

THE POSTFEMINIST CINDERELLA NARRATIVE IN *CRAZY RICH ASIANS*

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Adapted from Kevin Kwan's best-selling novel, Jon M. Chu's *Crazy Rich Asians* (2018) turns the original story from a satire and parody (Lies) to a romantic comedy with a Cinderella motif. Kwan's original story is about Chinese-American professor Rachel Chu (Constance Wu), and her romantic encounter with an Oxford graduate Singaporean Chinese professor Nick Young (Henry Golding). Their relationship goes smoothly when they are in New York; however, they face challenges when Rachel and Nick embark on a journey to Singapore to attend the wedding of Nick's best friend, Colin Khoo (Chris Pang). In Singapore, Rachel realizes that Nick comes from a prestigious and super-rich family, and the Young family rejects her. The story ends with the reconciliation of the couple without the blessing of the Young family. It is indeed Kwan's love story between a "comparatively lower" (middle-class) woman and an upper-class man that inspired Jon M. Chu to give the film adaptation a Cinderella setting; as Carol Dole points out, "The Cinderella story has long provided an outlet for female fantasies of a raise in social class coupled with romance and a new wardrobe, as it did in *Pretty Woman* (1990) and *Maid in Manhattan* (2002)" (60). 219

These Hollywood Cinderella variants, including *Crazy Rich Asians*, reimagine their respective protagonists. Instead of passively waiting for the prince to marry them, they choose to have a say in their marriages at the end of the films, and such twists make these films "postfeminist romantic comedies" (Soer), as the notion of "choice" plays a significant role in postfeminist romance films (Schreiber 4). Based on Rosalind Gill's argument on "postfeminism as a sensibility," Georgina Isbister coined the term "postfeminist fairy tales," a subgenre of fairy tales that incorporates and reconfigures both traditional and feminist fairy tale discourses in popular postfeminist culture. She defines postfeminist fairy tales as fairy-tale-like stories that depart from "traditional fairy tale forms in [their] incorporation of postfeminist twists on

the fairytale's transformations of the self—the realization of the ideal ‘true self,’ a woman capable of “having it all (education, career, economic independence, love, and family)” (Isbister). This article investigates how Jon M. Chu's *Crazy Rich Asians* incorporates features of postfeminist fairy tales by changing the characterization of the main female characters and altering the ending to a “happily ever after” one, as well as through Rachel's quest to search for her “true self” via her journey to the East, specifically to Singapore. In addition, since *Crazy Rich Asians* was “the highest-grossing romantic comedy since 2009 and was the first major studio film to center an Asian American story in 25 years” in Hollywood (Yap), this article will also discuss the significant role of the film in Hollywood cinema, particularly in postfeminist American cinema. To introduce the context of rewriting fairytale films in a postfeminist context and the features of postfeminist fairy tales, the first section of this article provides a general outline of the idea of postfeminism.

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THE RISE OF POSTFEMINISM

In the 1980s and 1990s, many feminist scholars, such as bell hooks (Gloria Jean Watkins) and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, found that then-current feminist theories did not reflect the needs of many women. The idea of feminism at the time was suggested by white, middle-class females, and these authors were concerned that it would not necessarily appeal to women of different classes or races. Furthermore, the rapid development of the idea of feminism resulted in greater numbers of women aspiring toward sexual equality and the development of their self-identity. Nevertheless, these feminist ideas were not comprehensive enough, and perhaps in some cases too radical for, the actual lived situations of women in the contemporary world. According to Susan Faludi, “it is more likely that the feminist revolution has petered out, leaving so many women discouraged and paralysed by the knowledge ... [that] the possibility for real progress has been foreclosed” (qtd. in Whelehan 222). In light of this, a new feminist theory was developed, one that incorporated new insights for present-day women.

Postfeminism developed from feminism as a consequence of the social situations and academic theories of the time. Other theories that similarly grew from existing ones include modernism and postmodernism, structuralism and poststructuralism, colonialism and postcolonialism. The term “postfeminism” is problematic, as postfeminists have different interpretations of the notion (Kung 96), as Rosalind Gill notes:

Some people use the term [postfeminism] to signal a temporal or historical shift—a time *after* second-wave feminism; others used it to delimit a kind of feminism—sometimes a feminism influenced by post-structuralist or post-colonial thinking, or alternatively, something akin to a new (third) “wave” of feminism; while others still used the term to refer solely to a *backlash* against feminism. None of these was entirely convincing to me

or only seemed to speak to part of the picture, and what's more, the terms often seemed to be used interchangeably, with people slipping between different meanings. (Banet-Weiser et al. 5)

Gill's comment highlights the problematic nature of the term *postfeminism*; she coined the term "postfeminist sensibility" to allow for more open discussion on post-feminism (Banet-Weiser et al. 5). Fien Adriaens also asserts that "postfeminism has no fixed meaning and is a pluralistic discourse in feminist media studies and cultural studies" (Kung 96); it is not *against* feminism but is *about* feminism today:

Post-feminism is a new form of empowerment and independence, individual choice, (sexual) pleasure, consumer culture, fashion, hybridism, humour, and the renewed focus on the female body can be considered fundamental for this contemporary feminism. (Adriaens)

Applying Adriaens's definition to Jon M. Chu's *Crazy Rich Asians* demonstrates Chu's use of features of postfeminist fairy tale narrative, especially his depiction of the film's protagonist Rachel Chu as a "Cinderella" figure with postfeminist qualities.

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CHICK FLICKS AS PRIME POSTFEMINIST MEDIA TEXTS¹

Paula Marantz Cohen states that "cinematic romantic comedies are often referred to under the rubric of chick flicks" (78), and "chick culture is vitally linked to postfeminism" (Ferriss and Young 34). In this light, it is essential to indicate the significance of the chick flick, a prominent genre in popular postfeminism, in terms of promoting postfeminist ideologies. Suzanne Ferriss and Mallory Young define the term "chick" as follows:

For women of a younger generation, however, the word chick, like girl (and even bitch), has been wielded knowingly to convey solidarity and signal empowerment. This new generation made up of women who were born with feminism as their heritage—often referred to as a third wave-feminist or postfeminist generation—has rejected or at least questioned some of the central tenets of feminist thought. Part of the third wavers' response to feminism has been the deliberate re-appropriation and revisioning of terms that make second-wave feminists cringe: Girlpower. (34)

Women in the postfeminist era have the agency to choose and the ability to indicate their choices. In line with this argument, Heidi Wilkins states:

Chick flicks frequently portray a complex representation of modern females and female chick flick protagonists are often hard-working, intelligent, professional women and working mothers. In line with postfeminist notions of having the freedom to choose, and unlike previous second wave agendas that rejected femininity, women in postfeminist chick flicks revel in the pleasure of womanliness, embrace consumerism, thrive on the notion of "having it all" and do not hold back when it comes to verbalising their experiences. (149)

Wilkins's argument also serves as the framework for my discussion of the postfeminist features of *Crazy Rich Asians*. At the beginning of the film, Rachel Chu is already an example of the postfeminist chick flick protagonist, as she is a successful economics professor at New York University. Rachel is introduced to the audience in a scene in which she lectures on "game theory." She is portrayed as a professional, intelligent woman. Unlike the protagonists of other postfeminist Cinderella films such as *Pretty Woman* and *Maid in Manhattan*, Rachel does not come from a humble background, and she has already fallen in love with her "prince," Nick Young, with whom she enjoys a relationship in New York. This immediately raises the question of how Rachel could be considered a "Cinderella" in the original fairy tale sense. She is not a Cinderella when she is in New York with Nick, as she has no idea who Nick is in Singapore. Furthermore, Nick's profession is not clearly stated in the film, although in Kevin Kwan's novel, he is a colleague of Rachel's who also teaches at New York University. The intentional omission of Nick's profession in the film accentuates

222 Rachel's professional and intelligent image by comparison.

When she arrives in Singapore, Rachel is placed in the "Cinderella" position, as everybody, including Nick's mother, Eleanor Young (Michelle Yeoh), believes that she is not a good match for Nick because she is not from an upper-class background. Karen Ho's description of Chu's film as "a pure escapist fantasy, a Cinderella story" (Ho) underscores the moment at which Rachel becomes a "Cinderella" in the eyes of the Young family. In this context, Nick's mother, Rachel's potential mother-in-law, plays the role of the evil stepmother who strives to stop Rachel from having a happy life with her prince. Even though Rachel is a professor from a prestigious university, her achievement does not gain Eleanor's approval, as Rachel is an ordinary Chinese American, whereas the Young family is essentially like "royalty" in Singapore, representing the "old money rich." Jaclynn Seah observes that "[a] major point highlighted in *Crazy Rich Asians* is that while there were plenty of rich people living extravagant lifestyles in Singapore, it isn't enough to have a lot of money—to be a true blue elite, you have to be born into a life of prestige with bloodlines that trace back generations to be deemed worthy of respect" (Seah).

THE CINDERELLA JOURNEY BEGINS

Before going to Singapore, Rachel knows nothing about the Young family. She simply assumes she will meet a Singaporean family that might differ slightly in terms of culture, as she has never travelled to Asia before. Ironically, through her journey to Singapore, she is forced to embark on a quest to find out the meaning of "true love" and "true self," making her a postfeminist Cinderella and elucidating the postfeminist fairy tale narrative in the film.

In Chu's film, Rachel is an American-born Chinese who has never visited Asia, whereas her counterpart in the book was born in China and had taught in Chengdu

for a year before visiting Singapore (Kwan 19). This significant change highlights Rachel's "Americanness" and foreshadows her identity crisis when she visits Singapore. Even though Rachel is ethnically Chinese, she has never lived in a place where Chinese people are the majority. Before her trip to Singapore, Rachel receives help from her mother, Mrs. Chu (Tan Kheng Hua), while preparing to meet the Young family. Seeing that Mrs. Chu came from China and knows Chinese culture well, she chooses a red dress that symbolizes "good fortune and fertility" in the Chinese sense. Mrs. Chu believes that Singaporean Chinese families are very traditional, and she worries that Rachel might not fit into the Chinese context well. However, as a Chinese American, Rachel believes that Nick's parents will like her because she is Chinese. After recognizing her mother's worry, Rachel emphasizes that she is "so Chinese" that she is an "economics professor with lactose intolerance," illustrating that her understanding of her Chineseness is filtered through Western stereotypes of Chinese people. For instance, for Westerners, "[t]he Chinese are money-oriented. They are happy to work with you even if you unintentionally upset them, so long as there is money to be made" (qtd. in Guirdham 123). It is unsurprising that business and management subjects are the top fields for Chinese students studying in the West, as numerous studies of this topic have suggested (Chao et al. 259). Rachel adopts the Western stereotype of Chinese people in believing that being an economics professor makes her Chinese enough to meet the Young family.

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Rachel's emphasis on being lactose intolerant similarly demonstrates her understanding of Chineseness from a Western perspective. In their clinical study of milk and lactose intolerance, Shi-Shung Huang and Theodore M. Bayless stated that many Asians "may have a genetically determined lactase deficiency that may lead to intolerance to milk" (83). In addition, Shirley Fong-Torres claims that "most Chinese are lactose intolerant, [and therefore] butter and cream are not involved in [Chinese] cooking" (64). In this way, Rachel regards herself as Chinese based on Western stereotypes of Chinese people, which are not acceptable to Chinese people from a Chinese cultural background. Rachel's mother makes a similar response after hearing Rachel's comment. Speaking Chinese, she says, "But you grew up here [America]. Your face is Chinese; you speak in Chinese." She then points at Rachel's head and adds, "But here, you're different." Mrs. Chu's comment foreshadows Eleanor's rejection of Rachel as Chinese and as worthy of being part of the Young family, which illustrates Karen Ho's observation that *Crazy Rich Asians* presents

the profound tensions within the Asian experience—especially the differences in identifying with mainland Asia vs. the diaspora. Rachel is part of a group that isn't the dominant culture; when she goes to Singapore, she's surrounded by people who look more like her, but the way she grew up makes her an outsider. (Ho)

As an American Chinese, Rachel is part of the overseas Chinese diaspora, but her nature and identity as an overseas Chinese is different from those of Chinese people who live in Singapore and still practice traditional Chinese culture.

Apart from the problem of identity when she visits Singapore, Rachel faces the problem of class, as Nick is not a “nobody” in Singapore. Rachel knows little about Nick’s family background when she is in New York, especially how wealthy the Young family is. Indeed, it is only through her good friend Peik Lin (Awkwafina), who lives in Singapore, that Rachel learns that Nick is from a very affluent family and is essentially a “crown prince.” Peik Lin’s comment, from which the novel and film take their name, highlights the supreme status of Nick’s family in Singapore, hints at the class discrepancy between Rachel and Nick, and further places Rachel in a “Cinderella” position: “Rachel, these people aren’t rich, okay? They’re crazy rich.”

In Kwan’s story, Peik Lin has no clue about Nick’s family background when she meets Rachel in Singapore. However, the film adaptation has Peik Lin play the role of fairy godmother, as she actively helps Rachel get a makeover and prevents her from looking humble at the first Young family gathering. According to Carol Dole, “In the Cinderella variants, a shopping and/or dressing scene always correlates to the fairy-tale heroine’s makeover for the ball” (61). In such a light, the makeover scenes are important features of the Cinderella motif in *Crazy Rich Asians*. Peik Lin helps Rachel with two makeovers; in the first, she prepares Rachel to meet the Young family for first time at the mini-ball, and in the second, she prepares Rachel to attend Colin Khoo and Araminta Lee (Sonoya Mizuno)’s “wedding of the century,” which resembles the ball in *Cinderella*. The following sections discuss the significance and implications of these two makeovers.

THE FIRST MAKEOVER

On seeing that Rachel is wearing a simple red dress for the first Young family gathering, Peik Lin warns her, “you need to not look like Sebastian of *The Little Mermaid*.” This indicates that Rachel will only play a minor role or even be the laughing stock of the scene if she wears the plain red dress to meet the Youngs. Even though Mrs. Chu picked the red dress because it symbolizes good fortune in the traditional Chinese sense, this is not good enough for the Youngs, as they focus not only on Chinese traditions but also on class background. Thus, Rachel must wear something more glamorous to present herself as a princess who is the prince’s equal. With Peik Lin’s help, Rachel transforms into a “70s goddess” and “disco Cleopatra” and becomes “the topic of the night,” as everyone loves her dress. Not only does Peik Lin help Rachel with her transformation, but she also provides the “pumpkin coach”—her hot-pink Audi—to deliver Rachel to the mini-ball at Nick’s grandmother’s house, where the Young family gathering takes place. According to Stéphanie Genz, the expression of girl power “in its most commercialized form—combines an emphasis on feminine fun and female friendship with a celebration of (mostly pink-coloured) commodities and the creation of a market demographic of ‘Girlies’ and ‘chicks’” (85). The pink Audi in this sequence both highlights Rachel’s postfeminist Cinderella quality and

emphasizes the consumption power of modern women; Peik Lin's ability to purchase an Audi reflects Heidi Wilkins's comment that women in postmodern chick flicks generally "embrace consumerism" (149).

THE SECOND MAKEOVER

If the party at Nick's grandmother's house resembles a mini-ball, Colin and Araminta's wedding serves the function of the ball in the Cinderella narrative, which allows Peik Lin to once again play the role of Rachel's fairy godmother. In addition, this sequence contains more dramatic and comic elements, as the plot provides another fairy godmother in Nick's cousin, Oliver T'sien (Nico Santos), a gay character also played by a gay actor (Danao), who joins in to help with Rachel's makeover. Placing a gay character in the role of fairy godmother challenges the traditional concept of a fairy godmother, which reflects, on the one hand, the neofeministic features of this rewritten version of *Cinderella*, and on the other, LGBTQ+ recognition in Hollywood (Danao) and influence on Hollywood postfeminist romantic comedies. During the second makeover, a Cantonese version of Madonna's "Material Girl," a song with postfeminist and postmodernist features (Real 192), plays in the background. The Cantonese translation of the song suits Rachel's image as a postfeminist Chinese American Cinderella, reflects her status using a postfeminist American song with Cantonese (Chinese) lyrics, and accentuates Rachel's hybrid identity as an American Chinese. After turning Rachel into a Cinderella by dressing her in a light blue dress, which director Jon M. Chu confirmed as a "Cinderella dress" (Cartagena), the two fairy godmothers drive a gold Bentley, the colour of which signifies the colour of a pumpkin and the status of which, as a luxury car, underscores the postfeminist feature of the pumpkin coach, to deliver Rachel to the wedding venue.

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A LOWER-CLASS, FOREIGN CINDERELLA

Even though Rachel has gone through two makeovers that enable her to fit in at the "mini-ball" and "the ball," she cannot avoid becoming a laughingstock or an object of humiliation. During her first visit to Nick's grandmother's house, she misinterprets some customs, particularly those related to Chinese culture, since she has never been to Asia before. At this moment, she faces the identity crisis of being a Chinese American versus being Chinese in a Chinese cultural context. For example, she attempts to drink tea from a finger bowl, which is a common practice in Chinese culture (Chow and Kramer 38). She also mistakes Nick's nanny for his grandmother, as she has no idea what a rich Chinese woman looks like, and her failure to differentiate a wealthy woman from a working-class one sets her up for teasing. This misjudgement emphasizes her foreignness and her lower-class background, which

is reinforced when she meets Nick's snobbish cousin Edison Chan, a purely money-oriented man from Hong Kong. When Edison meets Rachel, he bluntly asks, "So, are you from the Taiwan plastic Chus, right?" When Rachel denies this, Edison patronizes her with another question: "Hong Kong telecom Chus?" When Rachel denies this as well, Edison asks, "Malaysian packing peanut Chus?" These questions suggest that Edison only cares about Rachel's family background and has no intention of getting to know her, which echoes Peik Lin's comment during Rachel's first makeover: "These people [members of the Young family] are posh, snobby and snoshy." After he learns that Rachel is a nobody, Edison explicitly regards her as a Cinderella figure and asks Nick, "Are we in some kind of fairy tale story that I don't know about?" and "Did you find a shoe at midnight and jump in a pumpkin?" When she meets Aunt Jacqueline (Amy Cheng), Rachel's lower-class background is explicitly revealed, as "her father," not her biological father, was a factory worker in China.² Rachel's conversations with Edison and Aunt Jacqueline mark her as a lower-class Cinderella because she does not come from an upper-class background. The close-up of Aunt Jacqueline's disdain after hearing about Rachel's humble background further stresses the latter's lower-class background and identifies her as an outsider.

Rachel's identity as a lower-class foreign Cinderella is reinforced when she meets Eleanor, Nick's mother, during the family party, an encounter that reveals Eleanor's "evil stepmother" role. Eleanor dislikes Rachel not only because she comes from a humble family and was raised by a single Chinese immigrant woman in the United States, but also because she is not "purely Chinese." This is demonstrated by Eleanor's shock when Rachel hugs her as an initial greeting, as in Chinese culture, hugging is not acceptable when meeting someone for the first time. According to Laurie Chen, "hugging, especially when first meeting someone, is also rare for Hongkongers [Chinese] who may not be as touchy-feely with people they don't know well." In contrast, "Americans are known worldwide for their enthusiastic hugs" (James). When Nick mentions that he thinks Eleanor will be happy that the first girl he has taken home is a Chinese professor, Eleanor immediately responds, "Chinese American." Her extra emphasis on Rachel being an American shows that she does not see Rachel as Chinese, because Rachel was born and raised in the United States, even though her parents are Chinese. Rachel's Americanness thus prevents her from becoming Eleanor's candidate for a daughter-in-law.

Eleanor's rejection of Rachel as a Chinese person is further elucidated in their conversations during their second encounter at the dumpling-making party. Eleanor explicitly criticizes Rachel for not being able to understand the essence of being Chinese:

Ah Ma [Grandma] says if we don't pass traditions down like this, they'll disappear. I chose to help my husband run a business and to raise a family. For me, it was a privilege. But for you, you may think it's old-fashioned. It's nice you appreciate this house and us being here together wrapping dumplings, but all this doesn't just happen. It's because we know to put family first, instead of chasing one's passion.

In this passage, Eleanor indicates her belief in the Confucian doctrine of *fudao*. According to Michael Schuman, “Confucian ritual texts laid down the responsibilities and rules of a woman’s daily life in excruciating specificity. *The Analects for Women* expounded at length on the ‘wifely way’ or *fudao*, instructing women on all manner of household tasks” (153). As a traditional Chinese woman, Eleanor knows that she must put her family before everything else because women should also follow the “three obediences and four virtues” of Confucian doctrine: unmarried women should obey their fathers, married women should obey their husbands, and older women should be submissive to their sons. According to Dorothy Ko, “the age-old Confucian Four Virtues are womanly speech, womanly virtue, womanly deportment, and womanly work” (143).

Ironically, Eleanor is not presented as a traditional Chinese woman in the original novel, as she cannot speak perfect Mandarin and does not care about Rachel not being a “pure Chinese” (Kwan 405). The film adaptation presents Eleanor as a very traditional Singaporean Chinese woman; even though she received a Western education in law at the University of Cambridge, she endeavours to portray her Chineseness through “traditional Chinese practices.” As Soon Su-Chuin, Elvin Xing Yifu, and Tong Chu Kiong have suggested, “one can understand what it means to be Chinese in Singapore through ‘culture performing Chineseness’” (9), which is expressed through significant attachments to specific language, food, and family value choices. In this light, Eleanor believes that she is a real Chinese person compared to Rachel, who presents more American than Chinese culture. This is also why Eleanor tells Rachel, “You will never be good enough for the Young family,” not just because she comes from a different class, but because she is not a real Chinese person in Eleanor’s eyes. Eleanor’s mockery of Rachel’s being an American and failing to understand the duty of a Chinese wife is emphasized in the dumpling-making scene, which casts Eleanor as the evil stepmother. The change of Eleanor’s characterization to a very traditional Singaporean Chinese woman highlights the “binary of the East and the West,” as “Eleanor espouses ‘Asian’ values and is a tradition-bound woman who has made several sacrifices for the family [...] ‘Asian’ tradition and values are deemed distinct from ‘American’ values of individualism, hard work, and passion that Rachel represents” (Vijay 2).

After her humiliation at Eleanor’s hands, Rachel realizes that Eleanor is unwilling to accept her due to her being a “banana,” a slang term for an Asian American, and she starts doubting herself. However, after receiving support from Peik Lin, Rachel gathers her courage and meets the Youngs again at Colin and Araminta’s wedding. Peik Lin’s change in roles from a fairy godmother to a bosom friend reveals another important feature of postfeminist chick flicks: female friendship, which Heidi Wilkins argues is a subgenre in chick flicks (151). Hilary Radner echoes this idea:

As with the female friendship film and the neo-romantic comedy, the development of the girly film, which grew out of these genres, attests to the recognition of a new kind of female audience. While girly films may underline the importance of female friend-

ship, and may borrow, as convenient, slogans and ideas from feminism, these films offer updated version of neo-feminist paradigm as represented by the “Cosmo Girl.” (29)

The heroine in postfeminist chick flicks overcomes difficult circumstances through the support of female friends, as Rachel does here. Besides receiving help from her bosom friend Peik Lin, Rachel helps Astrid Leong (Gemma Chan), Nick’s cousin, by sharing her pain when she discovers her husband, Michael Teo (Pierre Png), is having an affair. The story of female friendship among these characters thus helps to characterize *Crazy Rich Asians* as a postfeminist chick flick.

CINDERELLA’S ESCAPE AND LEAVING THE PRINCE

228 Just as the ball is the climax in the original Cinderella tale, Colin and Araminta’s wedding is the climax of *Crazy Rich Asians*, and it is expected that Cinderella’s magic will soon disappear when the prince (Nick) and Cinderella (Rachel) dance. In the film, when Nick and Rachel are dancing at Colin’s wedding, Nick’s grandmother Ah Ma (Lisa Lu) suddenly calls upon the couple to confront them. To ensure that Rachel will not be able to marry into the family, Eleanor hires a private detective to check Rachel’s family background, revealing that Rachel is an illegitimate child, as she is the result of her mother’s alleged adultery. According to Andrea O’Reilly, “a child born out of wedlock was considered illegitimate, not deserving the ordinary entitlements of those born into marriage” (560). Given that the Young family is a rather traditional wealthy Chinese family, Ah Ma, as the head of the family, cannot accept Rachel. Thus, I argue that, through her representation of Chinese tradition, Ah Ma becomes a second evil stepmother figure. The shocking revelation of Rachel’s illegitimacy during Nick’s friend’s grand wedding creates an embarrassing and humiliating situation for her, and also serves the function of the clock in the original Cinderella story. To escape, Rachel dashes off through the crowd, and Nick immediately follows. Nick’s desperate chase echoes the prince’s pursuit of Cinderella, who flees when she hears the strike of the clock that indicates her magic will soon disappear. In addition, when Rachel pushes through the crowd to escape from the humiliating situation, Nick’s snobbish cousin Edison explicitly references the Cinderella motif when he exclaims, “Hey, what’s wrong, Cinderella? You gotta return your dress before midnight?”

After escaping from the wedding, Rachel, devastated, returns to Peik Lin’s house. In this sequence, the camera first gradually shows Rachel walking in bare feet with her high-heeled shoes in her hands, which alludes to Cinderella’s dashing away from the palace, leaving her glass slipper behind as her magic disappears. Once again, Peik Lin changes from a fairy godmother to a bosom friend who offers support and comforts Rachel, reinforcing the theme of female friendship. This sequence does not appear in the original novel, and its appearance in the film adaptation accentuates

the postfeminist approach of the film.

THE POSTFEMINIST CINDERELLA WHO MAKES HER OWN CHOICE

After facing humiliation from the Youngs, Rachel decides to break up with Nick and go back to New York. Even though the couple reconciles and is together at the end in the original novel, there is no hint of the two getting married or their relationship being blessed by the Youngs. Nonetheless, given that Jon M. Chu turns Kwan's story into a Cinderella tale, a happy ending, with the marriage of the prince and Cinderella, is expected. However, like the protagonists in other postfeminist Cinderella films, Rachel does not passively wait for Nick to marry her. Even though Nick does propose to Rachel after all the drama, she turns down his proposal and chooses to leave because she does not want him to be torn between her and his mother, demonstrating Heidi Wilkins's observation of postfeminist chick-flick protagonists "having the freedom to choose" (149). In the film's last sequence, Rachel invites Eleanor to meet her in a mah-jongg parlor to confront the latter by asserting her "true self" without comprising to the standard that Eleanor sets for her and letting Eleanor believe that she has been defeated. The mah-jongg sequence once again underscores the notion of "the binary of the East and the West," according to Jeff Yang:

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When Eleanor arrives, she takes the open seat across from Rachel and is offered the role of dealer—the "East" seat. The four seats in mahjong are named after the compass directions, which plays an important role both in the rules of the game and in the symbolism of the scene. Eleanor, in the role of the "East," representing Asia, is the player in control. Rachel, sitting across from her, represents America—the "West." (Yang)

The seating arrangement ironically represents the dichotomy of the East (Eleanor) and the West (Rachel), and highlights Rachel's "Americanness."

When they are playing mah-jongg, Rachel frankly asks Eleanor about her reasons for not welcoming her into the Young family. Eleanor states, "There is a phrase in Hokkein—*kaki lang* 自家人 [our kind of people]—and you are not of our kind. You are a foreigner. American." Eleanor rejects Rachel because she is not a "pure Chinese," as she is a Chinese American, which makes her an American who embraces American values. Eleanor's prejudice is ironically shown in the mah-jongg sequence, in which both Eleanor and Rachel need the Eight Bamboos to win:

Discarded bamboo calls to mind a frequently used term for Westernized overseas Asians, this one Cantonese: *jook sing* [竹昇], which literally means "empty bamboo." It's a slang term that's the Chinese equivalent of the Asian-American term "banana"—yellow on the outside, white on the inside—cited earlier in the film by Peik Lin (the frenetically hilarious Awkwafina). The "empty" bamboo tiles are scattered alongside the tiles for East and West, not truly part of either, representing Eleanor's perception of Rachel. (Yang)

On the one hand, the significance of depicting the two characters forming a suit of Bamboo Tiles highlights Eleanor's bias against Rachel, whom she considers "empty bamboo." On the other, Rachel shows that empty bamboo is still bamboo (Chinese). In this scene, Eleanor is trying to form the "All Triplets/Triplets Hand 對對糊" and "is trying to create a winning hand comprising all matches of the same exact tile—an 'extended family' that is metaphorically composed of *kaki lang* [our own kind of people]" (Yang). On the contrary, Rachel is forming "Half One Flush/Mixed One Suit 混一色," a hand that combines tiles in one suit—in Rachel's case, Bamboo—and Honour Tiles (Dragons and the Winds) (Lo 18), and this highlights her hybrid identity as a Chinese American. Surprisingly, Rachel has drawn the Eight Bamboos and can win the game. However, she knows that Eleanor also needs the Eight Bamboos, the only tile that could win the game for her as Eleanor already has a pair of Eight Bamboos, so she decides to give up the tile and let Eleanor win. Her decision echoes her giving up her relationship with Nick due to opposition by the Youngs, mainly

230 Ah Ma and Eleanor. Rachel's willingness to lose demonstrates that she is not "not good enough" to lose the game. Her willingness to leave Nick demonstrates that she loves him and does not want him to leave his family. Instead of forcing herself into the Young family as an unwanted daughter-in-law, Rachel tells Eleanor that she will fulfill Eleanor's ideal marriage for Nick, just as she lets Eleanor win in the mah-jongg game by giving up the Eight Bamboos, whereas Nick will loathe Eleanor for the rest of his life. This is reflected in Jeff Yang's comment on Rachel's decision during the mah-jongg game; Rachel "understands that family should always come first, something that Eleanor suspected she didn't comprehend as a *jook sing* Asian American." This decision also highlights Rachel's subjectivity, as she can choose to live the way she wants and can be a Chinese American without being inferior to Eleanor, who believes herself a pure Chinese. This could be justified by director Jon M. Chu's comment that "the film is really Rachel's journey of going to Asia and finding the dragon within, and becoming stronger and more self-assured in her own identity," and "the mahjong scene is the moment when the dragon finally comes out" (Dibdin).

LIVING HAPPILY EVER AFTER

Because *Crazy Rich Asians* is a chick flick with a Cinderella motif, it must have a happy ending. The twist at the end of the story comes when Nick holds Eleanor's engagement ring to propose to Rachel on the day of her return to America. In the end, Rachel's brave confrontation wins Eleanor's heart and persuades her to accept Rachel into the family. This also indicates that Rachel has enlightened Eleanor, who has not been approved by her mother-in-law, Ah Ma, as she could not inherit the Young's family engagement ring. Instead, Eleanor is willing to bless Rachel's and Nick's marriage by passing her own engagement ring to Rachel. This implies that Eleanor is willing to break from the Young family tradition and set a new tradition

in the family as Rachel's future mother-in-law. Rachel ends the film as a powerful woman who can have a fairy-tale life, illustrating Heidi Wilkins's description of postfeminist chick-flick protagonists as characters "who, like their screwball predecessors, are often strong, confident, and quick-witted, engaging in verbal battles to achieve their 'happily ever after' either with their lead male character or with fellow female characters, or sometimes with both" (149). In *Crazy Rich Asians*, not only can Rachel live happily ever after with Nick, but she also wins the approval of Eleanor, "the evil stepmother" and the representation of traditional Chinese culture. Overall, Rachel presents herself as a postfeminist Chinese American Cinderella who can "have it all (education, career, economic independence, love, and family)" (Isbister).

THE SIGNIFICANCE OF *CRAZY RICH ASIANS* IN HOLLYWOOD CINEMA

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Jon M. Chu's makeover of Kevin Kwan's *Crazy Rich Asians* created a sensation and achieved great box-office success. Scott Mendelson claims the film was the most successful romantic comedy in the United States in the past six years, "taking in \$237.9 million in worldwide ticket sales, to become the top-grossing rom-com of the last decade, as well as the sixth highest-grossing film in that genre of all time" (Lee). The \$30 million movie almost single-handedly dragged industry expectations about the commerciality of Asian-American films into the twenty-first century (Lee). Although *Crazy Rich Asians* did not receive good reviews or experience box-office success in China (Lee), and has been criticized as a "very American" film (Kang), the film does play a significant role in promoting "greater Asian American representation in Western commercial films" (Kang), with representations that are different from "stereotyped representations in Hollywood films of 'exotic, submissive, and hypersexualized' Asian American women and 'socially awkward, nerdy, and emasculated' Asian American men" (qtd. in Vijay 1). In addition, increasing diversity both in front of and behind the camera has become a trend in Hollywood cinema since 2017, and there is positive proof that films that show diversity can conquer the box office, for example, Jordan Peele's *Get Out*, which grossed \$253 million worldwide on a \$4.5 million production budget, and Patty Jenkins's *Wonder Woman*, which lassoed \$822 million globally (Lopez). Christy Haubegger, CAA agent and founder of *Latina* magazine, "argues that studios are leaving money on the table by not casting films with true diversity, meaning a film that is not all white or all of one ethnicity" (qtd. in Lopez). In line with this trend, *Crazy Rich Asians* is the first major studio film to feature an all-Asian cast in 25 years since 1993's *Joy Luck Club*, and has "cause[d] a tide to turn in Hollywood" (Cheng). The success of *Crazy Rich Asians* is in line with the "true diversity" that American audiences look for, as the producer of *Crazy Rich Asians* claims that "American audiences are tired of seeing the same stories with the same characters. And we have to give people a reason to get off their couch or devices.

We have to give them “something different” (Barnes).

Apart from changing the roles of Asian Americans in Hollywood cinema and falling into the trend of providing a form of “true diversity” in Hollywood cinema, *Crazy Rich Asians* also sheds new light on the academic literature of postfeminism, as most such studies examine “cultural representations featuring women who are young, heterosexual, middle-class, and white” (Butler 47). Unlike most successful postfeminist romantic comedies such as Robert Luketic’s *Legally Blonde* (2001) and Michael Patrick King’s *Sex and the City* (2008), which mainly focus on the stories of middle-class white American women, *Crazy Rich Asians* presents a postfeminist fairy tale of a Chinese American woman, an ethnicity that almost always plays minor roles in Hollywood films, which shows a breakthrough in Hollywood cinema, in particular in the genre of postfeminist romantic comedies. Joel Gwynne and Nadine Muller state that “postfeminism has been read as offering liberating possibilities to women as a discourse indicative of a post-traditional era characterized by dramatic changes in social relationships and conceptions of agency” (2). Applying this comment to the significance of a Chinese American female protagonist in a major studio romantic comedy, Jon M. Chu’s *Crazy Rich Asians* does show a “liberating possibility” and provides the agency to challenge the trend of Hollywood postfeminist romantic comedies that focus on young white middle-class women.

CONCLUSION

Crazy Rich Asians may have “cause[d] a tide to turn in Hollywood” (Cheng) and has been regarded as “a film to change Hollywood” (Ho); it also provides a new perspective of postfeminist Hollywood Cinderella-type films. It breaks the Hollywood stereotype of chick flicks with “a white chick,” because the “chick” in the film is a Chinese American. Given that “accusing chick flicks of focusing entirely on ‘whiteness’” risks oversimplifying the issues while ignoring or dismissing the contributions of other ethnicities (Ferriss and Young 37), *Crazy Rich Asians* is significant as a Hollywood film with an all-Asian cast. In addition, the female protagonist, Rachel, reinforces the postfeminist Cinderella qualities of other postfeminist chick flicks, as female protagonists such as Rachel do not passively wait for princes to marry them, instead showing their autonomy through their freedom to choose. Rachel’s quest for “true love” and “true self” also reveals the qualities of protagonists in postfeminist fairy tales as suggested by Georgina Isbister. She also fully exemplifies the heroine of postfeminist chick flicks suggested in Heidi Wilkins’s comment quoted in the introduction to this article: “Women in postfeminist chick flicks revel in the pleasure of womanliness, embrace consumerism, thrive on the notion of ‘having it all’ and do not hold back when it comes to verbalising their experiences” (149). However, Rachel differs from other postfeminist Cinderellas not only in her empowerment as a woman in a patriarchal society; she has also been empowered to challenge traditional

Chinese values and embraces her identity as a Chinese American.

NOTES

1. This line is taken from Ferriss and Young (34).
2. Rachel is the illegitimate daughter of Mrs. Chu and an old schoolmate.

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