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Abstract

In this review of *Crazy Rich Asians* (2018), I examine elements of orientalism, neoliberal feminism, privilege and inequality that layer the film. Specifically, I interrogate the film's American inflection of orientalism, surfacing a constant duel between essentialized Asian and American values, where what is American eventually wins out. Independent, entrepreneurial women are integral to this narrative of global capitalist accumulation. Yet, as the East meets the West in the globalized consumptive spaces of the super-rich, inequalities in the United States and Singapore are either repackaged under the myth of meritocracy, or conveniently erased. While the film demarcates a new Hollywood genre with greater Asian-American presence, whether it disrupts or amplifies hegemonic representations remains problematic.

Keywords

Crazy Rich Asians, Film, Marketing, Globalization, Orientalism, Feminism, Neoliberalism, Hollywood

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Film Review

Crazy Rich Asians: Exploring Discourse of Orientalism, Neoliberal Feminism, Privilege and Inequality

Crazy Rich Asians (2018) is a romantic comedy directed by John Chu, based on Kevin Kwan's eponymous novel. Peter Chiarelli and Adele Lim wrote the screenplay. The film is distinct in its genre as an offering from a Hollywood studio with an all-Asian cast. It grossed more than \$238 million worldwide (BBC 2018) and received several accolades – with nominations at the Golden Globe Awards 2019 for Best Motion Picture - Musical or Comedy, and Best Actress - Motion Picture Comedy or Musical. Sequels to the film are planned based on the second and third novels comprising Kwan's Crazy Rich Asians trilogy.

The film anchors around Rachel Chu (Constance Wu), a Chinese American economics professor at New York University who visits Singapore with her boyfriend, Nick Young (Harry Golding) for his best friend's wedding. Besides being Rachel's first visit to Asia, she will meet Nick's family. In Singapore, Rachel is surprised to learn from her friend Peik Lin (Awkwafina) that Nick is from one of the country's wealthiest business families. Rachel, raised by a single, immigrant, working-class mother in the United States, struggles to find acceptance from Nick's patrician mother Eleanor (Michelle Yeoh). The story follows the young couple negotiating their family's expectations and values and their own aspirations and feelings.

Tropes and Styles

Critics and commentators commended Crazy Rich Asians for setting the tone for greater Asian American representation in Western commercial films (Kang 2018). The film also departs from stereotyped representations in Hollywood films of "exotic, submissive, and hypersexualized" Asian American women and "socially awkward, nerdy, and emasculated" Asian American men (Le and Kang 2019: 525). It brings to center-stage themes of culture, values and belonging experienced by diaspora populations in two nodes – New York and Singapore – of a global, hyper-connected world.

A key motif underpinning the film is the binary of East and West, sometimes in contest, sometimes melting together. On the one hand,

there is a persistent distinction between Asian and American values and traditions. If the protagonist, Rachel, is an educated, cosmopolitan, hardworking, neoliberal American, the antagonist, Eleanor, espouses 'Asian' values and is a tradition-bound woman who has made several sacrifices for the family. When Rachel's mother advises her about Chinese traditions (e.g., Red as the color of good fortune and fertility) and Eleanor emphasizes family and sacrifice, 'Asian' tradition and values are deemed distinct from 'American' values of individualism, hard work and passion that Rachel represents. On the other hand, the East and West also meet seamlessly in an inextricably connected world, marked by globalized consumption practices of the super-rich. Here selfies and retweets circulate rapidly, while Singapore's social elite speak the language of Jimmy Choos, Bottega gowns and Vogue covers. The wedding band plays the now iconic, "Can't help falling in love" (lyrics by Hugo Peretti, Luigi Creatore, and George David Weiss), followed by the guests dancing to "Wo Yao Ni De Ai", a Mandarin version of Jon Hendricks's "I want you to be my baby". Indeed, while most of the film is set in Singapore, the setting could just as well have been Las Vegas.

Anchored around global capitalist lifestyle and success, *Crazy Rich Asians* celebrates strong entrepreneurial women, while simultaneously erasing inconvenient inequalities, such as the Singaporean working class. Layered over with this tapestry of the East/West dichotomy, *Crazy Rich Asians* then surfaces key elements of dominant American popular culture. In this review, I examine these repeating tropes by focusing on discourse of orientalism, neoliberal feminism, and privilege and inequality.

Discourse of Orientalism

Despite the Asian ethnic cast and the film's shooting locales in Singapore and Malaysia, *Crazy Rich Asians* is an American romantic comedy that appears to have been made for an American audience (including the now predictable, formulaic flight scene in Hollywood romantic comedies where the man chases after his ladylove). In its constant dialogue with the West, and by reproducing cultural structures of 'Asian' and 'American', albeit through alternative portrayals, the film reproduces discourse of Orientalism. Orientalism is a style of thought about the East—represented in writing, imagery or study—based on Western consciousness, and which aligns with the interests of Western empire (Said 1979). Those engaging in Orientalism rely on essentialized distinctions between the East and the West as a starting point for theories, descriptions, stories and political accounts to represent the Orient. Orientalism is a Western political exercise for structuring the difference between the familiar (Europe, the

West “us”), and the exotic (The East, the other, “them”). Orientalism, thus, produces distorted, often reductive images of the Other.

The film begins with a quote from Napoleon Bonaparte, “Let China sleep, for when she wakes, she will shake the world”. The quote represents early Orientalist discourse, “the world” located in the 18th Century French empire, obfuscating the older civilization that is China, and its history and activity long before the British and French empires. The use of the quote in the film appears to set the narrative – look, the Chinese have arrived! Here we are shaking the world – rich, upwardly mobile, talented, and cosmopolitan consumers. Of course, the use of a quote on China in a film on ‘Asians’ reflects a common equalization of the Far East as Asian in American colloquialism. China, with its economic ascent, is at the kernel of this American inflection of orientalist discourse. In the film, ‘Asians’ are primarily the Chinese diaspora in the United States, and those of Chinese ethnicity in Singapore. The sizeable Malay and Indian populations in Singapore are erased from this film. In a rare moment, two dark-skinned turbaned guards, seemingly from the Indian subcontinent, appear in a stereotyped caricature at the gates of Nick’s grandmother’s palatial mansion in Singapore.

The film’s first scene shows a younger Eleanor arriving at an upscale London hotel in 1995 on a rainy night with her children and her sister-in-law. The evidently racist hotel manager does not give her a room and suggests she find a place in Chinatown. But after a phone call to her husband, the aristocrat hotel owner comes to greet her himself and informs the manager that the Young family now owns the hotel. The arrival of an Asian family on the world stage, is marked by their acquisition of a luxury British hotel. However, what may appear as a subversive act against the West, gains significance only if it is to be seen in and by the West.

Throughout the film, characters are in constant dialogue with Western culture. Nick’s family and friends in Singapore studied in the West and have American or British accents. Nick’s cousin Astrid, reads *Le Petit Prince* to her son in French at bedtime. Such representations are not merely innocent outcomes of standardization and homogenization in a globalized world. Here, Western culture gains in strength by “setting itself off against the Orient as a sort of surrogate and even underground self” (Said 1979: 3). For instance, Nick’s cousin Eddie, a financier in Hong Kong, is caricatured as obsessed with class status and glamour. Eddie is disappointed after a professional photo-op, when he is told his family will appear on the Hong Kong *Vogue* cover. For Eddie this is an inferior outcome as compared to being on the American *Vogue*, and he blames

his wife for not dressing the part. In other words, the West as a cultural hegemon creates a trajectory for dominating and restructuring the Orient by constructing the “Other” with opposed values. What would the East do without the West? How could it possibly be represented otherwise?

In *Crazy Rich Asians*, this alterity manifests in the constant duel between Asian and American values, where what is American eventually wins out. In discourses of Orientalism, the West is rational, developed, humane and superior, while the Orient is aberrant, undeveloped, and inferior (Said 1979). Rachel, raised in the US, embodying the poor migrant family’s dream of ‘making it’, is depicted throughout the film as intelligent, calm (even in moments where she has been humiliated or wronged), compassionate and eventually superior. Eleanor on the other hand clings to traditions, sacrifices her Oxford education to take care of her family, and uses stealth and manipulation to break Rachel and Nick’s relationship. Similarly, during the bachelorette party, while other ‘Asian’ super rich women run after free clothes and spa dates, and leave a gutted fish on her bed, Rachel uses her intelligence and grace to disengage and disavows the “silly” things with which the other women are engaged.

In an emotional scene, Rachel asks Eleanor why she disliked her without getting to know her. Eleanor responds that Rachel is not “our own kind of people...you are foreign. American. All Americans think about is their own happiness...We know how to build things that last. Something you know nothing about.” This is one of the several instances in the story where American values are pitted against Asian values, where both American and Asian are essentialized, unmediated by gender, class, religion or race. Further, here Asian values are eternal, uniform: despite their global connectedness and embeddedness with the West, Singaporeans carry time-honored values and traditions yoked to their territorial space. In the end, Rachel’s sagacity and intelligence wins.

Finally, this Orientalist discourse is also sprinkled with satire, subversion and mimicry of the cultural hegemons. For instance, in Singapore, Rachel visits her nouveaux riche friend Peik Lin, whose family mansion is tacky and ornate. Lin’s mother announces that their golden décor is inspired by the Hall of Mirrors in Versailles. Their dogs are named Vanderbilt and Roosevelt, after two of the wealthiest families in the US. Lin’s father tells her siblings to eat up and not waste their food, because “there are poor children starving in America”. In another form of inversion, the sexualized, objectified women in the film appear in the bachelor party scene. Here, women wearing bikinis, entertaining alcohol and testosterone addled Asian men, are identified by the nationalities on their sachets as from United Kingdom, Italy, Netherlands, Ukraine and Angola. This scene

appears to signify rich Asian men's ability to now consume sexualized objects from across the world. However, such forms of mimicry are not necessarily subversive, and can indeed consolidate hierarchies of cultural hegemony.

Neoliberal Feminist Identity

The key characters in the film are independent, self-made, 'empowered' women portrayed by Rachel, Eleanor, Rachel's mother Kerry, Astrid, Nick's grandmother Amah. The patriarch, Nick's father, is away on a business trip and is absent through the film. Thus, Rachel's attempt to find acceptance with Nick's family, is really an attempt to gain the respect of his grandmother and mother. A close examination of the main characters, in particular Rachel and Astrid, reveals how they embody a neoliberal feminist identity. Neoliberal feminism recognizes gender inequality, advocates for empowered, self-sufficient women, while disavowing socio-economic structures mediating gendered lives. Neoliberal feminists espouse attitudes of individual drive, motivation, and entrepreneurialism.

Rachel is portrayed as intelligent, smart, self-made, rising to a prestigious job as an economics professor at an elite, private US university. Her mother is a poor Chinese immigrant woman who did not get a college education and waited tables while she earned her real estate agent license -a noteworthy narrative device, given Nick's family owns a real estate conglomerate, clearly demarcating class hierarchies. Rachel and her mother embody the 'merit' trope – a popular cultural ideal in neoliberal society, employed to sell the myth of upward mobility. With sufficient hard work and enterprising attitudes like passion and initiative, anyone can 'make it' – the 'American dream'. Of course, the fiction of the merit trope is that it is individuals and not a collective who climb the metaphorical ladder, celebrating individualistic 'progress', and not collective well-being and egalitarianism (Littler 2017).

Rachel also conforms to neoliberal ideals of a modern, empowered woman shaped by her consumption practices. She does not shy away from the designer clothes her friends think are necessary to make a desirable impression, indeed even be presentable, to Nick's family. She wears her friend Peik Lin's designer gown to the party where she first meets Nick's grandmother, and Nick's designer cousin fits her up with a blue, Cinderella-ish gown for the wedding.

In a similar vein, consider Astrid, Nick's cousin, presented as an Oxford graduate who ranked at the top of her class, runs multiple charities and is a fashion icon. She is married to a "commoner" who heads a tech startup. She likes expensive shopping and hides her Jimmy Choos and

exotic million-dollar Burmese pearl drop earrings, from her husband. Upon learning her husband is in a relationship with another woman, Astrid keeps it to herself to avoid a scandal. Eventually, when she decides to leave him, her moment of feminist assertion is signified by her wearing the Burmese earrings and walking out.

That neoliberal feminism sits comfortably with capitalist patriarchy is only too evident, as each of these women makes sacrifices for the men in their lives, so that it is, quite literally, business as usual. Eleanor and Astrid consider themselves carriers of family honor and reputation and are both concerned about scandals. Further, a clear example of an 'empowered' woman's repudiation of class inequities appears in the very first scene described earlier where Eleanor is turned away by the hotel manager. Eleanor has her husband buy the hotel, signifying a woman who is not docile or who takes discrimination quietly. Yet, at the end of the scene, Eleanor contemptuously tells the hotel manager to bring a mop to clean up the mess created by muddy shoes. The strong woman portrayed here, capable of rational thought and action, is then about gender equality for private gains, while class hierarchies may be reproduced and strengthened.

Privilege and Inequality

Crazy Rich Asians is unabashedly about the rich – gigantic mansions, luxurious parties, exotic flower blooming soirées, indulgent bachelor parties, foreign locales, and designer clothes. Mobility is an important descriptor of rich lifestyle in the film: young Eleanor in London with her children, Nick and Rachel in New York and then on first-class tickets to Singapore, helicopter rides that take wedding guests to the bachelor and bachelorette parties respectively on separate islands.

What is stark in these representations of the super-rich in Singapore is the invisibility of the non-elite. Peik Lin informing Rachel of Nick's family, describes the Youngs as Chinese aristocracy. Unlike Peik Lin's nouveau riche family, the Young family came to Singapore from China in the 1800's, when the place was "all jungle and pig farmers", and "they built all of this!". Peik Lin adds, "they are the landlords of the most expensive city in the world!". Lin and her family are clearly in awe of the "old money rich" Young family. However, what makes such statements salient is their resonance with broader cultural tendencies.

According to such articulations, Singapore finds a place on the map, not as an island trading port (among other names, *Temasek*) predating British civilization, but in its current symbolic construction as a global city – a place of affluence and prosperity where its citizens are

cosmopolitan and mobile (You Yenn 2019). Such statements then denigrate the earlier backwardness (jungle and pig farmers), while valorizing contemporary interconnectedness to global circuits of capital, manifest in high rises, great roads, and global consumer habits. Writing on inequality in Singapore, sociologist You Yenn (2019: 29) notes, “This is the story we tell ourselves about ourselves: Singapore became in a matter of a few decades a shining Global City. We were poor and now we are rich... We are safe, we are clean, we are amazing. We are amazing. We are amazing”. However, what such narratives obscure is Singapore’s pronounced inequality. In 2016, Singapore’s Gini coefficient stood at 0.458, placing it among the most unequal wealthy countries. Per capita household income for top 10% of households was Singapore \$12773, twenty-three times that of the lowest 10% households (S\$543) (You Yenn 2019).

Thus, when Lin hails the Young family for building Singapore, she reproduces a hegemonic narrative which erases the working classes that create wealth for the rich. It is in this context of stark urban inequality, where the film’s depiction of abundant capital and luxury appears vulgar. The story is replete with class bigotry. Rachel is from a poor, migrant background. As she runs away from the wedding party, Nick’s obnoxious cousin Eddie shouts out, “Hey Cinderella, what’s wrong. Do you have to return your dress before midnight?”, with resounding laughter in the background. In another scene, Eddie describes Astrid’s “commoner” husband as a “soldier toy boy”. Despite the elitism, manipulation, and attempts to sabotage her relationship at multiple instances, it is to this very fold that Rachel returns at the end, having earned Eleanor’s acceptance and respect.

Conclusion

In this review, my position is not to question the authenticity of representations – i.e., whether Singapore is really the way it is presented, or whether the film accurately depicts rich Chinese Americans’ experiences. Rather, I take the film as an entry point into political and cultural critique of a Hollywood product with its culturally hegemonic status. That the film director is of Asian descent or that the story is written by a novelist born and raised in Singapore, residing in the US exemplifies the fact that Orientalism as a system of thought is now diffused globally, including “the Orient”. Orientalism remains potent today, and it is infused in how even those diaspora communities living multicultural lives – Asians living and working in the West – can reproduce these very structures of power.

In sum, in this review I outline how the American and Asian binaries deployed in the film are falsely reductive and invent collective identities for people who have so many differences. Indeed, if there is one thing the film shows clearly, it is the commonality among the rich in America and Asia and how seamlessly they move across geographies, while the poor are expelled from their worlds. Given how Orientalism is unabashedly produced and reproduced in both academic and popular cultural discourse, Said's observation still holds import – “we need to concentrate on the slow working together of cultures that overlap, borrow from each other, and live together in far more interesting ways than any abridged or inauthentic mode of understanding can allow” (Said 1979:xxix).

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