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From Sojourner to National Icon: Chua Boon Hean

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Abstract

This paper takes a transregional approach to examine primary historical sources that reveal the significance of the experiential and professional meanderings of Chua Boon Hean (1905-1995) for Southeast Asian studies. Chua was a writer and artist who emigrated from Chaozhou in southern China to Malaya in the 1920s. He became a prominent figure in the film industry and is recognised as a cultural icon of post-independence Singapore. Chua's story calls for a careful re-examination of the ambiguities and connections between 'diaspora', 'ethnicity' and 'borders'. While policymakers had reasons to adopt such labels to manage a diverse population in a colonial and post-colonial setting, researchers must recognise the limits and implications of such efforts. Experiences of social belonging and ethnic identity – more malleable than categories might allow – repudiate this approach of rigid labelling. By adding new dimensions and fresh primary sources from Chua's archive to ongoing discussions in Southeast Asian studies, this paper illuminates the fluidity of Chinese diasporic networks and ethnic identity overseas. By examining Chua's story through a transregional historical lens, this paper lays the groundwork for a more imaginative approach to understanding the elastic and fluid process of identity formation in modern Asia. Such a perspective can contribute significantly to the current climate of heightened mobilities and politicised exchanges in Southeast Asia.

Keywords: Diaspora; Transregional studies; Singapore and South China; Chua Boon Hean; Film Industry and the Shaw Brothers

Prologue: Towards a Transregional History in *Nanyang*

In recent decades, researchers have identified an accelerating process of dislocation since the mid-nineteenth century, involving the mobilisation and diffusion of people, ideas, things and images across time and space (Geyer and Bright 1995; see also Appadurai 1990). Particularly in Asia, scholars have established the role of colonial cities as crossroads for various sojourners motivated by religious, economic and social goals (Ho 2006; Myers and So 2011; Stein 2011; Tagliacozzo and Chang 2011). Against this academic backdrop, scholars have increasingly seen 'Asia' as a flexible, fluid and contested concept (Acharya 2010; Duara 2010; Harper and Amrith 2014) rather than understanding its history as rooted in inherent national differences. Most of this work has focused on the story of ideas, people and materials in motion in places in and around Southeast Asia during the colonial period (Tagliacozzo *et al.*, 2015a, 2015b, 2019). What this fluidity has meant for different facets of social life at different historical moments and with varied geographical expressions is still being explored (Chan 2015; Chung 2018; Shih 2007; Stein 2011). Against this background, we set out to study Chua Boon Hean (1905-1995), a cultural icon of modern Singapore.

In recent decades, with the rise and growing prosperity of the city-state, the Singapore government has established many institutions to identify and display its rich historical heritage. These include the

National Library, the National Archives, and the National Museum. Cultural icons from different ethnic groups have been valorised in these halls of cultural fame to showcase the nation's history and contribute to a shared sense of identity (Abullah and Kim 2002; Zhang 2022). Among these, the story of Chua Boon Hean is of particular interest to our study. Celebrating figures such as Chua on official registers in the present invites us to return to their pasts. Chua's status is sedimented in the meanings of cultural identity in Singapore, but reconsidering his experiences reveals active movement between and among places and categories in search of opportunities. Of Teochew origin and crowned as a literacy icon in Singapore, Chua's experience reveals a far more complex Teochew migration story than the dominant historical discourse acknowledges. His archival collection at the National Archives of Singapore and the Hong Kong Film Archive tells how he navigated Singapore's film industry from the 1930s to the 1970s. Chua's experience reveals the diverse cultural references behind film production in post-war Singapore and sheds light on many significant moments in Singapore's cinematic history, vividly revealing the colourful world of Singapore's sojourners.

Drawing on under-explored archival material in Hong Kong and Singapore, this article examines Chua Boon Hean's historical journey to illuminate the fluidity of Chinese diasporic networks and ethnic identity in Nanyang. Specifically, it aims to draw attention to the diversity of translocal diasporic experiences of the Teochew-speaking community and more flexible expressions of 'Chinese identity' in Southeast Asia. This study, therefore, sits at the intersection of Southeast Asian studies and Chinese diaspora studies. A deeper understanding of the context in which Chua Boon Hean's story unfolds will contribute to scholarly discussions on 1) the South China–Southeast Asia connection, 2) the Chinese diaspora debate, and 3) the early history of Singapore's film industry.

The South China–Southeast Asia Connection

In Asia, a growing body of research has recently identified accelerating dislocation processes mobilising people and ideas across space and time (Chung 2018; 2019; Ho 2006, Stein 2011; Tagliacozzo 2005). These studies are breaking new academic ground by focusing on the flows, networks or matrices of power in port cities rather than on the structures of the nation state. They problematise traditional state-centred paradigms and stimulate academic and public debates on ethnicity and cultural identity, which are not neatly aligned with national borders. This development is particularly relevant for scholars of Chinese studies. A narrative of 'national victimhood' and the 'coolie trade' has dominated the modern history of Chinese migration and settlement in Southeast Asia. Traditionally, Chinese-speaking scholars have framed the exodus, beginning with the Opium Wars of 1841-1842, as a by-product of the 'century of national humiliation' (*bainian guochi*) at the hands of foreign imperial powers.[1] The Chinese diaspora in Southeast Asia was, thus, largely a legacy of Western exploits in China (Kuhn 2008; Wang 2005; Zheng 1997). As a result, the identities of overseas Chinese are often circumscribed by a sense of cultural impoverishment or the absence of a homeland. More recently, Macauley's research on migration networks and connectivity across China's Chaozhau (Teochew) region and Southeast Asia has further challenged the above state-centred, land-based paradigms that have dominated intellectual work in China (Macauley 2021; see also Choi, 2014).[2] By documenting how the transoceanic migration of Teochew-speaking peoples across a

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[1] According to this narrative, emigrants (often indentured labourers known as 'coolies') abandoned their ancestral homelands due to national disintegration, especially experienced as tormenting poverty, proceeding on a dangerous voyage to Southeast Asia (commonly referred to as '*Nanyang*' [South Sea] in Chinese literature) for which they ended up paying with hard labour.

[2] Chaozhou is an area on the southeast coast of China. In Imperial time, it was the northeastern-most prefecture of the commercial province of Guangdong. It shared a border with Fujian province, the business powerhouse to the north where Hokkien was a common dialect.

far-flung maritime world, Macauley reveals a resilient human network stretching from Chaozhau to an expanding frontier of settlement in Southeast Asia.[3] The resilience of these connections was sustained by a mixture of familial, commercial, and fraternal affiliations spanning the ports of Swatow, Hong Kong, Singapore, Bangkok, and Saigon. Both Choi and Macauley document that the rise of the Teochew-speaking people as a major economic group in Southeast Asia coincided with their increasing specialisation in the South China Sea rice trade. A distinctive dialect and ethnic identity facilitated business links and trade specialisation (Choi 2015, 2019; Macauley 2021, Tan 2000; see also Chin 1998).

Although many researchers considered Teochew-speaking migrants one of the most economically influential Chinese dialect groups in southern China and Southeast Asia, gaps remain. To date, our historical understanding of the Teochew-speaking community has been monolithic. Most studies have adopted an economic-historical perspective (i.e. using class-based categories such as 'coolie' or 'merchant') to illuminate the rags-to-riches stories of successful Teochew-speaking merchants (Douw *et al.* 2013; Luo 2000; Prasopsombat 2018; Qiu 2000). While their migration patterns and occupational specifications have been studied, little is known about those Teochew-speaking migrants who were unsuccessful in business and whose life stories unfolded outside the merchant circle. The livelihoods of these lesser-known Teochew-speaking settlers in Nanyang remain obscure in the dominant view. This paper considers how attention to one such figure can help to broaden and advance our understanding of the diverse and fluid self-identities of this Teochew-speaking migrant group under the umbrella of an overarching, monolithic identity of 'overseas Chinese'. This new understanding will help us to recalibrate the idea of the Chinese 'diaspora'.

On the Chinese 'Diaspora'

While the above narrative of 'national victimhood' has been revisited, a new trend since the mid-2000s, foregrounded by debates on the 'Sinophone', has tended to de-emphasise the national frame in favour of local or transnational scales. In 2007, Shu-mei Shih introduced the idea of 'Sinophone'. She conceived it as 'the study of Sinitic-language cultures and population on the fringes of China and Chineseness' (Shih 2007). This idea is seen by some cultural studies scholars as a challenge to Tu Weiming's idea of 'Cultural China', which sees Chinese culture as a large 'living tree' branching out to its many overseas offspring (Tu, 1997; see also Callahan 2002; Chan 2015). For Shih, the idea of the Sinophone is 'a place-based, everyday practice and experience'. It is a historical creation that is always changing to reflect local needs and conditions (Shih 2013). The idea of Sinophone has also been applied to facilitate multilingualism in the study of Chinese film, culture and literature (Yue and Khoo 2014). By adopting a time- and place-based application of Sinophone theory, scholars and critics of Chinese film, literature and culture are beginning to challenge the China-centric approach of 'Chinese diaspora' studies. Their work also shows how discussions of Chineseness and Chinese diaspora need to be grounded in specific local, demographic and political conditions rather than merely sentiments and identities. Their findings emphasised that 'Chinese culture' is context-specific rather than based on essentialist notions of Chineseness (Chan 2015; Hee 2019). By reducing the emphasis on nationality or ethnicity, these scholarly attempts destabilise a unitary account of Chineseness and reorient the China-centric approach of 'Chinese diaspora' studies. It underscores the need to reframe diaspora studies from the 'national' to a more localised but transnational scale. Our examination of Chua's journey and involvement in Nanyang's film history unfolds against this backdrop.

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[3]Focusing on Chaozhou, Macauley explains how the inhabitants of this far-flung corner of China became the business masters of the South China Sea. She traces how the people of Chaozhou enjoyed many of the advantages of an offshore colonial system, both at home and in Southeast Asia, without having to establish a formal governing authority. In doing so, Macauley challenges the conventional view that China was only a land empire, lacking maritime and colonial reach.

On the Early History of the Singapore Film Industry

In a parallel development, recent literature shows that Singapore, as a former colonial city, is an excellent site for studying Asia's diverse film cultures. As early as the 1930s, with the advent of sound film technology, South China and Southeast Asia became a thriving centre for commercial dialect entertainment (Ching 2008; Yung and Chan 2003). With a dynamic transfer of capital, agencies and talent, Hong Kong and Singapore became important production and distribution points for films in several Chinese languages/dialects. According to historians Chung and Yung, amusement park owners and cinema circuit operators in Hong Kong and Singapore, such as the Shaw brothers, were an important source of money that fuelled this booming market (Chung 2005; Rea and Nicolai 2015; Yung 2008). Chua Ai Lin (2015) further shows how Chinese migrants and local-born Straits Chinese (Baba) worked as dialect film distributors and cinema owners in Singapore and Malaya. In the 1930s, the greatest opportunities for these investors were in distribution, exhibition and promotion (especially advertising) rather than film production. In Nanyang's diverse cultural landscape, multi-ethnic networks were crucial to overcoming challenges such as the Great Depression and establishing cinema chains. Yung and Chua portray the landscape of the early cinema industry in Singapore/Malaya as a dynamic interplay of competition and collaboration among key players such as the Shaw brothers (from Ningbo) and various exhibition companies, often run by Anglophone Straits Chinese (Chua 2012b, 2015; see also Suryadinata 2010; Putten 2010).

Importantly, with the advent of sound film, the Baba cinema owners lost their advantage to the Shaw brothers, who were more connected to the Shanghai and Hong Kong film circles. Placing Chinese-dialect films in the context of Nanyang film history, Yung examined the history of the Shaw brothers, documenting how they collaborated with several Cantonese opera singers to brand their products ('Western-costume Cantonese opera' talkies) for urban mass consumption. These multi-ethnic collaborations were crucial in making Cantonese talkies a hot commodity (Yung 2008, 2015; see also Chua 2014). As a result of its far-reaching influence, dialect cinema was involved in cultural politics at regional, national and transnational levels. As Yung shows, the Shaw brothers were at the forefront of this nascent industry from the 1930s onwards – a time of great political and economic upheaval (Chung 2007; Yung 2008). While the role of the Shaw brothers in Chinese film history is well known, that the company was once active in the Malay film circle is less well known (Barnard 2008, 2009). There is a compelling case for looking at Shaw from these new angles, and Chua's story holds the key to unlocking this chapter of Shaw's history.

The method developed in this study is transregional history. Transregional history emphasises that boundaries are not the result of actions taken at one scale, whether local, national or transnational, but rather the product of inter-scalar relations, simultaneously negotiated at and between multiple scales. Chua's story reflects this unique character of border crossing – his story did not belong to a single city, nation or place. It was the result of a set of geographical, political and economic circumstances in an era when empires met and disintegrated, and political boundaries were drawn and redrawn. Such a transregional historical perspective has much to contribute to the recent macroclimate of intensified mobilities and politicised exchanges in Asia.

Unsettlement: Political Chaos and a Booming Print Culture in China

Chua lived under various political regimes. Chua's worldview was significantly shaped by the political turmoil that surrounded him at different stages of his life. As a child, he spoke the Teochew dialect at home and could also communicate in Hokkien. By the turn of the twentieth century, dialect culture faced a formidable challenge from the Qing court, which saw local dialects as an obstacle to creating a more coherent and stronger Middle Kingdom. Many government officials and intellectuals blamed the widespread use of dialects for the apparent lack of unity in China, contributing to Qing's military defeats to Western countries and Japan (Chung 2005; Weng 2018).

In 1905, the year Chua was born, the Qing government abruptly abolished the imperial examination. In its place, a centralised school system with a standardised syllabus was implemented throughout China. Among others, the new standard emphasised the teaching of *Guoyu* (literally, 'the national language'). The Qing court and the Republican government enforced legislation requiring all school levels to use *Guoyu*. The standard applied across China was largely based on the Beijing dialect, taught with a series of dictionaries used as reference books. Teochew, like other dialects, was marginalised within this new national system.

Chua was born in Chao'an, Guangdong, into a household of declining wealth. The year of his birth coincided with the Qing government's policies to abolish the Imperial examination. In an oral history interview, Chua described his family's experience as one of serial immigration. Like many Teochew families of his time, he had relatives residing in different parts of Southeast Asia who had acquired Malay and various dialects along their diasporic journeys. Chua had four older brothers who would all eventually settle in Southeast Asia. While three of them were given traditional private education (intended to prepare students for the imperial examination), Chua and his fourth brother attended modern schools. Like his peers, he was educated under a centralised government curriculum that emphasised the teaching of a 'national language' (*Guoyu*). He continued to speak Teochew at home and did not see the use of multiple dialects and *Guoyu* as problematic for his cultural identity (Chua, Oral History, NAS; Yap 2020).

For decades, the Chuas had been in the old-style business of textile-making. However, with the arrival of new technology in many coastal Chinese cities, it grew increasingly challenging for small family workshops to make ends meet. This development affected many family businesses in Chaozhou. The Chua family tried unsuccessfully to improve their livelihoods. To support the family, three older brothers followed in the footsteps of their relatives, departing for Nanyang to find work and support the family operation (Chua, Oral History, NAS; see also Yap 2020).

Chua grew up in an era of rapid urbanisation. By the 1920s, many Chinese cities, especially the coastal treaty ports, had furnished a unique economic and cultural setting in which popular cultures blossomed (Myer and So 2011; Rea 2015). With a flourishing print media consisting of newspapers and youth magazines connecting Shanghai with other coastal cities, the tapestry of an 'imagined community' developed (Anderson 1991). Thanks to modern printing technology and growing circulation, geographically dispersed readers formed a group with a shared outlook. Magazines produced for and encouraging the growth of a youth culture invigorated the association between 'progressive/leftist ideas' and young Chinese citizens' identities (Culp 2019; Graziani 2014).

Outside of school, as a teenager, Chua enjoyed reading magazines produced in Shanghai to which he subscribed, including *Xinqingnian* (*New Youth*) and *Zhongguo qingnian* (*China Youth*). Like his fourth brother and some of his cousins, Chua was attracted to the "progressive" leftist ideas expressed in these publications (Graziani 2014). Soon, Chua edited and published his own magazines and distributed it through his peer networks. He was not the only one in his family inclined toward 'progressive' ideas. As will be seen, this inclination significantly impacted Chua's life path (Chua, Oral History).

In 1926, amid the political chaos in China, Chua went to Tianjin, a British-controlled treaty port, to take entrance examinations for university education. Upon hearing of the 18 March massacre in Beijing, Chua was dismayed and decided to leave Tianjin immediately as a form of boycott. On his way to his hometown, he visited Shanghai, which was a booming city of opportunities that offered an idealistic world for young moderns to explore. Time spent there exposed Chua to the booming print culture and growing film industry. During his travels, Chua had an encounter that would shape his coming years. His peers introduced him to a military officer who invited him to join the Nationalist Party (Kuomintang, KMT). The officer claimed he was familiar with Chua's written works in various youth magazines. He recruited Chua and brought him under his wing. Chua joined the propaganda unit of the KMT as it prepared its military troops to embark on the Northern Expedition (1928) and promoted the ideas motivating this campaign to the public. He was given a modest salary

for designing promotional materials and organising related propaganda activities. It was an alluring offer because the money was enough to ease the family's burden and enable him to tour within China. Among his job duties, his superiors assigned him regular tours to Shanghai to acquire painting and drawing materials. During visits to Shanghai, he made the acquaintance of many young painters (Chua, Oral History, NAS; Yap 2020). As will be seen, peer group connections such as this would help shape Chua's future career in Singapore.

While working for the KMT, Chua enjoyed high autonomy and stimulating companionship with peers. Nevertheless, being exposed to wars and suffering because of this work pushed him to consider a career change. After he quit his job, he travelled with peers to different coastal cities on a limited budget. Upon his return home around 1927, he learned that his fourth brother, the one inspired by leftist ideas, had joined the Chinese Communist Party. Meanwhile, rumours that Chua and his brother could be caught up in rebellious activities were circulating in the village. The two brothers decided to leave their hometown (Chua, Oral History, NAS; Yap 2020) to avoid causing trouble for their family. Their destination was Nanyang, a place of refuge and possibility.

Nanyang Adventure: Joining a Thriving Film Industry

Challenging the dominant view that the migration from China to *Nanyang* was primarily in the form of a 'coolie trade' or 'merchant clique' network building, Chua's story reveals Singapore as an in-between place of repeated journeys and continuous movement that was not only oriented around trade connections (Harper and Amrith 2014; Sinn 2011; Trocki 2011; Yu 2011). Travellers between China and *Nanyang*, like Chua, formed a human matrix that turned *Nanyang* into an oceanic borderland connecting coastal China and Southeast Asia (Macauley 2021). Instead of just seeing it as a place to settle and earn money, like many who came from China during this period did, Chua and his peers thought of *Nanyang* as a destination for adventure (Chua, Oral History, NAS; Yap 2020).

In British Malaya, Chinese migrants were allowed to carry on their core cultural practices and traditions. This led to the growth of Chinese communal establishments such as schools, associations and newspapers. These establishments, contributing to internalising a shared Chinese identity, also created a market demand for teachers, newspaper editors, reporters and illustrators (Chua 2012a; Kuo 2014). Chua seized upon these opportunities, accepting an offer to teach at a primary school in Johor. This job began well, but Chua's approach to teaching conflicted with the conservative administration. He soon quit and set up his own business.

Despite an economic downturn starting in 1929, brought about by the worldwide Great Depression, Singapore's entertainment industry was booming (Chua 2012b; Yung 2008). Electric light prolonged the active hours of urban life, drastically increasing nighttime leisure venues, including cinemas and amusement parks (Wong and Tan 2004). Material progress gave rise to an inquisitive middle class that craved entertainment and found it in these amusement venues (Chua 2015; Foo 2018; Rea 2015; Putten 2010). The advertising industry was also thriving. In 1929, Chua, aware of the opportunities this growing market presented, set up an art studio with a young painter friend he had met in Shanghai. He cited a visit to Singapore's Happy Valley amusement park, an impressive venue where customers could dance and socialize with Malay women, as his inspiration for this business venture. Advertising firms provided services to businesses in this new urban leisure landscape, and Chua's art studio would do the same. Chua had a good knowledge of various drawing materials and the skills to quickly produce large billboards and posters. His early work experience in military propaganda with the KMT had prepared him for this business. The studio was successful and profitable (Chua, Oral History).

By the early 1930s, Straits-born Chinese owned most of Singapore's cinemas and amusement parks (Chua 2012b). In addition to English, many also spoke in Teochew or Hokkien, the dialects inherited from their male ancestors. Chua leveraged his fluency in Hokkien to approach a Hokkien-speaking film distributor, with a proposal to organise advertising activities for his firm. To prove his ability,

Chua designed a film poster for him with no cost. Delighted with Chua's work, the Hokkien film distributor hired him and facilitated connections with other Hokkien-speaking figures in the film industry (Chua, Oral History, NAS; Yap 2020).

Undaunted by language barriers, Chua expanded his networks beyond the Teochew- and Hokkien-speaking circles in Singapore using visual materials. To advance his business, Chua invested in an expensive camera that he would use to photograph his work and display it to prospective clients. He was soon approached by prospective partners, including two young men from Ningbo, the Shaw brothers (Chua, oral history, NAS; Yap 2020).

When the Shaw brothers first met Chua in 1929, they communicated in a mix of Shanghainese and *Guoyu*. Like Chua, Run Run Shaw attended a modern school with a nationally standardised *Guoyu* as the medium of instruction. Chua recalled that they spoke *Guoyu* with a strong Ningbo accent. Chua's ability to understand the heavily accented *Guoyu* came in handy. Chua proved his skill. He easily translated the Shaw brothers' verbal instructions into pictures and written words. Chua received an offer from Shaw. Their language of communication was a mixture of Shanghainese and *Guoyu* (Chua, oral history, NAS; Yap 2020).

Working Across Dialects and Ethnic Barriers

While working for the Shaw brothers, Chua needed to interact with various people with different linguistic backgrounds. Sometimes, differences in dialect still mattered. When the Shaw brothers arrived in Singapore around 1924 or 1925, they encountered an unfriendly business environment (Wong 2003). By the time they met Chua, they had been excluded from many spaces due to their Ningbo way of speaking. As Runme Shaw recounted, 'All Cantonese, Hokkien, Teochew...they controlled this film business. Shanghainese, they boycotted. Don't want to deal with me. I cannot sell the pictures, cannot show the pictures' (Runme Shaw, Oral history, NAS; Sam 1985; see also Run Run Shaw, Oral History, NAS).

Ethnic lines were, thus, markedly drawn. Speakers of Hokkien, Teochew and Cantonese, from China's two southern provinces, kept to themselves in business. When not at each other's throats, they were united against those of northern Chinese origin, including those from Shanghai. The Shanghainese were stereotyped as sly, grasping and mean (Chung 2007; Sam 1985). In this social climate, the Shaw brothers could not form a stable relationship with any cinema companies that might allow them to screen films. Thus, the brothers' business was largely carried out with mobile equipment. They capitalized on the accessibilty provided by the roads and railway system built by the British in the late nineteenth century. Using Singapore as a springboard, they travelled these routes to Johor, Penang, Ipoh and elsewhere on the Malayan peninsula. In places where no theatres could be found, they set up make-shift tents or open-air theatres (Runme Shaw, Oral History, NAS; Sam 1985).[4] In many cases, their cinemas were little more than a canvas screen set up in a field where viewers had to bring their own chairs. Beginning in 1927, the Shaw brothers paid a substantial amount to lease a theatre. It was a wooden structure with hard benches. The screen was just a piece of white cloth hung from the ceiling. It was named the Empire Theatre (Runme Shaw, Oral History, NAS; Sam 1985; Yung 2008).

Because the Shaw brothers travelled frequently to Kuala Lumpur, Penang and Ipoh to scout for more screening sites for their expanding business, they needed reliable staff to manage the Empire Theatre in Singapore. This task was entrusted to Chua. He was responsible for running the box office, as well as secretarial duties and publicity, including advertisements and posters. Over time, his work at the Empire granted him insight into the preferences of film audiences. Eventually, he began to advise the Shaw brothers on which films to purchase to ensure profitable screenings at an expanding

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[4]Runme Shaw recollected, 'We went to all the small towns all no cinema. We just tried a place, one place, two then next place. We just started like that. From this very beginning, we tried travelling shows, you know just like that. Some places had no cinema at all. We had a tent, you know, travelling...(sic).' Runme Shaw, Oral History, NAS.

number of theatres in Singapore and Malaya (Chua, Oral History, NAS; Yap 2020). With Chua's assistance, the Shaw brothers secured a business partnership with a small group of Straits-born Chinese (many of them spoke Hokkien and Teochew). These networks helped the Shaws rent their venues for film screenings. The timing was crucial because it allowed the brothers to diversify their business into lucrative entertainment industries when other parts of the economy were retracting. In addition to distributing and screening films, they secured management rights for several amusement parks (Wong and Tan 2004). To grow these businesses, they had the idea of building halls for Cantonese, Teochew, Hokkien and Malay operas. They also introduced *ronggeng* halls to host a cabaret featuring Malay women dancing (Chua, Oral History, NAS; Yap 2020; Foo 2018). Chua became the right-hand man of the Shaw brothers in consolidating this expanding business empire in Singapore.

On Chinese-Malay Relations

Chua and the Shaw brothers survived the war that interrupted life in the region by keeping a low profile. During the Japanese occupation (1944-45), the brothers were tasked with screening propaganda films in their cinemas. Runme Shaw ventured to explain why the Japanese chose them as 'collaborators.' The Shaw brothers claimed they were 'apolitical' because they had never been fully accepted by the dialect-based Chinese business cliques of Singapore and Malaya. Consequentially, this allowed them to avoid the pre-war boycott of Japanese goods (Runme Shaw, Oral History, NAS). During the occupation, the Shaw family invited Chua to help manage the ticket sales at some of the theatres that the Japanese had reopened. Theatre halls were altered for propaganda purposes, showing Japanese documentaries and newsreels, and schools under occupation offered classes in Japanese or Malay. While the Japanese troops identified the Chinese population as a clear enemy, they adopted a comparatively lenient stance toward Malay people (Kratoska 1997).

When the war arrived, Chua temporarily resided at the Shaws' warehouse at Tank Road. During the war, Chua also learned new languages, including Hakka, Malay and English (Chua, Oral History, NAS; Yap 2020). The Japanese occupation stoked nationalist feelings across Southeast Asia. While the U.S. kept prior promises and granted independence to the Philippines in 1946, British attempts to reinstate the pre-war colonial control in Malaya had serious consequences for local populations. Rumours and speculation abounded. In anticipation of an independent future under Malay dominance after decolonisation, Malay culture flourished (Barnard 2009, 2010; Harper 2001; Leow 2016).[5] This shift had implications for the film industry, including the work of the Shaws and Chua. Amidst waves of political uncertainty in post-war Singapore, the Shaw brothers quickly rebuilt their business. They launched a tabloid paper, *the Amusement*, to support their expanding exhibition circuit. The paper was used to advertise the films the Shaws were showing in Singapore. Chua recalled that as the editor of this paper, he became a 'gatewatcher' for the Shaws' printed promotional materials. As such, he needed to ensure that he avoided sensitive ethnic issues. Soon, the brothers asked Chua to help reviewing scripts for films that they would direct, produce, distribute, and exhibit throughout Southeast Asia. Remarkably, this script-screening duty covered scripts for the Shaws' Malay Film Productions (Chua, Oral History, NAS; see also Yap 2020).

Foreseeing a booming Malay film market, the Shaw brothers reopened their pre-war studio to produce Malay movies under the name MFP in 1947.[6] It was a politically sensitive investment. Chua recalled that the Malay film production process involved combined efforts by an Indian and Filipino

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[5]Singapore became independent in 1965. The city-state retained its heritage and made Malay its national language. However, by the 1950s, Singapore's population was overwhelmingly Chinese, with Malays and Indians forming large minority groups.

[6]In Singapore in 1941, Shaw constructed a studio at No. 8 Jalan Ampas. This facility was re-opened and incorporated as Malay Film Productions (MFP) in 1949. Collaborating with Malay, Indian and even Filipino directors, the company produced over 150 Malay films between 1941 and 1967, catering to audiences in Singapore, Malaya and Indonesia. Although many of the film plots came from the bangsawan, some were drawn from Chinese and Indian sources. In the late 1960s, MFP began to decline as the industry faced the market challenge of television broadcasting. The demise of the Indonesian market accelerated

crew and required flexibility and spontaneity. Scripts were loose and often improvised. Initially, the brothers hired Chinese directors to produce these Malay films. Soon, Indian and Malay directors were recruited because some Malay audiences favoured the Indian film style, especially the song and dance that Bollywood films became known for (see also Barnard 2010). As the film scripts were first written in Chinese, it was Chua's job to review them before translating them into other languages. To fulfil this duty, Chua continued to study languages, learning the Jawi script to enable him to read Malay books to learn more about Malay culture and customs (see also Yoong and Zainab 2002). He also studied the Quran. He was motivated by a concern with cultural sensitivity, taking care to tap into popular Malay folklore and ensure the appropriateness of the films for Malay audiences. He avoided referencing race, ethnicity and national identities (Chua, Oral History, NAS; Yap 2020).

Chua was aware of the political sensitivities and market conditions while devising plots for the Shaws' Malay films. For this work, he drew inspiration from traditional Chinese and Malay folktales. Chua also drew inspiration from Western sources. He recalled referring to English classics such as *Wuthering Heights*, which he felt contained themes that might resonate with the Malay audience in Nanyang (see also Barnard 2007, 2009; Yap 2020). As a core scriptwriter for MFP, Chua helped the Shaw brothers make P. Ramlee, who starred in films such as *Hang Tuah* (1955), a major Malay star (see also De Josselin De Jong 1965; Barnard 2007). Chua's experience reveals the diverse cultural references behind the Shaws' film production efforts (Chua, Oral History, NAS: see also Odell, Oral History, NAS; Yap 2020).

In addition to reviewing film scripts, Chua wrote the plots, stories, and scripts of more than ten Malay films for MFP. Some of his work engaged with themes important to Singapore's burgeoning nationhood. During the tumultuous period of decolonisation on the Malayan Peninsula, when change was imminent, inter-racial romance became a popular theme in films. Aware of this trend, the Shaw brothers invested in the production of *Sri Menanti* (1958), a Malay film about the tragic romance between a Chinese musician (Chinese actor Paul Chang) and a young Malay girl (Malay actress Zaiton). First shown in Malay and later dubbed into Mandarin, the film was groundbreaking in Singapore for its casting of Malay and Hong Kong actors and daring treatment of sensitive issues. The film was adapted from an original novel by Chua Boon Hean called *Fatimah*.

In the film, Zaiton (Fatimah) and Chang are lovers who share the same passion for music, but their desire to be together is thwarted by religious conservatism and racial prejudice. Chang's character resists a matchmaking arrangement with the daughter of a Chinese merchant, a woman with whom he has little in common despite their shared ethnicity. The film portrays Chang as genuinely respectful of the patriarch of his lover's family, a communal leader in the Malay settlement. To get the trust of Fatimah's family, he is willing to convert to Islam, an idea Fatimah's family rejects as impulsive. The sad ending of *Sri Menanti* evokes a realistic view of interracial relations in post-independence Malaya (Leow 2016). This view is encapsulated in Fatimah's heartfelt monologue, expressing that, although Chang may not be accepted by her family because of their different ethnic backgrounds, she had never allowed her heart to pursue love according to "race or skin colour". The post-independence Singapore government sought to promote just this kind of acceptance of diversity, reflecting its multi-ethnic population. The film was heavy with symbolism, marking an era of profound change during which the Malay community wrestled with nationalism and imagined its place in a new society.

A Cultural Icon of the New City-State

Singapore became independence in 1965 and, re-emphasising the racial and ethnic distinctions of Chinese, Malays and Indians, adopted multiculturalism as the underlying ideology of its national culture (Yeo 1973). Cultural icons from each ethnic group were selected and endorsed as national icons. They are celebrated in museums, schools and various cultural platforms (Zhang 2022). Chua

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the decline. In 1963, after Singapore became part of Malaysia, MFP's biggest star – P. Ramlee – shifted his base to Kuala Lumpur. The MFP studio was closed in 1967. See Barnard 2008.

is one such icon. After retiring in 1973, Chua immersed himself in Chinese painting and calligraphy. His two sons took over his role at Shaw. He gained iconic status after the People's Action Party (PAP) government recognised his written work with several literary awards. He was highly respected in the city-state as an established poet of Chinese literature. He is a revered national icon in Singapore, embodying the city-state's ideal of cultural harmony. Remarkably, while the PAP government recognises him as an iconic Chinese poet, his Teochew background is rarely highlighted in official documents. He is recognised as a representative of (written) Chinese culture rather than as a person whose mother tongue is Teochew (a minority language in decline due to the PAP's language and public housing policies).[7] This is no accident. Politically, the PAP government has effectively sidelined the cultural expressions of many 'dialects' (including Teochew) into Mandarin Chinese by restricting Singapore's linguistic diversity (Leow 2016). As a revered national icon in Singapore, Chua was invited by the National Archives of Singapore to record an oral history.

In his interview, which serves as the primary source for this article, Chua claims to be fluent not primarily in Mandarin Chinese but in Teochew, Cantonese, Hokkien. He also comprehends Shanghainese, Japanese, Malay and English – acquired throughout his career in different companies and places.[8] Perhaps fittingly, Chua adopted pen names in various languages throughout his writing career. Each name has a symbolic meaning related to stages in Chua's life (Chua, Oral History, NAS; see also Yap 2020). They point to a multi-layered history that reflects Chua's identity as an individual, enterprising in his life strategies, contingent in his cultural constitution and vociferous in his pursuit of a creative career, nurtured in the dynamic environment of Nanyang. Chua's story provides an alternative perspective on the shared yet divergent histories of Chinese and Malay-language films in post-colonial Singapore and the previously obscured contributions of Teochew-speaking communities. Chua's career, which included many multi-ethnic exchanges, reveals a diaspora journey to Nanyang, a creative and experimental site where different dialect groups meet, enter into dialogue, and realign themselves with one another. As Chua did, they can attach multiple meanings to their host environment as a legal place of residence, a means of subsistence, and a potent site for depositing values, personal and family memories, and career aspirations.

Epilogue: Regions Beyond Boundaries

This paper approaches the study of Southeast Asia by adopting a transregional lens to examine primary historical sources that reveal the significance of the experiential and professional meanderings of Chua Boon Hean in the diverse and rapidly changing context of Nanyang. Moving beyond conventional ideas of borders and boundedness, it follows Chua to a period in the 1970s in which colonial footprints and geopolitical shifts in Southeast Asia intersect and find expression in the adaptations of the film industry to post-colonial nation-building. By reconstructing the world of Chua and his contemporaries, who saw an inspiring sense of potential in the evolving film industry, this paper highlights Chua's agency and creativity as a sojourner. He drew upon family, linguistic connections, and a sense of peer group belonging to navigate the culturally fluid environment in Nanyang. By adding a novel interpretation of historical sources to ongoing discussions about the Chinese diaspora, this paper not only illuminates the fluidity and resiliency of Teochew networks in Southeast Asia but

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[7]Most previous studies have attributed the decline of Chinese dialect speakers in Singapore to waves of language planning and public housing policies (i.e. urban development that dispersed the concentration of dialect speakers into high-rise housing estates) under the PAP government. These policies, which result in the restricted use of various non-Mandarin dialects (including Teochew) both in public and in the home, make English and Mandarin the two socio-political majority languages in Singaporean society (Gupta and Siew 1995).

[8]Leow's research also examines the role of languages in shaping the Malaysian state. She shows how linguistic plurality was perceived as a crisis by the British and post-colonial regimes, and how the diversity of Chinese languages (Hokkien, Cantonese and Hakka) and Malay in legal matters posed challenges to government officials. She documents that government officials went to great lengths to tame this linguistic diversity and bring it into a new order. It shows how political regimes were able to tame and re-order this linguistic diversity through such transitions - from manuscript to print, from orality to writing.

also proposes that there are diverse ways to understand the diasporic experience of the Chinese-speaking communities. Chua's story demonstrates that there is more than one way to explore and express 'Chineseness' in Southeast Asia.

A key finding from our investigation of Chua's story is that ethnicity and cultural identity can be highly formative, developmental and contextual. Contrary to traditional Chinese historical perspectives that pair diaspora with 'national humiliation' and a discourse of exile and loss, Chua's story illustrates that his diaspora experience of ethnicity involved a dynamic social and cultural process of formation. In his case, ethnic identity was not uprooted and transplanted from China to Nanyang. Rather, it was transformed and reconfigured throughout his life journey. Here, identity was formed in relation to his social environment, but community was neither purely imagined nor shared among all. Boundaries, including those shaped by political and cultural fissures, still mattered. Political boundaries, for instance, shaped social life by establishing a framework for ordering, classifying and networking (Leow 2016).[9] We learn from Chua's experience that in twentieth-century Singapore, this process of boundary demarcation was highly dynamic due to wars and the demise of colonial rule, which led to frequent shifts and re-alignments of economic and political borders. Different intra-ethnic or inter-ethnic relational possibilities co-exist in various settings, each leading to different outcomes regarding identity formation. Chua's story illustrates how layers of self-identity are constructed and solidified through frequent and productive interactions with other dialect groups and ethnic communities.

This paper also argues that, like the idea of the 'nation-state', 'diaspora' is an ambiguous concept that requires careful examination, especially in Asian ethnic studies. Students and commentators tend to interpret diasporic identity as self-evident, while some even praise it as a counter-model to the hegemony of colonial power and the nation-state. By revealing the elasticity of 'diasporic' identity and the fluidity of 'diasporic networks', this study highlights the importance of human agency and its creative capacities in shaping the diasporic experience across national borders. 'Diaspora' as a concept is eminently malleable, capable of being reconstituted and reshaped. Through Chua's story, this study proposes rejecting essentialist understandings of diaspora and ethnicity. In national (Chinese) and colonial (Southeast Asian) histories, the popular but increasingly inaccurate view of overseas Chinese as a homogeneous group needs to be challenged. This point is particularly salient in post-war Asia, shaped by receding empires and newly independent nation-states, where political and ethnic boundaries took shape and solidified. As national borders and immigration controls hardened, racial and ethnic identity became the primary classification of political and social existence. However, malleable perceptions of social belonging reject rigid labels such as 'Chinese' and 'Malay' and require a more elastic approach. While policymakers had reasons to adopt legal and administrative criteria to govern a diverse population in a post-colonial setting, researchers must recognise the limits and implications of such efforts. Experiences of social belonging and ethnic identity – more malleable than categories might allow – invalidate this approach of rigid labelling. A label such as 'Chinese' or 'Teochew' cannot capture the complexity of moving targets such as Chua and others. Thus, the transregional method adopted in this research contributes to new historical perspectives for regional studies in East and Southeast Asia. It encourages researchers not to pre-define 'the' singular border of the area under study but to chart historical actors' movements across and between borders.

In a multinational and legally pluralistic colonial and post-colonial enclave like Singapore, nationality was simultaneously ambiguous, multi-layered and crucial to gaining economic and social privilege. As such, these enclaves serve as a virtual analytical space that highlights in-betweenness and fluid positionalities. By examining Chua's story, this paper opens a path towards a more imaginative approach to understanding the dynamic process of identity formation in modern Asia. Chua's

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[9]Leow's (2016) research reveals the significant role of languages (and government efforts to restrict linguistic diversity) in shaping the new state order. Leow also points out that ethnic politics is not always dyadic – between a coloniser and the colonised (the British versus the Malays) or between a dominant group and an ethnic minority (the Malays versus the Chinese). Instead, ethnic politics can involve a number of parties, each with their own conflicting preferences.

journey illustrates the peculiar nature of the border-crosser, who was not part of any one town, nation or locality but a product of circumstances at a time when national borders and political boundaries were drawn and redrawn. In this way, Chua's history further problematises the concept of 'diaspora' by revealing its heterogeneity and situatedness. Rather than defining diasporic identity in terms of concrete classifications, it should be defined along a continuum. Such a perspective is particularly relevant for Asian scholars in their efforts to understand the recent climate of heightened mobilities and politicised exchanges in Asia.

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*A Brit of Jewish origin, Odell was born in Hong Kong and later migrated to Singapore. He was a popular film distributor in Hong Kong and Singapore's movie market in the 1950s and 1960s.

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