

# Why are Singapore-made shows unappealing to many Singaporeans?

High production values, great storytelling. The home-grown drama Emerald Hill has it all, yet there's amazement that it matches foreign TV standards.

**Ben Chester Cheong**

It was an extraordinary development.

In March 2025, Mediacorp Channel 8 drama Emerald Hill – The Little Nyonya Story hit No.1 on Netflix Singapore, beating Korean blockbuster When Life Gives You Tangerines.

By June, Shanghai Media Group acquired it for Dragon TV in China, joining distribution deals across South-east Asia, Taiwan and Malaysia.

## THE YEARNING FOR OVERSEAS VALIDATION

I'm 35. I grew up watching Channel 8 dramas – The Little Nyonya, Holland V and the other evening shows my family gathered around to watch.

Today, when people my age choose what to watch, there's often a natural gravitation towards Korean series, Japanese anime or Thai shows. Local dramas remain on the radar, particularly when there's buzz or strong word of mouth, but they're less likely to be the automatic first choice.

Yet when I watched Emerald Hill, it hit all the right notes – high production value, compelling storytelling and meticulous Peranakan cultural details. What struck me wasn't just the quality, but my own mild surprise at the quality. It suggested I'd been approaching local content with slightly lower expectations than I'd realised.

Netflix data for the first quarter of 2025 offers an interesting regional snapshot. South Korea, Japan and Thailand consistently placed their own content at No.1. Korean shows topped Korean charts for all 11 weeks. Japan's top spots went to Japanese shows except for Squid Game S2. Thailand elevated Good Heavens!

I'm A Goose Not A Swan and Dalah: Death And The Flowers for multiple weeks.

Singapore had one show that reached No.1 in three months. The difference might reflect market size, production volume or streaming platform dynamics. But it also suggests different baseline expectations Singaporeans have about where compelling content comes from: not from Singapore.

Yet, whether because of aggressive marketing or early pre-release corporate tie-ups by Mediacorp, foreign markets quickly saw the commercial value of Emerald Hill. China's Shanghai Media Group acquired Emerald Hill for Dragon TV. Taiwan's friDAY and TVBS picked it up. Malaysia's Astro carries it.

Locally, the show drew 1.67 million viewers across its run – a strong showing for a market of six million people, representing roughly a quarter of Singapore's population – and secured regional distribution.

Mediacorp chief content officer Virginia Lim described the China acquisition as “a powerful signal that Singapore stories continue to command a place on the world stage”. The international reception has been strong. Yet domestically, the conversation on local productions carries notes of pleasant surprise or complaints about cringy scenes rather than confidence and support for local

productions.

## PROXIMITY AND PERCEPTION

There's something curious about that dynamic. Korean and Chinese producers do not need international distribution to validate their content's worth. In contrast, Singapore productions – whether a film, a song or even an athlete – often gain full recognition only after success abroad.

Anthony Chen's Ilo Ilo (2013) received a Cannes Camera d'Or before being fully celebrated here. Yeo Siew Hua's A Land Imagined (2018) won the Golden Leopard at Locarno before being released in Singapore theatres. Even JJ Lin's music career gained deeper respect in Singapore only after he became a Mandopop sensation in Taiwan and China.

That tendency suggests we still measure our creative confidence through the eyes of others. Part of the issue may lie in perception. Korean melodramas can be emotionally intense but we engage with them as compelling drama. Local productions with similar emotional beats, however, sometimes get framed as “melodramatic”.

This isn't necessarily about quality. Foreign content benefits from distance and feels global, even aspirational.

Local stories are closer to home

and therefore feel familiar and less exotic. There's no mystery in it. It's about us, made by us, for us. That proximity can make local productions feel somehow less remarkable, even when they are objectively strong.

The result? Many Singaporeans watched and enjoyed it. But there remains a slight hesitation, a sense that local content must still “prove itself” before it earns full-hearted support.

This attitude reveals something deeper about Singapore's cultural psyche. Perhaps because we've built our national identity on punching above our weight economically and politically, there's a persistent sense that we must be exceptional to even be considered good enough. This is a standard we don't apply to Korean or Japanese content, which we readily accept as ranging from excellent to mediocre without questioning the entire industry's legitimacy.

Singapore's creative industries have been building momentum for years. More recently, Yeo Siew Hua's Stranger Eyes (2024) premiered at Venice. Jean Yeo's Last Madame (2019-2020) has found international audiences. What's missing isn't quality but the instinctive confidence that quality is what we should expect.

This dynamic extends beyond television. We hold Singapore Airlines to impossible standards,

criticising service lapses that we would shrug off with foreign carriers. We approach Singapore food overseas with inherent scepticism, as if authenticity is automatically compromised by distance.

We question whether local tech start-ups can truly compete globally before they have proven themselves abroad. The pattern suggests we've internalised a form of cultural cringe – where made-in-Singapore anything must work harder to earn our trust, while made-elsewhere starts with a presumption of credibility.

## WHAT WE LOSE

That hesitation and lack of support for locally made productions matter because shows like Emerald Hill do more than entertain.

Emerald Hill offers a visual record of 1950s-1970s Singapore – shophouses with inner courtyards, outdoor kitchens with charcoal stoves, five-foot ways as social spaces. It captures Peranakan family life: the natural mixing of English, Mandarin, Malay and Hokkien in conversation, cultural traditions around food and family and the social dynamics of that era.

Mediacorp's trilogy series The Journey (2013 to 2015) spans 1920s-1980s Singapore – kampungs, street markets,

post-war challenges, nation-building years. These dramas capture textures of daily life that exist primarily in photographs and memory now.

They are dramatised stories that exercise creative licence rather than documentaries. But they serve as important visual depictions of everyday life through Singapore's early decades as a country experiencing decolonisation and independence. That preservation has value in building cultural identity and shaping public understanding, particularly as those eras slip from collective living memory into history.

That is not to insist that Singaporeans give unequivocal support for anything made in Singapore. After all, entertainment choices are personal and varied, and in a world where global streaming offers content from everywhere, watching a Korean or Japanese show is simply a reflection of this global diet.

But when multiple generations engage less regularly with local stories, our connection to our recent national history becomes diffused. Understanding of what kampung life, dialect usage, or older cultural practices becomes something we know intellectually, not something we understand viscerally.

The gap between generations can widen when we don't share common cultural references from content. If we all consume global stories but rarely our own, we risk losing the emotional continuity that local storytelling once provided.

## REFRAMING SUCCESS

Emerald Hill drew strong viewership, topped Netflix Singapore, and sold to multiple international markets. It was a success, yet was seen as a rare exception rather than a natural outcome of quality work that is becoming the norm in Singapore's fast-developing news and entertainment landscape.

Emerald Hill's domestic and international success demonstrates Singapore can produce compelling content with broad appeal. Whether this represents the beginning of a shift or remains an outlier depends partly on how subsequent productions perform and partly on how viewing patterns evolve.

Still, the conversation Emerald Hill has sparked – about local content, cultural confidence and viewing habits – might be as valuable as the show itself.

• Ben Chester Cheong is a law lecturer and MOE-Start scholar at the Singapore University of Social Sciences. He is a visiting fellow at Reading Law School and associate academic fellow at NUS Asia-Pacific Centre for Environmental Law, and a lawyer at RHTLaw Asia.



Emerald Hill – The Little Nyonya Story, starring Tasha Low and Tyler Ten (both left), hit No.1 on Netflix Singapore in March 2025. Later, Shanghai Media Group acquired it for Dragon TV in China, joining distribution deals across South-east Asia, Taiwan and Malaysia. PHOTO: MEDIACORP