

How well-deserved is the great success of *Crazy Rich Asians*?

By Nick Barrickman
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Directed by Jon M. Chu; written by Peter Chiarelli and Adele Lim, based on the novel by Kevin Kwan

Jon M. Chu's *Crazy Rich Asians* is a romantic comedy, adapted from Kevin Kwan's 2013 bestselling novel of the same title.

The film is set in the Asian city-state of Singapore. It follows a middle-class Chinese-American professor as she accompanies her boyfriend and attends a wedding, only to discover he is heir to one of Singapore's largest fortunes. Tensions and problems ensue.

A great deal of fanfare has surrounded the opening of the film, due principally to the fact that *Crazy Rich Asians* is the first major Hollywood picture since *The Joy Luck Club* (1993) to feature an all-Asian cast. The media is going to considerable lengths, in its usual manipulative manner intended to dull the critical faculties, to convince potential audience members, Asian and non-Asian alike, that their social and even moral credentials are in question if they fail to watch this supposedly "groundbreaking" film.

This aggressive public relations campaign has had some success. A sequel has already been announced. According to box office statistics, the film raked in over \$34 million at movie theaters during its opening weekend, a high point for the romantic-comedy genre and easily recouping the film's \$30 million in production costs. A recent *New York Times* article noted that 38 percent of the first weekend's filmgoers identified as Asian, a significant rise in viewership from the regular 10 percent of movie attendees from that demographic.

In what is by now standard operating procedure, the *Times* set the tone for the media in general with its identity politics/ethnicity obsession. In a comment on *Crazy Rich Asians*, Robert Ito gushed August 8 ("Crazy Rich Asians': Why Did It Take So Long to See a Cast Like This?"): "How often [does] a Hollywood filmmaker go looking for a whole bunch of Asians for anything?"

As for the content of *Crazy Rich Asians* itself, the plot focuses on the relationship between New York University professors Rachel Chu (Constance Wu) and Nick Young (Henry Golding). Young, the scion of one of Asia's wealthiest families, has kept a low profile about his family wealth around Rachel, hoping to maintain something of a normal life with his

American girlfriend.

His anonymity is shattered when he invites Rachel to accompany him on a trip to Singapore, where he will be attending his best friend's wedding with various relatives. From the moment the pair step on the plane and are given first class tickets, she is suspicious. Asked about his family's wealth, Nick reservedly explains, "We're comfortable"—to which Rachel replies, "That sounds like something a really rich person would say."

The difficulties begin when Rachel is introduced to Nick's extended family at a party held at their luxurious gated mansion-home in Singapore. In particular, Nick's mother, Eleanor Young (Malaysian film star Michelle Yeoh), is contemptuous of Rachel's commoner status, perceived lack of social graces and disregard for tradition.

Other interactions with cousins, aunts, nannies and the rest also go badly. The rising generation of the Youngs may be less well-mannered, but is equally ruthless and, for the most part, repugnant. While accompanying the bride-to-be, Araminta (Sonoya Mizuno), to a private resort for her bachelorette soiree, Rachel suffers humiliations and social ostracism of a sociopathic character from a group of Nick's jealous female pursuers.

Certain of the episodes involving Rachel, a middle-class "outsider," and Nick's wealthy and exclusive family, ring true.

In particular, the veteran Yeoh (*The Heroic Trio; Tomorrow Never Dies; Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*) is convincing as the severe and imperious matriarch Eleanor, who has devoted her life to guarding her family's wealth and reputation (at one point, she confronts Rachel in the hallway and coldly, quietly proclaims: "You will never be enough"). Eleanor's haughtiness makes it entirely believable when she orders a private investigator to look into Rachel's past, digging up personally damaging information on her son's unsuspecting girlfriend.

Whether the filmmakers were aware of the ultimate irony or not, one certainly understands Nick's decision to keep Rachel in the dark about his fabulously wealthy and celebrated family: for the most part, they are—or should be—shameful "skeletons in the closet"!

Unfortunately, the writer and director are not conscious of

such facts, otherwise they would not have assembled a film that is so impressed and overwhelmed by vast wealth, one of the very worst premises for a film or any artistic work. We are apparently supposed to share Rachel's awe at her first vision of the Young estate, so lovingly treated by Chu's camera. It is also possible, however, to find the billionaire family and their grandiose palace vulgar, cultureless and crude. More about this below.

What saves *Crazy Rich Asians* from instant and total dismissal is the presence of certain pleasures, guilty or otherwise. It is a delight, for instance, to encounter a number of talented Asian performers, faces and personalities that are generally absent from Hollywood films. Malaysian-born Henry Golding as sensitive, golden boy Nick, a fairy tale figure, has a nearly hopeless task, but he is obviously a gifted actor. A number of the minor family members are eccentric or amusing. The film even contains, almost in spite of itself, at tangential and relatively low-key moments, hints of real life.

In addition, the inclusion of Rachel's college friend Goh (played by hip hop and Internet personality Awkwafina) provides some entertaining moments. Goh, representing a crass, "new money" type, declares that the gauche interior of her family's home was inspired "by Donald Trump's bathroom." Her parvenu character, wealthy enough to belong to the top 1 percent, but only on its margins, and lacking in all refinement, becomes something of a support for Rachel as she navigates the world of the ultra-wealthy. The performances of Ken Jeong as her father and Calvin Wong as her ungainly, vaguely lustful brother, also stand out.

However, *Crazy Rich Asians* is at its very worst when it chooses in one breath, so to speak, to slavishly worship money and then, in the next, offers its viewers a social-moral tale to the effect that riches have no importance whatsoever for one's personal satisfaction and happiness. It is simply too absurd and unconvincing to be taken seriously.

As Chu's film advances toward its predictable conclusion, the formulaic and conventional elements of the story take greater and greater precedence.

The film's plot is generic, a "Cinderella story" set in Asia, and the dialogue (Nick: "You are so different from all the other girls I grew up with") is often banal. Its focus is far too narrow, and psychologically unbelievable, to be deeply moving. The central conflict is whether or not Rachel will ultimately be accepted by the snobbish Eleanor & Co. The filmmakers, with their wretched denouement, appear simply to have given up on depicting a realistic human relationship.

(For whatever significance it possesses, the conclusion of Kevin Kwan's 2013 novel ended in just the opposite manner.)

Although at times (and especially in regard to characters such as Yeoh's Eleanor), the film seems to criticize or satirize the lifestyle of the super-wealthy, all in all, it pulls its punches and embraces the decadent, empty-headed goings-on.

It is telling that one of the important plot strands in *Crazy*

Rich involves the troubled marriage of Astrid's (Gemma Chan) to a man from a humble background who is terribly conscious and resentful of Astrid's wealth. She is obliged to hide her expensive purchases from him. Astrid's great moment of personal "liberation" arrives, dear reader, when she breaks from her husband (after discovering he is having an affair) and now feels sufficiently "empowered" to wear her \$1.2-million earrings in public! The presence of a "real-life" Malay princess at the \$40 million wedding, who condescends to converse with Rachel, just about completes the picture.

Of course, *Crazy Rich Asians* also takes place in a fantasy Singapore, or a portion of the highly stratified city-state only available to a tiny portion of the population. The working class lives under a repressive, authoritarian regime, which, until recently, enthusiastically carried out executions by hanging (in the mid-1990s, Singapore had the second highest per-capita execution rate in the world) and widely carries out or encourages caning in prisons, schools and the military.

Portraying Rachel Chu, a professor at an expensive, private university, as an "ordinary" Asian American is also misleading. According to the results of a Pew Research Center poll released last month, "From 1970 to 2016, the gap in the standard of living between Asians near the top and the bottom of the income ladder nearly doubled, and the distribution of income among Asians transformed from being one of the most equal to being the most unequal among America's major racial and ethnic groups." Such is the reality that racialist and identity politics excludes.

In an interview with the *Times*, novelist Kwan stated that he'd like to write books about "Crazy poor Asians. Or just crazy average Asians. I've written three books about the 1 percent. Now, it's all about exploring this wide spectrum and showing other facets of Asians around the world." We shall see.

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