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Topic: The Chinese Identity: The Revelations in *Crazy Rich Asians*

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**Declaration**

I declare that this assignment is my own work and does not involve plagiarism or collusion. The sources of other people's work have been appropriately referenced, failing which I am willing to accept the necessary disciplinary action(s) to be taken against me.

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# 1. INTRODUCTORY CHAPTER

## Definition of terms

1. Chinese: A racially Chinese through heritage that may be classified into sub categories like: Chinese-American or Singaporean Chinese.
2. Identity: Identity consists of the ideals, values, looks, heritage and traditions one has.
3. Power: Based on a study Clingendeal(2017) which researches on the most powerful countries, economy is one of the seven main aspects which a countries' power is derived from

## 1.1 Background

### 1.1.1 The Chinese identity

The Chinese identity is a central theme in the film. The film's characters are all Chinese and come from wealthy families, with the exception Rachel Chu and her mother. The family's Chinese identity is portrayed through their practices and the values they possess for example but not limited to, “孝顺”, their respect to their elders, a very important value in the Chinese identity. In *Crazy Rich Asians*, another aspect of the Chinese are the Chinese-American diaspora. According to the United States of America's department of state, *Office of the Historian*, the diaspora faced many hardships because of the Chinese exclusion act. In 1882, Congress passed the Chinese Exclusion Act, which suspended the immigration of Chinese laborers for a 10 year period. It also demanded that every Chinese person traveling in or out of the country carry a certificate identifying his or her status as a laborer, scholar, diplomat, or merchant. The Act was repealed in 1943. This allowed them to work like Americans and lead normal lives without an exclusion act oppressing them. Despite originating from China and having the same heritage as a Chinese, in *Crazy Rich Asians* they are only seen as “American” due to a “us” and “them” situation according to Henri Tajfel's (1979) social identity theory where he proposed that groups give people pride and self esteem therefore people elevate their

group's status. This separation of groups cause the Chinese to only see the American-Chinese as "American".

### 1.1.2 The shift in the Chinese power

In the past, Singapore was a colony of the British and was not as economically capable and financially powerful as the British. According to the commonwealth, the British were impressed by the profitability of the port of Singapore established by Raffles that they simply bought the island from its two rulers, presenting the financial disparities between the two entities. Singapore became part of the British empire and was colonised. These colonisers deemed themselves as those who were much more civilised and superior to the natives of the place(Tyson 1950). Yet, currently, Singapore is considered to be one of the four economic tigers according to the World bank. Singapore, along with Taiwan, Korea and Hong Kong, underwent rapid industrialisation and achieved and maintained exceptionally high growth rates. According to Investopedia, Singapore has risen to become one of the World's leading financial centers. Moreover, Singapore is ranked 4th in terms of GDP per capita (Business Insider 2017), out of 30 other countries and the United Kingdom is not even on the list. This background information presents how economically sophisticated Singapore has become and how the world power balance has shifted to the Chinese.

### 1.1.3 *Crazy Rich Asians*

*Crazy Rich Asians* is a film with a full Chinese cast highlighting the film's emphasis on Chinese identity through an Chinese perspective. It is a narrative about the top 1% in Singapore and how a American-Chinese, Rachel Chu, traverses through her boyfriend's staunch Chinese family, while facing strong rejection by Nick's mother due to her belief that she is not good enough for Nick. Rachel attempts to find her place among the rich and powerful Chinese, though regarded with skepticism as she, being Chinese-American and of the middle class, does not have a similar identity to their family.

## 1.2 Rationale

### 1.2.1 Rationale for exploring the Chinese identity

From being a British colony that was simply bought over by the British empire to a

highly sophisticated economy, a world leading financial center(World Bank) and the 4th highest GDP per capita (Business Insider 2017) , surpassing that of the United Kingdom who colonised them in the first place and the United States, which is largely considered to be the most powerful country in the world, there is a need to explore the changes within one's identity. A country that has changed so much over a short period of time must indeed have some changes within one's own identity. Therefore it is important to discover what changes have occurred within their own Chinese identity.

### 1.2.2 Rationale for *Crazy Rich Asians*

Despite its lack of representing the middle class, the wealthy 1% is a representation of China's growing economic power. *Crazy Rich Asians* highlights the changes that the Chinese identity has undergone due to this emergence and is useful in exploring the changes the Chinese identity has gone through as it portrays powerful Chinese in today's globalised world and their interactions with their surroundings. It accurately portrays the growing power of the Chinese and presents the renewed Chinese identity through the wealthy top 1%.

### 1.3 Research Questions

Question 1: What are the factors that make up the Chinese identity in *Crazy Rich Asians*?

Question 2: How does *Crazy Rich Asians* show that the Chinese identity has evolved due to its growing global presence?

### 1.4 Thesis Statement

*Crazy Rich Asians* portrays the strengthening of the Chinese identity due to its emergence as an economic entity on the global stage.

### 1.5 Scope of Research/Delimitations

To analyse the film *Crazy Rich Asians*, I will be exploring its portrayal of the Chinese identity and the changes the identity has gone through by comparing the Chinese identity in the film and their past: Social clout, superiority, influence, economic stature.

Moreover, I will also be exploring the theme of Chinese identity through the characterisation of the different characters in *Crazy Rich Asians*: Rachel Chu and her mother, Eleanor Young, Astrid Leong, Peik Lin's family and lastly the Young Family in

general. Lastly, I will be exploring how the film reflects the emerging Chinese superpower through its characters.

## 1.6 Significance of Research/Usefulness

The Chinese have become increasingly significant on the global stage, contrasting with its lack of political power in its colonised past. Therefore it is important to explore the renewed Chinese Identity, from its scarred identity from the past, to currently an identity with significance in the world which *Crazy Rich Asians* explores.

## 1.7 Limitations

One limitation from using the film *Crazy Rich Asians*, is that while it portrays the crazy rich Chinese with an identity that holds weight in the world, it neglects the poor and not as well to do, therefore underrepresenting the whole Chinese community as the marginalised are excluded from the portrayal of Chinese Identity in the movie.

Another limitation is that contrary to its title which has the term “Asians”, it only portrays Chinese and that does not completely encapsulate what an Asian is.

## 2. Literature Review

### 2.1 Introduction

I will be using New Historicism to aid me in my analysis. New Historicism is used as the film is a portrayal of the Chinese shift in power through a Chinese perspective, it represents the Chinese identity based on how the Chinese sees it and not the West.

### 2.2 New Historicism

According to the Merriam-Webster dictionary, New Historicism emphasises the historicity of the text by relating it to the configurations of power, society, or ideology in a given time. This means that both the text and history have the same value, and that the text is a portrayal of a particular moment of time. However, according to Nusrullah Mambrol (2016) Old historicism creates a historical framework and places the literary text within it. This means it considers the facts of history as a “background” of a piece of literature and history as objective. *Crazy Rich Asians* is a portrayal of the growing

Chinese power and identity through a Chinese perspective, allowing the historical context and the literature itself to have equal weighting. Therefore, New Historicism is more relevant to the analysis of the film as it portrays how the Chinese go about to make their Identity significant within the historical context of the Chinese rise to power. Thus these two theories are able to accurately analyse the film and its revelations of Chinese Identity.

Tyson(1950) argues that new historicist believe that there is an “impossibility of objective analysis” This means that there is always a perspective that historicist look through to analyse something at any point of time. Furthermore, Tyson states that “our subjectivity, or selfhood, is shaped by and shapes the culture into which we were born.” John Brannigan (1998) also explains how New Historicism understands the stories of the past as society’s way of constructing a narrative which unconsciously fits its own interests. Hickling (2018) emphasises that new historicism “re-contextualize(s) the narrative” This is essentially the reperspectivisation of how one interprets history because you look at history through a different lens, for example the Chinese perspective. It emphasises the fact that history is not a linear series of events (Tyson 1950) and is different based on which perspective one looks through. This subjectivity is allows for the parallel reading of *Crazy Rich Asians* and the rise in Chinese power through a Chinese lens due to the film’s focus on an Chinese perspective. Moreover, as mentioned in postcolonial theory that there is an unequal representation of the Chinese by their colonial masters, a new historicist lens of the Chinese perspective allows us to observe more accurately how they shape their identity.

### 3. Methodology

New Historicism criticism allows me to explore how the film rejects the Oriental image of themselves and the postcolonial narrative that degrades the Chinese as it allows another side of representation of the Chinese through a Chinese perspective rather than a Western one. Moreover, the fact that the Chinese can now look at their identity through their own perspective represents power as they have gained freedom from the West rather than just being seen through an Oriental lens. Also, New Historicism allows me to draw parallels between the portrayals of economic clout and the Chinese in the film and the historical events that correlate and embody such portrayals.

## 4. Discussion Chapter

### 4.1 What makes up the Chinese identity

For this section, Chinese means Singaporean Chinese unless stated otherwise.

#### 4.1.1 Beliefs

There are 2 different groups of Chinese portrayed - the Singaporean-Chinese and the Chinese-American. Both share values of filial piety and following one's aspirations, albeit expressed in differently.

##### 4.1.1.1 Filial piety

Filial piety is portrayed through the relationship of Nick Young and his Mother and through the relationship of Rachel Chu and her Mother. However, the qualities that each Mother requires of their child differs due to their difference of environments.

##### A) Nick Young and his Mother

Eleanor Young portrays a mother which demands respect and obedience from her son. In a scene where one of her relatives tell her, "But he's different." She replies, "When children are away from home too long, they forget who they are." This is in response to his insistence that he needs to see things through in America and she needs to regain control over his decision of where to be and what he does. This shows that she is seeking obedience from her son to constitute to filial piety, regardless of what he wants.

##### B) Rachel and her Mother

Rachel's mother plays a supporting role towards Rachel's life, and merely requires respect. Respect in this case might even be a given. Throughout the film, Rachel continually listens to her Mother's advice and in the instance of going back to the memory of her old friend who she had Rachel with, Rachel consoled her own Mother, which is an aspect of filial piety. This however is contrasted with Nick Young and his Mother as his Mother demands obedience on top of respect, so much as to force him to abide by her choice by manipulating Rachel through many instances.

Therefore, it can be concluded that despite both Singaporean-Chinese and Chinese-American have filial piety as a value, the way they go about portraying it and expressing it is different as seen through the Singaporean-Chinese Mother demanding both respect and obedience and the Chinese-American Mother demanding respect.

#### 4.1.1.2 Aspirations

##### A) Nick Young and his Mother

Nick Young has his own dreams to chase, rather than just taking over his father's fortune and company, especially to be with Rachel. Her Mother however, feels that she gets to decide whatever she feels is the best suited. She went at great lengths to forcefully shape her son's future and wife, by having a private investigator to find fault in Rachel is one prime example. She feels that one's aspirations should be sacrificed for the family, using herself as an example. She had to stay at home and help her husband, sacrificing her time to simply measure up because she felt obligated to the family and her husband. Not only that, she emphasises so much on shaping her son's future that she does it at the expense of her son's relationship with her, by having a private investigator check Rachel out. Therefore, she treats one's personal aspirations as the second priority, and the family or parent's aspirations for the child as the first priority, and shapes her child's future, whatever the cost.

##### B) Rachel Chu and her Mother

Her Mother has played a supporting role of Rachel's life throughout the film. She gives advice to Rachel and how she should deal with a situation, for example after she ran to Peik Lin's house to mellow in her misery. She constantly encourages Rachel to get up and continue following her passion and aspirations. This sentiment is clearly expressed when Rachel says, "She knows that's what I'm passionate about, and that's what she has always wanted for me." This shows that her Mother has taken a more relaxed stance toward Rachel's future and has only encouraged her to pursue her passion, starkly contrasted with Eleanor's need to shape her son's future and taking the forefront of her son's future.

Overall, there are clear distinctions about how the Singaporean Chinese and the Chinese American go about expressing their values like filial piety and their dreams and aspirations. This can be largely attributed to the difference in the ideals of their environment. America is a much more liberal country, while the Chinese countries in general are much more conservative. These ideals that run through their country ultimately influenced how each Mother has gone about

constituting what filial piety is and shaping their child's dreams and aspirations. The American-Chinese clearly has a more liberal stance in general while the Singaporean-Chinese has a much more conservative and tight stance towards their children's goals and dreams and the way they treat their parents.

## 4.2 Strengthening the Chinese Identity

For this section, Chinese means Singaporean Chinese unless stated otherwise.

### 4.2.1 The reference point of the change in Chinese identity

The reference point of what the Chinese has changed from is presented in the first part of the film - the interaction between the Yang family and the British. This reference point of the Chinese is the Pre-Colonial to Colonial period Singapore which perpetuates the Oriental image of the international/British perspective that the Chinese are a socially inferior culture and race, lacking in economic clout and wealth, as compared to the British in terms of wealth and how refined and civilised they are. This Oriental image is constructed through the various remarks made by the British manager. The remark made by the British that this was a "private hotel" connotes that the Chinese were uncivilised and used public hotel that were not of British calibre, indicating that they viewed that the Chinese were lacking in wealth and could not afford the "Lancaster suite". Moreover, the mention of Chinatown indicates how the Chinese are segregated from the British through geography as the Chinese are allocated a plot of land to live in, rather than mixing with the British, pointing to the notion of cultural inferiority and discrimination. This points back to when Singapore and Hong Kong were part of the British Empire as colonies. This reference point is meant to juxtapose with the post-colonial state of the Singapore which has pivoted in terms of its economic power, allowing them to emerge as a bigger global presence.

### 4.2.2 An imbalance in economic growth and identity strengthening in the Asian community

When Peik Lin and Rachel attempt to enter the Yang Family mansion, they come across 2 security guards who are both Indian. The fact that other races did not appear for the entirety of the film despite being named "Crazy Rich Asians" could point out that only the Chinese are enjoying the exponential economic growth and wealth and that among the Asian community, the other races are still below the Chinese in the social and economic hierarchy. For example, the Indian economy has still remained or even decrease in its economy size in proportion to other countries, while countries like China and Singapore, which have predominantly Chinese populations,

experienced much economic growth, so much as for China to overtake Japan and Singapore, a small country with no natural resources to overtake Malaysia, according to a chart by the world economic forum. This notion is presented through the film's only inclusion of non-Chinese Asians as security guards for the Yang family, which might be a racist remark, but at the same time contrasts the position and economic status and clout the Chinese and the non-Chinese Asians have, which points to an imbalance in economic growth and identity strengthening. Moreover, the scene might have created an Oriental image of the Indian race, and therefore inadvertently establishing the Chinese as the Occident or the superior race. The Indian security guards held guns, pointing to the fact that they resort to violence. Also, the fact that they did not speak throughout their interaction with Rachel and Peik Lin shows that they are not educated and as refined as them. Therefore, this develops an Oriental image and presents the imbalance of economic growth between the Chinese and non-Chinese Asian communities. This inadvertently strengthens the Chinese identity as it allows for the contrasts in economic growth among the Asian community. Critics even mentioned that it might be because Hollywood itself might not be ready for Asians of non-eastern descent. It shows that the Chinese has stood out among all the other Asian communities in terms of economic power and wealth, making it a very if not the most significant Asian presence in the world, strengthening the Chinese identity.

#### 4.2.3 Economic clout- gain in pride and confidence

The racist remarks by the British hotel manager flashes out the British stereotypes and view of the Chinese as uncivil, unrefined and financially incapable ("this is a private hotel") to have a lavish lifestyle equal to theirs (shock written on the manager's face when he realised they bought over the hotel" as it presents the birzzarity of the entire situation), situating the Chinese as a socially inferior culture. However, the pivot/increase of economic power of Singapore and strengthening of identity is presented through how the Yang family interacts with the British. When the Yang family entered, they were confident in terms of their presentation of self. They did not falter when the receptionist subtly hinted that they did not belong here to prove that they were no longer inferior and afraid of the British. Moreover, the presentation of their clothes also rejected the image of the uncivil, unrefined Chinese but presented them as socially superior with economic clout. This allows them to remain poised as the British hurled subtle insults at them, as they were fully aware of their financial capabilities and their stature in the world. This prevented them from being intimidated and has allowed them to strengthen their identity in the world as they are no longer put down by their perceived inferiority in relation to the British.

Peik Lin's family and house represents a gain of excessive pride because of their wealth. Peik

Lin's family wear flashy clothing and have even made their house look like the Palace of Versailles with a big fountain inside, almost as if to scream and exclaim at people that they are rich, in contrast with the Yang family clothing where in one scene Astrid enters with sunglasses and not very flashy clothing, almost as if to hide her identity. This portrayal has also been viewed as criticism against the lack of taste of the ostentatious nouveau riche. This therefore shows that together with the growth in financial capabilities and economic clout, there is bound to be a small growth in terms of excessive pride and arrogance within the Chinese identity.

#### 4.2.4 Gain in global presence

In the film, it shows that the Yang family has bought countless things, including that of an ancient Cambodian Gong. This ancient Cambodian Gong symbolises many things, it represents the history of the Cambodians and the culture of the Cambodians as it is a relic from their past. Despite this being an invaluable relic, the Yang family bought it "because they can". This possession of a cultural relic from the Cambodian culture represents the financial capabilities of the Yang family and how they can make a global presence in the world through such financial dominance. When they bought over the British hotel, this reflects the company, "Suntec Reit" that bought over a Grade A Sydney office for 282m (Straits Times). It represents the asserting of a global presence due to their financial capabilities and because of the assertion of a global presence, they also gain the international recognition of their financial capabilities, therefore inadvertently strengthening their Singaporea -Chinese identity.

### 5. Concluding Chapter

*Crazy Rich Asians* contrasts the Chinese American and the Singaporean Chinese to represent that despite that both diaspora originated from the same place (China), their values and beliefs are not monolithic. The way they express values, beliefs and outlook on life are shaped by their various environments that they live in for example, the Singaporean one (majority Chinese originating from China), and the American one (filled with the ideals of the American Dream). Yet the core principles behind the common Chinese identity are still very much similar. Despite living in different environments and they have no doubt been influenced by their environment, the core principles and values that are traditional and gained through heritage is still maintained, though the way they go about expressing certain values might differ. This illustrates the fact that the Chinese traditional values acts as a link that allows each group, be it Singaporean-Chinese or Chinese-American, to be connected and categorised under the big umbrella of a Chinese. Moreover, the difference in the way each group go about expressing their values signify the multi-layered race the Chinese have become due to globalisation. It has enriched the culture

through the immersion of other cultural experiences and has allowed the Chinese to break away from being one race to a plethora of different groups but yet still united through their beliefs.

The Singaporean-Chinese identity has strengthened mainly due to its economic clout. Its economic has allowed it to gain pride and confidence and asserting a global presence in the world, helping it gain global recognition and increase in their stature in the world, thereby strengthening their identity. The sheer imbalance of economic growth between the Asian communities allow the Singaporean-Chinese to stand out in the eyes of the international community and thus strengthens their identity.

Overall, the Singaporean-Chinese identity has evolved into a combination of traditional beliefs and modern aspects like economy, language and education, which in turn also make up the Singaporean-Chinese identity.

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