

## The Princess Fantasy of Singapore

### *Shorter Histories and US Decline in Crazy Rich Asians*

At the 2016 White House state dinner, Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong presented President Barack Obama and First Lady Michelle Obama with a gift commemorating fifty years of US-Singapore relations: the “Dendrobium Barack and Michelle Obama.” In Singapore, where the national flower is a hybrid orchid known as the Vanda Miss Joaquim, there is a history of “orchid diplomacy”: orchids are bred for famous guests and state dignitaries, which have included Elton John and Aung San Suu Kyi.<sup>1</sup> In this case, the flower, created by the Singapore Botanic Gardens, is a cross between the Dendrobium Pink Lips, native to Barack Obama’s birthplace of Hawai‘i, and the Dendrobium Sunplaza Park, a hybrid orchid from Singapore.<sup>2</sup> Described by the Singaporean press as “vigorous and free flowering,” the orchid’s personality was symbolically apt for the Trans-Pacific Partnership free trade agreement that both nations’ leaders were espousing at the time.<sup>3</sup> Moreover, the flower’s mixed stock of Dendrobium Pink Lips and Dendrobium Sun Plaza Park symbolizes a heteronormative romantic relation that Singapore was projecting onto its US partner, one that reversed the typical gender dynamics of West and non-West relations. Through the suggestively named Pink Lips, the United States is feminized vis-à-vis Hawai‘i (as Haunani-Kay Trask drily tells us, “Hawai‘i—the word, the vision, the sound in the mind—is the fragrance and feel for soft kindness[;] . . . Hawai‘i is she”),<sup>4</sup> while Singapore is masculinized by the Dendrobium Sun Plaza Park and its attendant associations with built space and modern construction. Indeed, the courting, wide-eyed tone of Prime Minister Lee’s official state remarks—“I was struck by your focus, your informed interest in Asia and your desire to cement America’s role in it”<sup>5</sup>—only affirmed the apparent budding romance between the two heads of state epitomized by the orchid.

This amorous relation is a clear pivot from the Asian Values era of the 1980s and 1990s. For example, in a 1994 *Foreign Affairs* interview with the former prime



FIGURE 7. Photo of the Dendrobium Barack and Michelle Obama. blickwinkel / E. Teister / Alamy Stock Photo.

minister, Lee Kuan Yew, Lee argued that the liberal, intellectual tradition that flourished in the United States after World War II was causing societal breakdown. Agreeing with the interviewer that he used to admire the United States, Lee went on to say that America's "failed social policies . . . have resulted in people urinating in public, in aggressive begging in the streets, in social breakdown."<sup>6</sup> Lee's comments were made at a time when the Singaporean state performed its national identity through, on the one hand, particularized interpretations of Sino-Confucian values and, on the other, occidentalist logics. Illustrating the latter point, Lee's emphasis on uncontained bodily fluids and invocation of masculinized images of homeless people roaming the street casts the United States as improper and undesirable. Despite the distinct political and economic circumstances in which Prime Ministers Lee Kuan Yew and Lee Hsien Loong were speaking, it is clear from their rhetoric that gender is crucial for comprehending the relations between the two nations.

This chapter investigates the dynamics of desire in the context of Singapore as Global Asia in mediating the politics of difference. Historically, racial difference has been wielded to justify the civilizing mission and extractive capitalism of colonialism. In the postcolonial Asian context, however, state leaders deployed difference from the West to claim autonomy and economic exceptionalism. As typified

by Lee's interview, Asian Values discourse hardened binary differences between East and West in order to offer a culturalist explanation for so-called Asian Miracle economies and to fend off Western critiques of human rights records in Asia. The 1997 Asian financial crisis, however, marked the wane of Asian Values discourse in Singapore. One of the central investigations of this chapter, then, is how difference and thus desire have been reconceptualized in the post-Asian Values era, a time when Singapore's economic reputation is ascending and that of the United States is purportedly on the decline.

To address the question of how desire is reconceived, I turn to Kevin Kwan's novel *Crazy Rich Asians* (2014). Through the romantic travails of Nicholas Young and Rachel Chu—Singaporean Chinese and Chinese American, respectively—*Crazy Rich Asians* works within the familiar East meets West encounter but routes it through a postdiasporic context, in this case, Chinese. The breezily written novel, with its melodramatic plot and voyeuristic perspective into the lives of the obscenely wealthy of Singapore, made best-seller lists around the world and was adapted as a Hollywood feature film of the same title in 2018. For a number of local commentators, the *Crazy Rich Asians* film adaptation crystallizes some of the worst effects of Singapore as Global Asia. As the Singaporean poet Pooja Nansi puts it, the Hollywood adaptation's relegation of brown bodies to servitude is a "Singaporean Chinese man's fantasy of erasure of our multiculturalism," which is obscured in the reception of the film as a "win" for Asian Americans.<sup>7</sup> With its shallow chick-lit appeal, celebration of consumerism, and fetishization of wealth, Kwan's original novel too has been subject to much scrutiny, with many in the local literary community loath to have Kwan's work included under the label "Singapore literature." There is undoubtedly much to problematize about the politics of *Crazy Rich Asians*. Nevertheless, the novel, and the cultural phenomenon it generated, is significant for what it elucidates about Singapore's soft power and cultural capital and the workings of postcolonial capitalism over time.

My analysis centers on Kwan's novel and his presentation of Singapore in a chick-lit proximate genre that I describe as a "princess fantasy," or an unapologetically girly fantasy of being the center of attention, having all desires catered to, and being revered by all for her greatness. Much like male fantasies, princess fantasies are about power. But princess fantasies do not covet power and control in the male sense of domination. The princess fantasy is not a fantasy about becoming queen. Instead, the princess's power derives from her ability to attract and draw male subjects to her. The fantasy of being treated like a princess also suggests a desire for fantastical experiences of luxury, indulgence, and extravagance, for a Prince Charming to swoop in and save one from the doldrums or difficulties of one's life. The princess fantasy *feels* empowering insofar as the princess has all her material desires fulfilled by her ability to attract, but the patriarchal structure remains. The generic frame of the princess fantasy offers critical insights into the workings of

Global Asia with respect to the United States and, ironically, also explains the popular appeal of Kwan's work in the context of Global Asia. In this way *Crazy Rich Asians* is a complex text to read: the novel at once offers a critical commentary on Global Asia and history of postcolonial capitalism, is a beneficiary of Singapore's transformation into Global Asia, and, as the novel rose to fame, is constitutive of Global Asia itself. The criticality of *Crazy Rich Asians*, already quite subtle in terms of the writing, is further obscured by the fact that Kwan tends to promote his novel as an anthropological exposé of the Singaporean elite.

On the face of it, the princess fantasy simply inverts the gender relations between East and West as performed by (Prince) Lee and (Princess) Obama at the state dinner. Certainly, the princess fantasy relies on the passive female victim trope typical of what Cristina Bacchilega describes as the "Innocent Persecuted Heroine" fairy tale.<sup>8</sup> In doing so, it reinscribes the Occident's pleasure of the Orient to maintain the fiction of Western power. But more than a simple inversion where a masculinized Singapore dominates the now-feminized United States, Global Asia's appeal relies on a deracinated, "not quite" Asian masculinity. In this way, the princess fantasy shows how Global Asia's power is still mitigated by colonial histories of race, even as it instrumentalizes that very history of Western desire for power in order to accrue capital.

*Crazy Rich Asians* also makes a number of important historical points about Global Asia's power and the racialized politics of historical time. The novel illustrates the significance of US declinism for the production of the princess fantasy: the prince—manifesting in both character (Nick) and setting (Singapore)—saves the princess (Rachel and the United States) by bringing her to a site where heightened pleasures can take place. For Kwan's fictional princess fantasy, this has meant presenting Singapore as a place of strong affect with the use of melodramatic characters. Interestingly, Kwan's technique anticipates a state tourism campaign known as "Passion Made Possible" that emerged a couple of years after the publication of the novel. Both princess fantasy as novel and princess fantasy as tourism campaign counter Singapore's former image as a sterile, emotionless country. Through a reading of the novel's prologue—the infamous "Empire buys back" scene—I show that *Crazy Rich Asians* prioritizes shorter histories over the *longue durée* to comprehend the workings of postcolonial capitalism and how imperial critiques can maintain Eurocentrism. In doing so, I posit that *Crazy Rich Asians* reveals that a shorter view of new capital in Asia is necessary to undo a historicism that centralizes the British Empire. Like Jeremy Tiang and Hwee Hwee Tan in previous chapters, Kwan critiques how Singapore is typically read.

Finally, I argue that Kwan's princess fantasy calls attention to the role of setting in producing pleasure. If we think of the princess fantasy as articulating a kind of power over Western desires for the purpose of attracting capital, Kwan's novel demonstrates how this power is rooted in the aesthetics of Singapore's setting. Singapore as a setting of pleasure also, as I comment in the closing of this chapter,

helps us understand what enabled some of the more controversial aspects of the Hollywood film adaptation.

#### THE PRINCESS FANTASY OF SINGAPORE

The first installment of the *Crazy Rich Asians* trilogy centers on the romance of Nicholas Young and Rachel Chu. It is summer break for the New York University professors (history and economics, respectively) and Nick's best friend, Colin, is about to get married. On the occasion of Colin's wedding, Nick invites Rachel to visit Singapore, his childhood home, to meet his family and friends. Rachel has no idea that Nick is a member of one of the wealthiest families in Asia and that he is expected to receive a large inheritance. The learning curve is steep for Rachel, who was raised by a working-class, single, immigrant mother, as she realizes who her boyfriend is in this cross-cultural, cross-class encounter. Staying fairly true to a conventional romance plot, Nick's family and friends serve as major obstacles to the couple's anticipated nuptials.

As postcolonial studies has taught us, the colonial encounter is a highly gendered confrontation of racial difference. As Anne McClintock puts it, "Gender power was not the superficial patina of empire, an ephemeral gloss over the more decisive mechanics of class or race. Rather, gender dynamics were, from the outset, fundamental to the securing and maintenance of the imperial enterprise."<sup>9</sup> Such gender dynamics manifest in an orientalist dynamic, as Edward Said writes: "She [the Orient] never spoke of herself, she never represented her emotions, presence, or history. *He* spoke for and represented her."<sup>10</sup> *Crazy Rich Asians* plays on these colonial, gendered histories of encounter and orientalist representations with a contemporary twist. The West is figured through Rachel Chu, an American, and Nicholas Young, a Singaporean. Racialized difference is here portrayed as geopolitical difference, since the couple are both ethnically Chinese. By positioning the US/Rachel Chu as the feminized, passive figure in this allegory of Singapore as Global Asia, *Crazy Rich Asians* invites a reconsideration of how the gendered dynamic of postcolonial difference is reconceived in the Asian Century.

*Crazy Rich Asians* uses a familiar, Cinderella-esque romantic plot, with Rachel serving as the unwitting princess protagonist of the novel. Like Cinderella, Rachel is the "undeserving victim [who faces] various hostile antagonists,"<sup>11</sup> and her "persecution stems from the fact that she is temporarily denied her true position through some calumny."<sup>12</sup> (Indeed, the Hollywood adaptation of the novel features Rachel in a blue dress, clearly riffing on Cinderella's ball gown in the Disney animated film.) As with so many fairy tale princesses, readers are reassured of Rachel's "goodness, patience, innocence, [ . . . ] and, most of all, beauty."<sup>13</sup> Rachel's "natural, uncomplicated beauty" is drawn in contrast to the "red-carpet-ready girls [Nick] had grown up around."<sup>14</sup> Rachel is innocent not only in the sense that she is naive; she also does not put any effort into manipulating her image. Such a

depiction serves to emphasize the various injustices Rachel faces with Nick's friends and family and moreover stresses how little Rachel controls her circumstances, whether performed through her individual agency or her ability to manipulate her surroundings.

Through the gaze of Rachel, and all of her princess diminutiveness, the novel makes Singapore appear wondrously alien but in a way that emphasizes the setting's command over her. With the enumeration of hours of travel and the passage's attention to Rachel's first "glimpse" of Singapore, the description of Rachel's arrival in Singapore is reminiscent of that of a colonial explorer. Though her language draws on Western colonial tropes, the exotica of Singapore is also shaped by her ancestral knowledge: "She was in Southeast Asia now, in the realm her ancestors called the *Nanyang*."<sup>15</sup> Even for Rachel, who we may assume has familiarity with the region by virtue of being Chinese, the invocation of the *Nanyang* underscores the unknown of Singapore. The world she encounters is not what she expects: "But the view she could glimpse from the plane did not resemble some romantic terrain swathed in mist—rather, it was a dense metropolis of skyscrapers glittering in the evening sky, and from six thousand feet Rachel could already feel the pulsating energy that was one of the world's financial powerhouses."<sup>16</sup> Rachel's Westernized optic here does not reveal a hazy, indeterminate, malleable world waiting for interpretation and placement into history. The clarity of the sharp lines and bright lights represented by rigid skyscrapers asserts Singapore's modernity, denoting a masculinized authority over those who enter this world. The alluring phallic spectacle of Singapore is emphasized by "pulsating energy," offering a so-called money shot by uniting the masculine with the economic. The masculinized image of Singapore operates in sharp contrast to the "porno-tropics" of colonial-era writing that, as McClintock explains, feminized land for the taking.<sup>17</sup> Like a colonial narrative, Rachel's view of Singapore is based in an "erotics of ravishment,"<sup>18</sup> but if for Columbus types "ravishment" was a male power fantasy of "drag[ging] or carry[ing] away (a woman) by force or with violence," "ravishment" in the princess fantasy takes on its more passive definition of being "transport[ed] with the strength of some emotion; to [be] fill[ed] with ecstasy, intense delight, or sensuous pleasure; to [be] entrance[d], captivate[d], or enrapture[d]."<sup>19</sup> While colonial narratives express the "male bravura of the explorer, invested with his conquering mission,"<sup>20</sup> connoting a proximity because of the colonizer's aspirations to handle and master new lands, Rachel's initial encounter emphasizes distance and sensation in her ability to "feel" Singapore from six thousand feet above it. Like the porno-tropics, however, the eroticized overtones in the above passage are unmistakable and resemble that of sexual encounter.

High levels of pleasurable sensation compounded with Rachel's passivity (her lack of agency in determining the plot) enable everyday Singaporean scenes to transform into ones of excess and extravagance. After being picked up from Changi Airport, Rachel is whisked off to Lau Pa Sat, a hawker center "in the heart of the



downtown financial district.”<sup>21</sup> Though food tourism in Singapore is rather typical, that Rachel’s first gustatory experience of Singapore is in the financial district emphasizes the significance of consumptive capitalism for the princess fantasy. As Rachel samples local Singaporean cuisines, her various exclamations (“Why doesn’t it ever taste like this at home” and “Mmmm . . . heaven!”) and excited reactions (“her eyes widened in delight”) to the food make clear her ravishment.<sup>22</sup> The vibrant, endless descriptions of food in the grand, cathedral-like setting of Lau Pa Sat, combined with the emphasis on Rachel’s passivity as Nick slides one dish after another onto the table, are evocative of the “Be our Guest” feast scene in Disney’s *Beauty and the Beast*. While the princess allusion emphasizes the fantastical and otherworldly, the feasting also retains the eroticism of the porno-tropical financial scene, remarking on the sexualized relationship between consumption and pleasure through the eroticism of food consumption, or of foreign objects entering Rachel’s body. Moreover, positioned as foreigners to Nick’s Singapore world, readers are compelled to identify with Rachel, who also does not know anything about Nick’s family history or Singapore. As the story proceeds, readers are put in a more knowing position, further increasing Rachel’s passivity through her ignorance. The only willful action Rachel takes in trying to uncover Nick’s background comes very late in the novel, after Rachel has been antagonized by Nick’s family and friends over and over.

Though Nick’s and Rachel’s respective racial and gender identities counter the colonial expectation that such encounters are ones only between a white male (colonial) protagonist and a nonwhite (native) female, this gendered reversal, as it is figured through Nick, is not one in which he simply reperforms Western masculinity. The novel implies that such a simple reperformance is impossible in the racial context within and without the world of the novel. Before being introduced to Nick, Rachel’s friend Sylvia warns her and thus the reader: “He’s . . . Asian.”<sup>23</sup> Sylvia’s pause remarks on her hesitance, knowing Rachel’s “no Asian guys” rule, but also suggests Sylvia’s own surprise at how much the “curiously exotic” Nick defies her (and eventually, Rachel’s) expectations of Asian men,<sup>24</sup> presumably because of their racialized assumptions about emasculated Asian men. Insofar as masculinity in the United States is typically coded as white, much of Nick’s exotic appeal comes from his decidedly not white American subdued masculine manner: his “self-deprecating wit,” “quiet masculinity,” and “relaxed ease.”<sup>25</sup> Further differentiating him from American masculinity, Rachel notes (and finds attractive) Nick’s nostalgic colonial aesthetic: his “canvas jacket, white linen shirt, and faded jeans . . . reminiscent of some adventurer just returned from mapping the Western Sahara,” and humor redolent of “all those British-educated boys.”<sup>26</sup> Given the near-unlikelihood of “some adventurer” referring to an Asian mapping the Sahara (except perhaps the colonial assistant), we are to recognize that Nick’s fashion marks him as a British white. Yet Nick is characterized as an emphatically attractive Asian man, as Sylvia assures Rachel that he “looks a bit like that Japanese actor from the Wong Kar-wai

movies,”<sup>27</sup> unwittingly positioning Nick as embodying both former colonial powers of Singapore. But Rachel’s attraction to Nick focuses on his distinction *and* proximity to whiteness, or what Homi Bhabha describes as “almost the same but not white.”<sup>28</sup> In this way, the question of difference is not simply that of the dynamic between Rachel and Nick, but of how Nick’s inter-imperialist desirability—British, American, Japanese—is mediated by his racial proximity to whiteness.

But as much as Nick appears to be not quite/not white, so too is he not quite/not Asian. Rachel finds that unlike the other Asian American men she has dated, Nick does not flaunt

how many generations his family has been in America; what kind of doctors his parents were; how many musical instruments he played; the number of tennis camps he went to; which Ivy League scholarships he turned down; what model BMW, Audi, or Lexus he drove; and the appropriate number of years before he became (pick one) chief executive officer, chief financial officer, chief technology officer, chief law partner, or chief surgeon.<sup>29</sup>

Rachel finds the stereotypical achievement-focused, status-conscious, enumerating Asian man unattractive. While the opening nativist sentiment signals Rachel’s critique of a certain kind of Asian American, the passage also invokes a critique of Singaporean materialism—or what is locally joked about as the desire for the “five Cs”: cash, car, condominium, credit card, and country club—through a different five Cs, or “chiefs,” in the passage’s closing. Of course, for Nick, a character that the novel emphasizes is of old wealth, the status that accompanies any of the possible Cs is of little concern. As the daughter of an immigrant mother who moved around the country, seeking work at Chinese restaurants and eventually becoming a successful real estate agent, Rachel embodies a rags-to-riches American dream trajectory and represents the model minority myth. We come to understand that Rachel racializes showy capitalist materialism as Asian, which is part of why Nick and his ability to “fad[e] into the background” allows him to take exception to Rachel’s policy and be cast as not quite/not Asian.<sup>30</sup>

If conspicuous consumption remarks on an “old” way of being Asian, whether one is concerned with assimilating to upper-middle-class US culture or shedding a Third World image in favor of one of modernity, Nick represents a globalized Asian that surpasses the kinds of highly cultured Overseas Singaporean that the Singaporean state valorizes. Rachel is eventually impressed with Nick’s ability to recognize a Talking Heads song, “This Must Be The Place,” as they walk by a street performer: “She loved that Nick knew the song well enough to recognize this bastardized version.”<sup>31</sup> Even more than Chiah Deng of *Mammon Inc.*, Nick has impressive cultural knowledge of the West, even recognizing variations of a relatively obscure song. But unlike Chiah Deng, who needs to prove her skills as an Adapter by demonstrating her ability to learn Western cultural norms and then assimilate, Nick performs his depth of understanding of Western codes, not



just his achievement of them. This depth is “an implicit knowledge and procurement of knowledge that informs [his] consumption practices,” or what Elizabeth Currid-Halkett describes as the knowledge of the (American) aspirational class.<sup>32</sup> It is Rachel’s perception of their class alignment, in other words, that is the basis of her attraction to him. The *unattractive* Asian draws attention to the historical relationship between their race and desire to assimilate, racializing their aspiration. Nick’s characterization as Prince Charming suggests that the attractive Asian is one who does not ostentatiously perform dominant culture but has already arrived.

While *Crazy Rich Asians* illustrates how the pleasures that the West takes in the East now assume a gendered dynamic in which the West assumes a passive role, it also reveals how such gendered pleasures are conditioned on a deracinated, “not quite” Asian masculinity. The gender reversal performed through the princess fantasy might appear as a campy remark on the rising power of Asia because the princess fantasy functions within a heterosexual matrix and hegemonic femininity. The princess fantasy is not only a depiction of the passive experience of pleasure; it is also Kwan’s commentary on the circumstances that allow the West to find the East desirable even when the West is repositioned as feminine. In this instance, desirability is dependent on an erasure of materialist aspiration and assimilation of Western cultural knowledge. Both qualities are framed as some kind of transcendence of Asiatic race—a transcendence that is marked as sexually desirable—in the sense that Nick’s behavior does not remind Rachel of histories that have conditioned Asian subjects to economic ambition.

#### THE PRINCESS FANTASY: WHY NOW?

Although the fantasy of unfettered consumption and meeting Prince Charming is likely appealing at any historical juncture, the princess fantasy and its broader associations with being saved has a particular historical resonance when considering the economic decline of the United States and Singapore’s function as an offshore financial center that literally saves money for corporations and the elite. As Jed Esty writes, “The 2020s will be the last decade when the US economy is the largest in the world,”<sup>33</sup> and the fantasy of being “saved” or brought to a fantasyland to indulge in consumption without the worries of accruing more debt is especially comforting after the 2008 financial crisis.<sup>34</sup> Indeed, Kwan uses subtle and snarky humor to comment on the power of Asian capital in reference to US economic decline (itself a major factor that plays into the novel’s very appeal in the United States). For example, during a minor scene at Peik Lin’s house, children are chided for not finishing their food: “Aiyoooooh, finish everything on your plate, girls! Don’t you know there are children starving in America?”<sup>35</sup> Kwan repurposes a well-worn, racialized American dinner scene phrase to cast America as the new Third World Africa, a scene further ironized by the fact that said children are eating McDonald’s McNuggets, food emblematic of US corporate and cultural influence.<sup>36</sup>

Also significant is how Rachel and Nick's love plot begins in New York City, the financial center of the United States, in "Autumn 2008," when the global financial crisis began and US public debt began to increase substantially—a pivotal year in American declinism that "revealed the fragility of American prosperity."<sup>37</sup> The context of the couple's desire for each other, in other words, is one where the West's position has weakened. The least subtle reference to US economic decline happens well into the story, when Alistair Cheng embarrasses his family by announcing his engagement to Kitty Pong. In an attempt to ignore the announcement, Victoria Young and Cassandra Shang turn to Rachel.

"Now Rachel, I hear you are an economist? How fascinating! Will you explain to me why the American economy can't seem to dig out of its sorry state?" Victoria asked shrilly.

"It's that Tim Paulson fellow, isn't it?" Cassandra cut in. "Isn't he a puppet controlled by all the Jews?"<sup>38</sup>

The brief exchange echoes some of the same patronizing, Third Worlding sentiments of the earlier McDonald's scene: Hank is carelessly referred to as Tim, the complexity of the largest economic crisis since the Great Depression is reduced to an offhand remark, and a conspiracy theory on the "real" problem of the United States is offered. The humor behind many of the jabs at American economic decline takes on the same kind of "Empire strikes back" logics also apparent in the opening of the novel when the Leongs buy the Calthorpe Hotel and seem invested in stereotype critique. But they also make a pointed gesture at the new global order in which *Crazy Rich Asians* is situated, poking fun at a certain kind of imperial nostalgia represented by writers such as Tom Plate and Thomas L. Friedman. For them, Singapore represents a time when the United States too was a gleaming beacon of modernity made possible by "good governance," as Friedman puts it.<sup>39</sup> If we are to consider the broader emergence of the "princess industrial complex," which Peggy Orenstein suggests is a post-9/11 phenomenon, the princess fantasy of *Crazy Rich Asians* appeals to an American desire for innocence during an era when the global reputation and safety of the United States are perceived to be at risk.<sup>40</sup> Indeed, the *New York Times* describes the allure of *Crazy Rich Asians* as an escapist novel "after a year of heavy news—the Boston Marathon bombing, [and] nuclear threats from North Korea."<sup>41</sup> Whether ongoing national anxieties stemming from 9/11, the 2008 financial crisis, or the latest national crisis, *Crazy Rich Asians* offers needed relief.

While the novel appeals to some idea of Singapore as an imagined safe haven for the indebted and the spurned, Singapore as a haven becomes more literal when we contemplate its role in the offshore economy, something that *Crazy Rich Asians* also gestures toward. We might recall Peik Lin's comment to Rachel, that "Mainlanders feel that their money is far safer here than in Shanghai, or even Switzerland."<sup>42</sup> The Singaporean state makes plain its accommodation of transnational corporations

and the wealthy through its safe harbor accounting practices whereby capital gains and profits from investments or real estate are not taxed.<sup>43</sup> Less discussed is how the “stable image” that Peik Lin refers to also benefits foreign investors who are looking to put their money into emerging markets such as Vietnam’s real estate. As Kimberly Kay Hoang writes, “Emerging markets are characterized by weak formal institutions, limited information access, widespread corruption, and high levels of distrust.”<sup>44</sup> Hoang finds that foreign investors in Vietnam often “had majority ownership structures set up in Hong Kong or Singapore” because they mitigate perceptions of risky investment.<sup>45</sup> In this way, the princess fantasy articulates with the Global Asia image through their mutual emphases on safety, whether affective or financial.<sup>46</sup>

While the very success and cultural phenomenon of *Crazy Rich Asians* epitomizes how the desire for Global Asia that the princess fantasy produces is partly the outcome of global economic rearrangements, it is also the historical outcome of Singapore’s attempts to counteract its image as a sterile, lackluster destination. Already in 1997, and in response to the financial crisis, the Singaporean government began to voice concern about the nation’s dull national image and its implications for capital accumulation. Singapore’s economic trajectory led to its less flattering reputation as a “sterile and antiseptic” city as a result of its authoritarian government and relentless corporate work culture.<sup>47</sup> This reputation is best encapsulated in a piece by William Gibson who critiqued Singapore as an overly curated, “relentless G-rated,” “Disneyland with the Death Penalty” in a controversial 1993 piece for *Wired* magazine. Citing an exchange with a taxi driver, Gibson’s essay portrays Singapore as a function of corporate capitalism.

[Taxi driver:] “You come for golf?”

[Gibson:] “No.”

“Business?”

“Pleasure.”

He sucked his teeth. He had doubts about that one.<sup>48</sup>

Later that same year, Singapore’s reputation for punitive rule grew as the story of the caning of an American teenager, Michael Fay, for theft and car vandalism circulated in the US media. Also contributing to Singapore’s image of sterility has been Singapore’s poor performance on various “gross national happiness” indicators, where Singaporeans were reported “as the least likely in the world to report experiencing emotions of any kind on a daily basis” and Singapore was rated “the least positive country.”<sup>49</sup> Apparently noticing that Singapore’s sterile reputation had economic consequences, Lee Kuan Yew declared, “We need to be a cosmopolitan Asian city for all peoples from the world over—Americans, Europeans, Arabs and Asians.”<sup>50</sup> Part of Hong Kong’s “buzz,” Lee argued, was that its “foreign exchange dealers and share brokers, foreigners and locals alike socialise much more at lunchtime and after office hours in bars and restaurants than they do in

Singapore. When they fraternise, they exchange confidential information.”<sup>51</sup> For Lee, in other words, cultivating successful markets meant generating fun, social spaces of consumption.

Consequently, there began a pronounced developmental focus on leisure, recreation, and entertainment—the infrastructure of Global Asia. Many of these developments took place under the aegis of tourism, following Fanon’s predictions that the national bourgeoisie’s wealth would grow as a result of the Western bourgeoisie, “who come to [the nation] for the exotic, for big-game hunting and for casinos. The national bourgeoisie organizes centres of rest and relaxation and pleasure resorts to meet the wishes of the Western bourgeoisie.”<sup>52</sup> The newly reformed Singapore Tourism Board in 1997, for example, took the lead in revitalizing a number of attractions, including the so-called ethnic enclaves (i.e., Chinatown and Kampong Glam), shopping, nightlife, and museums.<sup>53</sup> Such plans worked in conjunction with other initiatives such as the Ministry for Information and the Arts’ *Renaissance City Report* (2000), which proposed strategies to shape Singapore into a “global arts hub.” Though many of the large-scale infrastructural developments had clear touristic aims, there was also an effort by the state to cultivate leisure among its citizenry. For example, in 1991, the Land Transport Authority commenced the construction of the Park Connector Network (PCN), biking and walking paths that linked parks throughout Singapore.<sup>54</sup> While the construction of the PCN was also for the benefit of “healthy lifestyle” state-led initiatives, such developments are examples of recreational infrastructure that we associate with the professional, yuppie demographic. Together with the gentrification of older housing estates, Singapore’s urban spaces make possible pleasure as well as business, unlike the city that Gibson encountered in the 1990s.<sup>55</sup>

In his seeming awareness of the Global Asia transformation that was taking place in response to its previous reputation as sterile and boring, Kwan’s princess fantasy offers a humorous corrective by portraying Singapore as a setting in which strong affects can take place. No longer defined by Gibson’s “white-shirted constraint,” “humorlessness,” and “conformity,” the characters in *Crazy Rich Asians* perform a range of extreme emotions: we observe Eleanor’s calculating determination to prevent Nick from marrying Rachel, Eddie’s intense jealousy of Leo, Kitty’s drive to be associated with the wealthy and elite, Colin’s depressive episodes, Charlie’s unrequited love for Astrid, and so on. Kwan’s characters suggest that Singapore’s setting is no longer restrictive or determinative, that people are able to fully experience and express an array of emotions. Not only do such high emotions seem to counter Singapore’s reputation for sterility, but they also contest orientalist stereotypes about Asian inscrutability. There seemed to be, at least at one time, a desire on the part of Kwan to challenge the status quo when it came to Asian representation. For a Western readership, the seemingly critical work that the emotive characters perform against stereotypes may feel especially novel, even though Asian melodrama is hardly new.<sup>56</sup>

Curiously, a few years later, Kwan's representational work in *Crazy Rich Asians* would dovetail with Singaporean state initiatives. The affective emphasis on Singapore as a site of unrestrained emotion foreshadows the Economic Development Board and Singapore Tourism Board's 2017 campaign slogan, "Passion Made Possible." The campaign sought to create a national brand that emphasized "Singapore's attitude and mindset: a passion-driven, never-settling spirit of determination and enterprise that constantly pursues possibilities and reinvention."<sup>57</sup> The emphasis on storytelling and passion in the campaign directs tourists to see Singaporeans as emotional affective beings and to indulge their own (consumerist) passions. One has to wonder whether the emergence of "Passion Made Possible" was coincidental or whether, given the wild success of the novel and film, the Tourism Board took the princess fantasy of *Crazy Rich Asians* as a blueprint.

#### THE SHORTER HISTORY OF *CRAZY RICH ASIANS*

*Crazy Rich Asians* critiques interpretations of Singapore's economic success as continuous with and enabled by British colonialism. Contra *longue durée* approaches to the history of capitalism, I advocate a midlevel scale of reading Singapore in a way that accounts for more recent national history. In doing so, I mean to emphasize an account of postcolonial capitalism that treats power's effects as not predetermined by colonialism.<sup>58</sup> In foregrounding the postcolonial rather than colonial status of Singapore's capitalist formation, I am rejecting historicist, potted narratives that lock the events of British colonialism and the rise of a complicit, draconian postcolonial state as the key, determinative episodes that explain the workings of postcolonial capitalism, or the Asian Century. Such historicist readings appear in both popular and academic responses to the novel and the film. In the popular realm we see a desire for Singapore's history to remain in the frame of a mythical past and accessible only through the native informant. In the academic realm we see recourse to a history that emphasizes the determinative effects of colonial or global (often coded as Western) institutions on postcolonial state formation. In their inability to grapple with the politics of the novel's presentation of contemporary Asia, both responses reflect the limitations of Eurocentric historicist interpretations of the novel.

As evidenced by the popularity of both the novel and the film adaptation, *Crazy Rich Asians* has been well received by Western audiences. Part of the novel's sellability, as a *Vanity Fair* journalist suggested in an interview with Kevin Kwan, has something to do with its exotic appeal to the Western reader. "I get the sense," Lauren Christensen comments, "that the appeal of the book isn't all about wealth, though—a book called *Crazy Rich Europeans* simply wouldn't have the same allure."<sup>59</sup> Christensen's observation is well taken: though the "wealth porn" of Kwan's novel is pleasurable, the "Asians" of the title and the exotic difference that they represent have been key to its success. While it would seem intuitive to turn

to orientalism as an interpretive framework, the twenty-first-century, neoliberal context of power is very different from that of Said's theorization, something that Kwan seems keenly aware of in his thinking about both his novel's subject matter and its audience.

Notably, Kwan once formulated the selling points of his book—racial difference and cultural distance from the West—as an issue of historical time. In interviews that took place after the novel became a best seller, Kwan tends to frame his book as an exposé of the affluent, as it is based on his childhood growing up in Singapore and on his own family's wealth. But earlier interviews reveal a more thoughtful framing of *Crazy Rich Asians*:

It just really felt to me that there was a gap in terms of the sort of book we were seeing about Asia in America. There really seemed to be only two genres within fiction: historical fiction set in Asia, of the Amy Tan variety for instance, and then the contemporary stories about Asian-American assimilation. It seemed like nobody was really writing about Asia now.<sup>60</sup>

While Kwan here is not quite fair to the American literary scene regarding contemporary Asia, he is correct insofar as US audiences tend to seek a particular imagining of Asia that maintains US superiority. Historical fiction and "Asian-American assimilation" narratives are interested in the pastness of Asia, and because of this, *contemporary* Asia is incomprehensible to the West. For Kwan, writing about contemporary Asia means dealing with its ascendant economic status: "There's so much emphasis on the economic might of China, of Southeast Asia, Asian 'Super Tigers' [*sic*] and things like that. But nobody was really looking from the perspective of a family story, of these individuals."<sup>61</sup> Kwan's "but" is key: his comments call attention to how contemporary Asia is rarely understood outside of economic discourse, a discourse that has been mostly framed with respect to Asia's threat to the West. By manifesting Singapore's rapid modernization and economic ascension in themes of generational difference and familial tensions, Kwan is able to depict exactly how acute such changes were in Singapore. Family dramas are also, of course, a familiar genre for Asian representation in the West—something that Kwan demonstrates awareness of in his mention of Amy Tan. In this way, we see Kwan contending with the representational challenges of depicting Singapore and making contemporary Asia legible to his Western readers.<sup>62</sup>

In their representations of Singapore to the West, both Kwan and the Singaporean state have a stake in a *contemporary*, transpacific Global Asia. The contemporary remarks on the representational politics of historical time emphasize coexistence with the West and perform a decolonial move even as it is, in this instance, in the service of global capitalism. Subtly distinct from what C. J. W.-L. Wee terms the "Asian Modern," or "East meets West [whereby] centre and periphery, old and new, are conjoined," my emphasis here is on the definition of *contemporary*: "belonging to the same time, age, or period; living, existing, or occurring together in time."<sup>63</sup>



Wee's Asian Modern, on the other hand, with the word *conjoined* stresses different elements together in a particular setting, akin to what Mary Louise Pratt describes as a "contact zone," or "social spaces where disparate cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other, often in highly asymmetrical relations of domination and subordination."<sup>64</sup> Insofar as the Asian Modern encourages contact between East and West, the Singaporean state enabled a performance of modernity that demonstrated Singapore is no longer regarded as a precolonial society of "primitive people" who are "shy, timid, [and] shunning contact."<sup>65</sup> While the performance of the modern and of the contemporary both respond to histories of colonialism and reflect different modes of postcolonial capitalism, the mode of the contemporary underscores intimacy beyond the encounter; it is an affinity, or a rapport, that moves through time. It is no surprise then that the contemporary is narrativized through a love plot.

This distinction between the contemporary and the modern is the difference between an economy driven by neoliberalism and industrial modernity. As Watson has written in *The New Asian City*, some of the qualities that distinguish the era of the Asian Modern in terms of socioeconomic initiatives are a developmental emphasis on catching up to the West, a more entrenched sense of difference between East and West, and an emphasis on urban development and language ability. In other words, under the modern great importance is assigned to developing and showcasing Singapore's infrastructure to prove that it is *functional* for global capitalism. Under the contemporary, however, there is a stronger sense of being on par with the West and the possibility of exploiting white American nostalgia for its global standing, what Esty describes as declinism. To be clear, the colonial histories of being subordinate to the West are still at play. With the contemporary, we see a shift in the Singaporean state's socioeconomic focus from infrastructure to affect, or from the "hard" to the "soft," or still yet, to use some of the conceptual terms of the previous chapter, from the material to the immaterial.<sup>66</sup> As I discussed earlier, this is why we see in Singapore more of a pronounced focus on recreational infrastructure and one's ability to "play," alongside perceptions of it as a model city/state.

Popular reviews of *Crazy Rich Asians* interpret its family drama as a critique of the elite and the moneyed. That is, the humor of the novel is a class critique. As the blurbs in the book tell us, *Crazy Rich Asians* is satirical: "Both a deliciously satiric read and a Fodor's of sorts to the world of Singapore's fabulously moneyed, both new and old" (*Daily News*); "[A] winning summer satire" (*Vogue*); "It's impossible not to get sucked into this satirical novel" (*Glamour*). Many of the reviews published in the Western media see Kwan's novel as critiquing the invisible, elite, old money world of the diasporic Chinese through satire. One reviewer, for example, describes *Crazy Rich Asians* as "a story about competitive wealth, tradition and hypocrisy told with an expert satirist's combination of affection and astonishment."<sup>67</sup> Indeed, the satire is conveyed by the novel's very title. The focus on issues of class and race thus tends toward attention to character, especially since

the exaggerated, humorous aspects of the novel, such as the outrageous protectionist tendencies that the Singaporean Chinese elite have against outsiders and the insatiable desires of those seeking entrance into high society, are central to the novel's plot. The Youngs, for example, are so secretive about their wealth that one of their gigantic mansions, Tyersall Park has been erased from satellite views on Google Maps. The Youngs' wish for intense security and privacy is an attempt to ward off characters such as Kitty Pong, whose drive for wealth and status spans the narrative across the trilogy.

Though Kwan depicts the insular, classist, xenophobic world of the affluent through parodic characters, his critique of class is often fleeting and subtle. For example, a passage about Eddie Cheng's servants explains, "[T]hey employed two Filipino and two Mainland Chinese maids (the Chinese were better at cleaning, while the Filipinos were great with the kids)."<sup>68</sup> While the passage portrays the extent of Eddie's wealth by enumerating his possessions, the parenthetical also acts as a racialized rationale for the domestic labor the Chengs employ. Because this passage is attributed to Eddie by way of narrative focalization, Kwan portrays the racialized logics as problematic, like Eddie, one of the most over-the-top, status-conscious characters in the novel. But Eddie is ultimately treated as a sympathetic character, who acts out as a result of feeling parental neglect. These jabs at class hierarchy are thus subdued by the fact that class difference is maintained throughout the trilogy and moreover understood as surmountable differences in taste and consumptive practices rather than of labor or class oppression. At best, a comment appears in the final installment of the trilogy on the untenability of maintaining an invisible, family-centered, old money world of wealth, favoring instead a corporate model to preserve class structure. One might read this as nostalgia for the social structures of old money or as a realpolitik observation of changing, neoliberalized class structures. Perhaps it is both. Either way, Kwan seems to take class hierarchy as a given and is uninterested in offering a round critique of it, focusing his critique instead on how various characters navigate and maintain class structure.

Treating *Crazy Rich Asians* as a satire of class can problematically stabilize the world Kwan depicts and has the effect of transforming the novel into an anthropological work. In other words, the novel's popular reception reveals a Eurocentric understanding of satire. The exaggerated details that appear in the service of class satire begin to feel possible if not plausible: the opening hotel scene of the novel feels reminiscent of the kind of wealth and power that Chinese property investors wield on the west coast of North America, for example. It is not even clear that the characters that appear as caricatures can really be sustained as such: the overbearing Eleanor, for example, is treated as truly domineering by other characters, to the point that her husband cannot live in the same city. Details of the novel that seem like evidence of satire, in other words, paradoxically appear as gestures toward realism. Satire is always risky because it may be read as true by audiences who do

not understand the joke, but the risk involved in *Crazy Rich Asians* is not simply one about genre.

As evidenced in later interviews with Kwan, the *Crazy Rich Asians* trilogy is most appealing to Western readers when they are assured that its criticality is based on an anthropological exposé of the affluent. In an interview anticipating the publication of the last work in his trilogy, *Rich People Problems*, Kwan declares, "There's very little in my book that's made up. Everything's actually drawn from observation and reality. I don't have the imagination to dream up plastic surgery for fish. I really don't."<sup>69</sup> What is notable is how Kwan discredits the possibility of his own artistic creativity, reinscribing the issues that Chow describes as "the dichotomy between the 'realpolitical' non-west and the 'imaginative' West."<sup>70</sup> In spite of his earlier aspirations to present a story about "Asia now," or the economic rise of Asia, Kwan takes recourse to his own past to explain the trilogy, vaguely appealing to an exoticized notion of history. Given the entirety of the *Crazy Rich Asians* phenomenon, we can take Kwan's framing of the novel as a marketing strategy that also suggests that popular audiences are not ready to be sold on a novel billed as about contemporary Asia because they desire an orientalized difference between East and West and are willing to read historically so long as it maintains this difference.

The illegibility of contemporary Asia appears not only in popular responses but in US academic criticism as well. When the novel is treated as thinking historically, Singapore is viewed as overdetermined by large, global forces. Anne Anlin Cheng points us to the residues of colonialism in the novel and film backdrops as registered by the Black and White Houses and "the tony British accents sported by this parade of beautiful people."<sup>71</sup> Cheng rightfully points out that the film perpetuates a Singaporean state myth about the modernizing forces of Chinese settlers, eliding the history of collaboration between Singapore's upper class and colonial power. Grace Kyungwon Hong also notes that Singaporean wealth, as part of what she describes as the global model minority, "cannot but reference colonial and racialized pasts."<sup>72</sup> Both Hong and Cheng, moreover, are conscious of the ways the novel is politically mired in the ascendance of Asian capital as it is figured through diasporic, affluent Asians. Hong observes that the novel "sets various modes of value against one another" and "attempt[s] to suture old and new histories of Asian racialization and capitalization."<sup>73</sup> For both thinkers, in other words, *Crazy Rich Asians* is an allegory for twenty-first-century global capitalism, a phenomenon that emerged from the structures of British colonialism.

Both are, of course, completely valid readings. But reading Singapore as an allegory for global capitalism often takes on a historical narrative that casts the British Empire and a complicit authoritarian postcolonial government as its main actors. For example, Hong describes the "true object" of the series as "a description of the consumerist behaviors and tastes upon which the Singaporean lifestyle is based," concluding that the novel is a treatise on consumerism as a governing ideology of

the PAP.<sup>74</sup> Although Hong's analysis is invested in comprehending Kwan's novel on the transnational scale of "interconnected global ethnic Chinese capitalists,"<sup>75</sup> when she turns to the national, her reading of the Singaporean state potentially reproduces depictions of Singapore as a nation with a despotic government and deluded citizens.

So what history does *Crazy Rich Asians* point us to? Let us turn back to the beginning of the novel. In the famous opening scene, readers are introduced to the Leongs and the Youngs, powerful, rich Singaporean Chinese families, during a standoff with a racist hotel manager, Reginald Ormsby, who refuses to honor the Young family's reservation of the Lancaster penthouse suite. Ormsby, who has no idea about the degree of wealth (or the degree of vindictiveness) that the "disheveled" and "dowdy" Leong and Young family women hold, snarkily suggests that they find a place to stay in Chinatown, making clear his race-based disdain.<sup>76</sup> Ormsby's prejudiced attitude is out of place in the context of 1986 London, to the extent that Felicity Leong muses that she "hadn't seen this particular brand of superior sneer since she was a child growing up in the waning days of colonial Singapore, and she thought that this kind of overt racism had ceased to exist."<sup>77</sup> With no other place to stay, Felicity Leong places a call to her husband, Harry Leong, who in turn makes a quick call to the hotel's owner. When the Leongs and Youngs eventually return to the hotel, Ormsby quickly learns with great horror that the Leongs have bought out the Calthorpe and Felicity is its new owner. The prologue closes with Felicity firing the hapless manager.

Part of the satisfaction of the prologue's "Empire buys back" revenge fantasy is in the way that it asserts the new world order of the Asian Century that the crazy rich Asian families represent by overturning the power dynamics of East and West. In one kind of reading, postcolonial capitalism here reperforms the territorial logics of colonial power for the purposes of vengeance; our perverse pleasure hinges on the East/West binary, even though, or precisely because, the power dynamic has changed. The passage gestures toward the politics of colonial mimicry as Ormsby observes Felicity's overbearing Chineseness alongside her "Thatcheresque perm and preposterous 'English' accent."<sup>78</sup> Rather than reinscribe Felicity's postcolonial subjectivity as "almost the same, but not quite," Felicity's reception as a woman who is mimicking the colonial becomes a source of ironic pleasure for the reader because of the way she eventually dispenses and displaces Ormsby.<sup>79</sup> Colonial mimicry is not simply a sign of difference or a symptom of deference to colonial culture, but a means of enhancing revenge.

The prologue serves as more than just a wry commentary on how such figures like Ormsby have no place in the new world order ushered in by Asian capitalism, or, as Hong cogently argues, the "narrative of Asian capital's ascendance cannot quite evade the specter of racism and colonialism."<sup>80</sup> Very subtly, the prologue also has readers consider *how* to read this specter, calling attention to how the history of postcolonial capitalism is obscured by modes of reading (and their

consequent pleasures) that privilege East/West or colonizer-colonized conflict. The prologue states:

Anyone else happening upon the scene might have noticed an unusually composed eight-year-old boy and an ethereal wisp of a girl sitting quietly in a corner, but all Reginald Ormsby saw from his desk overlooking the lobby were two little Chinese children staining the damask settee with their sodden coats.<sup>81</sup>

This passage shows how the narrative continues to be viewed through Ormsby's racialized perspective, emphasizing both the dominance of Ormsby's Western gaze and the difficulty of moving away from its pull. Despite their exceptionality as marked by descriptors of "unusually" and "ethereal," Ormsby can only see soggy Chinese children ruining furniture. By calling attention to what is *not* being noticed, that these two soggy children—Nicholas Young and Astrid Leong—are nonetheless "unusually composed" and "ethereal," our attention to the conflict in the prologue is problematized because it assumes the importance of British colonialism. The prologue's critique of binary difference is not its faulty logic but the way the drama of binary difference centralizes British colonialism as the specter in the story of postcolonial capitalism and at the expense of recognizing a post-1997 history that is symbolized by Nick and Astrid, who go on to become Overseas Singaporeans par excellence (as a respected fashionista in Europe, Astrid, like Nick, proves herself deeply versed in codes of Western culture). Spivak once warned that "placing colonialism/imperialism securely in the past, and/or by suggesting a continuous line from that past to our present," can "sometimes serve the production of neocolonial knowledge."<sup>82</sup> Or as Andrew Liu of *n+1 magazine* puts it, "There isn't a smooth path from British colonialism to 21st century Asian capitalism," and the *longue durée* of capitalism can actually reinstall Eurocentricism if shorter histories are not also accounted for.<sup>83</sup>

As my reading of the "Empire buys back" scene suggests, the answer to what history readers see depends on what readers assume is the show of "economic might" that Kwan speaks of in his interviews. Read from the perspective of Felicity Leong, who is incredulous at Ormsby's hostility, the 1986 context in which the scene unfolds is a temporal remark on the hotel manager's "backward and residual white animus."<sup>84</sup> If we are to situate the 1986 context as part of Nick and Astrid's childhood, however, 1986 can be read as the historical marker of the Overseas Singaporean's nascency. It was not only the year that Singapore experienced its first post-independence economic recession; it is also the year that Singapore began slowly developing its economy for modern services, away from a manufacturing economy. At this point in history, Singapore was around the corner from its Tiger economy status. Singapore was not regarded as economically significant and was but one nation among many in the post-British Empire world vying for a place in the global economy. But we might say that 1986 marks the beginning of a knowledge economy that would become more pronounced after the 1997 Asian financial crisis

and more culturally evident after 2008. Interestingly, the jump in time from the 1986 prologue to the novel's post-2008 present tempts us to gloss over the centrality of 1997 for understanding Singapore as Global Asia—a potential critical and subtle remark on Kwan's part. While Kwan's writing certainly invites a number of different kinds of readings (which has given him latitude in terms of how he can represent the novel), the opening indicates a consciousness about Singapore's history of the present as well as the politics of the West's reading of the East.

Assuming that the power effects of British colonialism are “negative,” as Foucault puts it, or oppressive centers the question of power through East/West conflict. Nick and Astrid, on the other hand, remind us of Foucault's injunction that “power produces.”<sup>85</sup> In this vein, we recognize that the historical effects of British colonialism on Singapore have generated Overseas Singaporeans as a new subjectivity that navigates different systems of power. Their newness does not mark a clean break from history, however; Nick and Astrid are there with their mothers, after all. The oppositional politics toward colonialism, as embodied by Felicity Leong's postcolonial revenge, are situated as but one historical thread in the broader condition of postcoloniality.

Allusions throughout *Crazy Rich Asians* centralize the shorter history of constructing Singapore as a safe haven for foreign capitalist investment rather than the longer history of British colonialism. One of the most common critiques of the prose in *Crazy Rich Asians* is its stilted dialogue and thus unrealistic, flat characters. Hong, for example, notes that dialogue such as Peik Lin's explanation of Singapore to Rachel, “We're the most stable country in the region, and Mainlanders feel that their money is far safer here than in Shanghai, or even Switzerland,” does not sound like realistic banter between old friends.<sup>86</sup> Rather than read the stilted dialogue as a reflection of bad writing, we should read it as a symptom of the novel reckoning with the specter of state power but circumventing the issue of reproducing an orientalist depiction of an Asian despotic government. In other words, Kwan avoids making *Crazy Rich Asians* about state power. The example of stilted dialogue that Peik Lin parrots is likely eerily familiar to Singaporeans, who, since independence, have faced state aspirations to “stability” in the name of global capitalism. In this respect, it is more useful to think about the stilted dialogue as giving voice to the authoritative discourse of the Singaporean state.<sup>87</sup> Although Singapore's reputation for stability (which amounts to safety for foreign investment) is touted by the Singaporean government and accepted by many international economic and political organizations, what clues us into the particularities of the voice of the Singaporean state is the reference to Switzerland, which holds an idiosyncratic symbolic significance in Singapore. As with Jeremy Tiang's short story discussed in chapter 1, the reference to Switzerland, the exemplary nation in the eyes of the Singaporean government since 1984, alludes to the former prime minister Goh Chok Tong's exhortation to achieve a “Swiss standard of living.”<sup>88</sup>



In fact, it is the Goh family that gives voice to the kind of Singaporean state rhetoric typical of Prime Minister Goh's tenure throughout the novel—and their names are plainly the same. Of the various families in the novel, the Gohs are represented as part of the *nouveau riche* who built up their wealth “out of sheer sweat and tenacity” against the odds of their Hainanese ancestry, a relative disadvantage compared to the Straits Chinese or Hokkiens.<sup>89</sup> According to Peik Lin's father, Wye Mun, “Singapore was a meritocracy, and whoever performed well was invited into the winner's circle.”<sup>90</sup> While the notion of meritocracy can be traced to Singapore's independence era under Lee Kuan Yew's leadership, the particular logics of monetary reward for hard work and ability is a cornerstone of Goh's incumbency.<sup>91</sup> In a passing exchange with a family friend, Dr. Gu, a minor character, Peik Lin, assures him that his daughter's and grandson's life decisions (which Dr. Gu disapproves of) are a sign that “they are being *creative*,”<sup>92</sup> which again links the Goh family to the socioeconomic policies associated with Goh Chok Tong, who promoted creativity in the name of the knowledge economy.<sup>93</sup>

Readers are made to understand that the Gohs' *nouveau riche* class identity is tacky in the ways that they revel in their wealth and the Trumpian, Vegas-like aesthetic of their home. The Gohs clearly believe that this is the lifestyle they have earned and that the government's policies have made their wealth possible. This is not a subtle aspect of the novel. Wye Mun, who is “always on the defensive whenever anyone criticized the government,” even goes so far as to repeat one of the Singaporean state's most deeply entrenched myths of its exceptional progress in the transition from “Third World to First World”: “Think of how they've [our politicians] transformed this place from a backward island to one of the most prosperous countries in the world.”<sup>94</sup> Given how Kwan's trilogy sets up “a value system of morality and discernment (and discernment *as* morality),”<sup>95</sup> there is a clear judgment imposed on state authoritative discourse that perpetuates the myth of Singapore's economic success when it is voiced by one of the most garish and tasteless families in the novel. State discourse is not positioned as a voice of reason, or as an oppressive force, but as that which does the work of concealing shorter histories of postcolonial capitalism.

While the novel might be critiquing upwardly mobile diasporic Chinese families like the Gohs for buying into and perpetuating state discourse, it also calls attention to the ways that those outside of Singapore reproduce such narratives. In the opening of the novel, when Rachel considers the idea of visiting Singapore with Nick, she thinks, “As an economist, she certainly knew about Singapore—this tiny, intriguing island at the tip of the Malay Peninsula, which had transformed within a few short decades from a British colonial backwater into the country with the world's highest concentration of millionaires.”<sup>96</sup> The repetition of language between Rachel and Wye Mun unifies an outsider to Singapore with a local, giving Singapore's success story transnational coherence. The narrative's Eurocentric versus meritocratic appeal demonstrates the wide-ranging function the myth has for different subjectivities.

With a wink and a nudge, Kwan calls our attention to how only certain historical versions of Singapore are palatable to Western and perhaps even Singaporean readers. When giving Rachel a tour of Tyersall Park grounds, Nick tells her about its historical significance for Malay culture and its roots in the Majapahit Empire:

“‘The Last King of Singapura.’ Sounds like a movie. Why don’t you write the screenplay?” Rachel remarked.

“Ha! I think it’ll draw an audience of about four,” Nick replied.<sup>97</sup>

What this exchange suggests is that Singapore’s ancient, indigenous history is not only of little interest (and it certainly was not in the Hollywood adaptation of the novel), but the master narrative of Singapore’s Third World to First World development as spawned by British Empire is actually a transnational source of pleasure. As I have discussed, such a *longue durée* conception of Singapore’s development is also at the expense of interrogating the particularities that emerge with attention to a shorter history of Singapore’s economic arc. The next section considers what the concealment of history makes possible for Western fantasies of the East.

#### PRINCESS FANTASY, READING SETTING

Another implication of the princess fantasy for reading postcoloniality in the context of the Asian Century that *Crazy Rich Asians* draws out is the role setting plays in pleasure. The melodrama, stereotypical characters, and stilted dialogue of the novel direct our critical attention to characterological approaches, and while Kwan’s characters provide entertainment, they are not the main draw of the novel or the basis for the phenomenon *Crazy Rich Asians* has become. Rather, consumerist pleasures are built into the setting itself: setting is not simply the backdrop or the stage on which character development takes place; it instead replaces character as the affective mode through which readers connect to the narrative. Reviewers and critics have frequently noted that Kwan’s writerly strengths do not lie in character development. Nonetheless, they marvel at the “guilty pleasures” that readers derive from the “expository nature of the novel.”<sup>98</sup> The passage where Rachel first visits Tyersall Park provides a good example.

The “living room,” as Nick so modestly called it, was a gallery that ran along the entire northern end of the house, with art deco divans, wicker club chairs, and ottomans casually grouped into intimate seating areas. A row of tall plantation doors opened onto the wraparound veranda, inviting the view of verdant parklands and the scent of night-blooming jasmine into the room, while at the far end a young man in a tuxedo played on the Bösendorfer grand piano. As Nick led her into the space, Rachel found herself reflexively trying to ignore her surroundings, even though all she wanted to do was study every exquisite detail: the exotic potted palms in massive *Qianlong* dragon jardinières that anchored the space, the scarlet-shaded opaline glass lamps that cast an amber glow over the lacquered teak surfaces, the silver- and

lapis lazuli-filigreed walls that shimmered as she moved about the room. Every single object seemed imbued with a patina of timeless elegance, as if it had been there for more than a hundred years, and Rachel didn't dare to touch anything. The glamorous guests, however, appeared completely at ease lounging on the shantung silk ottomans or mingling on the veranda while a retinue of white-gloved servants in deep-olive batik uniforms circulated with trays of cocktails.<sup>99</sup>

Emblematic of Kwan's writing in the trilogy, this passage evinces a suppression of character in favor of setting. Not only are characters entirely secondary to the setting itself—if not simply *of* the setting in the case of the nameless piano player and the “glamorous guests” lounging around—the language actively restricts Rachel's interiority and any emotional performance. Using the social mores of the world as a plot device, the narrative flattens Rachel as she tries to “ignore her surroundings” and *not* engage the setting through touch. The overwhelming design of the living room cows Rachel into silence, effectively anesthetizing her and erasing her personality as she becomes part of the grand scene. As Rachel attempts to ignore her surroundings, the narrative continues for the reader's pleasure. Certainly, Rachel's lack of affect instructs the reader of the magnificence of the scene, but our understanding of the setting has little dependence on Rachel's interaction with it. With the exception of the seating and the infrastructure of the building itself, the lack of interface has to do with the fact that very little of the setting actually has any use beyond scopophilic pleasure.

Much of the awe and pleasure from Kwan's elaborate settings come from its presentation of “exquisite details,” which in this case depict enormous wealth by means of the objects that make up the setting. The passage does not simply portray an accumulation of objects; it emphasizes order among “sensuous, trivial, and superfluous textual presences.”<sup>100</sup> The narrative moves our gaze through the scene, pausing on the furniture in the room and the views outside it. The grandness of the scene derives, in part, from contrasting scales that make up the setting of the living room: the details of filigree, batik, and Qianlong designs are juxtaposed to the openness of the veranda, parklands, and grand piano. The mathematical contrast of minute design and empty space marks the scale of the Young family's wealth and power through labor (commodities valued for their artisanal craft) and territory (command over space). This aesthetic of contrast is further constructed through the arrangement of Eastern and Western objects: the art deco divans with shantung silk ottomans, the tuxedo-clad piano player next to the batik-wearing servers, the Qianlong porcelain alongside opaline glass. The wealth that brings these contrasts together to construct the seemingly nonremarkable scene (for people of a certain world) denotes both a command over setting and an organizing logic whereby wealth is able to overcome cultural difference.

East/West aesthetic details are also idealized through the Leong family home. Resonating with Rachel's experience of Tyersall Park is Annabel Lee, Araminta's mother, who offers one of the few passages viewed through someone other than Rachel, in this case, her experience of the Leong family home. Like Rachel, Annabel

is an outsider to the Singaporean Chinese elite social scene, though she herself is incredibly wealthy. As she has been lauded by *Architectural Digest* for her “Edward Tuttle–designed house,”<sup>101</sup> we understand that Annabel is a discerning woman, so her awe signals the aesthetic magnitude we too should experience as readers. As with Tyersall Park, the Leong family home operates with East/West contrasts: Pimms cocktails served on Selangor pewter trays; orange blossoms alongside Ru ware from the Northern Song dynasty; and Peranakan-style opium chairs.<sup>102</sup> Although we are privy to a prolonged and rather animated internal commentary by Annabel, it seems that Annabel does not engage with the social scene at hand. At best, she thinks, “Oh look, Eleanor just waved at me,”<sup>103</sup> but otherwise there is no social interaction. Again, we observe how the narrative favors details of setting by flattening Annabel’s character, even though the writing *seems* to signal character depth through the internal monologue marked by italics. The internal dialogue, however, is simply a mode by which to, as Annabel expresses it, soak in “every minute detail of the way these people lived,”<sup>104</sup> and to bask in the aesthetic pleasures of the setting.

Kwan’s privileging of setting over character development is at once his resistance to the assimilatory pressures of the Western gaze and his way of attracting it. The novel’s favoring of setting over character development works against notions of difference derived from personality and personhood.<sup>105</sup> Given Kwan’s apparent scorn for Asian American assimilationist novels and Asian historical fiction that either capitulate to the Western gaze’s demand for likeness or maintain its demand for binary difference, we might read Kwan’s minimalist gestures toward Asian self-representation as deliberately avoiding characterological emphasis rather than as inadequate gestures.<sup>106</sup> We can also read the emphasis on setting as a technique of postcolonial capitalism, a way of profiting off colonial desire. Kwan’s elaborate depictions of setting are closer to what Anne Anlin Cheng describes as “ornamentalism,” or the processes that render Asian femininity ornamental and Asia as ornament. The way that Cheng describes the 2015 Metropolitan Museum of Art exhibition, *China: Through the Looking Glass*, which appeared a mere two years after the publication of *Crazy Rich Asians*, could also apply to a number of Kwan’s settings: “Opulence and sensuality are the signature components of Asiatic character; that Asia is always ancient, excessive, feminine, available, and decadent, that material consumption promises cultural possession.”<sup>107</sup> Cheng’s language also describes the rhetoric of the Singapore tourism campaign “Passion Made Possible.” Reading the details of Kwan’s setting as ornamentalism, however, still assumes the inherently masculinized ethos of the West in the East/West dynamic. Given the economic context that *Crazy Rich Asians* points us to, I have suggested that we read the West as increasingly feminized, not simply as a way of figuring the West’s economic decline through gender identity, but the implications of that decline for how we understand orientalist desire.

The elaborate detail of Kwan’s settings asserts a command over women, not by oppressing them, but by overwhelming them—that is, by overcoming mind

or feeling—with pleasure. There are resonances here between the effects of the princess fantasy and what Achille Mbembe describes as the aesthetics of superfluity, which is “premised on the capacity of things to hypnotize, overexcite, or paralyze the sense.”<sup>108</sup> Certainly, the details in Kwan’s novel maintain the Orient as a site of pleasure and fantasy for the colonial explorer, but they are not in service of a male fantasy of domination. Taking pleasure in Singapore’s setting would seem to position the Western subject as one in power because of the agential denotation of “taking.” Such is the illusion of the princess fantasy. But in the soft power context of Global Asia, pleasuring the princess—the West—is the means by which to draw in capital.

The emphasis on Singapore as setting performed through detail is not idiosyncratic to Kwan. In a 2019 episode of *The Bachelor*, a TV show where women compete for a bachelor’s affections, contestants were flown to Singapore. As if taking its cue from *Crazy Rich Asians*, Singapore is presented to the women (the princesses) through sweeping aerial views of the city and through the luxury of their Fairmont hotel suite.<sup>109</sup> The sound track is punctuated by various excited exclamations, but when the women enter the suite, they are awestruck and silent, reminiscent of Rachel’s initial visit to Tyersall Park. Like the wider views of the “verdant parklands” seen from the Tyersall Park living room, the camera offers impressive cityscape views from the suite’s balcony. “I’ve never been in a hotel like this,” one of the contestants tells us as the screen cuts to an interview. “From our room you can see all of Singapore.” The women walk through the suite single file, marveling at modern furniture with various ethnic touches, tropical houseplants, Chinese brush paintings, and art deco light fixtures. Like the women of *The Bachelor*, viewers are treated to the details of Singapore’s setting: this world will bring you all that you need. In its seeming accommodation to the needs of the Western gaze, Kwan’s writing is hardly subversive, at least in any critically satisfying way. The subversion of the West under postcolonial capitalism does not operate by a neat inversion of East/West binaries (though the opening of *Crazy Rich Asians* might tempt us to believe so). In other words, the assertion of power over the West is not a mimicry of the West’s power. To assume so is itself a Western fantasy. What *Crazy Rich Asians* in fact demonstrates is how postcolonial capitalism operates with a long historical consciousness of the workings of colonial pleasures and uses those pleasures to its advantage.

While it is through setting that we can read a subtle assertion of power through its ability to overwhelm, the details of setting also aesthetically assert difference from the West through cosmopolitan craft: Singapore has taste and style. Recalling here the state project of overhauling Singapore’s image of sterility, the emphasis on style—as sterility’s antonym—is unsurprising. Given the colonial history of Singapore as the “crossroads of the East,” as well as the emphasis on East/West difference in the Asian Values era, the reemergence (and continuation) of East/West aesthetics is not especially novel or contemporary. There are, however, some distinctions in the way that East/West aesthetics are asserted after 1997. Historically, Singapore as a site of East/West encounter served as validation for

British imperialism's civilizing mission and as proof of Singapore's modernity in an ever-globalizing world, whereas the East/West aesthetics of Singapore in *Crazy Rich Asians* emphasize the ability to synthesize unruly elements. Bringing East and West together in an aesthetically pleasing way is a matter of good taste and deliberate design. In admiring the East/West aesthetic in the novel, readers credit the (unknown) designer for their craft as a sort of invisible hand, validating the designer's power.

The novel upholds the contrasting aesthetic of East and West as ideal and as distinct from the aesthetic presented by Eddie's and Peik Lin's family homes, both of which assert wealth through their performance of conspicuous consumption and their accumulation of Western objects. While in Tyersall Park readers are overwhelmed by magnitude through an aesthetic of contrast, magnitude in Eddie's home is about enumerated excess: "five bedrooms, six baths, more than four thousand square feet, not including the eight-hundred-square-foot terrace," "two Filipino and two Mainland Chinese maids," "five parking spots," club memberships at the "Chinese Athletic Association, the Hong Kong Golf Club, the China Club, the Hong Kong Club, the Cricket Club, the Dynasty Club, the American Club, the Jockey Club, [and] the Royal Hong Kong Yacht Club," and "more than seventy timepieces from the most esteemed watchmakers"<sup>110</sup>—all made even more special when we consider Hong Kong's limited space as one of the densest cities in the world. Unlike Tyersall Park's brandless, eclectic aesthetic, Eddie's style is insistently old European, with a "Biedermeier-filled" home designed by the "Austro-German decorator Kaspar von Morgenlatte to evoke a Hapsburg hunting schloss."<sup>111</sup> Similarly, we see in Peik Lin's home markers of old Europe: a "frescoed replica of Fragonard's *The Swing*," "Venetian mirrors and candelabra," "two versions of the *Venus de Milo*," and "a heavy Battenberg lace tablecloth and high-backed Louis Quatorze chairs,"<sup>112</sup> but the overwhelmingly gold coloring throughout the home invokes a Vegas-Trump aesthetic. By virtue of Eddie's performances of wealth and Peik Lin's family's unapologetic nouveau richness, readers understand that the wealth performed by these two families is comically regrettable, especially when compared to the Young family's presentation. They are objects of disdain not only because of their over-the-top presentation of conspicuous consumption but also because they signify wealth through the mindless accrual of Western objects, which in turn reveals an inferiority complex with respect to the West.

## CONCLUSION

As I show in my reading of *Crazy Rich Asians*, attention to Singapore's shorter history of postcolonial capitalism can counter the hegemonic effects of *longue durée* master narratives, but it requires a reading practice that lets go of colonial binarism in favor of a more generative, rather than disciplinary, account of power. Moreover, as I showed in my discussion of the princess fantasy, the changed global order of the Asian Century does not result in a simple inversion of how power is



asserted. Instead, postcolonial capitalism works with a consciousness of that history of power by capitalizing on colonial desires and US declinism in the production of Global Asia.

I close here with a brief rumination on the Hollywood adaptation of *Crazy Rich Asians* (2018), a wildly successful film that generated much controversy over its representational politics for Asian Americans. While the film was celebrated for featuring a number of Asian American actors and actresses, its critics expressed ambivalence about the class politics of the film and how it might reaffirm a classist respectability politics in the United States. In the context of my discussion of the novel in the context of Global Asia and US declinism, the film adaptation adds another dimension, perhaps unexpected, to the perception of Singapore as a haven: it is not only a site of fantasy for capitalist consumption without debt or a safe harbor from corporate taxes and regulation; for Asian Americans, Singapore is an affective refuge from US histories of racialization. But what is most interesting to me about the film, which I understand as an American interpretation of the novel, is what its accommodation of the Asian American gaze indicates about Singapore as Global Asia. Certainly, we can and perhaps should hold accountable the director and scriptwriters, who had no concerns about putting in “ethnic” details that were clearly directed to an American rather than Singaporean or Southeast Asian audience. For example, in a tender scene that was described by one *HuffPost* reporter as an example of a “culturally nuanced moment”<sup>113</sup> and celebrated by other writers as especially meaningful for the way it speaks to how “many immigrant families stay connected with their heritage,”<sup>114</sup> Rachel sat down at a table with the Young family to fold dumplings. This was not a scene that came from the novel. Such dumplings (*jiaozi*), however, are unlikely to be part of the culinary traditions of the Chinese diaspora that went through Southeast Asia, since most of the migrants came from southern China rather than the north where such dumplings originate.

My point is not to quibble about authenticity. Rather, my question concerns how the screenwriters, director, and cast—many of whom are sensitive to racial and cultural representation—could transform a novel that is, in my reading, centrally about Singapore into a film about, as the director John Chu puts it, “how it feels for an Asian-American to go through a cultural identity crisis when traveling to Asia for the first time.”<sup>115</sup> In other words, what is it about Singapore that allows for the Asian Americanization of the *Crazy Rich Asians* film? Is the current Hollywood adaptation imaginable had Kwan’s novel been set in other Global Asia sites like Hong Kong, Kuala Lumpur, or Seoul?

I think the answer is no. We could read the imposition of details like the dumpling scene as reflecting a colonial mind-set of *terra nullius*, where Singapore is nothing but an empty stage for Asian American fantasies to play out, or as reflecting the American privilege of ignorance, where Singapore is imagined as a racial enclave like a US Chinatown. But I would suggest that the very possibility of making

the film about Asian American experience demonstrates the power of Singapore's anglophonic legibility, a legibility that produces desirability and, in this instance, is mistaken as evidence of Singapore as *not that* different—or, apparently, not different enough to precipitate the careful cultural and historical sensitivities of those we would typically assume to be concerned with the racial politics of representation. Even though Singapore and Asian America are diverse in manifold ways, Singapore's anglophonic legibility allows for an inter-imperial, transpacific coherence of sinocentrism: the dynamics of Chinese privilege in Singapore with the Chinese American representational hegemony in the Asian American context. Thus, what is especially revealing about the film adaptation is how the Singaporean state's work to craft its dehistoricized and decontextualized Global Asia image now has transpacific affective investments, further entrenching and exceeding a state-produced dominant narrative.

The sinocentric excess enabled by Singapore's anglophonic legibility, however, is potentially a threat to Singapore's national interests. Certainly, Singapore as Global Asia has served the class interests of Singaporean Chinese, and only time will tell how such racialized privilege will interact with China's expanding political and economic clout. Much like we saw with the Overseas Singaporean Unit, China has established the Overseas Chinese Affairs Office, also aimed at "winning the hearts and minds abroad."<sup>116</sup> Such attempts at ideological influence may be a challenge in Singapore, given local xenophobia toward recent migrants from China, or perhaps recent conflict between the US and Russia will facilitate China's efforts. Either way, the rise of China does not necessarily portend the end of Singapore as Global Asia, but it certainly suggests that Singapore's anglophonic legibility is risky business in the face of ongoing global rearrangements of power.