

Singaporean Culinary Heritage from Bestseller to Blockbuster:

Crazy Rich Asians

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NOT FOR CIRCULATION beyond the Food, Heritage and Community Conference, Prague, ProgressiveConnexions, March 2019. I will show 1-2 clips at the conference for discussion, so great if you can read my drafty draft in advance! Thanks.

Kevin Kwan's novel *Crazy Rich Asians* spent 20 weeks atop the *New York Times* Bestseller List when it came out in 2013, (Bamberger 2017) then attained record sales boosted by John Chu's 2018 film adaptation, which broke box office records in the US, grossing more money than any other film in about a decade. (Mendelsohn 2013; It did not do the same in Asia, but that's another story). The blockbuster was groundbreaking for its all-Asian cast. My attention to food in Kwan's "chick lit" novels and Chu's romcom constitutes a more unusual focus than race, ethnicity and social class. Looking at *Crazy Rich Asians* through the optic of the alimentary reflects the primacy of food in Singapore and the blurring of boundaries in Singaporean alimentary culture between social classes and ethnicities.

My attention to food also aligns with the contemporary fascination with food in media, be it cooking shows, food films, or food scenes. As reflected by the importance of Brad Bird's 2007

animated Disney-Pixar feature *Ratatouille*, the genre of the food film is not restricted to arthouse film nor should we ignore the representation of food in popular literature. Blockbusters no less than arthouse films, bestsellers no less than high literature represent culinary culture, which in turn embodies culture more generally. (and we might call into question the rigid distinctions between “high” and “low” be it art or cuisine). For instance, Singaporean Eric Khoo’s arthouse films such as *Mee Pok Man* (1995) and *Be With Me* (2005) merit study in the context of culinary heritage no less than does the same director’s telefilm *The Recipe*, (2013) even though the former films less explicitly call for culinary and cultural preservation. Note that despite my original title, I have decided to focus on *Crazy Rich Asians* rather than on Khoo’s films here because I have already published on *Recipe* (Bloom 2018) and due to time/space constraints. Nevertheless, Khoo’s oeuvre as a whole merits study through the optic of food and I do intend to do that work at another time. Although *Crazy Rich Asians* is not a food film any more than the trilogy is primarily about food, cooking and eating permeate both works, as they permeate Singaporean culture. *NY Times* movie critic A.O. Scott’s review reflects that food merits mention in summarizing the film: “The venue is fabulous — if there is any part of Singapore that is less than dazzlingly picturesque, we don’t see it here — the music is great, *and the food includes homemade dumplings, street-stall delicacies and lavish banquet dishes*” (Scott 2018). I will show that Kwan’s novel *Crazy Rich Asians* and Chu’s film adaptation portray food as a reflection of Singaporean and Chinese culture across social classes. However, *Rich People Problems*, the third novel in Kwan’s trilogy, more explicitly expresses anxiety about the loss of cultural heritage and underscores the urgency of culinary and architectural preservation, as well as the intersection of the two.

Visualizing the discourse on Singaporean culinary culture in Kwan's *Crazy Rich Asians*, John M. Chu's blockbuster movie portrays hawker food and dumplings as cinematic representations of Singaporean hybridity and Chinese family values, respectively. Consistent with Priscilla Ferguson's *Word of Mouth*, (UC Press, 2014) food in Kwan's novels is not just to be eaten, but also to be talked about, perhaps even first and foremost. Chinese-American Rachel Wu's boyfriend and his friend's fiancée Araminta Lee welcome her to Singapore in relation to food. On the flight, Nick tells Rachel she's going to love Singapore because she'll "flip out over the food" of the "most food-obsessed country on the planet." ((16) However, talking about food is as important as eating it, and both are specifically identified with its national identity. Araminta offers the greeting, "Welcome to Singapore, Rachel—where arguing about food is a national pastime... This is probably the only country in the world where grown men can get into fistfights over which specific food stall in some godforsaken shopping center has the best rendition of some obscure fried noodle dish." (114) Debates about the best satay stall (Kwan, *Crazy Rich Asians*, p. 114) or roast duck venue (*siew ngarp*) (Kwan, *Crazy Rich Asians*, 414) exemplify the culinary discursivity of Kwan's novel and Singapore. Though a page turner, *Crazy Rich Asians* details the composition of Singaporean dishes in asterisked explanatory footnotes. As Grace Kyungwon Hong puts it:

Written in a pedagogical, excessively descriptive style that inducts the reader in minute, name-dropping, brand-loving detail into the tastes, mores, and consumerist lifestyles of the Singaporean Chinese elite, this book operates within a lengthy literary tradition of the travelogue, a genre based on enabling Western readers to feel as if they are 'in the know' of a previously hidden and

exclusive subculture, as well as on reconsidering readers' own middle-class values and mores through identification with a translator figure, here Rachel, whose Asian Americanness signifies in this context the all-too-clichéd idea of the bridge between two cultures. (Hong, 2018, p.113)

I agree with Hong's characterization of the style as "pedagogical," or even pedantic, an approach accounting for the transmission of "local" culinary information throughout the work. The pedagogical tone and scholarly format are consistent with Nick and Rachel's roles in the academy (they are professors). Even in an unfootnoted reference, Nick invokes a source, asking Rachel if she remembers Calvin Trillin's *New Yorker* piece on Singapore street food and promising to take her to "all the local dives even *he* doesn't know about" (17). Whereas Kwan's "crazy rich" Singapore offers a skewed vision of the gamut of social classes on the island, the primacy of food and culinary discourse captures the ethos of the nation.

Whereas the disenfranchised—which Kwan omits from his Singapore, unlike filmmaker Eric Khoo, who focuses on the marginalized—cannot afford the luxury restaurants and imported foodstuffs of the crazy rich, the crazy rich readily partake of hawker food and appreciate its quality. Kwan describes what Chu shows in his film adaptation of the trilogy's first volume, introducing the Chinese American protagonist Rachel Chu, played by Constance Wu of the tv series "Fresh of the Boat," and the viewer to Chu's version of Kwan's imaginarily crazy rich island nation with a very "real" and nationally specific culinary and cultural icon: the hawker center. Fresh off the plane, Rachel and Nick, along with Araminta and Colin, whose wedding they have flown in for, land at a hawker center. In the film as in its literary source, the two couples "makan," Malay for "eat" as Kwan's footnote explains. Kwan's novel features extensive

dialogue about the specific destination, as Nick asks his friends: “should we welcome Rachel with a feast of Hainanese chicken rice at Chatterbox? Or should we head straight for chili crab at East Coast?” (Kwan, *Crazy Rich*, p. 113) After much debate, and reflecting their flexibility, their openness to anything from award-winning restaurants to hawker centers, they choose *Lau Pa Sat*, or “old market” in the Hokkien dialect, as Kwan explains, and which he characterizes as “an open-air pavilion that houses a bustling hive of food stalls” (Kwan, *Crazy Rich*, p. 115). Quite the tour guide or pedant/pedagogue, sharing architectural history as well as local culinary delights, Nick tells Rachel she’s going to “go nuts for this place—it’s the oldest Victorian structure in all of Southeast Asia” (Kwan, *Crazy Rich*, p. 115).

In Chu’s whirlwind cinematic hawker sequence, images usurp the role of many of Kwan’s words, be they narration or dialogue. Before we even see the hawker center, a close-up features a grill cooking satay. The equipment and the human hand of the hawker underscore the process of cooking. The camera moves outward to reveal crowds of people at the hawker center, with the flames of the grill now amplified to reflect Kwan’s “bustling hive” of consumers. The fast paced sequence moves to the lively tune of “I want your love,” (*Wo yao ni de ai*),¹ cutting from shots of people to shots of foodstuffs, such as a crab being weighed. Again, the hawker’s

¹ Jasmine Chen, singer of the song for the film, explains the origins of the song: was originally a blues from 1950s by American musician Jon Hendricks, called “I want you to be my baby” Chinese singer Grace Chang sang a Chinese and English version of it in the late 50s named “我要你的爱” (I want your love), in the late 50s, became another hit in China and Asia.”

~~<https://www.facebook.com/jasminechenmusic/posts/wo-yao-ni-de-ai-here-is-the-song-i-performed-and-recorded-for-crazy-rich-asians-/10156956735779824/>~~

face does not appear, the shot instead focusing on his hand, signifying labor, and on the foodstuff he will cook. The next shot shows a signboard menu of images of primarily seafood dishes, along with their prices, reflecting their status as commodities. Introducing his girlfriend to his home country, Nick explains to Rachel, “each of these little stores pretty much sells one dish, and they’ve been perfecting it for generations.” The film sequence condenses Kwan’s dialogue, which is divided between Colin, who offers that, “The beauty of the hawker center is that each vendor basically sells just one dish, so whether it’s fried pork dumplings or fish-ball soup, they’ve spent a lifetime perfecting it” (Kwan, *Crazy Rich*, p.115). Colin’s friend extends this duration in the novel, adding, “More than one lifetime. A lot of these people are second-and-third-generation hawkers, cooking old family recipes” (115). In the film as in the novel, Nick’s reference to generations embodies the character’s attention to heritage, as later seen in his desire to preserve his grandmother’s legendary house.

In *Edible Identities*, Ronda Brulotte and Michael Di Giovine define heritage with reference to the lineage between generations not of producers of food (hawkers in this case) but of consumers: “the communal, commensal experience of eating” which “binds people together, not only through space but time, as individuals collectively remember past experiences with certain meals and imagine their ancestors having similar experiences. When this occurs, food is transformed into heritage” (Brulotte and Di Giovine, 2014, p. 1). The concept of culinary heritage also encompasses nationality and ethnicity, or the particular group of people bound together. As Ronda Brulotte and Brulotte put it, “heritage can be small in scale, demarcating a particular community or group; it can likewise be large in scale, attempting to solidify nationalistic ideologies or multicultural ideals that purport to unify, homogenize, or celebrate diversity” (Hall 1999, p. 2) Given Singapore’s mix of Chinese, Indian and Malaysian peoples,

the emphasis lies in diversity rather than homogeneity. Kwan's protagonist speaks to his home country's hybridity: "That's Singapore for you—the originators of fusion cuisine..... You know, because of all the ships passing through from Europe, the Middle East, and India in the nineteenth century, all these amazing flavors and textures could intermingle" (Kwan, *Crazy Rich*, p. 116). Although author Kwan and director Chu, like auteur Eric Khoo, focus on Chinese people rather than on Singapore's minority populations, at *Lau Pa Sat* hawker center, Nick and company eat not only Chinese dishes and satay, meat on a stick popular in Malaysia, Singapore and Thailand but of Indonesian origins and developed from Indian kebabs, ("Satay" 2013, p. 183, 301) but also the Indian *roti paratha*, a "doughy golden pastry" (Kwan, *Crazy Rich*, p. 116).

In Chu's film, Nick suggests the quality and status of hawker food when he brags to Rachel, "This is one of the only places in the world where street food vendors earn a Michelin Star." The awarding of Michelin Stars to Singaporean hawkers recognized and even increased the value of hawker food on the global culinary scene, beginning in 2016 with Chan Hong Meng's HK Soya Sauce Chicken Rice and Noodle and, in the same year, Tang Chay Seng's Tai Hwa Pork Noodle, which opened in the 1930s (Yagoda, "Singapore Hawker") and is currently run by its second generation, (Michelin) consistent with Nick's commentary.

By contrast with Kwan's novel, which whets the appetite through a verbal description of the spread of hawker fare, Chu's film serves up a visual feast in a shot of the commensal table where the two couples indulge at the hawker center. Kwan highlights the labor and specifically the intensity of hawker labor in his description of "men and women... frenziedly cooking their delicacies." More leisurely and expository than Chu's scene due to the different capacities of novel and film, Kwan shifts from the dialogue about hawker heritage to a narrative description of

the table, every inch of which was “covered with colorful plastic plates piled high with the greatest hits of Singaporean street cuisine,” which he goes on to name and explain:

There was the famous *char kuay teow*, a friend omelet with oysters called *orb luak*, Malay rojak salad bursting with chunks of pineapple and cucumber, Hokkien-style noodles in a thick garlicky gravy, a fish cake smoked in coconut leaves called *otah otah*, and a hundred sticks of chicken and beef satay. (Kwan, *Crazy Rich*, p. 116)

Chu transforms Kwan’s rich verbal description of the hawker banquet as a visually delectable meal, a colorful feast for the eyes. In the film, the table is laden with specialties including the “best satay on the island,” according to Colin, and laksa, a spicy coconut milk-based noodle soup, (Joo Chiat) which comes in different varieties, but most famously Peranakan Katong Laksa. The Singaporean institution of the hawker center is a microcosm of the hybrid island nation, entailing the mixing of cultures, cuisines and social classes. (See Low 2016)

Ironically, Nick, who has been hiding his family’s wealth from Rachel until the first class flight to his home country, affirms his Singaporean identity by introducing his girlfriend to food and sharing his knowledge about it. Commensality and the quality of hawker food, perfected over generations and “the best on the island,” matters to these Singaporean consumers more than the status of the venue: hawker centers provide outstanding food and conviviality. By contrast, at Rachel’s college friend Peik-lin’s ostentatious Singaporean family home, over-the-top attire and tacky dishware and presentation dominate, with emphasis on display and spectacle and little attention given to taste; indeed, their aesthetic sense is tasteless.

The dumpling scene added to Chu's film (Erbland 2017) testifies to the importance of heritage for the Youngs as a family, as Chinese and as Singaporean. The sequence portrays the labor of making dumplings, not consuming them. Notably, the only reference to food consumption is by the uninitiated outsider, Rachel, who asks Nick whether the dumpling making session will include eating. A quintessential Chinese food, eaten on Lunar New Year, dumplings constitute culinary heritage. As the film *Crazy Rich Asian*'s co-writer Adele Lim notes, "Jon Chu grew up in a restaurant family and the dumpling-making scene, that seems to be a similar trait Asian families have, whether they're in America, they're in Taiwan, China, Malaysia, Singapore, but there is this thing of coming together and making food... The scene provides a glimpse into the Young family's own culture" as well. (As a Chinese American brought up by a single mother, Rachel lacks a sense of family, as she discloses in the dumpling sequence. Dumplings reflect not only Chinese culture, but also familial heritage, as Nick's grandmother taught him how to make dumplings and his mother's generation (his aunts) instructed his generation (his cousins). Michelle Yeoh's Eleanor Young tells her son Nick, "Ah Ma says if we don't pass down traditions like this, they'll disappear." (Kwan, *Rich People*, p.4)

The dumpling session, absent from the novel, not only portrays culinary heritage, but also brings the discursive dimension of the culinary to the film adaptation. Close ups show culinary activity: cutting the dough, rolling it and spooning the pork and cabbage filling. Instructions for wrapping the dumplings take the form of a ditty about putting a baby in a blanket, in Nick's version, or about pinching a face with Botox, in his flamboyantly gay cousin Oliver's. In addition to ditties, moral lessons about the labor of raising children, and preservation, the film's dumpling wrapping scene exposes Rachel's lack of linguistic knowledge (of Cantonese, though

she knows Mandarin quite well): she is uncovered, like the filling of a dumpling without its “blanket.”

In *Rich People Problems*, the third volume of *Crazy Rich Asians*, Nick picks up where his mother left off, expressing concern about the disappearance of cultural heritage. Nick takes his now-wife Rachel to the best noodle hole-in-the-wall in Singapore, (Kwan, *Rich People*, p. 391) only to find that the venue has permanently closed. As he tells his wife, “Everything I love about Singapore is gone. Or it’s disappearing fast. Every time I’m back, more and more of my favorite haunts have closed or been torn down.” (Kwan, *Rich People*, p. 391). This justifiable concern about the loss of heritage is distinct from the more extreme anxiety about innovation. Nick expresses appreciation of Pacific Rim fusion molecular cuisine inspired by El Bulli, but imagines (albeit erroneously) that his mother is “having a fit” because of it (when it’s instead because her daughter-in-law is wearing Ah Ma’s sapphire necklace). Kwan parodies fusion cuisine when the character Victoria calls it “absurd food” and proclaims that she’s “so bloody sick of this Chinese fusion trend. I mean, it says on this menu card that this is *Carmelized Peking Duck y Chocolat Molé*, but it looks like peanut brittle. Where’s the duck, I ask you? Where’s the damned duck?” (Kwan, *Rich People People*, p. 406).

However, Nick takes action to ensure architectural preservation in a manner equivalent to fusion cuisine. He is not so rigidly wedded to tradition that he avoids innovation. Accordingly, his vision captures Stuart Hall’s conception of heritage not merely in the traditional sense of the “material embodiment of the spirit of the nation, “ but also as the “active production of culture and the arts as a living activity.”(Hall 1999, p. 4) At the end of the novel, Nick’s commitment to cultural heritage in the sense of the conservation of the past results in his plan to save his deceased grandmother’s palatial home, Tyersall Park, from a complete redo. Instead, he helms a

family project to buy and preserve it: “The result of Nick’s proposal had now come to life as the Tyersall Park Hotel and Museum, which preserved the main historic house as a historic landmark while breathing new life into it as an incomparable elegant boutique hotel” (Kwan, *Rich People*, p. 427). “[B]reathing new life” reflects the fluid, innovative dimension of Hall’s definition of heritage, albeit in capitalist fashion, with a boutique hotel in this case. However, Nick’s project also encompasses a more admirable innovation to help the less well-off (albeit not impoverished), in the form of “a forty-five-acre community of sustainable housing specifically designed for artists and middle-income families” (Kwan, *Rich People*, p. 427).

Kwan’s trilogy and Chu’s film adaptation are popular works that portray the attempt to preserve culinary and architectural heritage in the face of the rapidly changing island-nation. By representing Singaporean food, the best-selling trilogy and the blockbuster film also serve to preserve the island nation’s culinary heritage.

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