

Interweaving Border Folklore and Cultural Identity: An Exploration of Sound Aesthetics in *The Story of Southern Islet*

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Abstract

In The Story of Southern Islet (2020), the debut feature film of Malaysian Chinese director Chong Keat Aun, sound functions not merely as a regional soundscape delineating the Malaysian borderlands, but as a core cinematic narrative mechanism through which the diasporic identity of Malaysian Chinese communities is constructed and negotiated. Drawing on R. Murray Schafer's soundscape theory, Homi K. Bhabha's concept of the "Third Space," and diaspora studies as its principal analytical frameworks, this article undertakes a close textual reading of three categories of sonic elements in the film: how gamelan music and *Wayang kulit* vocal performance activate the cultural memory of ethnic communities along the Malay-Siamese border through ritual sound; how the *serunai*, functioning as a soundmark, foregrounds the boundary tensions between sound and body, the sacred and the secular, within the audiovisual field of a soul-summoning ritual; and how the performance of *Nanyin* transforms the Chinese diasporic experience into an irreversible sonic elegy, constituting the emotional climax of identity negotiation at the film's conclusion. This study argues that through the meticulous design of its sonic elements, *The Story of Southern Islet* renders the Kedah borderlands as a "Third Space" in which diverse cultures converge and questions of identity and belonging remain unresolved. Sound operates therein simultaneously as a vehicle of folkloric memory and as an agentive medium through which Chinese ethnic identity is reconstructed in situ. The study also carries methodological significance in advancing the interdisciplinary dialogue between film sound studies and diaspora cultural studies.

Keywords: soundscape; diasporic identity; folkloric sound; Third Space; *The Story of Southern Islet*; Chong Keat Aun



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Introduction

Within the genealogy of Malaysian Chinese cinema, Chong Keat Aun's debut feature, *The Story of Southern Islet* (2020), constitutes a remarkably singular object of scholarly inquiry. Set in 1987 in the state of Kedah along the Malaysian-Thai border, the film follows Ah Yan as she seeks out a deified exile, Nenek Keriang, after her husband Ah Cheong falls gravely ill following a neighbor's curse. Directed to a cave on *Gunung Keriang* by a spirit medium, Ah Yan encounters Nenek Keriang, and in the intersection of legend and lived reality, she is ultimately compelled to confront the spiritual predicament of diaspora and belonging. What elevates the film beyond the conventions of genre narrative, however, is not merely the strangeness of its subject matter, but the director's highly self-conscious cinematic treatment of sound. The vocal chants of wayang kulit, gamelan accompaniment, the piercing timbre of the serunai, and the mournful Nanyin song "Depart from the Border of Han Dynasty Kingdom" at the film's close, these sonic elements function in the film not as decorative cultural backdrop, but as agentive forces that carry narrative weight and actively construct identity.

This article argues that the sound design of *The Story of Southern Islet* systematically transforms the diasporic experience of Malaysian Chinese communities into a perceptible auditory form. Sound operates here simultaneously as a medium of cultural memory and as a symbolic field in which border-dwelling ethnic communities negotiate their sense of identity and belonging within a multicultural “Third Space.” This argument responds to two lacunae in existing scholarship. First, studies of Malaysian Chinese cinema have tended to privilege visual narrative and ethnic politics, leaving the cinematic function of sound critically underexamined. Second, the application of soundscape studies in film criticism remains underdeveloped, particularly in interdisciplinary approaches integrating soundscape theory with diaspora identity research.

To advance this argument, the analysis is organized around three clusters of sonic elements and draws upon three mutually reinforcing theoretical resources. Methodologically, Schafer’s (1977) tripartite soundscape framework, comprising Keynote Sounds, Signals, and Soundmarks, provides the coordinates for analyzing the hierarchy and function of cinematic sound. Bhabha’s (2012) concept of the “Third Space” illuminates the spatial character of the Malay-Thai borderlands as a site of cultural negotiation. Shih’s (2010) theorization of “against diaspora” furnishes a conceptual anchor for understanding the claims to in situ Chinese identity

encoded in the Nanyin sequence. At the textual level, the analysis proceeds in three stages: first, it examines how Wayang kulit and gamelan sound activate collective cultural memory within a ritual context; second, it analyzes the serunai as a Soundmark and investigates its audiovisual function and cultural symbolism in the soul-summoning ritual sequence; and third, it offers a close reading of the Nanyin performance of “Depart from the Border of Han Dynasty Kingdom,” arguing for its role in rendering the Chinese diasporic experience as an irrecoverable sonic lament that achieves the emotional climax of identity negotiation within the film’s narrative structure.

The Mysterious Voice of Folklore and the Cinematic Construction of Cultural Memory in Film

Muthalib (2013) has noted that the word “Wayang” in Wayang kulit is the Malay term for film, an etymological fact that already intimates the profound historical affinity between the shadow puppet tradition and the cinematic medium. The Malaysian traditional art of Wayang kulit is not only a significant symbol of the nation’s multicultural and religious heritage, but also a constitutive element of the sonic aesthetics of *The Story of Southern Islet*. To read the folkloric ritual sounds in the film as mere exotic cultural ornamentation, however, would be to obscure their deeper narrative function. In the borderland region of Kedah along the Malaysian-Thai frontier, the sonic dimensions of folkloric ritual carry a dual function: they encode the ethnic community’s historical memory and sustain the emotional bonds of collective belonging.

In Assmann's (2008) terms, such sonic practices belong to the domain of "cultural memory", that is, the process by which collective pasts are crystallized into transmissible symbolic forms through ritualized communal action. At the same time, the operation of sound within the cinematic medium has its own specific logic. As Chion (1994) argues in his theory of audiovisual relations, filmic sound is not a simple reproduction of reality. Still, it actively shapes the audience's perception and affective experience through its co-constitutive relationship with the image. It is with these considerations in mind that I turn to Schafer's (1977) tripartite soundscape framework to examine the sound design of the film's Wayang kulit ritual sequences, and to clarify how the director employs specific sonic strategies, including the differentiated deployment of Keynote Sounds, Signals, and Soundmarks, to transform folkloric ritual into a form of sonic expression that is simultaneously a vehicle of cultural memory and a source of cinematic narrative tension.

Mysticism derives from the ancient Greek root *mystikos*, originally denoting secret or esoteric experience. It generally refers to a form of spiritual experience in which the individual establishes a connection with ultimate reality or a sacred force through intuition and inner perception, privileging such inward modes of knowing over rational cognition (Inge, 2022). While this concept has been systematically elaborated within Western religious traditions, its

essential experiential structures can be observed across diverse cultures, manifesting in a wide range of cross-cultural spiritual practices (Stace, 1987). In the Malaysian context, the yogic disciplines of Hinduism, Buddhist ritual traditions, the ascetic contemplation of Islamic Sufism, and the shamanic beliefs of indigenous communities have coexisted and interpenetrated over centuries, collectively engendering the richly mystical character of local folk culture. This multi-religious coexistence is not merely a matter of cultural juxtaposition; rather, it constitutes a complex spiritual world formed through sustained mutual permeation under specific geographical and historical conditions.

The film is set in Kedah, a region characterized by the long-term coexistence of multiple cultures and religions, with a deep entanglement between political practice and Islamic faith (Hamid, 2019). As a borderland zone, Kedah has historically been a site of significant Malay-Siamese cultural convergence. This cultural hybridity of the borderlands resonates with Nora's (1989) concept of *lieux de mémoire* (sites of memory), that is, the process by which, as organic and living memory fades, communities crystallize it into symbolically charged cultural residues through ritual and place. The folklore sound archive that director Chong Keat Aun has assembled over years of fieldwork represents an active effort to salvage precisely this disappearing living memory; accordingly, the film's sound design acquires a profound cultural-mnemonic depth that becomes a crucial foundation for its narrative construction.

Wayang kulit Gedek

Wayang kulit Gedek is a recognized form of intangible cultural heritage in Malaysia. Performances are typically drawn from Hindu mythological narratives and accompanied by gamelan music rooted in the pentatonic tradition. Introduced from Java to Indonesia in the nineteenth century and subsequently integrated with local cultural practices, the Malay shadow puppet theater gradually evolved into a distinctive regional art form. Notably, ancient Javanese cosmology held that the soul persists after death and can bestow protection or inflict harm upon the living; consequently, rituals of appeasement directed at ancestral and supernatural spirits were considered essential. During such ceremonies, effigies of ancestors or objects they had cherished in life were used to cast shadows onto a white cloth screen, and these shadows were understood to be the embodied presence of ancestral souls, through which the presiding ritualist communicated with the spirit world. Over time, this role of intermediary gradually gave rise to the specialized figure of the professional shadow puppeteer, the dalang. The Wayang kulit Gedek that appears in *The Story of Southern Islet* bears the dual imprint of Malay and Siamese cultural influence; it is most prevalent in the borderlands straddling Malaysia and Thailand, and its ensemble configuration draws on the musical traditions of both countries, with melodies frequently inflected by Thai folk idioms. As such, it constitutes a direct sonic articulation of the cultural hybridity characteristic of the border “Third Space.”

At the film's opening, the dalang's lyrical chanting and the gamelan ensemble's percussive accompaniment jointly construct a ritual soundscape for the worship of Nenek Keriang (see Figure 1). It is worth noting that such a ritual would conventionally take place within a quiet, enclosed interior rather than in an open outdoor setting. Analyzing this scene through Schafer's (1977) tripartite soundscape framework, one discerns how the director has carefully orchestrated a coherent acoustic order within the enclosed ceremonial space. The sustained low-frequency resonance of the gamelan ensemble and the reverberant ambiance of the interior ritual space constitute the Keynote Sounds. This constant acoustic ground does not depend on geographically specific natural soundscapes; instead, through the sonic density generated by an enclosed environment, it establishes at the perceptual level the ritual site's categorical distinction from the register of everyday life. The Signals manifest in the periodic strikes of the gong and drum and in the incantations intoned by the dalang in the Siamese chanting mode. These sounds recur as periodic foreground elements within the overall mix, marking the critical junctures of ritual progression and guiding the viewer along the narrative rhythm. The Soundmark, finally, is carried by the high-frequency melodic line of the serunai, whose penetrating timbre renders it instantly distinguishable within the overall sound design. It bears the unique sonic cultural memory of the Kedah region, exceeding the functional role of

an ordinary accompanying instrument to serve as the acoustic signature of the ritual space itself.



Figure 1: Screenshot of the Malay Shadow Play “To Worship Nenek Keriang” Scene at the Beginning of the Movie.

In its handling of the image-sound relationship, the film employs what Chion (1994) theorizes as the strategy of sonic “foregrounding.” Throughout the shadow puppet sequence, the camera remains locked on the ritual screen and the silhouettes of the puppets performing on it; the dalang himself is never shown. The viewer hears his voice without ever seeing his body. This deliberate visual restriction transforms the dalang’s chanting from the sound of a visible performer into an acousmatic voice suffusing the ritual space, simultaneously belonging to the physical world behind the screen and evoking an invocation that seems to emanate from beyond

the frame, even beyond the diegetic space itself. The gamelan music recedes into the background layer so that the semantic clarity of this disembodied voice may fully emerge, thereby reinforcing the narrative function of the puppet screen as a visual metaphor for the membrane separating the human world from the divine. This *mise-en-scène* enters into a compelling resonance with the concept of ritual “liminality” theorized by the anthropologist Turner (2017): the tension between the dalang’s visual absence and his acoustic presence is precisely the cinematic figuration of the liminal state of ritual, at that singular moment when the worlds of the living and the dead temporarily overlap, the ritualist’s physical body is suspended, and what endures on screen is the ritual efficacy carried by sound alone.

The lyrics of the shadow puppet performance in this scene read as follows:

To Nenek Keriang, please accept this play as a gift. Pray for smooth sailing despite the rapids. No misfortune along the journey. May it bloom like a coconut flower. May it expand like the spirit of a snake.

The lyrics are cast in the mode of supplication, drawing on the metaphors of the coconut blossom and the serpent spirit to condense desires for abundance, prayers for safe passage, and the veneration of nature into a few compressed lines. Within the film, these words function not as a static folkloric display but, through the dalang’s vocal inflection and its interplay with the gamelan’s rhythmic pulse, as a sonic force that propels the narrative’s affective momentum. Chong Keat Aun has articulated the structural role of the shadow puppet theater in the film with

notable precision: “In this film, the shadow puppet play serves the important function of dividing the story into acts. It is a folk art with a long history, used in Malaysia for rites of passage and the veneration of spirits” (Qi, 2021). This statement illuminates the dual identity that Wayang kulit Gedek assumes within *The Story of Southern Islet*: it is at once a ritual sound bearing the indigenous folk belief of Kedah and a structural device within the film’s narrative system that demarcates temporal and spatial shifts and introduces the work’s thematic preoccupations. Its storytelling function as an opening frame, in concert with the lyrical content itself, announces the film’s diegetic context, the multi-ethnic ecology of the Thai-Malaysian borderlands, in which humanity and the spirit world coexist.



Figure 2: Screenshots of a Scene From the “Summoning the Soul” Ceremony Featuring a Dalang Manipulating a Shadow Puppet and Chanting Siamese Spells.

Of particular significance is the moment near the close of the shadow puppet sequence when the sound of a *dong xiao* (Chinese vertical bamboo flute) quietly enters the audio track. At the narrative level, this sound belongs to the category of non-diegetic music: it is not a sound actually produced within the ritual space, but rather a deliberately inserted sonic gloss introduced through cinematic editing. The *dong xiao*'s tone, distant, introspective, and unmistakably marked by the musical culture of the Southern Min tradition, stands in vivid contrast to the dense, outward character of the gamelan percussion, rooted in Malay-Javanese sonic conventions. The "intrusion" of this sound anticipates precisely the thematic tension the film will subsequently develop: the predicament of identity confronting Chinese Malaysians in a culturally hybrid borderland. The screen then fades to black as the film's title card appears, and the *dong xiao* assumes the role of a sonic bridge connecting the Malay ritual tradition with Chinese cultural memory, completing, at the perceptual level, an emotional prefiguration of identity and belonging before the viewer has even entered the formal narrative. Chong Keat Aun's own framing of this opening lends the sequence a further meta-cinematic dimension: "*The Story of Southern Islet* opens this way as my retrospective gaze and tribute to one hundred years of cinema" (Qi, 2021). Shadow puppetry, as among humanity's oldest arts of light and image, shares an ontological root with the medium of film itself. By naming his film after the shadow puppet theater and opening his narrative with it, the director expresses both a

commitment to Malaysia's indigenous folk traditions and a reflective consciousness of the very nature of cinematic art.

The second shadow puppet sequence to appear in the film, however, differs markedly from the first in both its ritual function and its narrative context. This scene centers on Aunt Kawe's grief for her deceased son and her attempt to summon his spirit through a puppet performance, a practice whose folkloric roots lie in the soul-summoning tradition of Kedah's rice-cultivating culture. In the padi planting ceremonies of Kedah, the shadow puppet theater does not serve as mere entertainment; it constitutes a ritual intervention with a clearly defined religious function (see Figure 2). According to local tradition, before the clearing and planting of paddy fields, several generations of a family would gather beneath the eaves of their home, and a shaman would invite three deceased female ancestors to take possession of living bodies, completing the summoning rite to the accompaniment of musical instruments. The living did not manipulate the puppets in this context; rather, they were understood as the visible manifestations of ancestral spirits inhabiting mortal vessels. This ritual thus constitutes a sonic field that integrates agricultural belief, familial memory, and supernatural communication, with the summoning and reception of the spirit world through sound as its animating logic. Chong Keat Aun has similarly noted, citing *The Story of Southern Islet* as an example, that the Siamese-Malay mixed-heritage communities of the Thai-Malaysian border region continue to maintain

the tradition of performing Wayang kulit Gedek as part of the padi planting ceremony, and that Aunt Kawe's soul-summoning rite in the film is a cinematic re-enactment and transformation of this historical practice (Pek, 2021).

At the level of concrete sound design, the scene is relocated to an outdoor paddy field, where the continuous chirping of insects forms the acoustic foundation of the entire sequence. Following Schafer's soundscape theory, these unceasing, barely perceptible insect calls exemplify Keynote Sounds, they do not solicit the active attention of the listener. However, they shape the underlying auditory tone of the scene, anchoring the audience in an expansive, hushed border night remote from the rhythms of daily life. Compared to the Wayang kulit sequence that opens the film, the Keynote Sounds in this scene shift from the enclosed register of an interior ritual space to the open expanse of the nocturnal outdoors, producing what amounts to a qualitative transformation in the spatial perception of the soundscape, from the sense of communal gathering that characterizes collective ceremony, to the solitary desolation of private grief. Over this sonic foundation, the gamelan ensemble gradually comes to dominate the entire auditory space. Within the performance tradition of Wayang kulit Gedek, the gamelan's acoustic structure is grounded in the low-frequency resonance of the gong, above which the high-frequency serunai melody rises to lead and orient the overall texture, producing a pronounced sense of vertical depth (Hazri, 2015). The musicians generate interlocking

rhythmic patterns through alternating performance, demanding a high degree of synchronicity and precision; the cyclic repetition of the melodic material simultaneously creates a meditative, sacred atmosphere in the auditory realm, demarcating the ritual domain from the space of everyday existence. Within this sonic framework, the dalang's chanting of sutras specifically intended for the salvation of the departed, delivered in a measured, solemn register, carries the ritual intent of guiding the deceased across the cosmic threshold, constituting the scene's acoustic signal, one charged with explicit symbolic content. Rather than intensifying as the ceremony proceeds, the chanting subsides once its liturgical function has been fulfilled; it is precisely after the sutras conclude that the serunai's melodic line begins to thrust progressively into the foreground, its rhythm quickening, its timbre growing sharper and more penetrating, steadily escalating the emotional intensity of the entire soundscape until it terminates abruptly. The sound design of this sequence demonstrates a precise command of ritual rhythm: the sutra chanting fulfills the semantic dimension of the ceremony, summoning the spirit and accomplishing the rite through vocalization, while the serunai takes over from the chanting to independently assume, at the instrumental level, the narrative function of driving the ritual toward its climax. The serunai's acceleration and sudden cessation constitute the auditory emotional apex and terminal signal of the entire ceremony. Simultaneously, Aunt Kawe, who has been manipulating the shadow puppets throughout, collapses abruptly at the precise

moment the serunai falls silent; the cessation of sound and the collapse of the body coincide in the same instant, rendering the serunai's silence not merely a musical ending but an acoustic marker of the dissolution of the state of spirit possession. The soundscape thereafter reverts to the original insect chorus. Following Schafer's framework, "silence" within a soundscape is itself a meaningful sonic event: the absence of the gamelan and serunai allows the insect calls to reclaim the entire sound field, as though the supernatural passage briefly opened by the ritual has been sealed once more and the acoustic space restored to an ordinary border night. This contrast in sound texture, from the fullness of musical performance to the solitary persistence of insect song, accomplishes, without recourse to dialogue or narration, the narrative articulation of ritual closure and the sealing of the spirit realm, achieved entirely through the internal logic of sonic structure. From a broader narratological perspective, the two Wayang kulit sequences collectively constitute the first dimension of the film's sonic narrative: sound as the medium and repository of endangered cultural memory. Chong Keat Aun developed, from childhood, a distinctive affective relationship with folk sounds through the influence of his grandmother and great-grandmother, and from 2000 onward systematically undertook fieldwork to establish a dedicated sound archive with the express aim of preserving disappearing sounds. The sound design of the Wayang kulit sequences in the film is not an exotic spectacle of audiovisual curiosity. However, rather than a historically grounded

reconstruction of the ritual soundscape of the Malaysia-Thailand borderlands during the 1980s, the incantatory chant for the salvation of the deceased depicted in the film draws directly on a tradition of ritual recitation that had by this period already begun to wane and, in some instances, been officially suppressed. By incorporating these sounds into the film's audiovisual structure, the director renders the ritual vocalizations, previously confined to specific temporal, spatial, and ethnic contexts, perceptible to a far broader audience, enabling endangered cultural memory to persist over time through cinema. This approach also resonates with the particular significance of gamelan music in the preservation of Malay cultural heritage: the music and instruments employed in Wayang kulit Gedek are themselves acoustic emblems of Malay historical memory and cultural identity; their integration into the film's sonic narrative constitutes, in essence, a creative act of reactivating and disseminating cultural memory through the language of cinema.

Serunai as Soundmark

In the spirit-summoning ritual sequence (*Ritual Menjemput Roh*) of *The Story of Southern Islet*, the serunai functions not merely as an atmospheric accompaniment but as an instrument bearing core narrative and cultural responsibilities, marking the sacred boundaries of ritual space through its distinctive timbre and participating in the construction of ethnic identity at the sonic level. To understand this function, it is necessary first to clarify the serunai's position

within the theoretical framework of soundscape studies. Schafer (1977) defines the Soundmark as a sound recognized by a specific community as possessing unique symbolic significance and affective value within local culture, analogous to the visual landmark, and as the most representatively memorable stratum of the soundscape. It is precisely in this sense that the serunai constitutes the soundscape's Soundmark in the film's ritual sequences.

The acoustic properties of the serunai provide the material basis for its capacity to function as a Soundmark. As a traditional wind instrument native to the Kedah, Penang, and Kelantan regions of Malaysia, the serunai is constructed from bamboo or wood and produces a tone that is high-pitched, bright, and highly penetrating, resembling the *suona* (a Chinese double-reed woodwind) yet somewhat softer in quality, and its performance requires the technique of circular breathing in order to maintain a continuous flow of sound (see Figure 3). Within the instrumentation of the Wayang kulit Gedek ensemble, the serunai typically carries the principal melodic voice; its high-frequency timbre ensures its natural prominence within the overall texture. At the same time, it possesses a marked improvisatory character, engaging in spontaneous dialogue with the *gendang* (drum) and *rebab* (spike fiddle) to lend the soundscape a dynamic complexity. This acoustic configuration enables the serunai to distinguish itself from the scene's Keynote Sounds (the ambient undertone of wind over the paddy fields, insect calls, and footsteps) and from the Signals (the gong and drum as ritual markers of commencement

and conclusion), occupying the foreground of the soundscape in the manner of a Soundmark, directing the listener's auditory attention and marking the sacred moments of the rite. It is worth noting that within the Wayang kulit performer community, the serunai player holds a rank second only to the dalang, with a training period of comparable length (Matusky, 1997). This hierarchical structure reveals the serunai's central position within the ritual musical system, what it bears is the acoustic authority that connects the present world with the spirit realm, the ordinary with the sacred, rather than a merely occupational distinction.



Figure 3: Screenshot of the Shadow Puppet Band and Aunt Kawe Performing a Ritual to Summon Her Son's Spirit.

This function receives precise cinematic realization in the film's sound design. When the spirit possesses Aunt Kawe and takes up the shadow puppets, the dalang's chanting and the ensemble accompaniment are set in motion (see Figure 4). Analyzed from the perspective of the image-sound relationship, the serunai's high-frequency melody at this moment "separates" from the broader gamelan texture in the mixing hierarchy and occupies the foreground track.

This relatively subjective sonic treatment signals to the audience, in tandem with the transformation of Aunt Kawe’s consciousness, an entry into the ritual’s perceptual register. The serunai’s sound thereby ceases to be merely the background accompaniment of the rite and becomes an acoustic sign marking the liminal state: in anthropological terms, the ritual “liminality” is a special moment in which the ordinary order is temporarily suspended and communication between the human and the supernatural becomes possible (Turner, 2017), and the serunai’s foregrounding in the mix constitutes precisely the cinematic-auditory rendering of this liminal condition as perceptible experience.



Figure 4: Serunai Aliran Utara (Kedah, Perlis, Perak, Pulau Pinang) Retrieved from <https://senimuzikbakuwarisannegerikedah.blogspot.com/2016/04/kenali-serunai-malaysia.html>.

The text of the ritual chant for the salvation of the deceased reads as follows:

Dear Madam Pon and Madam Marini, Fairies have gathered here to serve you. Pass through seven layers of Heaven, Pass through seven layers of Heaven, Pass through, my son, God of sun, Pass through seven layers of Earth, Pass through, my son, God of sun, Strong like a rock, Tough like a steel column.

The sutra centers on the image of “passing through seven layers of Heaven and seven layers of Earth,” with iterative syntax reinforcing the ritual’s incantatory power. At the auditory level, the serunai’s melody does not simply furnish a backdrop to the chanting; rather, it enters into a dialogic structure with the dalang’s vocalization: each time the dalang completes a set of repeated phrases, the serunai responds with a brief melodic motif, as though offering a sonic reply to, and affective extension of, the incantation. This technique of instrumental imitation and repetition of vocal motifs has been identified as effective in heightening the emotional expressivity and dramatic intensity of the performance (Uehara, 2008). This sonic dialogue serves a dual narrative function: within the ritual itself, it amplifies the incantatory power of the chant; at the level of spectatorship, it channels the audience’s affective engagement through auditory rhythm, allowing the emotional logic of the salvation ceremony to be communicated through sound rather than speech. As the dalang reaches the peak of the chant, Aunt Kawe’s manipulation of the shadow puppets accelerates accordingly. The density and volume of the serunai melody rise in synchrony, this threefold coordination of sound, movement, and affect renders the serunai an irreplaceable component of the film’s sonic narrative system:

simultaneously the auditory guarantee of ritual authenticity and a cinematic instrument of emotional direction.

From a broader cultural perspective, what the serunai's function as Soundmark ultimately signifies is the historical memory and cultural identity that the Malay community has sedimented within sound. The serunai's central role in religious ceremony, traditional celebration, and shadow puppet performance has made its acoustic presence a highly recognizable sonic sign within Malay cultural contexts; the performances of the Kelantan serunai master Isa bin Samad are said to have moved numerous listeners to tears, an emotional penetrating power that derives not only from the melody itself, but from the collective memory and cultural belonging the serunai carries. The film's precise deployment of this sound reconstructs on screen the distinctive ethnic soundscape of the Kedah borderlands, and through this shared cultural resonance, transforms the serunai's voice into a medium of affective mobilization, enabling Malaysian audiences to accomplish, at the auditory level, an identification with and re-immersion in the cultural memory of their own community.

In sum, the serunai's function as Soundmark in *The Story of Southern Islet* does not rest at the surface level of "evoking a mysterious atmosphere" or comparable effects, but rather participates deeply in the film's narrative construction and cultural expression through specific

sound design strategies, its foregrounding in the mixing hierarchy, its dialogic structure with the dalang's chanting, and its synchronized coordination with on-screen action. Sound here becomes the key medium connecting ritual space with cinematic space, historical memory with present-day viewing experience: it not only re-presents folk practice, but constitutes an effective mechanism for the reactivation of cultural memory within the cinema as a medium.

Sound, Diaspora, and the Construction of Chinese Malaysian Identity

If the Wayang kulit and serunai sequences establish sound as a vehicle for Malay cultural memory, the film's deployment of Nanyin in its closing movement extends this sonic logic into a resonant but distinct dimension: the negotiation of diasporic identity among ethnic Chinese communities along the Thai-Malaysian border. Through the figure of Nenek Keriang and her performance of the Nanyin piece *Depart from the Border of Han Dynasty Kingdom*, *The Story of Southern Islet* presents sound not as cultural ornamentation but as the primary medium through which the irresolvable tension between "putting down roots" and "the impossibility of return" is articulated. In this sense, Nanyin functions throughout the film as what might be called a "diasporic sonic marker", simultaneously an acoustic inscription of cultural memory and a formal declaration of that memory's permanent historical closure.

The Border as Third Space: A Spatial Framework for Chinese Malaysian Identity

Homi K. Bhabha's concept of the "Third Space" designates an interstitial zone in which cultural difference is negotiated rather than dissolved, a space defined by ambivalence, hybridity, and its irreducibility to any single cultural grammar (Bhabha, 2012). This framework maps directly onto the spatial logic of *The Story of Southern Islet*. The film renders the social reality of Kedah along the Thai-Malaysian border as precisely such a Third Space: Malays, Chinese, and Siamese coexist within it; Buddhism, Taoism, and Islam overlap and interpenetrate. No singular cultural logic governs this terrain, and identity is formed not through stable cultural belonging but through continuous negotiation under pressure.

For the film's Chinese characters, this Third Space carries a particular historical weight. As Shih (2010) has argued, "Chineseness" in the Southeast Asian context has consistently been constructed as something foreign and diasporic, an alterity that can never be fully absorbed into national identity. Wang (2009) responds to this predicament by arguing that Malaysian Chinese must move beyond the sojourner mentality and genuinely "put down roots." The film's distinctive contribution to this debate lies in its revelation of a crucial emotional truth: the transition from diaspora to localization is not a clean break but a process accompanied by loss, the loss, specifically, of the very possibility of "going home." It is Nanyin that bears the weight of this loss within the film's sonic architecture.

Soja's (1996) spatial theory further clarifies the structural situation of the film's Chinese characters. Unlike Malay-Thai characters who retain at least a geographical affinity with their ancestral cultural homeland, the Chinese of the Kedah borderlands occupy a position of double displacement: estranged from China as a cultural origin, yet never fully integrated into Malaysia. This condition, what Deleuze and Guattari (1987) describe as the dynamic interplay of "deterritorialization" and "reterritorialization", is precisely what the figure of Nenek Keriang externalizes. Her confinement to the mountain is not merely a supernatural curse but a spatial metaphor through which the film gives form to a cultural predicament: the road home has been permanently foreclosed.

Nanyin and the Cinematic Representation of Diasporic Memory

The film's most profound and cinematically accomplished treatment of Chinese identity is concentrated in its closing sequence, in which Nenek Keriang, the spirit of a princess from Quanzhou, Fujian, sings the Nanyin piece "Depart from the Border of Han Dynasty Kingdom" while she and Ah Yan drift together upon an open sea (see Figure 5). This sequence merits close analysis at two levels: its audiovisual construction and its intertextual logic.

Nanyin originated in Quanzhou, Fujian, and was carried across centuries of merchant and labor migration into Southeast Asia; it is among the oldest surviving forms of Chinese classical music. Its vocal tradition is characterized by performance in the Southern Min (Hokkien)

dialect, restrained melodic ornamentation, and an aesthetic sensibility whose emotional register is grounded in understated sorrow. It preserves tonal structures and performance conventions traceable to the Tang and Song dynasties. In the film, this historical depth is not merely cited as background but genuinely activated. During the scriptwriting process, director Chong Keat Aun sought out three elders fluent in the Southern Min dialect and folk song tradition: Wang Fengying (王凤英) from Kedah, Ah Quan (阿全伯) from Penang, and He Shui-niang (何水娘) from Malacca. Through fieldwork recordings of their performances of *Depart from the Border of Han Dynasty Kingdom*, he drew upon their material to transform the melody and its lyrical meaning into the film's central recurring motif. This compositional method ensures that the Nanyin score is not merely a piece of music composed for the film but functions as a living cultural document, embedding the authentic voices of the community the film depicts into the fabric of the film itself.

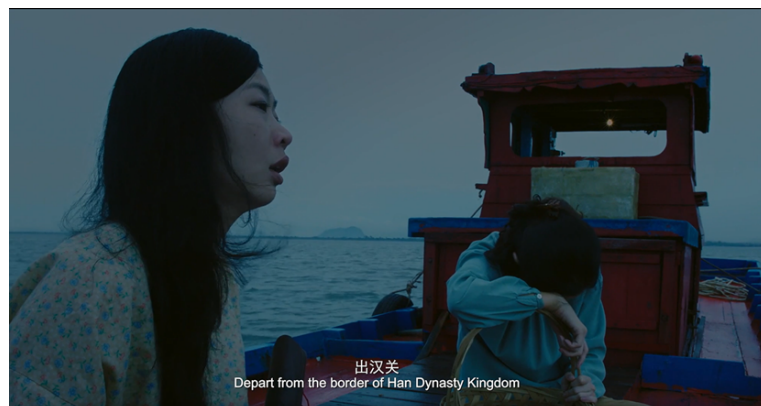


Figure 5: Keriang and Yan Drifting at Sea as Keriang Sings "Depart From the Border of Han Dynasty Kingdom" With Emotional Anguish.

Depart from the Border of Han Dynasty Kingdom, an elegy associated with the Han dynasty court lady Wang Zhaojun (王昭君), who was sent to the frontier as a peace offering and forever severed from her homeland, serves in the film as a precisely calibrated intertextual image carrying the full weight of the Chinese diasporic experience. The term Hanguan (汉关), meaning “the border of the Han realm,” denotes not merely a geographical frontier but the cultural boundary of Han civilization: to cross it is to enter a world from which there is, structurally, no return. Keriang’s choice to sing this piece is therefore far from incidental. Confined as she is, she sings a song about the irreversibility of departure, and in doing so her historical metaphor and her lived situation achieve perfect coincidence.

The audiovisual construction of this sequence repays careful analysis. As Keriang and Ah Yan float in a small boat on the open sea, the film sustains an extended wide shot that renders the horizontal expanse of water as boundless and undifferentiated; the two women appear diminished and adrift within the frame, a visual translation of Keriang’s line, “I can’t return to my hometown,” and the director’s primary means of spatializing the experience of diaspora. At the level of sound design, the most significant feature of this sequence is its studied minimalism: aside from Keriang’s vocal performance, the scene’s entire soundscape consists of little more than the continuous environmental layer of ocean waves. There is no instrumental

accompaniment, no ritual music, no narratively motivated sound effects. The Nanyin emerges as an unaccompanied voice, a cappella, surfacing in solitude from this expanse of sonic emptiness. This formal choice carries deep significance: what Schafer would call the Keynote Sound (here, the sound of the waves) recedes to the barest threshold of presence, maintaining only the spatial orientation of the scene without enveloping or reinforcing the human voice. Keriang's voice is thereby exposed in an acoustic environment almost entirely devoid of support; rather than integration with the Keynote Sound, what emerges is a relationship of confrontation.

A further question worth pursuing concerns the ontological status of this Nanyin performance. Keriang appears within the frame, her expression grief-stricken, her lips synchronized with the melody, by the logic of the image, this is diegetic sound. Yet the a cappella performance, stripped of all instrumental context, resists easy categorization within the realist register of "a character who is singing." She sings an ancient song in Southern Min; she sings of Wang Zhaojun's departure to the frontier, a Han woman dispatched to a foreign land, thereafter expressing through song a homeland she can never reach; and she sings a narrative of irreversible exile, whose temporal and spatial dimensions exceed anything the small boat on screen can contain. Is this a character singing, or is it the historical memory of an entire community finding voice through her? The film deliberately withholds the answer. This

deliberate ambiguity in the ontological attribution of sound is precisely isomorphic with the identity logic of the Third Space. Keriang is simultaneously a figure within the diegesis and a cultural symbol that transcends its narrative time and space; her voice is simultaneously a real act of singing and a collective expression of diasporic experience. The director's choice to present this moment as unaccompanied vocal performance rather than through instrumental arrangement constitutes, at the level of form, a refusal of any sonic framework that might anchor the music to a single cultural belonging. The emptiness of the sound is the sound of the border: those sounds that cannot be contained within any fixed place are precisely the most honest expression of the diasporic condition.

It is also worth noting that Nenek Keriang delivers the line "I can never cross this border" while holding Wang Fengying's Nanyin paiban (clapper board). This detail is quietly significant: what connects Keriang to the Nanyin tradition is not a prop fabricated for the film but an object belonging to a real Kedah elder. In this moment, the fictional character and the historical witness converge; the boundary between the diegetic and the extradiegetic dissolves; and the line between aesthetic representation and cultural testimony becomes indeterminate. From the perspective of cinematic sound's narrative layers, this sequence positions Nanyin in a deliberately ambiguous sonic register: is Keriang's singing a sound belonging to the story

world, or a cultural summons that transcends the narrative altogether? This tension between diegetic and non-diegetic sound is itself a formal expression of the “unbelonging” that characterizes the diasporic experience, sound, like identity, refuses to be cleanly assigned to any single space.

The director’s selection of “Depart from the Border of Han Dynasty Kingdom” endows this moment with an additional dimension of cultural allegory. The historical resonance of Wang Zhaojun’s story and Keriang’s fate, trapped in Kedah, without any path of return, produces a transhistorical intertextual echo. Crucially, the “Han-jia” (汉家, Han civilization) invoked here is not a reference to the historical Han dynasty but functions as a symbolic signifier representing Han cultural civilization in its entirety, defined against the “barbarian” or non-Han periphery. Quanzhou appears in the film as a concrete embodiment of “Han-jia”: although the figure of the “Quanzhou princess” is fictional, this framing profoundly mirrors the deep and genuine cultural ties binding the Malaysian Chinese community to its Southern Fujianese ancestral homeland. As the film’s narrative progresses, however, the concept of “Han-jia” undergoes a quiet but consequential transformation: by the closing scenes, Keriang has changed into traditional Malay dress, and her connection to Quanzhou is no longer a geographical reality one might touch but has been mythologized into a permanent impossibility (Cheng, 2021). This transformation in her image signals the irreversible reconstruction of her

identity, she is no longer the princess of Quanzhou in exile awaiting return, but a borderland existence clothed in Malay culture and animated by a Nanyin soul.

By the film's conclusion, the transformation of Keriang's image and voice is complete: what began as a narrative of diaspora has been refigured, through Nanyin, into a narrative of necessary loss. The function of "Depart from the Border of Han Dynasty Kingdom" within the film is therefore not to mourn a homeland that remains recoverable, but to formally acknowledge that the process of re-territorialization, what Wang (2009) terms "putting down roots", is inevitably accompanied by loss that is both real and irreversible. However, to interpret this scene solely through the lens of "putting down roots" risks reducing it to a unidimensional diaspora narrative. In her critique of diaspora theory, Shih (2010) argues that the fundamental problem with conventional diasporic frameworks lies in their implicit centripetal structure: they persistently position China as the authoritative cultural origin, while defining overseas Chinese communities as perpetual "derivatives" or "peripheries" in relation to that center. This structure not only obscures the autonomy of cultural production among overseas Chinese communities, but also epistemologically reinforces a politics of originary return, one that consigns overseas Chinese to a state of permanent displacement, forever "not yet arrived." As an alternative, Shih proposes the framework of the "Sinophone," which foregrounds local, heterogeneous, and

polycentric Sinophone cultural practices, treating the cultural production of overseas Chinese communities as possessing intrinsic value rather than as imitations or extensions of some “authentic” Chinese original (Shih, 2010).

Returning to the film, this theoretical perspective enables a more precise understanding of the deeper significance of Keriang’s act of singing Nanyin. The image of Keriang, dressed in traditional Malay attire while singing in the Hokkien Nanyin tradition, is itself an embodied instantiation of the Sinophone in Shih’s sense: it is neither a transplantation of Chinese culture overseas nor a simple assimilation into Malay culture, but rather an autonomous local cultural formation generated under specific geographical and historical conditions. Of equal significance is the director Chong Keat Aun’s decision to weave the dialectical inflections and musical lineages of three Nanyin elders from Kedah, Penang, and Malacca into the film’s narrative. The Nanyin traditions of these three localities are themselves the products of generations of migration, hybridization, and local adaptation; their cultural genealogy can neither be nor needs to be reduced to a single originary source in Quanzhou, Fujian. This resonates directly with Shih’s fundamental challenge to the concept of “diaspora”: interpreting overseas Chinese culture through the axis of an “ancestral homeland” is precisely to impose an (imaginary) standard of purity that suppresses the autonomous value of Chinese local cultural production (Shih, 2010).

At the level of audiovisual language, the director situates Keriang's singing against images of a vast, open sea: a counterpoint emerges between the boundless expanse of the visual field and the distant, lingering quality of the vocal performance, as the Hokkien melodic contours of Nanyin drift across a liminal space that belongs neither to China nor to Malaysia. This is the sonic actualization of Bhabha's (2012) Third Space, yet when read alongside Shih's "against diaspora" framework, the political implications of this Third Space become further legible. What the film suggests is not that Malaysian Chinese must agonize over a choice between "loyalty to China" and "integration into the local". Rather, it is precisely this in-between space that constitutes the site of Sinophone cultural self-production and self-affirmation. In other words, the Nanyin in *The Story of Southern Islet* does not seek to return to a homeland, nor does it labor under anxiety about its distance from one. It is complete in the very act of drifting; the cultural identity it carries does not depend on sustained connection to a geographical origin, but is constituted, in the present moment, through the act of singing and the act of listening.

The Nanyin sequence in *The Story of Southern Islet* thus achieves far more than merely representing cultural nostalgia. By constructing a cinematic soundscape around the voices of three elders, one that deliberately blurs the boundary between individual singing and collective

memory, the director transforms sound itself into a site where diasporic identity can be mourned, negotiated, and ultimately transcended. Within Shih's theoretical framework, the significance of this soundscape may be given its final formulation: the continuation and transformation of Nanyin in Malaysia is not a symptom of diaspora, but a testament to the productive capacity of Sinophone culture in situ. Each time it is heard, Nanyin simultaneously acknowledges the reality of loss and asserts a cultural subjectivity that requires no return as its precondition.

Conclusion

The Story of Southern Islet employs the horror genre as its narrative frame and sound as its central medium, constructing a cinematic text that engages the diasporic experience of Malaysian Chinese and the negotiation of cultural identity. The analysis presented in this article demonstrates that the film's sonic elements are not passive displays of cultural background, but active narrative mechanisms that participate in the production of meaning: they mobilize cultural memory, demarcate identity boundaries, and, within the context of the border "Third Space", illuminate the complex structure of diasporic identity formation.

At the level of folk ritual, the gamelan accompaniment and incantatory chanting of the Wayang kulit performance together establish the film's foundational soundscape. Applying Schafer's (1977) tripartite soundscape framework reveals that these sounds are not evenly

distributed across the acoustic space, but rather organized through a clearly differentiated hierarchy that structures narrative tension: the sustained environmental sounds of the natural setting function as Keynote Sounds, establishing the perceptual geography of rural Kedah; the percussion and ritual chanting operate as Signals, marking the initiation and turning points of ceremonial action; while the high-frequency timbre of the serunai functions as a Soundmark, rising above the other sonic strata to serve as the acoustic emblem of ritual sacredness. Crucially, this sonic hierarchy is not a static cultural tableau but operates dynamically in response to shifts in the ritual process and the characters' states of consciousness. As Aunt Kawe enters a trance, the foregrounding of specific sounds guides the audience through a perceptual experience of liminality, reactivating the sacred dimensions of folk ritual through the cinematic medium.

At the level of cultural identity, the use of “Depart from the Border of Han Dynasty Kingdom” constitutes the most analytically significant sonic moment in the film. In this sequence, Keriang and Ah Yan drift across an open expanse of sea; around them, only the unceasing sound of waves extends to the horizon, while Keriang's unaccompanied Nanyin singing, stripped of any instrumental support, floats into relief within this acoustic emptiness. From a strictly diegetic standpoint, this is a clearly anchored on-screen sound: Keriang is visible

within the frame, her expression filled with grief, her voice synchronized with her lips. However, the linguistic and cultural freight of this unaccompanied voice, a classical Hokkien melody, the legend of Wang Zhaojun's exile to the frontier, a historical narrative of permanent departure from one's homeland, extends far beyond the temporal and cultural dimensions that the present boat can contain. This excess does not arise from any hyper-real orchestration of the music; on the contrary, it emerges precisely from the sonic minimalism of the scene. When all instrumental scaffolding is removed, the cultural memory carried by the human voice reaches the listener in its most unmediated form. This audiovisual relationship is itself a bearer of meaning: Nanyin functions simultaneously as the cultural identity marker of Keriang as a Fujianese princess, and as the sound of a homeward crossing she can never make.

However, to stop at the interpretation of inconsolable inability to return risks reducing this sonic moment to a unidimensional elegy of diaspora. It is here that the convergence of three theoretical perspectives, Shih (2010), Bhabha (2012), and Wang (2009), jointly discloses the more complex political stakes of the scene. Shih's critique of conventional diaspora theory demonstrates that interpreting overseas Chinese cultural expression through the authoritative center of "China as ancestral homeland" itself reproduces, at the epistemological level, a centripetal structure that suppresses the subjectivity of local cultural production. Within the alternative framework of the "Sinophone," Keriang's Nanyin performance does not attest to

cultural loss, but affirms the productive capacity of Sinophone culture in Malaysia (Shih, 2010). This judgment finds confirmation at the level of the film's production methodology: Chong Keat Aun's weaving of the dialectal inflections of three Nanyin elders from Kedah, Penang, and Malacca into the film's narrative means that the Nanyin traditions of these three localities already constitute locally rooted sonic practices with their own transmission lineages, formed through generations of migration, hybridization, and localization, rather than overseas replications of Chinese cultural originals. Viewed through Bhabha's (2012) Third Space framework, Keriang's singing drifts across an open sea that belongs to neither China nor Malaysia; this liminal space is precisely the metaphorical condensation of Chinese cultural self-affirmation in the in-between. The introduction of the "against diaspora" perspective further clarifies that this in-between is not a passive interstice but an active field in which Sinophone culture produces its own meanings (Shih, 2010). As Wang's (2009) concept of "putting down roots" implies, localization entails a genuine commitment to the place of settlement; in Shih's (2010) framework, the deeper implication of that commitment is rendered fully legible: genuine localization is not the denial of loss, but the reconstruction of cultural subjectivity that takes the acknowledgment of loss as its point of departure. Nanyin here requires no return as its precondition; it is complete in the very act of drifting, self-sufficient in each moment it is heard.

With respect to this article's contribution to film studies, the analysis presented here integrates soundscape theory with diaspora studies and the theory of the Third Space to examine a specific cinematic text, thereby offering an analytical pathway for understanding Sinophone diasporic cinema through the medium of sound. The case of *The Story of Southern Islet* demonstrates that for films engaging questions of borderland geography, multi-ethnic hybridity, and cultural memory, sound design frequently constitutes one of the most precise strata of narrative construction: it supplements meaning beyond the image, triggers identification prior to language, and reconstitutes the perceptual connection between audiences and cultural tradition within ritual sequences. This finding may offer points of reference for understanding sound strategies in the broader context of Southeast Asian Sinophone cinema and other films of diasporic communities.

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