

“Little Nagri” and Cinematic analysis of Womanhood from a Gender Perspective in Southeast Asian culture

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ABSTRACT

“Little Nyonya” is a classic Singaporean TV series, which reflects the lives of the women of Southeast Asia. In advancing the Nyonya culture, it also has the distinct quality of describing the construction of female identities in Southeast Asia. The characters such as Tianlan, Juxiang, and Yuemang, who struggle against the male domination and feudal etiquette, help to draw the picture of the transition through the long-suffering silence to the active protest and, thus, to freedom. It is a process that is characterized by confusion, exploration, growth, struggle and sacrifice. The strength, bravery, autonomous and self-assured characters that Nyonyas showed as they developed themselves have a lot to teach women who are trying to re-develop their life decisions and interests.

Keywords: Cultural identity, Film and television culture, Gender perspective, Southeast Asian women, The Little Nyonya.

INTRODUCTION

Southeast Asia with its specific geographical location and abundant cultural diversity is on the one hand a leader in terms of cultural convergence and tension in the context of globalization. As important carriers of regional cultural identity, the women of Southeast Asia have been the subjects of numerous films and TV productions that do not only reflect the

changing local socio-cultural environment but also offer a critical commentary on gender roles and cultural identity. Such media representations have become effective instruments in studying the entanglement of traditional and modern values, as well as the ways female identities are built and negotiated in the swiftly globalizing world (Lim, 2013)

Little Nyonya, a new Chinese drama directed by Xie Minyang and Lu Yanjin, is a story about three generations of Nyonyas in Malacca in the 1930s. The center of the story is Tien Lan, her daughter Khoi Xiang, and her granddaughter Moon Nyeong. Khoi Xiang, a deaf and mute girl because of a severe disease, flees an arranged marriage and marries a Japanese photographer, Yamamoto Yoichi, with whom she has a daughter, Moon Nyeong. After the premature demise of Khoi Xiang, Moon Nyeong goes back to the house of her maternal grandfather where she is initiated into the arts of Nyonya cookery and embroidery by her grandmother, Tien Lan. When she becomes an adult, Moon Nyeong is lovely and clever, but she experiences a lot of misfortunes in her love life. She, later on, emerges as a successful businesswoman, restoring the legacy and wealth of her family (Dawis, 2015; Montsion & Parasram, 2018). The first series of Little Nyonya was shown in Singapore in 2008 and scored more than a million viewers (about one-quarter of Singaporean population), becoming the record of the best ratings in 15 years. It then aired in Malaysia, Cambodia, France, the Philippines, Myanmar, the United States, China, Thailand, and other areas, and the Nyonya culture went mainstream in Southeast Asia. Released in 2020, the new version directed by the Chinese director Guo Jingyu marked two different phases of the social and cultural development of the Southeast Asian countries in the conditions of globalization (Jing, 2020).

The old Little Nyonya was based on the conservative ideas and perceptions of the women in Southeast Asia back in the day whereas the new one will feature the transformed ideas and perceptions of women with the opening up of borders and shift in social values. Gender roles change and show the new social demands. This transformation does not simply manifest itself in the inner character and outer conduct of the roles of women, but also in their attitude towards family, society and cultural traditions (Lee, 2008).

As the concept of gender equality spreads and women's self-awareness awakens, the

portrayal of women in film and television and women's liberation have become widely significant themes in literary works. "**The Little Nyonya**" is a work with extensive influence; its portrayal of Southeast Asian women not only shapes the audiences perception of Southeast Asian women but also, to some extent, influences their self-identity. Studying the portrayal of Southeast Asian women in "**The Little Nyonya**" holds important academic value and social significance for understanding cultural analysis in film and television from a gender perspective (Eng, 2020; Jing, 2020).

The Origin and Development of Peranakan Culture

The Peranakan (BabaNyonya) culture is the unique blend of the Chinese and the SE Asian cultures that has deep historical roots and rich heritage (Lee, 2008). This mixed culture is of great cultural value in places like Malaysia, Indonesia and Singapore. Nyonya (or Nonya), is a Malay and Indonesian honorific- borrowed by the Portuguese as *dona* and subsequently adopted by Javanese to denote married women; in Hokkien, it has some of the same connotations of respect as *nanny* or *auntie* *Baba* is a Malay (or possibly Hindustani/Sanskrit) word meaning father or grandfather, which was used as an honorific title applied to Chinese men born in the Straits Settlements. These people, who are usually of mixed Chinese and Malay descent, are mostly found concentrated along the strait of Malacca (Penang, Malacca and Singapore) where they came to be collectively referred to as *Baba-Nyonya* (Liu, 2020; Ng & Karim, 2016).

The Peranakan culture started as early as the Ming Dynasty when Zheng He commanded the voyages to the Western Seas. Zheng He traversed the Western Seas seven times between 1405 and 1433, and at least five of those times he made port in Malacca, where he stocked up on supplies (Beadwork, 2009). During their long stays at official factories or waiting for monsoons, some Chinese began to marry Malay women to foster friendly relations with local ethnic groups, resulting in mixed-race offspring. The early migration period was a critical phase in the formation of the *Baba Nyonya* community. The Strait of Malacca, located at a key point on the ancient Maritime Silk Road, attracted many immigrants from China. From

the mid-14th century to the mid-17th century, Chinese who traveled south to Southeast Asia often married local women for trade convenience. Among their mixed-race descendants, the males were called Baba, and the females were called Nyonya (OOI, 2017; Lee, 2008). As time went on, Peranakan culture continued to evolve. Chinese culture, Malay culture, and elements from Portuguese, Dutch, British, Thai, Indian, and Indonesian cultures gradually merged, forming a unique Chinese-inherited culture known as Peranakan culture. In this process, Peranakan culture not only preserved the festivals and traditions of Chinese culture but also reflected the profound influence of Malay culture in clothing, cuisine, and language (Oh *et al.*, 2019).

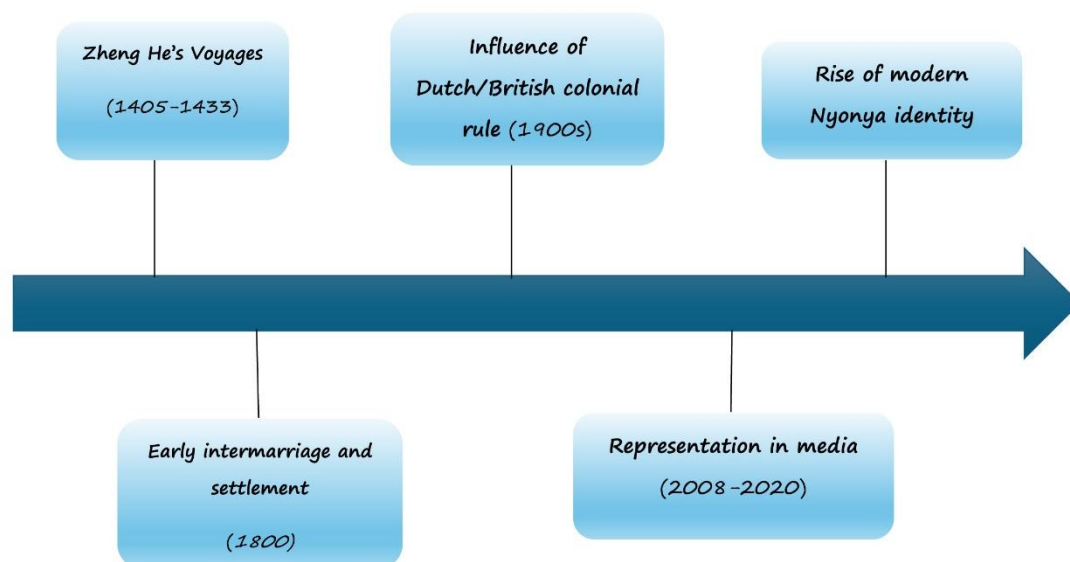


Figure 1: Timeline of Nyonya Cultural Evolution

The Little Nyonya: Virtual Museum of Peranakan Culture

Being a virtual museum, The Little Nyonya proposes a strongly gendered image of the Peranakan culture focusing on the feminine arts and decorations. The Little Nyonya was shot with many scenes happening at the ancestral altar, which is, as Henderson puts it, was an obligatory element of the Peranakan household and the location where the most significant social, cultural and religious values of the community were expressed (Henderson, 2003; Eng, 2020). In all episodes of the series the term *zhuiyuan* (remembering ancestors) is featured at the top of the ancestral altar, encouraging the family members of their filial duties. It happens

when Yueniang is hit by cane in front of Huang ancestral altar because she has broken family laws; above the ancestral altar she perceives those words which are visually etched into her memory in spite of her illiteracy.

Her nice cousin Yuzhu explains to her later the meaning of these words: reflect upon the remote past and remember and honor ones ancestors (episode 10). Several marriage rituals and practices are explained in the story. Simplified Peranakan- Juxiang marries the Japanese photographer Yamamoto Yousuke. A bride and a groom feed each other red and white dumpling balls in a kamcheng, which means that a couple will never be separated (episodes 45). The family rituals entrenched with Confucian ideals of the harmonious family, ancestor worship and female chastity are enshrined in *The Little Nyonya* which might be remembered as a detailed reproduction of Peranakan cultures with its underlying Confucian rituals (MCI Singapore 2019).

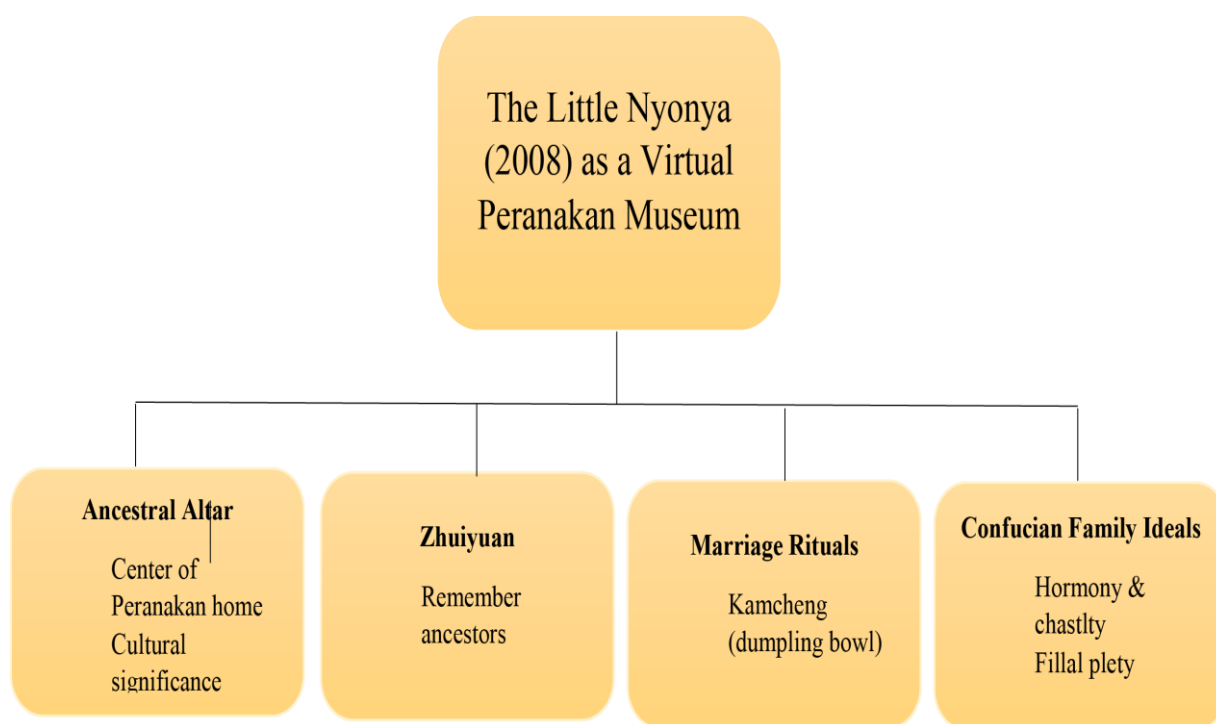


Figure 2: Peranakan Cultural Representation in *The Little Nyonya*

Righting the Wrongs of Social Injustice and Gender Bias of the Confucian Family System

The *Little Nyonya*, instead of being an uncritical praise of Confucianism, acknowledges

the respect to ancestors as a symptom and cause of ethical behaviour and moral values, but points at the same time to the gross social injustice in the Confucian family system. Yueniang tells Angela that the Chinese society of confining women to the domestic realm sets women against each other as they fought over the attention of men as well as over the positions in the home. Polygamous men with a couple of wives were as everyday as sunshine in the olden time. Women had nothing in life except the house and the men in the house. They fought with each other in order to possess monopoly with men. Women despised one another, and they warred one another. It was a pity, it was a tragedy' (episode 19).

The other incidence of injustice in the traditional family system is that the marriages are not out of love between the husband and the wife but it is a business agreement between the two families and is determined by the elders. As Madame Chen elaborate to Chen Xi, 'Xi-er, people marry not only because of love. It is just important to carry on the family line. You are our only male heir. Your duty is to marry a girl of good repute and character, have children and perpetuate the family line, so to speak (episode 23). In contrast with Chen Sheng and most of the female characters in *The Little Nyonya*, Juxiang and Yueniang do not accept arranged marriage. Xiujuan, the younger sister of Xiufeng, and the cousin of Juxiang also tries to get personal happiness with rebellion against her family. Xiujuan and Huang Jincheng have fallen in love secretly when they discover that the elders had arranged the marriage between Jincheng and Xiufeng. When Xiujuan is unable to make Jincheng agree to refuse the marriage proposal (episodes 24), she elopes with an Englishman, travelling first to Singapore and then to England. She eventually divorces and goes back to Melaka (in episode 8 and 19). Xiujuan 684 R. Y. ENG confesses to Yueniang that she was moved by the precedent of Juxiang fighting to stay at home and not go to Britain by herself: Yes, I came back with many bruises. But I did try to fly (episode 19). *The Little Nyonya* highlights gender injustice in three groundbreaking courses of action by Yueniang. Most radically, and first, she reconstitutes the Confucian family and ritual by defying the patriarchal and patrilineal boundaries of the Chinese family system. Second, Yueniang crashes the gender boundaries in the world of economy by discovering many opportunities that can be offered to women in

addition to their domestic roles of wife and mother and the four walls of the house. Third, Yueniang is good at cultural activities dominated by men (Eng 2020).

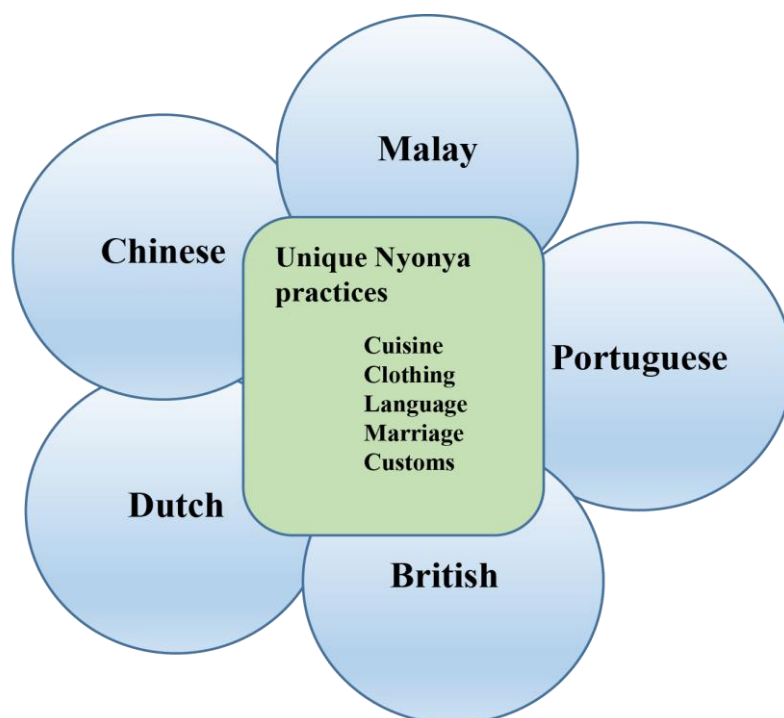


Figure 3: Cultural Influences in Peranakan/Nyonya Identity. This figure illustrates the fusion of Chinese, Malay, Portuguese, Dutch, and British cultural elements that collectively shape the unique practices of the Nyonya identity, including cuisine, clothing, language, and marriage customs.

The Portrayal of Women in the Original and Remake of Little Nangri

A Resilient Character Trait

In both the old and new versions of "Little Nangri," the resilient character trait is one of the important similarities in the portrayal of women. The female characters such as Juxiang and Yuenniang in the drama show admirable resilience when facing difficulties (Jing, 2020). Juxiang, a deaf-mute woman, harbors a resilient inner strength. Her time at the Huang family was fraught with hardships and obstacles, facing internal family conflicts as well as external pressures. Yet, she never succumbed to the whims of fate. She stood up against the injustices of the family to save her mother, she willingly went through agonizing pain to clear her name and she courageously broke the marriage bonds to gain control over her life. Amidst the

storm, her affair with a Japanese photographer Yamamoto Yuzo was brilliant. Resilience of Juxiang is also seen in her words as well as her deeds. Her insulting words, A woman does not have to rely on fate; you must control your own destiny, are a kind of symbolic manifestation of female protest in the play, which found an incredibly large number of supporters among viewers (Jing, 2020; Neo *et al.*, 2020). Yue Niang, the daughter of Juxiang, was also given the resilience of her mother. She experienced family oppression and the unfairness of the fate, as she was growing up in stormy times, but she never stopped chasing her idea of happiness. Yue Niang is a brave and smart girl since early childhood; even being thrown in a well she could not be subdued. She practiced a lot to learn how to cook the traditional Malay dishes and she eventually outdid her grandmother and displayed her skills and persistence. Being a strong and a dignified woman, Yue Niang never gave up even after the emotional disappointments that she underwent in terms of love. Her maturing represents the dawning of female self-consciousness and crumbles the conventional perception of women in the light of the shifting age (Kurniawan *et al.*, 2023).

As it was discussed in *The Little Nyonya*, besides the main protagonists, Chrysanthemum and Moon, other women also represent amazing strength. As another illustration, Tianlan, in spite of a lifetime of mistreatment, always maintains her benevolence and grace. She showed the most remarkable courage and patience when she was left alone in the ancestral Huang family home when her family had to escape during the Japanese invasion. In the same way, Yuzhu also keeps her innocence and purity even during the time when she is against luck, she willingly sacrifices herself to save Moon and Chen Xi. These images of resilience and endurance add to the existing abundant and multi-faceted collective of female characters to strongly resonate with the positions of women and their identities within certain historical and cultural parameters. Together, they provide an effective model of studying female representation in cinema and television (Hjorth, & Khoo, 2016).

Character	2008 Version (Traits & Role)	2020 Version (Traits & Role)
Juxiang	Strong, downtrodden, conventional role	Stronger, more aggressive, self-sufficiency sought

Yue Niang	Powerful, compassionate, victim of circumstances	Independent, professional,
Xiufeng	Conventional housewife role	,Less reinvented or rethought
Xiujuan	Bends the tradition	Accentuates gender revolt

Table 1: Female Character Comparison 2008 Vs 2020 Version

The Inheritance and Challenge of Traditional Female Values

The traditional values of women in Nyonya culture are characterized by gentleness, kindness, and caring for their husbands and children. In "Little Nyonya," these values are vividly and profoundly portrayed through the behavior and speech of the female characters, clearly demonstrating the unique imprint and profound connotations of Nyonya culture among women (Dawis, 2015).

Under the norms of traditional Nyonya culture, unmarried Nyonya women were confined outside public places and were required to focus on learning skills such as cooking, sewing, and embroidery. After marriage, they adhered to the principle of "men handle external affairs, women manage the household," dedicating themselves entirely to managing the household and raising children. Xiufeng in the drama as an example; she is a typical traditional Nyonya woman, aspiring to marry into the Huang family and obediently following her mother-in-laws instructions, often getting involved in inappropriate matters at her mother-in-laws instigation. Her fate is filled with sorrow, exacerbated by her infidelity of her husband and sister. She devoted her entire life to the family, strictly adhering to traditional female values, but her story ends tragically, deeply reflecting the survival conditions and destiny of traditional Nyonya women within a specific cultural framework (Kurniawan *et al.*, 2023).

Xiujuan, her image is a bold challenge to traditional gender roles. She completely abandoned the behavioral norms of traditional Nyonya, boldly embraced complete Westernization, courageously pursued free love, even conceived out of wedlock, and resolutely married a foreigner. After divorce, she fearlessly returned to retaliate against the Huang family who had treated her badly. Each of her choices was like dropping a massive

stone into a calm lake, stirring up waves that shattered the established patterns of traditional gender roles, blazing a trail for an unprecedented path in women's lives (Eng, 2020).

In both versions of "Little Nyonya," the portrayal of Moon and some female characters is not traditionally typical Nyonyas. They retain aspects of traditional Chinese virtues while adopting the independence and autonomy promoted in Western society. This modern image of women represents the inheritance and promotion of the Nyonya spirit, symbolizing the adaptation and development of Chinese traditional culture in response to foreign cultures and the process of modernization.

Table 2: Transformation from Traditional to modern Nyonya Women

Aspects	Traditional Nyonya (e.g., Xiufeng)	Modern Nyonya (e.g., Xiujuan, Moon)
Cultural Traits	Obedient, family-centered, gentle	Bold, expressive, confident, Independent
Role of Women	Manages households, follows the instructions of Men	Rejects all traditionally imposed gender roles
Education/Skills	Focused on learning domestic skills (sewing, cooking, embroidery)	Education, Adopts to Western values, and self-determination power
Relationships & Marriage	Arranged marriage, sacrifices her desires, obedience to in-laws	Loves freely, spends life on personal terms
Character	Life full of duties and miseries	Bold life, challenges the status quo, seeks justice
Cultural Symbolism	Reflects the women's challenges and survival within traditional systems	Highlights the adaptations of Nyonya identity due to globalization

Film and Television Culture Analysis from the Perspective of Gender

Gender Roles and Social Expectations

Gender roles not only reflect societal expectations of men and women but also shape them to some extent. In "Little Miss Sunshine," traditional Confucian culture has profoundly influenced the shaping of gender roles. Male characters are often endowed with authoritative traits and leadership skills, while female characters are seen as embodying gentleness, obedience, and a spirit of dedication. In the 2008 version, the distinction between gender roles was quite clear, but by the 2020 version, this distinction has shown signs of change. The Little Nyonya tackles gender injustice by having three ground-breaking courses of action by Yueniang. Radical and first, she transforms the Confucian family and rituals by going against the patriarchal and patrilineal boundaries of the Chinese family system. Second, Yueniang destroys the gender boundaries in the economic sector as she discovers that there are many opportunities that can be explored by women other than the domestic duties of a wife and a mother and the four walls of the house. Third, Yueniang excels in cultural activities dominated by men (Eng, 2020).

This evolution highlights the dynamic changes in gender perceptions during the process of social and cultural development, providing a typical example for film and television culture as well as gender studies. The remake of The Little Nyonya (2020) takes female characters beyond the scope of their traditional role of family caretakers and turns them into independent social actors. This change is in line with contemporary values in society which embrace gender equality and acknowledge different ways of being a woman. Indicatively, Yue Niang fights to achieve financial independence and establishes a career of her own; Juxiang has the audacity to pursue freedom by running away home; and Yuzhu embodies the essence of strength through benevolence and sagacity. This show offers a social critique of feudal standards and these characters are a way of attacking the traditional systems of oppression. Chen Sheng in the drama engages in the process of self-introspection and realizes the truth about the conventions of marriage, including the so-called test of female chastity, which is based on the inherent disrespect and dismissal of female dignity. He says that he

hopes that his wife will be able to think independently and not be confined to the traditional roles of bearing and raising families, of being subservient to her husband or listening to the elders. This judgmental attitude can be described as a powerful feminist manifesto and a serious attempt to redefine the roles of women as they were established in the past (Neo *et al.*, 2020).

Women Picture and Civilization identity

As the reflections of the times, the two versions of Little Nyonya in 2008 and 2020 reflect the deep implied meaning of female images and cultural identity in different perspectives. In the view of female character representation, in the 2008 adaptation of the Little Miss Foreigner, Juxiang, in spite of her handicap, is strong and courageous. She rebels against the feudal etiquette and goes to the extent of breaking relations with her family and displays a sense of independence in the fight she gives between love and fate. Moon Maiden is a character that reflects the image of the conventional women who endure the ordeals. Through family crises and personal crisis she never gives up her essence of being kind and hardworking, she tries to support a sky amidst thin family relations and social surrounding and this is the result and effort of women power in a Crisis. The 2020 version enhances this image even more by paying attention to smaller details like costumes and makeup, making the picture display more saturated (Wuttirut, & Limbut, 2024).

Meanwhile, in character development it emphasizes the awakening of independent consciousness in women's independent consciousness. The two plays define their culture based on the Peranakan culture. The 2008 edition gives a detailed presentation of aspects like Peranakan clothing, food, architecture, etc. with the Nanyang cultural texture and the Chinese traditional culture affluence merged together. This enables the viewers to experience the strong sense of Peranakan culture in family inheritance and social life. In a way it strengthens the acceptance of the old Peranakan cultural identity that is by family descent, regional attributes and preservation of traditional practices. The 2020 version innovates on this basis and does not just show the tip of the iceberg of culture, but goes deeper and shows its values.

Through modern narrative perspectives and techniques, it explores how Peranakan culture adapts and transforms under the impact of diverse cultures in modern society. For example, the female character's reflection and breakthrough of traditional marriage concepts reflect both the influence of contemporary social trends on cultural identity and the adaptive adjustments of culture in the face of changing times (Kurniawan *et al.*, 2023).

CONCLUSION

"Little Nyonya" draws on the aesthetics of Nanyang, highlighting the vibrant vitality of Chinese traditional culture through its plot and dialogue. The line "If a person does not understand their past, they will be like a leaf, unaware that they belong to a tree" emphasizes the return to and inheritance of traditional culture, reflecting the deep attachment of Southeast Asian Chinese to Chinese traditional culture. The long history of Southeast Asia has not only shaped its economic structure but also spurred profound cultural changes. As a unique fusion of Chinese and Nanyang cultures, Nyonya culture carries immense historical value and holds irreplaceable significance in cultural exchange.

Two versions of the TV series "Little Nyonya" vividly portray the diverse and rich image of Southeast Asian women through the performances of different actors and plot structures. During this period, the awakening of female consciousness and the unique charm of Nanyang aesthetics are highlighted. The resistance against feudal customs and the persistent pursuit of self-respect reflect their struggles and paths to break through within the framework of traditional society. The portrayal of Nyonya culture also highlights the unique appeal derived from the fusion of Chinese and Nanyang cultures, emphasizing the significance of cultural confidence. The future direction of film and television creation should focus on the diversity and deep exploration of female characters. While inheriting traditional culture, it is essential to boldly challenge traditional concepts, showcasing women's independence, autonomy, and courage.

Storytellers need to find the courage to change the old social norms and give women their independence, autonomy, and resilience with stories that are preserved and honored with

traditional values. When traditional aesthetics is merged with modern topics, as seen in case with “*The Little Nyonya*”, it can lead to not only the feeling of cultural confidence but also enhance cross-cultural understanding. Future production must further experiment with the juxtapositions of heritage and modernity and how a culturally specific narrative, such as that of the Nyonya, can serve as an effective means of encouraging dialogue across cultures, female empowerment, and the redefinition of Southeast Asian womanhood in the globalized society.

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