

# Book Review: *Crazy Rich Asians*

Reviewed by Christian Stewart

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*Crazy Rich Asians* is a 2013 novel written by Kevin Kwan, and the basis of the 2018 movie of the same name. It is the first in a trilogy. On one level, it's the story of Rachel Chu, born in China, raised in America from six months' old, and her visit to Singapore to attend a wedding along with her Singapore Chinese boyfriend Nick Young. Nick is going to be the best man at the wedding. They have been dating for two years and living together in New York for one year. Nick has never told Rachel about his family, and he has never told his parents about Rachel until their trip. It turns out that Nick comes from a traditional extended Chinese family clan that has "more money than God" and is practically "Singapore Royalty". It's old money. Nick has been keeping secrets. A key theme of both the movie and the book is marriage (or not) into an ultra-high net worth, traditional Collective Harmony<sup>1</sup> family. Rachel was raised by a single mother, is very down to earth, a graduate of Stanford, and an up-and-coming professor in the economics department at a university in New York. Nick is a history professor who transferred from Oxford.

I found it to be much harder work to get through the book than the movie, which I enjoyed. The movie maintains a more compelling plot line. Each chapter in the book is highly descriptive of the setting, the décor and the fashion, there is almost too much extraneous detail. But it is worth getting to the end of the book, which is different from the movie and has some twists. The movie focuses on the experience of Rachel in meeting Nick's family and whether she will be accepted by them. The book could be read as being more about the extended family of second generation matriarch Shang Su Yi, with a particular focus on the lives of the three very different cousins, Nick, Astrid Leong who lives in Singapore, and "Eddie" Cheng, their image-obsessed investment banker cousin from Hong Kong.<sup>2</sup>

*Would I recommend that Crazy Rich Asians be read as part of a family book club?* The fictional story paints a wide cast of characters and describes the extended Young, Tsien and Shang clan. Fortunately, there is a family tree at the start of the book. It turns out that even Colin Khoo, the childhood friend of Nick's who is getting married, is somehow related as well. Stories, even fictional ones, provide a framework that allow families to safely discuss and explore topics together. The book does offer much to discuss, in particular around the theme of marrying into a family of

significant financial capital and of the value in terms of new human and intellectual capital, that can be contributed by those who choose to marry in. The extended family clan is very focused on its quantitative financial capital, its old values, and carefully guarding who is allowed to marry in, but it has no concept of investing in the human, intellectual, social and spiritual capital of its members. The advantages of remaining anonymous are made clear in the book but the human cost of enforcing behaviour on individuals to maintain that anonymity is high.<sup>3</sup>

*Would it be better to watch and discuss the movie or to read and discuss the book?* This depends on how much detail you want to get into. There is much more fodder for discussion in the book; therefore, to read and discuss the book together would be more valuable, but is going to take more work. There are also differences in the story as told by the movie. One difference is that in the movie, Nick's mother Eleanor Young (herself a married-in) is portrayed by actress Michelle Yeoh as being practically the next generation matriarch. Not so in the book. In the book she is clearly lower down in the family pecking order (she is only a sister-in-law) and she generally works behind the scenes to get rid of Rachel. But the book finishes with a very explicit statement by Rachel that the family obsession with money and pedigree is the reason why she could not marry Nick and this is worth getting to.

*Family flourishing:* For a family clan with "more money than God", a question to consider is how much are they investing in family flourishing?

- Which of the characters are flourishing? Which are not?
- Which of the characters is pursuing their own dream or vocation?

Ways to think about flourishing include thinking about which of the characters might have done any work on knowing themselves,<sup>4</sup> and differentiating from the family?<sup>5</sup>

Nick was encouraged to find his own way and purpose outside the family, but now the elders are distraught that he no longer wants to leave that world. A story that parallels Nick's own father who has effectively made his life in Sydney. Cousin Eddie is a tyrant of a father, obsessed with image, jealous of friends with greater financial capital than he, and

waiting for the day when he can inherit from his own parents (which will be a long time coming). There might be one or two exceptions but I read this as a story of a family in entropy.

*Strengths, meaning and purpose:* Cousin Astrid appears to be a strong character and you get the sense that she has her own strengths, but her marriage to her husband Michael is a sham, and she desperately hangs on to the illusion that she has a perfect life. Does Astrid have any purpose beyond buying expensive clothes? Is she doing anything with her life? Does she, could she, use her strengths for something beyond herself? You can ask the same questions of Nick and cousin Eddie from Hong Kong. What about Colin Khoo and his bride Araminta?

- How could these various characters start exploring, with professional help, these kinds of questions?
- Could Nick evolve into a family champion having the mission of helping others in his family to rise?

*Mental health and anxiety:* Nick's mother Eleanor is extremely anxious about Rachel. She has stories about gold-diggers running wild in her head. She is mentally running up ladders of inference. Her husband Philip lives in Sydney so he can keep away from all of the family dynamics (emotional cut-off?). To get to sleep Eleanor uses up to four different kinds of medication. She has panic attacks and carries Xanax. Colin Khoo has been groomed since day one to be the future CEO of his family's Khoo Organization. Childhood friend Nick is one of the few people that know that Colin suffers from a severe anxiety disorder and crippling depression. He swings between the highest of highs and the lowest of lows. And he is about to marry a very shallow (in my opinion) Araminta! What kind of Group CEO is he going to make if he is unable to be authentic as a leader and unable to seek professional help in his personal life?

- In a family of this size and complexity should they be anticipating that some in the family will have anxiety or mental health issues?<sup>6</sup>
- What could they do as a family to put in place mechanisms to ensure that individual family members are getting help with mental health issues?
- In the family is there, or should there be, any one responsible for helping Eleanor get the counselling help that she needs?

As a starting point someone should introduce Eleanor to "The Work of Byron Katie"<sup>7</sup> or Andrew Bernstein's "ActivInsight" worksheet.<sup>8</sup> These are simple worksheets that can allow a person to hold less tightly to their own thoughts, get a wider perspective on things and lower their mental anxiety. When we get stressed and anxious, our perspective narrows, and it is harder to think clearly.

*Communication triangles and gossip:* In one study on why financial capital failed to transition between generations, some 65% of the failure cases related to a breakdown in trust and communication.<sup>9</sup> What is communication like in this family, and does it matter? On the surface Nick apparently has a good relationship with his grandmother and some of his aunties, and with cousin Astrid. However, his mother is the "last to know anything", and they don't talk and his father does not seem to be much better. Eleanor triangles with third parties rather than talking directly to Nick and Rachel. With the grandmother it's actually a case of "my way or the highway".

- If you think about that statistic of 65% of failure cases, how serious is the issue of improving communication within this family?
- How might they start doing that?

On the other hand, there is also the issue of gossip. One of the cousins is called "Radio One Asia". The gossip drives Eleanor's anxiety and is extremely hurtful to Rachel. There is a lot of toxicity in the system.

- Is gossip ever healthy for a family?
- What could this family do to stop the gossip?

*Keeping secrets:* Nick has gone out with Rachel for two years and never told her about his family nor prepared her for the overwhelming shock of meeting them in Singapore. He was brought up to never talk about his family. When asked directly, Nick does not actually know how wealthy his family is. So he kept secrets and he did not know how to go about preparing her to meet his family (or them to meet Rachel).

- Should Rachel really marry a man who has kept such a significant secret from her for so long?
- What were the family messages about money (and about work) received by Nick, Astrid and also Eddie?
- Was it really a wise strategy for his family to have taught Nick not to talk about his family (or

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money) at all? What were the consequences?  
What would have been an alternative approach?

*Shame and jealousy:* Cousin Eddie is extremely jealous of his wealthy childhood best friend. Is he ashamed that he is never going to be rich enough? At the other end of the spectrum, Eddie's mother dresses down and lives in an old house in Mong Kok<sup>10</sup> in Hong Kong. She is avoidant of her family wealth (which enrages Eddie). If you have seen the movie there is the incident with the dead fish to give you an indication of the degree of jealousy that Rachel attracts from other girls that think they are more entitled to qualify for Nick's attention and that they have a better 'pedigree'. Eleanor has spent her life trying to position Nick as the favoured grandchild. Is Astrid ashamed of her money, the way she hides her expensive clothing and hides how much she owns? Other characters are jealous of Astrid. Is Astrid ashamed she has to live in a house that her husband Michael can afford (she says no)? Is Michael ashamed that nothing he does ever matters?

- Are there other characters where questions of shame and/or jealousy arise?
- How does an individual coming from a family with significant financial capital deal with issues of shame about money and/or jealousy?
- Would facing these issues be a pathway to personal growth?

*Married-ins and their contribution to the qualitative capitals of a family?:* Grandmother Su Yi expects that none of her grandchildren may marry without first having received her consent. She guards the boundary. She watches out for gold-diggers. Her criteria are focused on family pedigree and whether a potential spouse comes from the 'same kind' of old moneyed family as hers. Her own marriage was arranged for her by her father (the original wealth creator, an enormously wealthy banker from Beijing) who chose her husband on the basis that: "This man has a good face. He will never make any money, but he will never hurt you". But her husband did come from a family with many generations of money.

However, Su Yi's father had another criteria for marriage. He engineered a marriage that strategically bound together the T'siens, the Shangs and the Youngs, to keep the family fortunes of these families locked up.<sup>11</sup> Colin Khoo's wedding to Araminta was

actively encouraged by Colin's grandfather<sup>12</sup> who saw it as a smart tie up between two business families: "He only cares about power and prestige and expanding the ... Khoo empire". His grandparents dictated who Colin could be friends with even as a child. You can contrast the arranged wedding of Colin and Araminta with Nick wanting to marry Rachel for love.

This shows a focus on concern about preservation of financial capital and protection of old family values. By these criteria Astrid's husband Michael does not qualify nor does Rachel. Yet in educational and CV terms, and level of maturity both Michael and Rachel would/should be significant contributions to the human, intellectual, social and spiritual capital of the extended clan.

- Can Astrid's husband Michael or Nick's mother Eleanor ever feel like they are really part of the family instead of merely tolerated? If not, what does that mean for the family?
- What kind of steps could the members of Nick's generation of the family take to start to get recognition of a new set of criteria for thinking about the potential contribution to their extended family of new married-ins?
- What would be some steps and good practices that could be put in place to help the family with onboarding of new married-ins?

*The fiscally unequal relationship:* James (Jay) E Hughes Jr has highlighted that there are powerful biological and sociological messages that the man in a relationship must be a provider. When the woman in a relationship does not have the same scale of financial capital, that is still a socially acceptable arrangement. That is probably the case of Eleanor herself and perhaps also Araminta marrying Colin. However, when the man does not have the same level of financial capital as the woman, expect that the relationship is going to be fraught with difficulty, and the man will often have severe challenges to his esteem. That scenario requires a special kind of pre-marital counselling.<sup>13</sup> Both the movie and the book show Astrid sneaking around hiding her expensive clothing from her husband Michael. Her parents and siblings treat Michael like a handyman. Astrid's family never visit Michael's parents. Astrid's brothers tell Michael in black-and-white terms that he is never ever going to get any of Astrid's money if they divorce. The

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*Think of a family as being an energetic system and like all energetic systems only having three options, namely, entropy (decline), fission (conflict) or fusion (synergy).*

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prenuptial agreement is a completely one-sided process. Michael feels like everyone thinks he only married her for her money. He leaves her. I think this theme by itself is enough to warrant study of the movie and/or the book. According to Jay Hughes, we will and are seeing an unprecedented re-gendering of financial capital, making this an increasingly critical issue for UHNW families.<sup>14</sup>

- What could Astrid have done, what could her parents have done, to welcome Michael into the family, help him integrate, give him respect and support and avoid the breakdown of their family?
- Are the women and men in your own family prepared for the challenge of fiscal inequality?

*Chinese culture and Western culture:* I saw the clash between Western Individualistic culture and Asian Collective Harmony culture more clearly as an issue in the movie than in the book. Nick's grandmother Su Yi is a Confucian matriarch, and a good reminder that Collective Harmony culture families can have both matriarchs as well as patriarchs. The culture question centres around Nick who has studied and worked in England and in America. Has Nick become 'too American'? Yet when he is back in Singapore, he fits in. In the movie he knows there is an expectation at some point to come back and play his role in the family. In the book, his grandmother expects strict obedience and there are consequences for Nick for non-compliance. Should he observe his grandmother's wishes, should he come back to Singapore and take his place in the family? Or should he leave his family and follow his heart and make a new life for himself and Rachel in America?

- How can Nick navigate the cross-cultural issues?
- What would a win/win solution look like for Nick and Rachel that does not involve him cutting himself off from his family?
- Are there any characters that could help to mediate negotiations between Nick and his parents (mother) and grandmother?

This is a significant issue in practice for Asian families and their next or rising generation members. The issue is helpfully explored in the book *Cross Cultures: How Global Families Negotiate Change Across Generations*.<sup>15</sup>

*Who would Rachel be marrying?:* As the clan is a Collective Harmony culture family, I suspect that a decision to marry Nick cannot be separated from the decision to marry into the family clan.

- If Nick were from a Western Individualistic family, would she just be marrying Nick, and his family background would be less important?<sup>16</sup>
- Alternatively, even in a Western Individualistic family, if the family is tied together by shared ownership interests and a shared legacy and values, is it naive to try to ignore the question of how a partner will fit in (or not) to the wider family?

*The paradox:* By the end of the book Nick proposes to Rachel. (But wait, what about premarital counselling?) Nick observes that his family's obsession with money, having the right pedigree, and avoiding gold-diggers paradoxically becomes the reason that Rachel rejects him. Rachel knows she will never be accepted into his family and she worries for her future children. She also knows the emotional climate of Nick's family is not warm and accepting. In the end Nick appears to have the option of rejecting his wider family and staying with Rachel in New York.<sup>17</sup> Yet, is that really a satisfying and healthy option, or would that just be another example of emotional cut-off (like his father)? Nick rejecting his family in favour of Rachel would be a significant loss of family human capital as the family would both fail to accept and integrate Rachel and, even worse, would lose the next generation leadership qualities of Nick. The grandmother will lose her favorite grandson.

- Isn't it in the best interests of Su Yi and her clan to find a way to resolve this dilemma, and consider the necessity for making some change?
- Is there a pathway through this paradox, which is about integrating a new member of an extended family who can fit in, and extending trust, acceptance and compassion for a "stranger to the land of wealth"?<sup>18</sup>
- Is there a way that Nick and Rachel could live a happy balance of being 'apart' from the extended family (living a happy life in New York) while still being able to remain 'together' as accepted members of the extended clan?
- Is there an irony in that the older generation needs strong human capital to continue the



family legacy but such strong people tend to recognise their own strength and ultimately can't be forced to make a decision counter to their own long-term interests?

- Are there any characters in the story who can help to mediate and recognise a middle way that is respectful of the culture values and concerns of the family, but would welcome in a Rachel and be an acceptable compromise to a more Western Nick?

*Entropy fission fusion:* Think of a family as being an energetic system and like all energetic systems only having three options, namely, entropy (decline), fission (conflict) or fusion (synergy). Entropy is the norm. For a family to avoid entropic decline it needs to be able to achieve fusion (synergy) by making itself attractive and by growing its own human intellectual social and spiritual capital through investing in its family members and by authentically accepting and integrating those who choose to marry into that family system.<sup>19</sup> While Nick's family may have very substantial financial capital, it does not have any ideas on how to invest in its human and intellectual capital

and the rigid boundary enforced around the system only has the effect of keeping out the potential new energy that Rachel and Michael can bring, and that perhaps Eleanor once represented.

*The responsibility of the rising generations:* Finally, there is also something in this story about the need for members of the rising generation of the family to take responsibility for their own lives and respectfully questioning what they have learned from the family elders. Nick grew up with the message of never talking about money, never talking about the family. At age 32 Nick still follows these family messages, which leads to secrets which led to a disastrous interaction between Rachel and Nick's family.<sup>20</sup> As a now grown man, shouldn't Nick be making his own reassessment of these family messages? If Nick really is to be the champion in the rising generation of his family clan, that role also has to involve respectful engagement with the family elders, to start a dialogue across generations about the need to have a more flexible and nuanced approach to how family members can engage with the external world, the purpose of the money, and the purpose and vision for their family.

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1 The term 'Collective Harmony' culture is used by Dennis T Jaffe PhD and James Grubman PhD, in their 2016 book, *Cross Cultures: How Global Families Negotiate Change Across Generations*, to refer to Asia's Confucian culture.

2 However, the theme of Eddie's life does not extend beyond the wedding of Colin and Araminta. It is further developed later in the trilogy.

3 This is seen particularly in the later books.

4 This is the approach emphasised in the books *Family Wealth, Keeping it in the Family* and *Family, The Compact Among Generations*, both by James E Hughes Jr.

5 Another model for flourishing is Martin Seligman's PERMA model of Positive Emotion, Engagement with Strengths, Positive Relationships, Meaning and Accomplishments.

6 I have seen a statistic which says that 14% of the US population suffer from some form of common mental disorder. Data retrieved from Keyes, CLM (2002). The Mental Health Continuum, "From languishing to flourishing in life", *Journal of Health and Behavior Research*, 43, 207–222. Thank you to Stacy Allred, managing director, leading Merrill Lynch's Center for Family Wealth for this statistic. Therefore, I think the answer to this question is 'yes'.

7 See <https://thework.com/instruction-the-work-byron-katie/>.

8 See <https://resilienceacademy.com/resources/worksheet/>.

9 The William's Group research.

10 Mong Kok is an extremely crowded busy older part of Hong Kong. Definitely not upmarket.

11 Professor Joseph Fan from the Chinese University of Hong Kong has studied the impact of marriage networks on family firm performance in Thailand. He found that stock price rises when a family member marries a partner from a prominent business or political family. See "The Value of Marriage to Family Firms", by Pramuan Bunkanwanicha, Joseph PH Fan and Yupana Wiwattanakantang, available at [www.cuhk.edu.hk/ief/josephfan/doc/research\\_published\\_paper/18.pdf](http://www.cuhk.edu.hk/ief/josephfan/doc/research_published_paper/18.pdf).

12 Araminta's parents emigrated to Singapore from mainland China and are a 'new wealth' family. They see the marriage as being about finally becoming accepted by a 'higher level' in Singaporean society.

13 See "Reflections on Fiscal Unequals" by James E Hughes Jr, Joannie Bronfman and Jackie Merrill, available at [www.jamesehughes.com/articles/FiscalUnequals.pdf](http://www.jamesehughes.com/articles/FiscalUnequals.pdf) and "From Fiscal Unequals to Financial Diversity" by Kristen Kefeller, William Hughes and Adrienne Iglehart, available at <https://fbnasia.org/en/wp-content/uploads/2018/06/From-Fiscal-Unequals-to-Financial-Diversity.pdf>.

14 See "What does the future hold for Families with Significant Wealth?" by James Hughes, Chapter 50 of *Wealth of Wisdom, The Top 50 Questions Wealthy Families Ask*, edited by Tom McCullough and Keith Whitaker, Wiley, 2018.

15 Dennis T Jaffe PhD and James Grubman PhD, 2016.

16 Family systems theory tells us that it would not be emotionally healthy for Nick, even if he came from a Western Individualistic family, for him to be cut-off or maintain a distance from his family.

17 I think, in real life, bi-cultural Nick would find it extremely hard to walk away from his extended family obligations.

18 The metaphor of a "land of wealth" is used by James Grubman in his book *Strangers in Paradise, How Families Adapt to Wealth Across Generations*.

19 This is the philosophy of James E Hughes Jr. See *Family Wealth, Keeping it in the Family* and *Family, the Compact Among Generations*, both published by Bloomberg Press.

20 Astrid was brought up with the message that you should never work. Astrid would be responsible for questioning the validity of this message and for looking to find her own work that would provide her with meaning and engagement – she sees this as a calling.

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