

# Unveiling the Mask of Asia: Representation of Western and Eastern Values in *Crazy Rich Asians*

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**Abstract:** The release of the film *Crazy Rich Asians* in 2018 caused a sensation. Its all Asian cast and commercial success are extolled as a breakthrough for Asian American cinema. The author attempts to explore how the film presents the Western and Eastern values and cultures by applying Representation theory, constructed in the intersectionality of gender, race and class. The author finds the film's release is probably the byproduct of the Feminist Movements and the Civil Rights Movement and that the representation on Eastern values is stereotyped by Western-centered ideas, thus Asian American still have a long road before they can effect a change.

**Keywords:** *Crazy Rich Asians*; Value Representation; The West and East.

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## 1. Introduction

If asked to name one repeatedly discussed film in the year of 2018, filmgoers are likely to mention a film called *Crazy Rich Asians*. The film's sensational success can attribute to its all Asian cast and a huge box office. And a more systematic analysis of the film can enable us to understand different values in the West and the East, social currents as well as the hidden cultural meanings behind "Crazy Rich Asians heat" phenomenon. Therefore, the author intends to apply Representation theory to analyze how the film *Crazy Rich Asians* represents Western and Eastern values on femininity, career and love, and marriage through textual analysis on characters, storyline, and scenes and objects.

## 2. Literature Review

Before analyzing the film in an academic way, it is prerequisite to review literature on the film itself, Asian American cinema and representation on screen, and some specific Asian American films.

### 2.1. Review on the Film Itself

Since the film *Crazy Rich Asians* made its debut in 2018, there are in fact few papers surveying it academically. Therefore, the author chooses some articles from foreign sources in terms of the film's content analysis, its audience acceptance and varied comments it received. The author finds that the film was welcomed by Asian American, while Chinese audience made a rather cold response. Some applauded its contribution to Asian representation on cinema, others criticized the absence of authentic Asian culture, and still others responded with mixed comments. Essays like "Asian-Americans need more movies, even more mediocre ones" sang high praise for the film's all Asian cast, which signifies improved Asian representation in the film industry. Specifically, articles such as "Why 'Crazy Rich Asians' does not represent me" and "Guiltless Escapism" pointed out the film's significance for Asian American, similar to the film *The Black Panther* for African American. However, the article "Crazy Rich Asians' was made for the Western gaze" criticized that the film has nothing new but its stereotyped representation of "the Oriental splendor", and "Why 'Crazy

Rich Asians' does not represent me" also held negative views about the film's absence of Asian culture and its failure to appropriately present Singapore. Meanwhile, the article "Crazy rich omission; Banyan" also expressed with mixed attitudes that although the film was praised as a leap for Asian American cinema, it has a conservative tradition-saturated theme on family values and leaves no room for representing other Singaporeans like Malays and Indonesians (38). As for the film's content, Hannah Yasharoff summarized five changes in the adapted film from the original novel in terms of characters, storyline and added scene (the mahjongg game); Lisa Bonos was impressed by the film's narrative in the end, that is, using the ring of Nick's mother to imply hidden meaning; Ross Douthat also expounded on some weak points about the film's plot, characters and narrative. Some essays, be it praise or critic, noticed the film's "romantic comedy" style, featuring a popular Cinderella story.

Based on the aforementioned articles, the author finds the film indeed makes a breakthrough in terms of Asian representation onscreen and that it is the romantic comedy feature that incurs critics of not being Asian. However, the author holds that the film does reflect Asian values through confrontations between the West and the East.

### 2.2. Review on Asian American Cinema and Representation

As for Asian American representation and cinema, "Asian American Cinema" offered a specified definition of "Asian American cinema" and also stated that Asian American cinema could not exist without the identification of Asian American during the Civil Rights Movement in the 1960s (123). Then it explored Asian American cinema's historical development from 1910 all the way to the late 20th century from the aspects of various positions in film-making, America-preconceived representation of Asian American men and women, and the varied types of Asian American films. "Film and Asian Americans" maintained that Asian American representation served the interests of America's changing politics and economy in different periods (475), while the former article thought that not only changing world situation and America's "foreign policy" but western "Oriental" ideas contributed to stereotyping Asian American (124). In the end by listing the film *Better Luck Tomorrow* as

an example, it demonstrated that Asian American's resistance to those stereotypes could only be achieved via independent film-making by Asian American (476). "Race and Ethnicity" stated the nature of "Eurocentrism" in cinema (370). It also discussed Hollywood's practice of "blackface minstrelsy" (374). In the end it explained the rise of African American cinema, which draws a parallel with Asian American cinema.

The literature on Asian American cinema and representation sketches a broad account of its development, explains the causes for Asian American stereotypes, and offers viable suggestions of Asian American resistance. The author holds that equipped with such knowledge the audience can better understand the popularity of *Crazy Rich Asians* and the social currents behind the film blockbuster.

### 2.3. Review on Specific Asian American Films

Though we may grasp the historical development of Asian American cinema, without a closer look at some specific well-known films we could not better understand how Asian American are related to the West and the East. The historical vein of Asian American films has highlighted two famed films, one is *The Joy Luck Club* and the other *Better Luck Tomorrow*. The film *The Joy Luck Club* was adapted from Amy Tan's novel, published in 1989. Apart from both praise and critic of the novel, Tara Fickle focused on its "binary scheme" of serious and playful language style and its role in shaping Asian American identities (69). Specifically, she explored how such games as mahjongg and chess, a creational form, helped to form Asian American community and their identities. Margaret Hillenbrand noticed the absence or unfavorable portray of Asian American men in *Better Luck Tomorrow*. And the reason of this phenomenon, in her view, is that representation of Asian American masculinity is under the subject of mainstream production code (53). She also contended that the combination of "teen flick" and "ethnic gangster movie" in *Better Luck Tomorrow*, two well-accepted Hollywood genres, helped to redefine the Asian American image onscreen, thus breaking the model minority code (64).

In a nutshell, combined with all these accounts on film reviews, Asian American cinema and specific Asian American films, the author thinks that they can enable us to analyze how *Crazy Rich Asians* represent Western and Eastern values and what are the social factors contributing to its unique value representation as well as what are real meanings behind it.

## 3. Analytical Framework

According to Stuart Hall, "Representation theory" works as a bridge between concepts and language through which we can define real or imaginary objects and events (3). Moreover, our "conceptual maps" may vary from each other as we may have different interpretations about the same thing (4). Those who hold almost the same concepts form their own culture. In this way different cultures emerge. Therefore, the author observes film characters, storyline, and scenes and objects convey certain meanings and that the process of interpreting them can reflect distinct Western and Eastern values and cultures. Meanwhile, inspired by how Yen Le Espiritu constructs her arguments in *Asian American Women and Men* by intersecting class, race and gender, the author also sets the similar framework in the paper: the first part focuses on gender when analyzing representation of Western and Oriental femininity; the second one centers on race when explaining Western and Eastern values on career; and the final

one pivots on class in exploring Western and Eastern values on love and marriage.

## 4. Body of Analysis

### 4.1. The Distinct Representation on Western and Oriental Femininity

In this part, the author aims to find out the different representation on Western and Oriental femininity by analyzing women characters in the film *Crazy Rich Asians*. A series of women's behavior on pursuit of career, romantic relationship, and family responsibilities can reveal hidden cultural values.

The heroin Rachel Chu is depicted as a brilliant economics professor in New York University. And she is about to embark on a trip because of a wedding invitation from her boyfriend Nick's best friend Colin Khoo. During this incredible trip, she will unveil her boyfriend's mysterious identity and finally attain true love. Asian American audience may feel thrilled by the portrayal of this character, given the history of stereotyping Asian women onscreen. This time, however, the Hollywood not only thrusts Asian American in the limelight, but also its representation of Asian American is so positive, which echo the praise of the film as the progress of Asian American cinema in aforementioned film-review articles. From the conversation between Rachel and Eleanor, Nick's mother, the audience is deeply impressed by Rachel's mother Kerry. She immigrates to the United States, fights all her way to make a living and raises her daughter on her own. She manages to transform from a lower -class immigrant who can hardly speak any English at first to a successful real estate agent who excels in her work. Although Rachel and her mother Kerry seem to be Asian women, the author maintains that based on the fact that Kerry is American immigrant and Rachel is actually a native-born American who rarely speaks Chinese, Rachel and Kerry are the representatives of the modern American women in a more deceitful way. According to the view in "Film and Asian Americans" that representation of Asian American serves America's changing political and economic interests (475), the author also holds that the practice of presenting American or Western femininity via not-white minority women is likely to be under the influence of the second and third wave of Feminist Movement wildfired in America. The second wave fought for white women's various rights and independence in 1960s, while the third wave started to recognize the rights and equality for minority women like African American women and Asian American women in late 1970s and 1980s.

After most difficult work of identifying Western women representation in the film, it would be relatively easier to find its Eastern counterpart. Nick's mother Eleanor is the most explicit embodiment of Eastern women representation, "the Dragon Lady". She shows her hatred for Rachel even before they have the chance to meet. Later Eleanor confronts Rachel, telling her face to face that she is never good for Nick. And she even secretly investigates Rachel's background in an attempt to demonstrate zero chance for her and Nick. A talk between Rachel and Nick introduces one of his cousins Alistair Cheng, a big shot film-maker in Tai Wan. And he is dating the lead actress in his recently-invested film. Though the film tells little about the actress, she is probably an Asian from Tai Wan based on skin tone and her family name Pong. The actress is a varied representation of "the Dragon Lady", immoral and gold-digging. One sound example is that on

attending the extravagant wedding ceremony, tricked by Nick's another cousin Oliver, she easily abandons her man to seduce another sole rich heir Bernard Tai because her lover is merely the fourth in line to inherit large fortune. Astrid seems to be the only positive figure among Nick's cousins she is portrayed as a successful business woman and fashion icon, thus does not fit into the typical Oriental types. Nevertheless, the author thinks that Astrid is a hybrid version of "the Lotus Blossom Baby" or "the China Doll". Though Astrid is a dazzling success in her career, she deliberately hides all her luxury items immediately she gets home before her husband Michael returns. Since Michael comes from common origin, in this way she tries to protect her husband's self-esteem. When Michael comments that she is the decision-maker of the family after finding out her hiding behavior, she denies it by stating her status has been overrated. All these details show her consideration for and obedience to her husband. Later even when she finds out that Michael is having an affair, she is broken-hearted but does not make a scene.

## 4.2. The Representation of Western and Eastern Values on Career

In this part, the author attempts to analyze the representation of Western and Eastern career values through storyline of varied characters.

From the film's narrative of the conversation between Rachel and Kerry after Eleanor's investigation, Rachel and her mother's stories are pieced together. Mistreated by her husband, Kerry falls in love with her schoolmate. When she realizes that she is pregnant, she becomes so scared that her husband would take revenge on her and her lover. So she flees to America and later gives birth to Rachel. The film in fact does not show more about her early immigrant life, it would be incredibly hard to make a living and raise a child, being a single immigrant mother without good educational background. Nevertheless, she survives, brings up Rachel and manages to become an excellent real estate agent. Rachel's story resembles most Asian American children. She is a straight A student all the way from senior high school to college. Later she continues to become the youngest faculty member in New York University. Their inspiring personal stories remind the author of one crucial concept in American culture "the American dream". Rachel and her mother's stories are typical examples of achieving American dream from being nobody to somebody through hard work. Some readers may wonder why using immigrant American as embodiment of American values. As stated in previous review articles, *Crazy Rich Asians* caters to Asian American audience just as *The Black Panther* targets African American. The attempt of representing American dream through Asian American reflects the butterfly effects of Civil Right Movement in 1960s in which black people fought for equal rights. Later on more ethnic groups like Asian American and Latino American in the United States started to advocate for their equal rights modeled on the movement. It is in this period that Asian American cinema came into being as demonstrated in "Asian American Cinema" (123). From then on Asian American have strived hard for their opinions being voiced out and heard in politics and big screens as well. As a matter of fact, this practice is a clever tactic as it meets Asian American's need for more onscreen representation, yet still conveying the mainstream American values.

As to representation of Eastern values on career, Eleanor would also be most representative. In the face-to-face

confrontation with Rachel, she uses her personal story in an attempt to fear away Rachel. At first she is not a good match for Nick's father, either. That's the reason why Nick's father proposed to her with a ring made by him instead of a family ring. In order to attain approval from Nick's ah ma (grandmother), Eleanor gives up her college education to help run the family business. After all these efforts, she is gradually accepted by the whole family. Therefore, Eastern values place family responsibility over individual success. Specifically, Eleanor is willing to care for family at the expense of her future career. The actress mentioned in the first part also reveals Eastern career values. A terrible actress though she is in acting, she can still play the heroin in a film because her lover is the film's investor. For her, to achieve personal success is closely connected to dependence on rich and powerful men. Therefore, through the stories of Eleanor and the actress, Eastern career values mainly focus on the bandage of family and dependence.

## 4.3. The Confrontation between Western and Eastern Values on Love and Marriage

In this part, the author tries to explore how Western and Eastern values on love and marriage are represented, how they clash and reconcile with one another via the description of special scenes and objects.

Rachel and Nick meet and fall in love in America where individual happiness and free romance are engrained values. However, when they come back to Nick's homeland Singapore, the Eastern world, things would be a lot different. When attending a glamorous party thrown by Nick's grandmother, Rachel meets Nick's cousins, Astrid and Eddie. Eddie, a successful banker, acquires Rachel's family background. After hearing Rachel's family name Chu, he throws a list of families named Chu like "Tai Wan plastic Chus", "Hong Kong telecom Chus" or "Malaysian packing peanut Chus". All these Chu families share the same family name with Rachel, but the striking difference is that they all run family business just like the Young family does while Rachel is a girl from an immigrant family. Later when Nick joins Colin's grandiose bachelor party, Bernard, their annoying schoolmate, comments that concerning Rachel's family background she is not suitable for Nick by comparing Colin's upcoming marriage with Araminta. Unless Araminta comes from a wealthy family just like Colin himself, their marriage would not be possible. These two incidents demonstrate the tension between Western and Eastern values on love and marriage. In the United States one couple, if they truly love each other, they can tie the knot regardless of their social status. However, in the Eastern world where once the arranged marriage was prevalent, people nowadays will still consider various factors before getting married, among which the most prominent is family background. People of high status quo attach great importance on it because their marriage is not only about individual happiness but also has something to do with the whole family interests. Sometimes, family interests are even placed above individual happiness as they decide to marry someone they do not love.

Meanwhile, Astrid's marriage is another example of Eastern values on love and marriage. Much like Rachel's life experiences, Astrid's husband Michael comes from an ordinary family. In the party held by Nick's grandma, apart from acquiring Rachel's family background, Eddie also comments Michael is just princess Astrid's "soldier boy" with a display of contempt towards him. Because of the huge

differences on family background, their problems do not work out and they end up with a divorce. Despite different cultural backgrounds between the West and East on love and marriage, Rachel and Nick's love story, together with Astrid's exemplifies the role of class as a hurdle in marriage and family matters.

Then, there comes the critical question: can the curse of Eastern marriage values be broken in the film? The confrontation between Western and Eastern values on love and marriage which centers on the conflict between Rachel and Eleanor is finally resolved through the mahjong showdown. Yasharoff noticed the added mahjong scene and regarded it as a tribute to another famous Asian American film *The Joy Luck Club*. As the film progresses, Rachel invites Eleanor to play mahjong to settle down the conflict once for all. During the game, she tells Eleanor that Nick has already proposed to her, but she refused because she loves him so much that she does not want to see his disengagement from his family. And she also makes clear that if Nick has to choose the family over her, he would resent Eleanor for the rest of his life. It seems that Eleanor is confident about Nick's final decision as she acts aggressively to win the mahjong game. In fact, in the game the winning side is on Rachel. She hesitates for several times and then throws away the critical tile to let Eleanor win the game. Then Rachel claims that in the future if Nick finds someone whom the whole family can approve of, it is she, an immigrant nobody, who contributes to it.

This mahjong show is eye-catching in that it shows how brave and considerate Rachel is and how Eleanor is affected by Rachel's words and behavior. After the mahjong showdown, it seems that Eleanor wins the game, but in no way does a romantic comedy end like this. Later well aware of the severe consequences, Eleanor has a deep and open conversation with her son. Therefore, Nick's another proposal at the airport is no surprise at all. But the author is greatly impressed by the way the film presents it. Rachel knows it too well that without Eleanor's approval, she and Nick cannot be happily together. Under the circumstances his proposal would just render her even more heart-broken. It is at the time when Nick takes out an engagement ring, a different one from previous proposal. Rachel immediately realizes that the ring is exactly Eleanor's engagement ring when Eleanor told her about its story in their face-to-face confrontation. Nick's deliberate proposal using this ring signifies Eleanor's final compromise and consent. At the moment, any words fail to convey the meaning that the ring carries. Upon deep reflection on the happy ending, the author thinks that Rachel's victory over Eleanor not only means she obtains personal happiness but also shows Western values override Eastern ones by overcoming class obstacle.

## 5. Conclusion

It is of academic importance to analyze the recent hit film *Crazy Rich Asians* to find the tensions between Western and Eastern culture and the film's hidden meaning behind these cultural phenomena. Combined with the intersectionality of gender, race and class, the author finds that the film reflects

different representations of Western and Eastern values on femininity, career pursuit, as well as love and marriage and that its representations ultimately signify the West's victory over the East. In the author's opinion, the release of *Crazy Rich Asians* seems to be a breakthrough for Asian American cinema, but its essence is still Western-centered as the unfavorable representation of Eastern values is the projection of the Western stereotypes about the East.

As for the paper's limitation, to list only one film to represent Western and Eastern values cannot reveal a fuller picture and to analyze the film in terms of value representation is uni-dimensional. Therefore, future research on this topic can be improved by a comprehensive survey on famous Asian American films from different periods and multi-angle analysis on *Crazy Rich Asians*.

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