

## For Some Viewers, 'Crazy Rich Asians' Is Not Asian Enough

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HONG KONG — “Crazy Rich Asians,” a romantic comedy that opened in the United States on Wednesday, is a rare commodity: a Hollywood film with a majority Asian cast. For many Asian-American viewers, that is a positive, if sorely belated, development.

But ahead of the film’s release next week in Singapore, where much of the action is set, some residents there have questioned whether “Crazy Rich Asians” is the panacea of diversity that its proponents suggest.

A primary worry is that the Warner Bros. film focuses on Singapore’s Chinese, the dominant ethnic majority, at the expense of Malays, Indians and other ethnic minorities who collectively account for about a quarter of Singapore’s 5.6 million people.

“Part of the way that this movie is being sold to everyone is as this big win for diversity, as this representative juggernaut, as this great Asian hope,” said Sangeetha Thanapal, a Singaporean Indian writer and activist who is researching a doctoral dissertation on the concept of Chinese privilege in Singapore.

“I think that’s really problematic because if you’re going to sell yourself as that, then you bloody better actually have actual representation” of Singaporean minorities, she said.

The film’s detractors said that because “Crazy Rich Asians” has not yet been released in their hometown, their criticisms are based on the film’s trailer and marketing campaign.

In a statement posted on Twitter last month, Constance Wu, the film’s female lead, indirectly addressed the criticism by acknowledging that the film “won’t represent every Asian American.”

“So for those who don’t feel seen, I hope there is a story you find soon that does represent you,” Ms. Wu added. “I am rooting for you.”

Janice Chua, a producer on the film, initially agreed to comment, but later said she was unavailable. A spokeswoman for Warner Bros. did not respond on the record to questions about the film.

“Crazy Rich Asians” is based on a novel by Kevin Kwan that satirizes Singapore’s megarich, and the film’s trailer oozes with luxury cars, opulent parties and other trappings of the One Percent.

The film is “an unabashed celebration of luxury and money, with hints of class conflict that have more to do with aspiration than envy or anger, set in an Asia miraculously free of history or politics,” the film critic A.O. Scott wrote in *The New York Times* on Wednesday.

Kevin Ma, the founder of Asia in Cinema, a Hong Kong-based news site, said that the film’s emphasis on over-the-top wealth was not surprising. “It’s not a new thing for Asians to see rich Asians on screen,” he said.

Other critics have applauded the inclusion of cast members who are not of East Asian descent. The cast includes the Filipino-American actor Nico Santos, and Henry Golding, the male lead, who has an English father and a mother from Malaysia's Iban indigenous group.

Some Singaporean writers said they feared the film would mirror the underrepresentation of minorities that already pervades local films and television shows.

"Mind you, I'm happy that there are non-East Asian actors involved in major roles," said Ng Yi-Sheng, an author and gay rights activist whose debut poetry collection won the 2008 Singapore Literature Prize.

"But judging from the trailers, the browner Asian characters are predominantly guards and domestic workers and drivers," Mr. Ng said in an email. "That's kind of oppressive, don't you think?"

Singapore, a financial hub at the southern tip of the Malay Peninsula, is a former British colony that gained independence as part of Malaysia in 1963, and then split from Malaysia two years later. The city-state's governing party has never lost its hold on power, and the government controls the domestic news media.

Even though Singapore's Chinese ethnic majority accounts for about three-quarters of the city-state's population, the government often goes to great lengths to promote interethnic harmony as a symbol of national identity.

"We don't really have enough of a precolonial culture to celebrate — we're on Malay land, but most of us aren't Malay, and Chinese culture was a little too Communist-affiliated in the old days," Mr. Ng said. "So a multiracial concept of nationhood was kind of the obvious choice for us."

But it has always been a delicate balancing act. Today, there are growing concerns in Singapore that a newly powerful China could upset that equilibrium by seeking to promote loyalty to the Chinese "motherland" among Singaporean Chinese.

In the local film industry, the concern centers on why minority actors are "seldom featured as leads in movies and sometimes assigned stereotypical roles," said Mathew Mathews, a senior research fellow at the Institute of Policy Studies, a Singaporean research institute.

Last year, for example, the Singaporean Indian actor Shrey Bhargava wrote on Facebook that he had been asked in an audition to use a stereotypical Indian accent.

Mr. Bhargava said he left feeling disgusted, and concluded that diversity in Singaporean films "comes down to playing stereotypes so the majority race can find it amusing." His post went viral and sparked a debate about ethnicity and diversity.

But Mr. Mathews, who has studied race, religion and immigration in Singapore, played down the debate over ethnic representation in "Crazy Rich Asians."

"I think most fair-minded Singaporeans would see this film as a work of fiction and not expect a high level of realism and accuracy in cultural portrayals," he said in an email.

The film's detractors, however, disagree.

Alfian Sa'at, a prominent Singaporean author, who writes in English and Malay, said in a scathing Facebook post that the film featured "East Asian people purporting to speak for all Asians," adding that he hoped it would "go away quietly."

And in a Twitter thread and a Medium essay, Kirsten Han, a Singaporean journalist and activist, offered an equally blistering critique.