13 A case study of *Crazy Rich Asians*

The evolution and development of Asian Hollywood films

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Crazy Rich Asians was the North American Weekend Box Office Champion (US\$34 million) in the first week after its release on August 15, 2018. It was the North American Weekend Box Office champion in the following three weeks in a row. The global box office exceeded US\$238 million (China released it on November 30, the box office was only 11.49 million yuan), *Crazy Rich Asians* has made the highest box office record of romantic comedy in North America of the past ten years.

Crazy Rich Asians was produced by Warner Bros., directed by Jon M. Chu, with an Asian star cast, Constance Wu, Michelle Yeoh, Henry Golding, and Lisa Lu. The story was adapted from one of the best-selling novels, *Crazy Rich Asians*, written by Kevin Kwan, an American-Singapore writer. The movie has won both remarkable box office and high acclaim, receiving 93 percent positive rating on Rotten Tomatoes (a famous American film review website), and was also praised by the Western media. This was a “politically correct” film telling a story of ethnic minorities, changing Hollywood’s long-standing prejudice against Asian filmmakers.

The production process of *Crazy Rich Asians*

Kevin Kwan’s novel *Crazy Rich Asians* was published in 2013 and was a great success. It has been translated into more than 20 languages, and more than one million copies were distributed worldwide.

Because of the popularity of the novel and the rapid development of the Chinese film industry, Hollywood decided to adapt this novel to the big screen. Kevin Kwan chose the famous producers of the *Hunger Games* series, Jacobson and Simpson. He only requested a US\$1 adaptation fee, providing that he could be involved in the decision-making process of the film production. The two producers then invited John Penotti, the president and producer of SKGlobal Entertainment, to join the production team. John’s company has offices in Singapore, Hong Kong and China, so shooting in Singapore and Malaysia was much easier.

In 2016, after the screenplay draft of *Crazy Rich Asians* was finished, the Hollywood director of Chinese origin, Jon Chu, received the adapted

screenplay on the same day he had just finished reading the novel. After Jon Chu officially joined the *Crazy Rich Asians* production team, in order to incorporate more cultural characteristics and more emotions into the screenplay, he invited the Malaysian-born TV screenwriter Adele Lim to be one of the screenwriters.

After the screenplay and the director were chosen, the next step was casting. Jon Chu released an online video to recruit English-speaking Asian actors worldwide. Constance Wu (who was born in Virginia, of Taiwanese origin) was the best candidate and she was confident to play this role. In fact, Rachel Chu was the role she had long been expecting to play. To match her schedule, the crew delayed the shooting time by five months. Another important female role in the film was Rachel Chu's mother-in-law, Singaporean rich lady Eleanor. Michelle Yeoh, a well-known Asian actress in Hollywood, became the best choice. The third important role was the rich man, Nick Young (Eleanor's son, Rachel Chu's boyfriend). Yang Nick was born in a rich and famous family and grew up in London. He is handsome, kind and sincere, with London accent. It was not easy to find such an actor. The accountant at the SK Global Entertainment Malaysia Office suggested a man. A few years ago, when he watched a travel show on BBC and the Asia Discovery Channel, he was impressed by the handsome Asian host with a strong British accent. The host was Henry Golding. He was born in the United Kingdom, his mother is Malaysian Chinese, and his father is English. When he flew to Los Angeles for the audition, Jon Chu and Warner executives unanimously said: "He is Nick Young!" After the main characters were determined, the casting team then tried to select the other 76 characters with lines in the film, who are all Asian actors. After the film was released, the audience saw many familiar actors who had appeared in Hollywood films and television programs, like Lisa Lu, Korean actor Ken Jeong (who used to be a doctor, then a comedy actress), British-Chinese actress Gemma Chan, Chinese-Korean rapper and actress Awkwafina, Nora Lum, talk show Chinese actor Jimmy O. Yang. Other actors came from countries such as Australia, Singapore, Malaysia, Thailand, Indonesia, Costa Rica, etc. The director Jon Chu admitted in an interview with *The New York Times* that he was concerned about the box office. If the box office performance is good, the Asian group would have more opportunities, if not, everything would be gone.

Jon Chu also incorporated his thoughts on this film when he chose the theme song. He decided to use Coldplay's *Yellow* (Warner Bros.) but the band disagreed as the color yellow is often used to vilify Asians. Jon Chu wrote a letter to the band Coldplay, explaining why he wanted to use this song. He himself had suffered insults being called "Yellow" in elementary school. Then he heard the song *Yellow*, in which the color yellow was seen as "the most beautiful color," and he felt that the word had been redefined. He said: "I want to adapt the British pop songs into Chinese culture, so that people can feel the feeling of being Chinese-American who are shaped by mixed 'identity' and 'cultural features.'"

In April 2017, *Crazy Rich Asians* began an eight-week intense shooting in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, and then moved to Singapore where production costs were higher for the next three weeks. A low production budget (US\$30 million) had been carefully calculated.

On August 15, 2018, *Crazy Rich Asians* was released in North America as scheduled, and caught the attention of the public and the media overnight as a great success.

Five key factors in the success of *Crazy Rich Asians*

There are five main reasons why *Crazy Rich Asians* was popular in North America:

1. Narrative structure and operational mechanism under the Hollywood model.
2. New faces, new images.
3. Asian society's social status and identity.
4. The economic rise of Asia and the success stories of Asian filmmakers.
5. It shows off the wealth.

Narrative structure and operational mechanism under the Hollywood model

Since it was produced by Warner Bros., a major Hollywood studio, *Crazy Rich Asians* is a Hollywood film in nature. As mentioned above, *Crazy Rich Asians* is adapted from Kevin Kwan's best-selling novel, which means this is also an intellectual property (IP) movie. *Crazy Rich Asians* not only looked back at the changes of the past decades in terms of the social environment and status of Asian or Chinese people in North America, but also reflected the socio-economic conditions of the new generation of Asian or Chinese people. This is the main reason for widespread discussion. The director Jon Chu once said that, as a Chinese person living in the United States, when he returned to Asia for the first time, he found a completely different culture, and he was torn in two, but he also found a brand-new side there, and he hopes to show off the things he has experienced in the movie.

The conflict between Rachel and Eleanor in the film was both cultural and conceptual, as well as geographical and environmental. These conflicts are not alien to Asians, they have universal significance. Michelle Yeoh, who played Eleanor, thinks that the film "will make everyone feel the same." She said:

Eleanor's concern is not because of the social and economic gap between the son and his future wife, but Rachel does not know what to do in a traditional Eastern family. She hopes that Rachel can do the same as herself: a supportive woman behind her successful husband, but Rachel was obviously not ready for it.

(Huang An, 2018)

The Young family believes that Rachel's family has no wealth or social reputation, and she herself is a typical "banana girl," that is, "yellow skin with white soul, e.g. American-born Chinese." The traditional standard for Chinese marriage is to be "equally matched," that is, to look for people with similar economic, ethnic, linguistic and educational backgrounds in marriage. The cultural tradition of "the priority of family" considers the marital relationship to come second to the family's interests and needs. Women like Rachel, who pursue their own happiness and dreams, are completely different from the Young family. The characters in the film demonstrated that there is a cultural gap of values between traditional Chinese in the East and modern Chinese in the West.

The discussion of traditional family, marriage, love and friendship in the film also resonated among the audiences. This is the unchanging theme in the Hollywood romantic love comedy.

New faces, new images

The film chose Singapore as the main setting, which subverts the western stereotype of Asians. After entering the new millennium, Chinese people impressed the world with China's continuous significant economic growth. The Chinese national identity as an economically powerful nation is also represented in Hollywood movies, with Chinese people collectively associated with such an image. In the film *2012*, the world's last refuge was in China. In *Gravity*, China's International Space Station became the last refuge for Sandra Bullock. In *Pacific Rim: Uprising*, Jing Tian owns the largest arms company, and American audiences could see the strength of the Chinese economy. In *Wall Street: Money Never Sleeps*, there is a character played by Zhang Xin (the wife of Chinese real estate dealer Pan Shiyi) as a powerful Chinese businesswoman in the film.

Asian society's social status and identity

In addition to the high box office, *Crazy Rich Asians* projects positive images for both Asian filmmakers and Asians living in North America. The release of the movie raised discussions on these issues in the United States. Chinese journalist Kimberly Yam, born in New York, USA, wrote six articles in the Huffington Post on *Crazy Rich Asians* between August 1 and August 16. Over the years, the deviation and entanglement of Asian identity have become common pains for immigrants and their descendants. Kimberly concluded:

Finally, at the age of 25, I watched a Hollywood movie with almost full Asian cast. For some reason I could not help crying, for it was the first time I saw a movie with such cast, and everyone is excellent, I'm proud to be a Chinese.

(Tong Li, 2018)

A Chinese mother watched the film with her child, she said in an interview:

The Asian faces on the screen are a breakthrough for overseas Asians. What is more important to me and my child is that these Asian actors are so sunny, humorous, confident, fashionable, and modern, they play favorable characters, we can't help but cheering for them.

She hopes that her child could fall in love with Asian and Chinese culture, and be proud of being Asian, whether living in China or in the United States.

After the great success of the *Crazy Rich Asians*, the responses from American-Chinese and Chinese students studying in the United States are not the same. One Chinese student said online:

All ABCs (America-born Chinese) around me are applauding, while my Chinese friends think this movie is just average. It is like eating General Tsos Chicken in a Chinese restaurant in the United States, foreign students can't get the point what's so special to the Chinese students. Without the experience of living in North America and being influenced by its mainstream culture, it may be difficult for international students to understand why this film has made Asian American see the future of Asian American films. Therefore, it is not difficult to understand that *Crazy Rich Asians* encounters Waterloo at the box office in mainland China. Asians outside North America have not experienced the identity crisis of Asian-Americans or Chinese Americans (including Asian-American filmmakers) in North America.

The economic rise of Asia and the success stories of Asian filmmakers

Since the 1960s, Hong Kong, Taiwan, Singapore and South Korea have achieved great economic growth in a short period of time, becoming successful well-developed regions in Asia. In 1998, the financial crisis hit most Asian countries and regions, and many countries suffered recession. But the four economies in East Asia and Southeast Asia went through the crisis safely and became typical examples of development economics. In the 1990s, Thailand, Malaysia, the Philippines and Indonesia became emerging countries in Asia, known as the "Tiger Cub Economics." At the same time, China fully entered the period of Reform and Opening-up. China has now become the world's second largest economy. In the 1980s and the 1990s, more and more films from the Chinese Mainland, Hong Kong and Taiwan gained success at major international film festivals. A number of well-known directors emerged through international film festival circuits, such as Edward Yang, Hou Hsiao-hsien, Karwai Wong, Stanley Kwan, Zhang Yimou, Chen Kaige and Jia Zhangke, etc. Six major Hollywood studios have set up branch offices in China, and more and more co-production films between China and Hollywood have appeared. *The Last Emperor* (Bernardo Bertolucci, 1987) won nine Academy Awards.

In the same year, *Empire of the Sun* (Steven Spielberg, 1987) also won the Academy Awards for Best Cinematography and Best Original Music Score.

Hollywood and American audiences got to know Chinese films mainly through Bruce Lee, Jet Li and Jackie Chan's martial arts films. The martial arts genre did make a significant contribution to the promotion of Asian films in the early days, but Asian or Chinese films have never successfully blended into the mainstream of Hollywood.

Hollywood represents a matured film business in many ways. Asian filmmakers have been constantly working hard in Hollywood, and waiting for their opportunities.

Show off the wealth

Wealth-X's *Billionaire Census 2018* shows that Asia is now the region with the biggest increase in the number of billionaires (in US\$) in the world, surpassing North America. In 2017, Asia's billionaire population increased by nearly one-third, accounting for 29.2 percent, and the number of rich people was 784, surpassing North America's year-over-year growth rate of 11.2 percent. The numbers illustrate the speed of Asians becoming rich. *Crazy Rich Asians* was made at the right time, which catered to the expectations of Asian audiences and satisfied the general audiences' "peeping tom" mentality to view the lives of legendary super-rich Asians. In recent years, as the numbers of Chinese investment immigrants moving to the United States and Canada have increased, shocking stories of wealthy Chinese people have been reported in newspapers and social media. Young students and tourists from China have become the major consumers of luxury goods in overseas markets. They purchase all kinds of luxuries, making Asians in the eyes of Westerners "rich and wealthy." In the film, the scene in which the rich lady (played by Michelle Yeoh) throws money in the receptionist's face in London impressed audiences. In addition to the fascinating scenery of Singapore and Malaysia, the film also shows the luxury life-style of the local rich: thermo-static wardrobes, villas in the forest, luxury cars at the airport, yachts on the top floor, numerous pieces of jewelry, and luxury items ... which go even beyond the audiences' imagination. When the luxurious yet romantic wedding scene appears in the film, "Oh My God" could be heard in the theaters. In *Crazy Rich Asians*, there are many private-ordered luxury products shown. The costume was designed by Hollywood's famous designer Mary E Vogt. She was the costume designer of the movie *Black Man* trilogy, and the creator of the cat woman image in the classic *Batman Returns* in 1997. In *Crazy Rich Asians*, she invited a large number of Asian designers in order to guarantee the classy design and tailoring quality for each character. For example, Rachel Chu starts by wearing the popular brand Ralph Lauren and the Italian brands Missoni and MiuMiu, and then she changes to wear the Marchesa wedding dress from New York as the bride. Nick Young's costumes are from the designer of the Royal Malaysian suits. Goh Peik Lin and her family's daily

dressess are Versace with big logos. The map handbag she shows to Rachel Chu is also specially designed for the film. In this sense it might also be safe to say *Crazy Rich Asians* is a fashion blockbuster.

From 2013 to 2017, Kevin Kwan's Rich Trilogy: *Crazy Rich Asians*, *China's Rich Girl*, and *The Rich People's Worries* were published and become bestsellers. Many readers believe that the novels are a faithful portrayal of the Kwan family, which is true. His family is not only one of Singapore's top three richest families, but his great-grandfather is one of the founders of Singapore's oldest OCBC Bank. This background has increased the audiences' expectation for the film *Crazy Rich Asians*. In the film, the characters seem to be more elegant, enjoying fashion, beauty and travel bloggers, luxury bags, limited edition shoes, high-profile dresses, luxury cars, houses and yachts, and private jets, etc. All of these are ideologically and visually iconic for the audiences to perceive and experience the madness of the rich Asians.

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