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2019

## Crazy Rich Asians: When Representation Becomes Controversial

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### Recommended Citation

Zhao, Yikun (2019) "Crazy Rich Asians: When Representation Becomes Controversial," *Markets, Globalization & Development Review*. Vol. 4: No. 3, Article 3.

DOI: 10.23860/MGDR-2019-04-03-03

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.uri.edu/mgdr/vol4/iss3/3>

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### **Cover Page Footnote**

The author would like to thank the anonymous reviewers, as well as Professor Nikhilesh Dholakia for inspiring the idea of writing this film review.

# Markets, Globalization & Development Review



## ***Film Review***

# **Crazy Rich Asians: When Representation Becomes Controversial**

## **Introduction**

*Crazy Rich Asians* (2018) is a romantic comedy directed by Jon M. Chu, based on Kevin Kwan's eponymous novel, the first of Kwan's trilogy on the rising economic elites in Asia. The story unfolds as we follow the young American-born Chinese Rachel Chu (Constance Wu), an Economics professor at New York University, to travel to Singapore with his posh professor boyfriend Nick Young (Henry Golding) for his best friend's wedding. The trip literally turns out to be a journey of discovery for Rachel: her boyfriend of one-year is in fact the scion of a wealthy family that is indeed 'crazy rich'. In a world of splendor, glamour and excess, the story reaches its climax when Rachel is introduced to her boyfriend's Singaporean Chinese mother, Eleanor Sung-Young (Michelle Yeoh). Nick and Rachel's relationship is at first threatened to crumble in the face of Eleanor's disapproval, for Rachel is seen as an outsider, therefore not a good fit for the old-moneyed Young family that remains couched in 'traditional' Chinese values. But in the end, as it happens, true love triumphs. Maybe for witnessing Rachel's act of sacrificial love in deciding to walk out of the relationship for Nick's sake, or for seeing the shadow of her own past in young Rachel, Eleanor at last lets Nick to pass her own treasured engagement ring onto Rachel in his proposal. The film ends with a spectacular rooftop party at Singapore's iconic Marina Bay Sands Hotel, for celebrating the couple's engagement. Everyone appears crazy happy except for Eleanor, who, donning a courteous smile, disappears into the crowd.

Since this film's release in theatres in August 2018, it has stirred up a controversy on diversity representation. It claims to be the first major Hollywood studio movie that features an all-Asian principal cast since *The Joy Luck Club* (1993), thus a significant breakthrough for Asian-American representation in Hollywood and in American society. In this film, after a long while, Asian faces are finally seen as protagonists in a Hollywood production. More importantly, these roles are said to break away from the stifling stereotypes of Asians in Hollywood cinema: mad scientists embodied in the character of 'Dr. Fu Manchu' (based on the novels of British author Sax Rohmer), Kung-Fu masters (as seen in the roles played

by Bruce Lee and Jackie Chan), and unattractively geeky Asian American men (Chiu 2018a). Curiously enough, this movie has also encountered waves of critiques questioning its representativeness. A plethora of questions were raised by critics and viewers from various ethnic and cultural backgrounds: Is the experience of the top one-percent Singaporean Chinese representative for other ethnic groups in Singapore (Han 2018; Ives 2018; Xie 2018)? Is this film a sanitized tribute to the uber-wealthy and the world of blatant consumerism (Bhutto 2018; Stirland 2018)? Is the film really beyond the 'white norms' that permeates Hollywood (Tseng-Putterman 2018) and therefore 'Asian enough' (Ives 2018), or is it just another 'banana movie', yellow on the outside but white inside (Tsoi 2018)? From different perspectives, the attempt of viewing this film as an emblem of diversity representation of great social and political significance is questioned. Both the celebratory and critical stances appear to be reasonable assessments based on solid evidences, so the question is how did *Crazy Rich Asians* (2018) become a controversial case on diversity representation? Does it deserve the laurel wreath?

### ***Crazy Rich Asian* (2018) as an Event: The Creation of a Milestone for Representation**

The director of *Crazy Rich Asians* (2018) said: "It's not a movie, it's a movement" (cited in Lee 2018). Certainly, the making of this film was turned into a timely public event. An 'opportunity space' (Baumann 2007; DiMaggio 1992) had taken shape in Hollywood and broadly in the North-American cultural landscape before turning Kwan's 2013 hit novel into a 30-million-dollar Hollywood blockbuster. Two concurrent sociocultural trends together prepared an opportunity calling for Asian-American representation in Hollywood and beyond: the rise of Asia, particularly China as a new global economic superpower, at an unprecedented speed since the beginning of the millennium; and the more recent anti-whitewashing campaign that originated in Hollywood and later sprang into a publicly-engaged movement through digital platforms (see Mizukoshi 2018, another review in MGDR, on 'whitewashing'). These sociocultural changes both produced a desire to see the new 'other' and awoke a frustrated need of being seen.

No representation is apolitical (Hall 1997). The subject of film representation is to a great extent shaped by the ebbs and flows of power and its balance. Since the early 2000s, Asia has been increasingly under international media spotlight for its exponential economic growth headed by China. This much accelerated shift of the "world's economic center of

gravity” to the emerging world of the far east in the past two decades (“Urban world: Cities and the Rise of the Consuming Class” by McKinsey Global Institute, 2012; cited in Nougayrède 2017) has consequently generated an inquisitive interest in a particular group - the Asia’s super-rich, in whom a disproportionate scale of wealth has been accumulated fairly quickly. As Kevin Kwan, the author of the original novel, found out in his book reading tours that non-Asian readers such as “housewives in Texas and New York City socialites” (cited in Ho 2018) actually constituted a high percentage among his readers. For the non-Asian-American audience, *Crazy Rich Asians* (2018) opportunely produced a visceral representation of the new ‘other’, culturally exotic and outrageously rich. Amid the shopping spree on the beach, the private-jetted bachelor party on a camouflaged cargo-ship on ‘international waters’, and the hidden palace with Thai servants and turbaned security guards in the heart of Singapore, the familiar splendor of the world of money and consumption is seen inhabited by the rising distant ‘other’. This visceral spectacle satisfies the curiosity from the over 60% of non-Asian American moviegoers who contributed to its over \$26 million box-office gross during its domestic opening week (Toy 2018). Nevertheless, this movie was mostly turned into a progressive symbol of representation for its proactive participation in the anti-whitewashing campaign led by the Asian-American community in the United States.

The problem of whitewashing, the practice of casting white actors for non-white characters, is a long standing one in Hollywood ever since the Hays Code that was enforced in 1930 (Lee 2018). This persistent issue that had been tugged at and finally escalated into a full-fledged anti-whitewashing campaign after a few Hollywood releases being publicly challenged from 2015 onwards: Rooney Mara plays Native American Tiger Lily in *Pan* (2015); Emma Stone plays a quarter-Chinese and quarter-Hawaiian girl Allison Ng in *Aloha* (2015); Mackenzie Davis plays the Mindy Park who is supposed to be Korean-American in *The Martian* (2015); Tilda Swinton plays a Tibetan monk in *Doctor Strange* (2016); and Scarlett Johansson plays the Japanese Major Motoko Kusanagi in *Ghost in the Shell* (2017), with a black bob wig (see a review of this film on the issue of whitewashing by Mizukoshi 2018). In protest, a group of Asian-American actors spoke out (Cheng 2016; Hess 2016). Among them was the “Fresh off the Boat” sitcom star Constance Wu, who later became the female lead in *Crazy Rich Asians* (2018). Asian-American fans responded passionately and joined the force of the protest on social media through creating websites and hashtag campaigns on Twitter. Shortly the scope of their critical voices evolved from rooting for Asian-American actors for

more opportunities in Hollywood (e.g., #StarringJohnCho created by a young digital strategist - William Yu) to demanding more media representation for Asian Americans and other ethnic minorities in American society (e.g., #whitewashedOUT by Ellen Oh).

This sociocultural climate was seized upon by the production group of *Crazy Rich Asians* (2018). From its early stage of casting to the final release in theaters, the whole process of its making was transformed into an extended event for advancing Asian-American representation. In January 2017 a video of open casting call was posted across Warner Bros' social media accounts; there director Chu encouraged Asian actors to post a two-minute video, with the hashtag #CrazyRichAsiansCasting, for the chance to play a role in his film that boasts "the first all-Asian cast for American Hollywood studios in a long long time," therefore "a huge step for representation and a great opportunity to showcase all the most talented Asian actors out there". A 'movement' was officially made. When the original novel's author, Kevin Kwan, revealed to the media that a Hollywood producer once suggested rewriting the female protagonist as Caucasian (Lee 2018), more symbolic capital on representation was imbued to this movie by turning it into a concrete case, therefore a more legitimate part of the anti-whitewashing campaign. Asian-American fans pitched in too. During the film's opening week in the domestic American market, a group of rich Asian-Americans like "Silicon Valley venture capital and tech minds" (Yoon-Hendricks 2018) across the United States initiated another social media hashtag campaign: #GoldOpen. More than a hundred of them volunteered to buy out theaters during the opening week and gave out tickets for free as support (France 2018). By the end of the opening week, the domestic Asian-American audience made up a record high of forty-one percent of the film's first-week viewers, whereas in comparison, this demographic group only accounts for about six percent of all moviegoers on average, according to the Motion Picture Association of America (Toy 2018).

It has become clear that the film's production group strategically rode the sociocultural waves to turn the making of *Crazy Rich Asians* (2018) into a symbolic event on diversity representation. They leveraged the growing public interest in the rise of Asia and proactively participated in the quest for more Asian-American representation voiced in the anti-whitewashing campaign. Yet this film's participation appeared calculated - the very socially progressive campaign that it proactively partook was embarked on as its major source of symbolic legitimacy. From early on, the film's production group framed the making of this film as an effort to 'right the wrong', to advance the Asian-American representation in

Hollywood. They conspicuously revealed their earlier refusals of the proposals to make the protagonists 'white' and broadcasted having a 'full-Asian cast' as this film's exclusive trademark. It is therefore interesting but not surprising that this movie's symbolic significance on diversity representation had already been (self-)declared even before its shooting. Without the production group's strategic orchestration in embedding the making of this film within these rising cultural trends, *Crazy Rich Asians* (2018) could not have been crowned as a symbol of diversity representation so soon, if at all.

### ***Crazy Rich Asians* (2018) as Cinematic Storytelling: Representation in Question**

Although heralded as a progressive landmark for representation, *Crazy Rich Asians* (2018) is also challenged for its inadequacy in representing social diversity: Singapore is not portrayed as a diverse society of a prevalent condition of socio-economic and ethnic disparities (Han 2018; Ives 2018); Non-Chinese Singaporeans only played diminutive roles of servants and guards without problematizing the 'Chinese privilege' in a country that stands on a historically Malay island (Selby 2018). The audience with Chinese cultural background outside North America, including China as the second-largest movie market in the world (Jenkins 2018), found it hard to resonate with its main characters (Xie 2018). It is fair to argue that shouldering one film with the task of representing all diverse groups in a limited timeslot of two hours is unrealistic. Yet, once a film has been made into a progressive milestone for representation, it is rightfully expected to tell a story of unique experiences, even if it belongs to the genre of rom-com that prides on giving the audience light-hearted laughs. So, what and whose story is told in this film?

At the core of *Crazy Rich Asians* (2018) is a classic Cinderella story with a new contextual twist - in a globalized world where the long-sustained yet tilted power balance between the 'East' and the 'West' is flipped over. It employs a familiar trope of unexpected romantic love between a pair from different socioeconomic backgrounds. And in this story, what makes Rachel Chu and Nick Young different, according to Nick's mother, is mainly their cultural upbringings by virtue of being Chinese-American and Singaporean Chinese (although Nick was educated in England for an extended period of time and works in New York), or rather, between the diverging American and 'traditional' Chinese values. Rachel and Eleanor's final confrontation at the Mahjong table is staged as a renewed moment of the 'West' meeting the 'East': Rachel, sitting in the west, coming from a humble family and grew up with



American values; Eleanor, sitting in the east, economically powerful and firmly rooted in traditional Chinese cultural ideas of sacrificial love and filial piety. Eleanor's disapproval of Rachel is expressed in a stern tone:

*Eleanor:* ...And you're not our own kind.

*Rachel:* Cause I'm not rich. Cause I didn't go to a British boarding school or wasn't born into a wealthy family?

*Eleanor:* You're a foreigner. An American. And all Americans think about is their own happiness.

A line between *Us* and *Them* was drawn. Putting aside the issue of whether cultural differences can be adequately represented by pinpointing some shared cultural values (such as the individualist pursuit of personal happiness versus the idea of love as familial sacrifice, as seen in this film) without risking reducing complex cultural systems into symbolic tokens, this Cinderella storyline does not present unique experiences of any definite demographic group, besides the glitzy lifestyle of the uber-wealthy. It is the contextual twist that produces relief and elicits laughter from its audience. With the abruptly reversed power equation between the 'West' and the 'East', it presents a scenario that frustrates the long-held popular imagination of the economically developed 'West' that is constituted of core countries in the world-system (Wallerstein 2004), and the developing Asia that comprises periphery countries striving to grow economically. If we swap the identities of Rachel and Nick to be Asian and Asian-American, respectively, the story will probably lose a great deal of charm to its audience, including the most enthusiastic Asian-American fans, for igniting an immediate danger of portraying too bland a love story squarely fitting into the stereotypical perception of the global geographic distribution of economic power, without accounting for its drastic changes in the recent history. The storytelling of this film is able to renew a classic Hollywood trope through a direct reversal of positions between those that have been long considered economically powerful and otherwise, even till today.

The power reversal is also a major technique employed in this film's storytelling to poke fun. Two of the most-talked-about comic scenes are more explicit in deploying it. The film opens with an incident that took place in London in 1995, when Nick (then a little boy) and Eleanor arrived at a private hotel with his cousin and aunt on a rainy night. At first, they were dismissed by the arrogant Caucasian hotel manager (Daniel Jenkins) who, in Queen's English, sarcastically advised Eleanor to "explore the Chinatown" for a hotel room. He even refused to let her use

the hotel telephone to call her husband to sort out the confusion over their hotel suite reservation. A short while later, when Eleanor returned from a public phonebooth, the table was turned - she was enthusiastically welcomed as “the new Lady of the House” by Lord Calthorpe (Peter Carroll), who had then been made into the *former* hotel owner. This unexpected news resulted from Eleanor’s husband’s swift decision to buy the hotel out of revenge for the mistreatment received by his family, terrified the hotel manager. His face went frozen with surprise, embarrassment, a sense of defeat, and a dose of dismay; it was then twitched into an awkward nervous-smile that quickly dissipated in confusion. The hotel manager’s comic reaction to this sudden news is caused by the shock at the unexpected wealth coming from an Asian family, from the far east that had not been particularly known overseas for businesses tycoons. The unreadiness to accept this long-time unfathomable yet changing reality was expressed through the manager and hotel crew’s awkward reactions that are intended to make the audience gag.

The nouveau-riche family of Rachel’s Singaporean friend Peik Lin Goh (Nora Lum, a.k.a. Awkwafina) is the main source of laughter in this movie. They form a contrast against Nick’s old-moneyed family that is ‘like the royalties’ in Peik Lin’s words - accumulated their wealth since the 18<sup>th</sup> century. Similar to other new-moneyed bunch from anywhere in the world, the Goh family is not shy to flash their money conspicuously: living in a house modeled after the Palace of Versailles and indulging in bright colours and loud patterns from *haute couture* designers. Their exuberance is cheerful for the audience, and their eccentric manners appear wickedly funny for an exaggerated lack of subtlety. In the scene when Rachel visits the Goh’s, at the dining table the father of Peik Lin, Wye Mun Goh (Ken Jeong), tells his twin daughters off by saying: “You haven’t finished your nuggets yet, sweeties. There’re a lot of children starving in America, right?” In a joking tone that almost sounds nonchalant, this punch line is intended to overthrow the spectators’ expectation through an unexpected characterization of today’s world’s economic superpower as a country of many hungry children. Without the background of the rapidly changing economic power dynamics between Asian countries and Western ones, this line cannot make itself into a funny pitch. Almost as the comic center throughout this film, the Goh family’s outlandish lifestyle and eccentric manners that are commonly thought to be typical of the nouveaux riche cannot appear as funny – through a contrast against the old-moneyed families like the Young’s – if the contextual twist of the rising Asia is absent.

Aside from the Cinderella story with a cultural-clash twist situated in a changed world, there is one particular experiential fragment that can be empathetically identifiable for those who have lived in-between different cultural worlds. In this film the ambiguity of cultural belonging is most clearly embodied in Rachel, the female protagonist. Despite the fact that – prior to the trip to Singapore – she saw herself as being American with recognizable Chinese inclinations such as being a university professor in Economics and having lactose intolerance, she is seen as a cultural outsider by Nick’s Singaporean-Chinese mother, for upholding a different set of values than her own. Asian-Americans and other Asians living overseas can easily resonate with the in-betweenness felt by Rachel, a permanently unresolved sense of cultural belonging, because of their shared experiences of growing up in a society as ethnic minorities while maintaining liaisons to a different cultural world mostly via familial ties. The ambiguity surrounding Rachel’s cultural identity is familiar to the audiences with similar backgrounds, yet this film does not analyze this issue in a more extended or reflexive manner. In the story, the cultural clash that manifested in Rachel and Eleanor’s confrontation is conveniently and hastily dissolved through their commonality in the universal language of love, a panacea that is too eager to reconcile differences and conquer hardships in romantic tales. The Asian-American audience’s enthusiastic reception of this film is thus not necessarily a reaction to this film’s in-depth analysis of this sentiment, but a definite sign of the long-existing void of cinematic representation of ethnic minorities’ experiences in Hollywood.

### ***Epilogue***

Once the author of the original novel that *Crazy Rich Asians* (2018) is based on said that the novel was intended to be a satirical ethnography of the uber-rich in Singapore, mainly based on his childhood memories of his extended families from the upper echelon of the Singaporean society (in Chiu, 2018b). As it turned out, its cinematic adaptation in Hollywood was timely sculpted into a symbol of diversity representation, without a detectable satirical hue. This rom-com of a Cinderella story with a contextual twist is told in a cheery rhythm with comic episodes, art-deco aesthetics, and jubilee updates of familiar tunes. But allowing a satirical reading of this film is farfetched (*c.f.* Coo 2018), mainly for a conspicuous lack of reflexivity that social commentaries and critiques necessitate. Surely the public attention that this film has generated onto the issue of art representation of ethnic minorities could possibly lead to steps forward through revealing this socially unjustifiable void, yet its symbolic status

implying social and cultural progressiveness demands the presentation practices to be substantiated with greater sensitivity to the issue of diversity along different spectrums (e.g., ethnic, class, intracultural), and with more detailed analyses of the complexities and conflicts contained in this issue through storytelling. Otherwise, for instance, although this film begins with an intriguing quote attributed to Napoleon Bonaparte: “China is a sleeping giant. Let her sleep, for when she wakes, she will move the world,” some Chinese viewers on Douban (i.e., a Chinese language book and film review website) left the theater wondering who are the Chinese and who are the Asians portrayed in the film. If a movie that is hailed as a symbol for diversity representation does not attend to more fine-grained cultural differences, it would be crazy satirical, and not rich.

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