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Sophomore Essay

Reimagining Chineseness: Class, Capitalism, and Mobility in *Crazy Rich Asians*

From the seemingly miraculous emergence of the Asian tiger economies to China's meteoric rise to the rocky ascendancy of high-population countries like India and Indonesia, the global center of gravity is moving to Asia.¹ More than just an economic shift, contemporary fascination with wealth has possibly found its new nexus. Amidst the proliferation of narratives about transnational Asian capitalism, titles like *How to Get Filthy Rich in Rising Asia* and *Five Star Billionaire* are only the tip of the imaginative iceberg. Of these narratives, no other novel has captured as much of the global imagination as Kevin Kwan's *Crazy Rich Asians* (adapted into a Hollywood blockbuster in the summer of 2018). Saturated with wealth, featuring a sweeping cast of characters tracing the global Chinese diaspora, and set in the postcolonial global city of Singapore, the novel focuses on a very particular configuration of race, class, and mobility exemplified by the elite overseas Chinese. In this essay, I argue what is significant is how these specific modes of class privilege converge in demonstrating a new logic of Asian modernity that, while being an inherently exclusive vision, both engages and challenges the West.

Although its title features the umbrella term, "Asians," the novel is undoubtedly about a very specific subset of Asians: the "crazy rich" overseas Chinese, who migrated to Singapore

¹ "The Chinese century is well under way," *The Economist*, October 27, 2018, <https://www.economist.com/graphic-detail/2018/10/27/the-chinese-century-is-well-under-way>.

centuries ago and have since accumulated their wealth over generations. In drawing the contours of this elite class of Asians, the novel explores the diverse and ever-shifting status of “Chineseness” shaped by and embedded within the processes of global capitalism. *Crazy Rich Asians* simultaneously uses the particular articulations of the global and the local — universalizing capitalist forces and local *Nanyang* (Southern Ocean, where the Chinese diasporas to Southeast Asia have settled) culture — to invert Euroamerican expectations and challenge Western hegemony over capitalism. Before delving into the configuration of the elite overseas Chinese, I would first like to highlight who they are *differentiated* from. The novel demonstrates an acute awareness of the widespread Western view of Asia’s embrace of capitalism as a relatively recent economic phenomenon. In particular, the dominant media image of Asia’s burgeoning economic power has been the conspicuous rise of global consumption of luxury goods, which often mirrors the “Yellow Peril” discourse of Chinese encroachment on a Western domain.^{2 3} Indeed, *Crazy Rich Asians* taps on this impression with irreverent humor — a Parisian baronne expresses the sentiment quite pithily, “I thought [the Chinese] were all penniless Communists in drab little Mao uniforms not too long ago.”⁴ The underlying assumption here is that capitalism — a predominantly Western invention — is perceived as being newly adopted by the Chinese. Various characters poke fun at this mainstream stereotype of the *bao fa hu* (newly rich in a short time) appearing in hordes — the enforced lines and restriction of purchase to one item at Louis Vuitton in Paris for Asian customers are compared by one character to the rationing lines for the Chinese during the Japanese occupation⁵; another character notices the

² Tagliabue, John. “OUT THERE: Paris; Rationing Vuitton: If Only Hot Cakes Sold Like This.” *New York Times*, April 8, 2001, <https://www.nytimes.com/2001/04/08/style/out-there-paris-rationing-vuitton-if-only-hot-cakes-sold-like-this.html>

³ Erlanger, Steven. “After a Long March, Chinese Surrender to Capitalist Shrines.” *New York Times*, September 14, 2011, <https://www.nytimes.com/2011/09/15/world/europe/eager-chinese-shoppers-flock-to-paris-stores.html>.

⁴ Kevin Kwan, *Crazy Rich Asians* (New York: Doubleday, 2013), 33.

⁵ Kwan, *Crazy Rich Asians*, 45.

“usual queue of Mainland Chinese shoppers”⁶ outside the Gucci store in Hong Kong.

Yet, though present, this popular picture of Chinese wealth — young and unsophisticated compared to the West — takes backstage in *Crazy Rich Asians*. The particular brand of wealth that the novel is most fascinated with is *old* money possessed by overseas Chinese in Southeast Asia. The historicity of wealth accumulation becomes a main signifier of class, even amidst the rarefied circles of the Chinese wealthy. For the Singaporean families that majority of the characters hail from — the Young, T’sien, and Shang clans (YTS) — the strength of pedigree and elitism of class stems from two interrelated historical phenomenon: firstly, their lineage as Straits Chinese; secondly, how far back they can trace their capital accumulation. In the sociality that emerges in CRA, different historical claims on capitalism delineate the Straits Chinese from other rich Chinese. Early on, there is a telling scene in Paris where Astrid’s pedigree is made explicit. One of the Parisian elite voices the question that may have weighed on a Western reader’s mind, “How is it possible that these Chinese have been rich for generations?”⁷ In response, a more knowing member of her set thoroughly delineates the distinction between the Chinese from “*Mainland China*”, who made their fortunes post-Mao, and the “*Overseas Chinese*,” who immigrated to the Malaya region during the colonial era in the late fifteenth- and sixteenth-century.⁸ In the novel, the Straits Chinese who have controlled commerce — making family fortunes by dabbling in, amongst other things, the “opium”⁹ trade — since colonial times are deemed to be “the uppermost echelon of Asian wealth.”¹⁰ Other types of wealthy Chinese such as the “Taiwan tycoons” and “Beijing billionaires” — the kind that Western audiences would be more readily familiar with — are deemed to be a step below the YTS clan in the

⁶ Kwan, *Crazy Rich Asians*, 338.

⁷ Kwan, *Crazy Rich Asians*, 33.

⁸ Kwan, *Crazy Rich Asians*, 33.

⁹ Kwan, *Crazy Rich Asians*, 377.

¹⁰ Kwan, *Crazy Rich Asians*, 35.

hierarchy of class elitism because their accumulation of capital is much more nascent in comparison. A subtle transformation of capitalism into a Chinese phenomenon is at work, which will be the bedrock of a new vision of Asian modernity (as I will delve into later).

Against this longer history of capital accumulation, how the characters engage in the global processes of capital flow as diasporan subjects deserves further inspection. Their strategies of class and capital accumulation pivot on an important concept: mobility. In *Flexible Citizenship*, Aihwa Ong draws attention to Hong Kong emigrants' acquisition and deployment of what Pierre Bourdieu calls "symbolic capital" — in particular, cultural capital represents the means of "propelling one across cultural and geopolitical spaces."¹¹ As active manipulators of cultural symbols, Ong argues, the Chinese diasporan subject her- or himself becomes "body capital" that flexibly adapt to meet the shifting, competing cultural criteria of symbolic value.¹² In *Crazy Rich Asians*, the younger generation of the YTS clan epitomizes such strategies of cultural accumulation. Nicholas Young and Astrid Leong are exemplars: growing up in the "right" schools (missionary and taught in English), possessing a clipped British accent ("straight out of a Merchant Ivory film"), educated at Oxbridge, and cultivating a cosmopolitan cultural taste determined by Euroamerican regimes of credentialization (helped by regular sojourns in places like Paris). Citizenship, the emblem of mobility within the circuits of global capitalism, also becomes a form of symbolic capital. In a methodical breakdown of the metrics of prestige for a Hong Kong character, the "ultimate membership card" is Canadian Permanent Resident Cards for his entire family — Canada is termed a "safe haven" in case Beijing ever pulled "a *Tiananmen* again."¹³ The elite Chinese diasporan subject in the novel is flexibly positioned and

¹¹ Aihwa Ong, *Flexible Citizenship: the Cultural Logics of Transnationality* (North Carolina: Duke University Press, 1999), 91.

¹² Ong, *Flexible Citizenship*, 91.

¹³ Kwan, *Crazy Rich Asians*, 62.

constantly negotiating with the shifting political and cultural terrains of the global economy — mobility is a crucial element of his or her cultural values and class strategies. It is almost unsurprising how interest-driven and attenuated most characters' sense of citizenship is. In fact, though assumed to be Singaporean, most of the characters in *Crazy Rich Asians* seem like they can belong anywhere (though this too may be a sign of poor characterization on Kwan's part).

Yet, are there limits to the accumulation of symbolic capital for the Chinese diasporan subject? Critics of *Crazy Rich Asians* have argued that beneath the veneer of diversity is a message of “white-Asian equivalence”¹⁴ or that the characters are still negotiating the “racial politics of colonialism.”¹⁵ No doubt, in a novel saturated with Euroamerican signifiers of prestige, it is easy to view the accumulation of symbolic capital as a process of *whitening*. But, are the characters just trying to be white? How salient is the colonial mentality in the choices that they make? Euroamerican standards of desirability have internationally recognized symbolic power, which facilitates the transnational transposition of social status. There does exist an aspiration to ‘whiteness’ — in the form of Oxbridge degrees and French haute couture dresses — which is fundamental to new class formations. Yet, such symbolic capital accumulation also represents a desire to ultimately overcome the racism embedded in the normative Western regime. Such tensions abound in the moments of racist encounters between the novel's Chinese characters and Euroamerican scrutiny.

The novel begins with such an encounter — a few members of the YTS are turned out of an exclusive London hotel by its racist white manager because they look bedraggled from the pouring rain. Later, Astrid Leong, who is metropolitan glamor and status personified, also comes

¹⁴ Mark Tseng-Putterman, "One Way That Crazy Rich Asians Is a Step Backward," *Atlantic*, August 23, 2018, <https://www.theatlantic.com/entertainment/archive/2018/08/asian-americas-great-gatsby-moment/568213/>.

¹⁵ Rebecca Liu, “On ‘Crazy Rich Asians’, Crazy Rich Asia, And Capitalism In The Time Of Postcolonial Love,” *Another Gaze*, October 11, 2018, www.anothergaze.com/crazy-rich-asians-crazy-rich-asia-capitalism-time-postcolonial-love/.

face to face with “snooty” French aristocrats and salespeople. Rachel Chu, the sole Chinese-American protagonist in the novel, discriminates against Asian men, expressing that she does not date them (a friend calls her “self-loathing”). While it’s easy to read these scenes as illustrative of an aspirational whiteness, a subtle contestation is at work. All these scenes end with the tenor of racial comeuppance, wherein the coveted capitalist symbols are not only appropriated but also recast within an unabashed construction of East-West. How? Euroamerican cultural hegemony is destabilized by a Chinese logic of capitalism. In the first scene at the hotel, Harry Leong buys the hotel in a matter of minutes and the family fires the racist manager on the spot. In the other scene when teenage Astrid’s ability to afford haute couture is blatantly doubted by a saleslady, her boyfriend, Charlie Wu, teaches her a mantra (which he follows promptly in action): “The only way to get these *ang mor gau sai* (Westerners) to respect you is to smack them in the face with you *dua lan chiao* (big cock) money until they get on their knees.”¹⁶ Rachel, of course, ends up eating her words and dates Nicholas Young, whose masculinity is upgraded by his cultural capital.

In fact, instead of reductively labeling the characters in CRA as simply being “white,” I would like to argue that the novel offers a conceptualization of “whiteness” as capital and property — part of the bedrock of a new logic of Asian modernity. While there is no denying that the criteria of symbolic power that dominate the characters’ psyche are mostly Euroamerican, the novel actively negotiates new relations to capital, which treat Western knowledge and terms as yet another ‘property’ to be acquired. There is a simultaneous appropriation of “whiteness” alongside an articulation of a new modernity that is not simply equal, but *better*. This new vision of Asian modernity is, however, only available to very few — the elite, eponymous “crazy rich Asians.” What is new is that this vision ruptures the Western claims to universality. It takes a

¹⁶ Kwan, *Crazy Rich Asians*, 326.

particular configuration of race (Chinese), class (elite), and mobility (diasporic and cosmopolitan) to rupture the universalizing trajectory of Western modernity.

Skepticism is expected: Does this configuration develop a new logic of Asian modernity or is it still stuck in a postcolonial structure of mimicry? Critics have lambasted the wealth porn in *Crazy Rich Asians*, one even claiming, “It is the monoculture of capitalism, not Asia, that is on display.”¹⁷ Should one simply read the Asian engagements with global capitalism in the novel as postcolonial? My answer is no. The new logic of Asian modernity reclaims capitalism as a Chinese phenomenon — a significant rupture. In foregrounding the historicity of capital accumulation in its calculation of class, *Crazy Rich Asians* is celebrating a distinctly Chinese history of capitalist development. By placing the overseas Chinese in the same coeval space as the West in parallel narratives of modern development, the YTS clan becomes as modern as its Western counterparts, instead of being some immature version of a Western prototype. By appropriating narratives of capital as an essential modality in its own identity formation, the Asia viewed through the prism of *Crazy Rich Asians* may be, as Arif Dirlik observes, “making their own claims on the history of capitalism.” (“Postcolonial Aura,” 51) The crucial backdrop to the novel’s obsessive scrutiny of class features the nodes of capitalist development in Nanyang that were in interplay with Western imperialism *but* too have their roots in earlier China-centered tributary systems and inter-Asian regional trade, predating Western colonialism.¹⁸ The conceptualization of class in *Crazy Rich Asians* — one which places the wealthy Straits Chinese at the pinnacle of not only an Asian but also a *global* hierarchy — reflects an Asia-centric logic of capitalism. Though Dirlik might not have anticipated this conceptualization in the time of his

¹⁷ Fatima Bhutto, “Crazy Rich Asians is no racial triumph. It’s a soulless salute to the 1%,” *Guardian*, September 12, 2018, <https://www.theguardian.com/film/2018/sep/12/crazy-rich-asians-racial-triumph>.

¹⁸ Victor B. Lieberman, *Strange Parallels: Southeast Asia in Global Context, C 800-1830*. (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2003).

writing, on his view, the logic of capitalism in *Crazy Rich Asians* would have “decentered capitalism ... and abstracted capitalism for the first time from its Eurocentrism.”¹⁹ There is an implied historical process here, then, from Asia as the always Othered “third world,” “developing countries,” or “the postcolonial” transformed dramatically into an Asia embodying the past and future of capitalism. This new logic of Asian modernity is being discursively constituted by locally hegemonic, historical projects that simultaneously draw extensively from the West but also resist the West’s universalizing domination.

With this new cultural logic and imaginary, it then becomes tempting to think in bipolar view of an East-West divide in the narrative normativity of *Crazy Rich Asians*. In this vein of thinking, the new logic of Asian modernity would then be set against Western modernity as binary oppositions. Samuel Huntington’s “clash-of-civilizations” thesis readily lends itself to such a reading, arguing that the dominating source of conflict in the twenty-first century will be “cultural,” instead of ideological or economic.²⁰ This clash will be between the non-Western civilizations that will rise from “objects” and “targets” to become “movers and shapers of history,” with different values to propagate.²¹ At first glance, *Crazy Rich Asians* seems to fall prey to Huntington’s demarcated binary between Western individualism and Asian collectivism. While Rachel Chu is economically independent from her single, immigrant mother (perhaps, the reason why she does not see her class as related to her family), the dynastic networks of the YTS clan privileges family, with most of the characters economically interdependent and under the firm control of the family patriarch or matriarch. Ong describes the familial regime as a structure for nurturing and expanding wealth and vice versa — “filial piety is instilled through the force of

¹⁹ Arif Dirlik, *After the Revolution: Waking to Global Capitalism* (New Hampshire: Wesleyan University Press, 1994), 62.

²⁰ Samuel P. Huntington, “The Clash of Civilizations?” *Foreign Affairs*, vol. 72, no. 3 (1993): 22, JSTOR, www.jstor.org/stable/20045621.

²¹ Huntington, “The Clash of Civilizations?” 23.

family wealth.”²² Indeed, the mothers of the YTS clan constantly entertain the strategy of cutting their sons off if they want to marry the “wrong” girl — for instance, Kitty Pong, the soap opera starlet. Eleanor Young, who spends much of the book plotting how to break up her son’s relationship with Rachel and fails, blames it on Western values since Nicholas Young (her son) spent more than a decade in England then America. She laments, “Why do we Chinese never learn? Every time we get mixed up with the West, everything falls apart.”²³ Similarly, Nicholas’ refusal to return to Asia is labeled by his grandmother, the matriarch of the YTS clan, as testament to his being “far too seduced by Western ways.”²⁴ However, the characters are all too self-aware of the irony of this East-West cultural dichotomy. While Nicholas’ grandmother looks and sounds like a traditional Chinese woman, Rachel notes that the exchange happens in a French-like walled garden as they are having English afternoon tea. This cultural hybridity — manifest for the matriarch — is all the more overt for the younger members of the YTS family, who are mostly “bananas”: yellow on the outside, white on the inside.

The vestiges of British colonialism for these young Singaporeans are everywhere: from Christian fellowships to afternoon tea to their accents. Yet, are there really an Asian way and a Western way? It appears that Huntington’s thesis of irreducible cultural differences can be read as another form of American orientalism — what Edward Said depicts as “a Western style for dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the Orient,” a one-sided project with the Orientals passively situated.²⁵ It is easy to essentialize the Asian values that the older characters espouse as being broadly Confucian: filial piety, respect for elders, understanding of one’s social roles and obligations, and for some, moderation in the form of frugality. However, *Crazy Rich*

²² Ong, *Flexible Citizenship*, 124.

²³ Kwan, *Crazy Rich Asians*, 391.

²⁴ Kwan, *Crazy Rich Asians*, 259.

²⁵ Edward Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Vintage Books, 1978), 3.

Asians points out that there is a common civilizational referent that overarches these Asian values — whether or not they are in tension with Western values. In a world where the market is “absolutely transcendental,” any cultural division between the East and the West serves only to disguise the shared values of late capitalism and the economic rationalities of moneymaking.²⁶ *Crazy Rich Asians* as a cultural artifact can be seen as a selective engagement with orientalist discourses. The novel simultaneously reproduces and subverts stereotypes; it is both complicit with hegemonic constructions but also active in staking authority on the hegemonic links between global capitalism and “Chineseness.”

In *Crazy Rich Asians*, we must go beyond the binary of East versus West (à la Huntington’s clash-of-civilizations), which would treat the novel as either presenting an entirely Western sensibility or showing a clash between Western modernity and its antithetical, non-Western other. The new logic that emerges is modern without being Western, modern without deracination. In the novel, the ethnoracial moral order in Nanyang is neither simply of China’s Confucian tradition nor a postcolonial inheritance of the West, but their hybrid offspring. The younger generation — like Nick, Astrid, Colin, and Araminta — are not bananas who are white on the inside. Neither are members of the older generation — the gatekeepers of their class — orientalist stereotypes. The hybridity emerges from two imaginaries. Firstly, there is a nationalist (or at least territorially bound) imaginary that emphasizes fixity and essentialism. This can be found in the geographical locality, cultural heritage, and strict sociality that defines the identities of the Straits Chinese. Secondly, there is a transnational (deterritorialized) imaginary of capitalism that emphasizes fluidity and plurality. The new logic of Asian modernity that emerges from the diasporic subjects in the novel calls into question not only stability in cultural identity, but also ties to a single nation-state, or even to a single imagined community. Perhaps, as *Crazy*

²⁶ Ong, *Flexible Citizenship*, 7.

Rich Asians presents, the hybridity of these two imaginaries is blend of Asian values with Asian capitalism. The older characters' choice to employ civilizational differences in their rhetoric could be an assertion of moral superiority — the language of ancient civilizations, though inflected with orientaling essentialisms, is one way of gaining superiority over the West.

Ultimately, while this new logic of Asian modernity presents ruptures in the universalizing trajectory of Western capitalism and postcoloniality, it is crucial to take note that not everyone gets to be in this new narrative of Asians. Only its most elite and privileged class has access to this unique blend of mobility, the longer history of capital accumulation, and hybrid imaginary. The economic rationalities of globalization and cultural logics of subject making are embedded in the specific power context of class privilege. How Chineseness, capitalism, and mobility have culminated in demonstrating a vision of Asian modernity is very much about race and Euroamerican cultural hegemony, but it also transcends that to present whiteness as capital, modernity without deracination, and a narrative of capitalism that is decidedly Asian.

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