced an existential threat. British government censorship and poor public opinion combined to banish it to abject obscurity if not complete oblivion, thus putting a premature end to Liu Bei-jin’s filmmaking career. Half a century, the existence of *New Immigrant* was affirmed, thanks to the re-publication of some old Chinese newspapers and oral histories. Nevertheless, these important historical documents did not receive due attention from mainstream Chinese academics and were ignored by mainstream Singaporean and Malaysian Anglophone academics. The latter even deny Liu’s contribution. This denial reconfirms the peculiar destiny of Chinese immigrants in Singapore and Malaysia. Their cultural memories tend to undergo double rejections, first by national ideologies in their motherland and by postcolonial concerns in a new country. Even though historical evidence vindicate their existence and authenticity, these memories are frequently dismissed as rumors or gossip by mainstream academics.

From the past to the present, the history of Chinese, Hong Kong and Taiwanese film has failed to mention Liu Bei-jin and *New Immigrant*. This article does not wish to accuse the authors of *Latent Images* of negligence. Instead, this relates to a more complex issue of the knowledge production of Singaporean/Malaysian Sinophone history. The knowledge production of Singaporean/Malaysian Sinophone history has been guided for a long time by Anglophone scholars, and has not been treated with great importance by Chinese scholars from China. The voice of local Singaporean/Malaysian Sinophone scholars and authors in international academia is very weak, and can often be overlooked. Even though the voices of these local scholars and authors are diverse and heterogenous, their existence has been permanently covered up. Unfortunately, the case of *New Immigrant* illustrates this fact.

***New Immigrant*: multiple sounds and multiple orthographies**

Starting with the first locally produced film *New Immigrant*, the Singapore-Malayan film culture has presented a Sinophone world that ‘is not only of multiple sounds (polyphonic) but also of multiple orthographies (polyscriptic)’ (Shih 2011, 716). Appropriating Bakhtin’s idea of polyphonism, Shih convincingly argues that the Sinophone world is characterized not by one hegemonic language but by ‘multiple sounds’. *New Immigrant* is a silent film. Although this article is unable to analyse its sound, the film script still survives. Therefore, one can get a glimpse of the Sinophone hybridized writing system of the time from the script. It is also sufficient to allow us to imagine that the film was responding to the modern multilingual environment in South-East Asia, which had long since formed. Liu Bei-jin’s *New Immigrant* powerfully demonstrates this linguistic diversity. Familiar with several languages, Liu weaves different linguistic registers into his film. Although most of its dialogues are in either Chinese or its regional variants, the film is also punctuated by Malay, such as ‘apa’ (meaning ‘what?’) and ‘tak tahu’ (meaning ‘do not know’) (Guo et al. 1972, 405). Exemplifying what Shih calls ‘multiple orthographies,’ these words are peculiar to Nanyang and cannot be found in the canonical *Global Chinese Dictionary* and the *Modern Chinese Dictionary*. In the 1950s and 1960s, the Shaw Brothers, Cathay Company, and Kong Ngee Company vied for prominence in the Singapore-Malayan film industry. This competitive atmosphere encouraged film-makers to experiment with different languages, such as Chinese, Cantonese, Malay, thus creating a golden age for polyphonic and polyscriptic films. Contemporary Singaporean and Malaysian Sinophone films inherit this commitment to representing ‘multiple sounds.’ Accommodating Cantonese,

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Hokkien, Hakka, Malay, English, and other languages, they exemplify the ‘creolized lingua-scape’ that their predecessors have created in the first place.

To reflect the polyphonic nature of a Chinese community, *New Immigrant* describes two Nanyang Chinese communities with different living conditions: new immigrants (‘Xin Ke’) and local Peranakan. *New Immigrant* tells the story of a Chinese man who travelled south from China in the 1920s to earn a living in Nanyang, where he met a Peranakan woman. They were involved in tribal conflicts but gradually learned how to reconcile cultural differences. Their story finally ended up in a happy marriage. With a melodramatic plot, *New Immigrant* demonstrates the potential of love to bridge the emotional distance separating two conflicting families, and, by implication, two Nanyang Chinese societies.

According to the *Overseas Chinese Encyclopedia*, ‘Xin Ke’ originally and specifically means new Chinese immigrants to Indonesia and Malaya (Zhou, 454). Later, the word was broadly used to designate ‘those who were born in China but moved to locations such as Indonesia’ (454). The word ‘Xin Ke’ readily invites comparison with Peranakan, whose parents are overseas Chinese born in Indonesia and Malaya (454). Peranakan are also known as individuals of ‘Chinese descent’ or ‘baba’ (men) and ‘nyonya’ (female) (25). The difference between ‘Xin Ke’ and Peranakan lies in the different historical moments in which they leave their motherland and resettle elsewhere. ‘Xin Ke’ are immigrants who arrived in Southeast Asia between the end of the 19th and the early 20th century (Leo 2007, 118), whereas the Peranakan arrived from China and settled in Southeast Asia before this period. Some Peranakan married the aboriginals there and successfully integrated themselves into the local community.

In Singapore and Malaya at the beginning of the 20th century, many Peranakans were no longer proficient in Mandarin. Most spoke Chinese dialects. The vast majority were fluent in

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English or Malay but observed Chinese rituals and customs in their daily lives. In contrast, ‘Xin Ke’ were generally proficient or fluent in Mandarin, and they practised their Chinese ancestral culture in their foreign homes. Typically, ‘Xin Ke’ men did not marry aboriginal women. These ‘Xin Ke’ and their descendants constituted a ‘Xin Ke’ society markedly different from the Peranakan groups. *New Immigrant* dramatizes the tension between ‘Xin Ke’ and Peranakan, a natural consequence of different cultural values and lifestyles. In the film, Shen Huaqiang (hereafter Shen) is a quintessential ‘Xin Ke’ and Zhang Huizhen (hereafter Hui) and Gan Fusheng (hereafter Fu) are typical Peranakans. Hui’s father, Zhang Tianxi (hereafter Zhang), had been living in Nanyang for a long time, became wealthy in business, married a native woman, and was gradually assimilated into the Peranakan culture. Zhang’s son and daughter also view themselves as Peranakans. Zhang hires Fu, another Peranakan, as his English secretary. Shen, the son of Zhang’s cousin, travels south from China to visit Zhang. He stays temporarily with Zhang at his home in Johor, Malaya. Afterwards, through Zhang’s connections, Shen finds a position as a secretary at the rubber plantation in Singapore.

Shen experiences numerous difficulties with Nanyang customs, languages, and food. For example, he is not proficient in English and Malay. He vomits after eating durian, dislikes curry, and refuses to eat with his hands as the Peranakans often do. Shen’s difficulties only provoke Hui’s and Fu’s ridicule. Hui comments in Shen’s absence that ‘no wonder people say “Xin Ke” are silly, stupid and ignorant’ (Guo 1927, 405). One ‘Xin Ke’ responded sympathetically while reading the film’s script and summarised the snub that ‘Xin Ke’ suffered in Nanyang during that period: ‘Those who know me do not treat me nicely, and those who do not know me try to bully me. All that I valued was insulted, and all of my words were undervalued. Though well-educated,

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I cannot find a position in which to apply my abilities. This is the fate of a “Xin Ke” ’ (Chun 1927).

Fu tries to court Hui. To please her, Fu obtains special permission from the Malaya Johor Malay sultan (i.e., the Malay hereditary monarch) and gives her a tour of the Johor Royal Palace. Hui’s mother also invites Shen. Fu does not like it but can do nothing about it. Therefore, when they dine together, Fu mocks Shen. Here, the screenwriter Liu Bei-jin obviously incorporates his experience of socializing with the Johor Malay royalty in the script. In 1934, Liu was invited by the Nanjing Kuomintang Government to visit China. After Liu discussed the invitation with the prince of the Johor Malay sultanate, the Malay prince decided to appoint Liu to lead more than 20 Malayan Chinese high school students to study and travel in Shanghai for more than ten days (Tay 2013a). This visit to China was certainly not Liu’s first. However, the beautiful Chinese countryside sparked a strong sense of national pride in him (Tay 2013a).

Liu Bei-jin was born in Nanyang and maintained a good relationship with the local Malay royal family. *New Immigrant* also reproduced the festive Peranakan culture and Malay dances. However, Liu identified himself more with Chinese culture. As a screenwriter, Liu used the adjectives ‘silent and determined’ (Guo et al. 1972, 404) to describe Shen, implying authorial approval of him as a ‘Xin Ke.’ Interestingly, Liu reserves negative descriptions for Peranakans like Fu and Hui. He disapprovingly portrayed the former as ‘roguish, lustful and deceitful’ (405) and laments that the latter was ‘lively and intelligent but unfortunately contaminated by indigenous customs’ (404). Thus, it is easy to ascertain the screenwriter’s opinion of the relative merits of the Xin Ke and the Peranakan culture. In the Nanyang society of the 1920s, Peranakans such as Fu, who were fluent in English and Malay, could effectively liaise with the British colonial government and the Malay rulers. As a result, they tend to have a superior socio-

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economic status. Constituting the upper middle class of the society, Peranakans look down on Shen. This is because most members of the 'Xin Ke' community were settlers or laborers socially inferior to Peranakans. This is exactly why Hui mocks and despises Shen when they first meet.

Although Shen is born into a poor family, he was educated in China and possesses a good understanding of Chinese culture, a knowledge beyond Hui's reach. Proud of his Chinese heritage, Shen intends to civilise this Peranakan young woman, who in his mind is contaminated by indigenous customs. When Hui enrolls in a Singaporean school with the only goal of learning how to dance, she is immediately ridiculed by Shen: 'A school is designed for for education and not for dancing!' (Guo et al. 1972, 408). Shen also lectures Hui: 'We should all aim at obtaining a good education, however difficult it may be! Uneducated people are uncivilized people!' (409). Not fluent in Chinese, Hui asks Shen, 'What does "uncivilized people" mean?' (409). Shen specifically defines this phrase as 'silly, stupid, barbaric, unintelligent [individuals]' (409). From Shen's point of view, Peranakans like Hui are strangers to Chinese culture and are culturally rootless. Education provides the only way through which this wrong can be redressed.

In the film, Chinese-language education is an obvious means of bridging the cultural distance between Shen and Hui. Hui attends school for two years, and her father then hastily arranges a marriage of her and Fu. Declaring that 'my happiness cannot be sacrificed thoughtlessly' (Guo et al. 1972, 410), Hui defies the orders of her parents and the words of the matchmakers. She runs away on the wedding day and hides in the mountains. Apparently influenced by her school education, Hui uses the discourse of free love popularised by the May Fourth New Culture Movement in China to break through the restrictions of traditional marriage. Shen resolutely supports Hui's decision. In the mountains, they are attacked by poisonous snakes

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and other animals. Shen rescues Hui from danger. Hui falls ill, and Shen brings Hui to a farmer's house to nurse her. Later, Fu discovers Hui's hideout and attempts to kidnap Hui. Shen stops Fu, and Fu falls into a cavern along with his automobile. Finally, Hui and Shen fall in love, marry, and live happily ever after.

The film demonstrates that, despite initial opposition and hostility, 'Xin Ke' and Peranakan, two large Nanyang Chinese communities with different cultures, better understand each other and work together to face the difficulties of the future. Dialogue plays a central role in this process of cultural reconciliation. More importantly, the film communicates the concepts of 'multiple sounds' and 'multiple orthographies', which in turn suggest the optimistic ideals of Liu Bei-jin and his colleagues regarding the future of the various ethnic groups in Nanyang society. The contemporary Chinese community in Singapore and Malaysia has divided into a Sinophone community and an Anglophone community. This is basically a variation on the opposition of new immigrants and Chinese Peranakan. It is even that case that the current disputes between Singapore-born Chinese people and new immigrants from China- the differences and conflicts created between their language abilities, cultural attitudes, and social properties- are a repetition of the opposition between new immigrants and Chinese Peranakan in the first half of the last century. (Lee 2010, 175-181) Examining Liu Bei-jin's multi-lingual background and the multilingualism in his *New Immigrant*, we can understand that the phenomenon of 'creolized lingua-scapes' has a long history. Although it becomes a standard feature in modern Singaporean and Malaysian films, the problem of indigenoussness, colonialism, and Chineseness that it invokes can be traced back to the early twentieth century.

Conclusion

Drawing on a large number of old newspapers, this article not only corrects the long-established critical consensus that the film *New Immigrant* was never released but also affirms the historical significance of *New Immigrant* as the first Singaporean and Malayan film. Additionally, this article traces the development of the Nanyang Liu Bei-jin Homemade Film Company and the public response to it. The moving and tragic life of the film company's head, Liu Bei-jin, who joined the Namchow mechanics and left Singapore and Malaya to fight in the Chinese War of Resistance against Japan, is also portrayed. Appropriating the creolization theory, this article scrutinises the presence of 'multiple sounds' and 'multiple orthographies' in *New Immigrant*. These characteristics play an important role in constructing the history of Singaporean and Malaysian Sinophone films, from *New Immigrant* in the early twentieth century to the present day. Moreover, this article argues that 'multiple sounds' and 'multiple orthographies' have always been the constitutive elements of Singaporean and Malaysian Sinophone films. These elements are exactly what distinguish Sinophone films in Singapore and Malaysia from their counterparts in mainland China, Hong Kong, and Taiwan.

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Notes

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² Raphaël Millet's *Singapore Cinema* (Millet 2006) is less influential among academics than *Latent Images: Film in Singapore* because the former does not offer many compelling arguments and analyses. However, *Singapore Cinema* (2006) does include some speculation that *New Immigrant* was Singapore's first locally produced film (Millet 2006, 117). Regrettably, the author does not provide any supporting evidence. In 2011, I published a Chinese article that combined a large amount of periodical and historical materials and proved for the first time that *New Immigrant* was the first Singaporean/Malaysian film (Hee 2011, 3-9). The materials and opinions in this article were

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cited in an article co-written by Uhde, Jan, and Yvonne Ng Uhde in 2013. They agreed that the first Singaporean/Malaysian film was *New Immigrant* (Uhde and Uhde 2013, 36-47) .

³ On February 5, 1927, *The Sin Kuo Min Press*, a 'Xin Ke' special issue, published an article titled 'The "Xin Ke" Script' by Xu Yin-ji. (Nanyang Liu Bei-Jin Homemade Film Co.,1927a) Xu must have been a screenwriter who joined the team after the film production began. The latter half of this script differed from the version of the script that was published on November 26, 1926. The earlier version was more complicated, whereas the content of the later version was relatively simple. This difference confirms Chen's statement that the *New Immigrant* script underwent significant changes.