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Mastering the Medium and the Message, Riding the Platform Era

By XING Jiahui

SYNOPSIS

Emerald Hill – The Little Nyonya Story, a 2025 Singaporean drama, has gained a wider cross-border audience by tapping into the current platform-led media environment. The show's popularity signals a shift in how cultural content is circulated and soft power enhanced. This goes beyond state diplomacy, market design, or fan mobilisation, to include activating the power of today's media infrastructure and algorithms, through mastering both medium and message.

COMMENTARY

When a reboot of a beloved 2008 Singaporean television drama series, *Emerald Hill – The Little Nyonya Story*, premiered in March 2025, it quickly topped [streaming charts](#) in Singapore and Malaysia. Though not a Netflix Original, *Emerald Hill* was the first Chinese-language drama produced by Singapore's national broadcaster, Mediacorp, that was launched simultaneously on meWATCH and Netflix, signalling a new distribution strategy.

While not explicitly designed for streaming, its visually streamlined and narratively familiar format resonated with [platform-era sensibilities](#). It is not a Netflix production, but it speaks fluently in a programmatic dynamic, which audiences on these platforms have become accustomed to.

Beyond streaming metrics, *Emerald Hill* demonstrated something harder to quantify. On [Xiaohongshu \(Rednote\)](#), a Chinese lifestyle platform, screen-recorded clips, scene edits, fashion breakdowns, and emotional commentary proliferated. Users from mainland China, Taiwan, and Southeast Asia, and even cast members, engaged in loosely coordinated conversations, despite the drama not being officially released in mainland China. This was not part of Mediacorp's official plan, but neither was it

entirely incidental. It reflects how today's media algorithms can surface compatible content regardless of a producer's plans or intentions.

While stories matter, this article focuses not on plot, style or narratives, but on how cultural programming – and with it, “soft power”, as defined by the recently departed Harvard professor Joseph Nye – gains visibility and traction in today's fragmented and competitive media landscape. *Emerald Hill's* popularity reflects how influence can travel, less through institutional pipelines and more through infrastructural alignment in a platform-governed ecosystem.

From Local Heritage to Global Audience

The original *Little Nyonya* (2008), produced by Mediacorp in Singapore, was a massive [local success](#). Rooted in the cultural nostalgia and family ethics of the Straits-born or Peranakan Chinese community, it was exported to Malaysia and broadcast in mainland China while remaining fundamentally Singaporean in its authorship, production and narrative. Its 2020 mainland China-Singapore co-produced remake largely preserved the original plot and aesthetic tone but failed to resonate with [mainland audiences](#), many of whom found the series somewhat tired and cliched.

Emerald Hill (2025), again from Mediacorp, updated the Nyonya universe for a new media environment. While [Peranakan symbols](#) – architecture, garments, rituals – remain, these motifs are woven into a storyline centring on a new generation of female protagonists navigating romantic autonomy, intergenerational tension, and cultural friction. These elements function less as historical anchors than expressive backdrops – resonant but flexible, nostalgic yet narratively streamlined. The show's format – featuring tightly paced episodes, highly focused subplots, and arcs that build toward discrete emotional payoffs – mirrors traits that align well with [streaming](#) and social media sensibilities. This is not to say that *Emerald Hill* was designed as a “platform drama”, but that its reception highlights how even legacy broadcasters are, consciously or not, working within [the streaming-native aesthetic grammars](#).

From Streaming Interface to Shadow Circulation

While East Asian markets like [South Korea](#) and [Taiwan](#) have crafted clear narrative paths for platform success, Southeast Asia presents a fragmented and relatively small market. Regulatory complexity, uneven infrastructure, and linguistic diversity – long noted as structural barriers in Southeast Asia's digital media landscape – have complicated regional consolidation. In this context, *Emerald Hill* does not represent a cohesive Southeast Asian media strategy but offers a useful case study. It reflects a breakthrough: showing how a small-market production can gain traction on increasingly dominant media platforms by adapting stylistically and fitting with their programming and algorithmic norms.

Though not commissioned by Netflix, *Emerald Hill's* simultaneous release across regional streaming platforms reflects a pragmatic approach aligned with emerging distribution practices. Its depiction of female agency, emotionally resonant conflicts, and Peranakan-inflected nostalgia was not tied to a specific national or cultural context but tapped into common resonant emotional narratives widely shared across Chinese-speaking audiences well beyond Singapore and Southeast Asia.

What makes *Emerald Hill* especially notable is that its success on streaming platforms stemmed from more than just the mode of distribution. It adopted more agile formats that could scale by spilling over into informal and impactful social media channels such as Xiaohongshu. This signals a different form of circulation: one governed not by narrative depth nor diplomatic intention.

Visibility Across the Wall: The Xiaohongshu Effect

Unlike Korean and Taiwanese dramas that often travel through established fanbases and networks, *Emerald Hill's* appearance on Xiaohongshu was more unexpected. It had no official release in mainland China and no mobilised fandom, yet it gained traction through the platform's algorithmic resonance.

Its predecessor – the original *Little Nyonya* – aired on Chinese television in the late 2000s and remains part of the cultural memory of older mainland viewers. But what resurfaced in 2025 was not nostalgic recall but a different media logic altogether. *Emerald Hill* reached a younger, digital-native audience through a platform optimised not for broadcast, but for emotional resonance and aesthetic recognition. The drama was not pirated wholesale. It was recorded, sliced, remixed, and reframed into romantic shorts, fashion commentary, and nostalgic vignettes. What moved was not a linear story, but a modular interface of feelings and aesthetics recognisable to Xiaohongshu's lifestyle grammar.

Xiaohongshu is no neutral pipeline of content. It builds on audience affinity and emotional pull. Its ecosystem privileges visually expressive, emotionally charged, and lifestyle-compatible content, especially around fashion, food, gender, and lifestyle. It has a predominantly young, female-skewing user base. That *Emerald Hill* could thrive here suggests not memory or fandom but audience affinity and fit: its aesthetic structure resonated with the viewing habits and tastes of the platform's users.

This circulation was not deliberate cultural diplomacy. Instead, it achieved its impact through shadow circulation – content moving through algorithmic compatibility rather than geopolitical intent. In such a media context, visibility depends less on what a story means than on how well it can be recontextualised across platforms, tailoring content to their respective audience aesthetics and demands. *Emerald Hill* didn't break through China's firewall – it slid through its infrastructural seams.

Conclusion: Maximising Cultural Pathways

Emerald Hill's case exemplifies two under-acknowledged dynamics shaping cultural mobility in today's media context.

First, a programme's visibility hinges not just on its content, but also on the agility to adapt to the format and consumption patterns across platforms. In other words, mastering the medium remains as critical as shaping the message – *an enduring insight* from communications theorist Marshall McLuhan goes.

Second, platforms like Xiaohongshu are not simply secondary outlets but powerful cultural infrastructures that shape cultural flows. Together, these forces suggest an emerging architecture of visibility and soft power.

Emotional resonance and production quality are notable, but in a platform-governed age, they can no longer fully explain content's circulation trajectory. *Emerald Hill* offers an instructive case study of how content from historically less dominant media markets, like Southeast Asia, might bypass structural disadvantages, not through institutional promotion, but through infrastructural alignment.

Regional content can gain traction by being recognised, redistributed, and remixed across digital infrastructures, where recognition is no longer solely conferred by states, industries, or markets, but negotiated through the process of circulation itself.

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