

The Representation of Chinese Characters in Kevin Kwan's *Crazy Rich Asians* (2013)

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ABSTRACT

Crazy Rich Asians (2013) is a best-selling novel depicting the life of Chinese characters who were born and grew up in Singapore and America respectively. Throughout their life, they interacted with Chinese as well as American culture which made them culturally hybrid characters. Thus, this study aims to analyze how Chinese characters are represented in the novel and the meaning behind the representation within the qualitative approach and textual analysis method. Using the theory of representation (Hall, 1997) and hybridity (Bhabha, 1994), this study reveals that the Chinese characters are represented through their thought, behavior, and language which inclined towards American culture. It is found that Rachel and Nick, despite their Chinese ethnicity, are represented to adopt and uphold American culture while also maintaining a few aspects of Chinese culture. Rachel adopts and chooses American culture consciously while maintaining her Chinese culture subconsciously. On the other hand, Nick is portrayed to uphold and maintain both American and Chinese cultures by choice throughout the novel. Furthermore, the analysis of this study indicates the effort of the author to challenge and subvert the existing Chinese stereotypes in literature namely yellow peril and model minority by utilizing the characters' hybridity. The characters are shown to interact and negotiate with the new culture within the "Third Space of Enunciation" where all presumed characteristics and perceptions are nullified. By negotiating the cultures, they invalidate the notion of pure and fixed culture which is glorified by the stereotype of Chinese.

Keywords: *American culture, Chinese culture, hybridity, representation, stereotype*

INTRODUCTION

Chinese ethnic group is one of the biggest diasporas in the world. This is in accordance with the statement by Poston and Wong (2016), who report that Chinese ranked the third after Germans and Irish as the largest diasporas in the world. Chinese diasporas are known as overseas Chinese. Poston and Wong (2016) describe overseas Chinese as Chinese people who reside outside the mainland (People's Republic of China, Hong Kong, Macau, and Taiwan). These overseas Chinese spread over the globe, residing in almost every country in the world. Being in foreign places and interacting with people in different cultural contexts, overseas Chinese need to modify their notion of cultures. New environments oblige them to learn new language skills, different etiquette patterns, different culinary possibilities, different parenting customs, etc. The new cultures, either adapted or assimilated, are not necessarily taken from superior cultures, they are just simply different from the cultures overseas Chinese have when they first

come to certain countries. The emergence of these intermixed cultures is often referred to as hybridity.

Hybridity is one of the most widely employed concepts in post-colonial study. This term is closely associated with the work of Homi K. Bhabha which discussed the interdependence and mutual construction of subjectivities of the colonizer and colonized. According to Bhabha (1994), hybridity refers to the emergence of new cultures due to colonialization and a conscious movement of cultural suppression. The occurrence of new cultures is possible because culture is not a static entity that can be fixed in time and space, rather, culture is something which is fluid and perpetually in motion (Bhabha, 1994). Furthermore, Bhabha (1994) states that culture is a melting pot of several disparate elements which are regularly being added and negotiated in a space called "Third Space of Enunciation". The new cultures as a result of negotiation in the "Third Space of Enunciation" can be investigated through the manifestation of culture such as

language, ideas, beliefs, customs, taboos, codes, institutions, tools, techniques, rituals, ceremonies, symbols, works of art, etc.

Regarding the topic of hybridity, there are several studies that have been conducted. Jopi Nyman (2007) in his article entitled "The Hybridity of the Asian American Subject in Cynthia Kadohata's *The Floating World*", Shirin Zubair (2012) in her journal article entitled "Crossing Borders, Reinventing Identity(ies): Hybridity in Pakistani English Fiction" and Shahbaz Arif and Nighat Parveen (2014) in their research entitled *Cultural Hybridity in Nadeem Aslam's Maps for Lost Lovers*. The studies conducted by the researchers show that the cultural hybridity or identity can be represented and manifested through very diverse cultural forms. Nyman (2007) found that memory and ghost are utilized to show the representation of the character's cultural identity in the novel. Zubair (2012) identified language, dressing, and thought as the signifier of cultural identity. Lastly, Arif and Parveen (2014) categorized

language as the indicator of nation, ethnic, and religion mixture in the novel.

The present research aims to investigate the issue of representation in Chinese characters who are hybrid in the novel by Kevin Kwan entitled *Crazy Rich Asians* (2013). The novel is written by a Singaporean Chinese who has been living in the United States for almost two decades. This novel is interesting because it tells about the story of hybrid characters from America and Singapore using the perspective of hybrid writer. Published in June 2013, the novel instantly gained worldwide success as a best-selling book in many countries and recommended by influential celebrities like Oprah Winfrey, Anna Wintour and Bryan Boy. Due to its popularity, the novel is adapted into a movie and released in August 2018. The movie is also a big hit and its engagement can be seen in the creation of other 'Crazy Rich' terms such as *Crazy Rich Surabayan* or *Crazy Rich Tasikmalayan*. The big impact given by this piece of literature to society has become one of the reasons this study is conducted.

Despite the fame of the movie in popular media, this study chooses to analyze its novel since it is the source of the story. Due to limited screen time, a movie may alter and adjust the story to fit its limitations. In addition, when made into a movie, the story is told from the director's point of view instead of the novel's writer. Thus, the novel is more suitable to be discussed in the present research to find the representation of Chinese characters, who are hybrid, in the story. Regarding the novel, the issue of hybridity and representation is less discussed. Studies on this novel have discussed the authorial ideology via the class structure and class conflict reflected in the novel using Marxist theory (Adhitya, 2015) and the family conflict reflected in the novel using sociological approach (Dwi & Prastiwi, 2013). The present study, on the other hand, focuses on analyzing the issue of hybridity and representation of Chinese characters, who are hybrid, in the novel using the theoretical framework of hybridity by Homi K. Bhabha (1994) and representation by Stuart Hall (1997).

The problems of the present study are formulated in the following research questions:

1. How Chinese characters are represented in *Crazy Rich Asians*?
2. What is the meaning behind the representation?

METHODOLOGY

The research calls for in-depth understanding regarding the representation of hybrid Chinese characters in Kevin Kwan's *Crazy Rich Asians* (2013). For the intended purpose, qualitative approach is employed as Hancock B., et al. (2001, p.7) describes qualitative approach as an approach that attempts to broaden and/or deepen the understanding of how things come to be in social world.

In addition, the present study employed the method of textual analysis to answer the research questions. McKee (2002) describes textual analysis as a methodology to collect and analyze information where the researcher makes an "educated guess" (p. 70) at some of

the most possible interpretations that might be made of the specific text. This method of analysis resembles the purpose of qualitative approach to deepen the understanding regarding a certain phenomenon. Thus, to answer the research questions, the present study used textual analysis method to analyze the words, phrases, and sentences in *Crazy Rich Asians* (2013) by Kevin Kwan.

Data collection

The data were collected in the form of excerpts, narration, and dialogues related to the representation of hybrid Chinese characters in the novel. In collecting the data, close reading the novel was performed in order to understand the text thoroughly.

Data analysis

There were six steps of collecting the data in the present study. Firstly, read the novel thoroughly several times. Secondly, create a note contains words, phrases, sentences, and dialogues related to the way the Chinese characters are represented in the novel through thought, behavior, and language. Thirdly, categorize the data into two

sections: the way Rachel Chu and Nicholas Young are represented based on the three aspects mentioned previously. Fourthly, analyze and interpret the findings and find the meaning behind those representations based on the Hybridity theory proposed by Bhabha (1994) and the theory of Representation by Hall (1997). Fifthly, relate the data found with the literature reviews. Finally, conclude the study and gave suggestions related for further studies.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The findings show that the chosen characters in the novel are represented to have a hybrid culture. This claim is based on the portrayal of the characters' manifested cultural items, namely thoughts, behaviors, and language. The study of Zubair (2012) also uses language and thought to investigate the character's hybridity in addition to a specific focus on dressing. Rachel and Nick, despite their Chinese ethnicity, are represented to adopt and uphold American culture while also maintaining a few aspects of Chinese culture. It is worth to notice that

Rachel adopts and chooses American culture consciously while maintaining her Chinese culture subconsciously. On the other hand, Nick is portrayed to uphold and maintain both American and Chinese cultures consciously throughout the novel.

Both Rachel and Nick maintain Chinese culture because of their respective family environment. Considering her childhood, Rachel's subconscious preservation of Chinese culture might appear due to her Chinese mother and relatives. During her growing up period, she interacts closely with her mother and relatives who are both Chinese. Throughout that period, she must have heard or been advised to do or not to do something based on Chinese traditions and norms. This Chinese upbringing certainly affects Rachel's perspectives and actions. For example, when Rachel is in the plane with Nick, she says, "Wait a minute. Is it bad to watch a film about a plane crash while you're flying?" (p. 86). She prefers not to watch a movie about plane crash when she and Nick are in a flight because she thinks it is

a bad omen. However, Rachel's Chinese culture manifests more at a subconscious level because she interacts less with this culture than American culture. Growing up in America, Rachel's interacts more with American culture. Her interactions with Chinese culture are mostly limited to those involving her mother and relatives. This is not to mention that since her mother and relatives have been living in America for a long time, it is very likely that they have also already affected by American culture. Thus, Rachel's Chinese culture most of the time appears subconsciously. Meanwhile, Nick was raised in a conservative Chinese family that teaches him how to think and act like Chinese since he was a child. In addition, he lives in Singapore where 75% of the society are Chinese who also uphold Chinese culture. Thus, unlike Rachel, he is more aware of Chinese culture. While Rachel's Chinese culture appears subconsciously, Nick is conscious when he practices Chinese culture; for example, when he prioritizes visiting his grandmother over meeting his friend on time.

Nevertheless, Rachel and Nick choose to adopt American culture due to the influences of American environment. Rachel consciously adopts American culture because she lives in America all her life. Living in America, she must have been receiving all American cultural ideas, for example through mass media, social media, and her friends. At the same time, growing up with her mother and relatives, it seems that Rachel also receives several Chinese values from them. In the novel, Rachel's relatives are depicted as Chinese who have been living in America for longer than Rachel. While it is most likely that they have adopted several American cultures, Rachel signifies that they still uphold Chinese culture, for example, she states that her "busybody relatives" try to set her up and encourage her to marry early. Growing up with two cultures, American cultural ideas might be more apparent to her since she spent her time equally, if not more, outside her family. Furthermore, even though Rachel's mother comes from China where conservative traditional Chinese

values are highly upheld, she has adopted and taught Rachel several American values such as liberal relationship and meritocracy. These habituated American cultures then become how Rachel identifies herself. Furthermore, the ideas also influence her perspective and behavior. This is apparent in her thoughts, behaviors, and languages throughout the novel.

Meanwhile, like previously mentioned, Nick knows about and is aware of Chinese culture since he was raised in a conservative Chinese family. In addition, he is also familiar with American culture since he continues his study in America and needs to adapt to the country's culture. By knowing both cultures, he has the privilege to choose which culture to uphold in certain situations. In the novel, Nick is portrayed to be more inclined to American culture. This might happen because Nick is more familiar and comfortable with American culture which heavily emphasize on individual choice that can accommodate his personal interests unlike the imposed and dictated Chinese culture from his family. For example, when Rachel is

planning to return to America, Nick says, “No, no, I’m as sick of this place as you are! I want to go home with you!” (p. 478). Nick insisted to return to America with Rachel because he believes that America is his home where he feels comfortable. On contrary, he thinks of Singapore as a place he despises. Nonetheless, despite the inclination, both characters show that they uphold two culture at the same time which indicates their cultural hybridity. This is similar to Zubair’s (2012) study which shows that the characters are living by upholding two different culture, their native culture and the dominant culture of the country they live in.

Unlike some previous studies, the present study focuses more on the representation of hybrid Chinese characters and the meaning behind the representation. Studies by Nyman (2007), Zubair (2012), and Parveen & Arif (2014) aimed to investigate the construction of hybrid identity of the characters in their respective object of study. To investigate the cultural hybridity, Nyman (2007) and Parveen & Arif (2014) utilize symbolism such

as memory, ghosts, setting, and history while the present study concentrates on the interactions of the characters through their thoughts, behaviors and language. The diaspora characters in previous studies have a difficult process before deciding to adopt American culture. Meanwhile, in the present study, both characters show they almost naturally make decision by adopting American culture consciously. In addition, they can manipulate the culture according to their needs in particular situations. This might happen because the common theme regarding hybridity revolves around immigrant characters. Usually, immigrants have a hard time trying to adapt to the local culture in the place they live in which can be seen from the immigrant characters in the previous studies. It is different from the present study as the theme of the investigated novel is about the descendant of diaspora characters in the context of globalized world where interconnectedness is inevitable and thus, triggered “the third space” where hybridity emerged as the result.

Rachel and Nick are the descendants of Chinese diasporas from *Huashang* emigration pattern, an overseas Chinese group who adopts American culture while still maintaining their Chinese culture. They uphold two different cultures and are not strictly defined by their national or cultural origin, as a result, they have their own perspective on how to see and act. This is in accordance with the statement of Ashcroft et al. (2000) who affirm that the descendants of diasporic movements have cultivated their own distinctive cultures which combine their native culture with foreign culture. The findings in the present study have shown that the characters are portrayed to be culturally hybrid which, according to Bhabha (1994), is the result of negotiation in the “Third Space of Enunciation” where all cultural presumptions are avoided. In addition, Bhabha (1994) states that cultural hybridity functions to subvert the concept of pure or authentic cultures. This means that the concept of fixity like racial and national stereotypes is no longer valid in the “Third Space of Enunciation” or

hybridity. It enables the subjects of the fixed colonizer’s cultural authority to construct their cultures and identities in an endless process and every possible interpretation. Thus, the endless process in the third space results in the absence of fixed and original culture. Therefore, the representation of hybridity in the novel might be taken as the effort of the author to subvert the current fixed perspectives of Chinese.

These findings are in line with the interviews of the novel’s author, Kevin Kwan. In his interview with Reuters, he states that he does not feel like the Asians represented by the media. He believes that the media only portray Asian in two ways, “the science geek who’s using his mobile phone” and “a very token Asian family - yuppie mother and father and two little Asian kids” (Lies, 2013, par. 20) which is in line with the model minority stereotype. Furthermore, he says that books narrating about Asians in America are also seemed to be in only two genres, “historical fiction set in Asia, of the Amy Tan variety” and “the contemporary stories about Asian-American

assimilation” (Lies, 2013, par. 5). Hence, he believes that he needs to write this novel to bring new perspectives on Asian, especially Chinese, to “bridge the gap between East and West” (Ho, 2017, par.29). He states that “Asia is becoming so Westernized” (Christensen, 2013, par.10); however, the media and literature are still depicting them in a rigid and fixed stereotype, either following yellow peril or model minority stereotype. Thus, this book is written to subvert and challenge the existing Chinese characters’ stereotype in media and literature by showing the representation of hybridity in the novel.

The present study finds that Kwan’s claim in terms of subverting yellow peril and model minority stereotype is not entirely wrong. He tries to subvert the stereotypes by promoting the idea of culturally hybrid Chinese characters in the novel. Bhabha (1998, p. 58) states that “Hybrid strategy or discourse opens up a space of negotiation where power is unequal, but its articulation may be equivocal. Such negotiation is neither assimilation nor collaboration

and it happens within “The Third Space of Enunciation”. In the story, “The Third Space of Enunciation” appears when the hybrid Chinese characters uphold a culture based on their personal interests, for example, the culture which they found more convenient and have more simple practices. In this space, the richness of the characters’ personal interests is taken into account which makes the emergence of an ‘interstitial’ agency that refuses the binary representation” possible. However, throughout the novel, even though both characters are represented to uphold several Chinese cultures, they are depicted to be inclined mostly to American culture. While a very Americanized Chinese characters might be seen as a problematic representation, Bhabha (1998) believes that cultural hybridity challenges cultural stereotype no matter how dominant one culture compared to the other or how unequal the culture in a narrative. In the story, despite the dominant inclinations to American culture, Rachel and Nick are also represented to uphold several Chinese cultures. Thus, their cultural hybridity will open the negotiation for

their cultural identity which in turn will nullified the fixed cultural stereotype.

To sum up, the analysis show that the culturally hybrid characters are created deliberately by the author, Kevin Kwan, as the attempt to subvert the fixed cultural stereotypes apparent in literatures. While the characters are more inclined towards American culture, this study does not read it as a stereotyping agenda. Instead, by representing Chinese characters having both Chinese and American culture, this indicates Kwan's effort to challenge the existing Chinese stereotypes such as yellow peril and model minority. This is because no matter how inclined the characters to certain culture, the issue of hybridity will be prevailing. The narratives and discussions about both cultures will be apparent and nullify the existence of one single rigid pure culture which is glorified by stereotype.

CONCLUSION

The purpose of this research is to show the representation of hybrid Chinese characters and its meaning in

Crazy Rich Asians (2013) by Kevin Kwan. Based on the analysis, it is found that the chosen characters in *Crazy Rich Asians* uphold at least two cultures namely American and Chinese culture which make them culturally hybrid. The characters are investigated based on their manifested cultural items such as thought, behavior, and language. These cultures are then classified based on Fan's (2000) general assumptions of Chinese culture and Althen, Doran, & Szmania's (2003) general assumptions of American culture. Based on the categorized data, the findings are analyzed with the theory of Hybridity proposes by Homi K. Bhabha (1994) and Representation (1997) by Stuart Hall.

The representation of hybridity in *Crazy Rich Asians* shows the effort of the author to challenge and subvert the existing Chinese stereotypes namely yellow peril and model minority in literary works. Rachel and Nick's conscious and subconscious decision in upholding either American or Chinese culture depict their cultural hybridity. Both Rachel and Nick obtain their cultural

hybridity through experiences and interaction with people who influenced them such as their experience with family, friends, and the society where they live. Hence, their cultural hybridity is constructed by the surroundings, narration, and cultural influences during their life. Upon interacting with new culture, they negotiate it through the “Third

Space of Enunciation” where all presumed characteristics and perceptions are nullified. Here, they have the privilege to be inclined to certain culture, or even, create a new combined culture. By negotiating the cultures, they invalidate the notion of pure and fixed culture which is glorified by stereotype.

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