



Crazy Rich Asians: Deformation and Reconciliation of Mother-in-law and Daughter-in-law Conflicts in Western-Centrism Perspective

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Abstract. This article focuses on Eleanor and Rachel, a mother-in-law and a daughter-in-law and analyzes the causes of conflict and reconciliation between mother-in-law and daughter-in-law in terms of stereotypical characterization and discourse hegemony. Western-centralism has shaped the behavior of Eastern mothers-in-law to be old-fashioned, controlling and arrogant, and has put a cultural reason on her behaviors in order to cater to the Western imagination. At the same time, Western-centralism also sets up Rachel, who pursues freedom and independence, contrasted with Eleanor, in order to celebrate the superiority of Western civilization.

Keywords: Western-centralism · stereotype · discourse-hegemony · reconciliation

1 Introduction

As an Asian film made by an all-Asian cast in Hollywood, *Crazy Rich Asians* has been a hit in the West but has received a lukewarm response in Asia, where Asian audiences have criticized the film's characters and culture as detached from the reality [2]. The film's, from the cross-cultural perspective, revolves around the conflict and reconciliation between Eleanor, mother-in-law, and Rachel, daughter-in-law, expressing the imagination and interpretation of the East from a Western-centered perspective, showing the film's own Western audience group and audience's thinking. The analysis of the existing literature on film stays on the shaping of stereotypes of all Chinese in film and the cultural differences between East and West. However, they lack a deeper focus on the research objects and an in-depth exploration of the cultural differences, and ignore the issue of cultural stereotypes as a research perspective.

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2 Theory Background

As a civilization view, Western-centralism always centers on the superiority of western civilization. It's about 18th centuries that this view appeared and was shaped in the first place, following the expression of "cultural superiority", "institutional superiority" and "racial superiority" in next centuries, with the shared core of colonial ideology.

Overall, Western-centralism asserts the values of western countries as the universal and exclusive world values and the orientation of the west as the forward direction of all of the world [8]. This article uses film text close-reading and documentary research methods to analyze the reason for the conflict and reconciliation between Eleanor and Rachel, to explore the western attitude under the discourse hegemony towards eastern characters and culture, hence a relevant paradigm for cross-culture study.

3 Conflict Between Eleanor and Rachel Under Stereotype

Hollywood commercial films often use public shared good feelings as the surface narrative structure, but which carefully wraps a narrative of ideological mythology. *Crazy Rich Asians* highlight the conflict between Rachel and her mother-in-law-to-be, Eleanor, with the theme of balance between individual and family. However, this theme is apparently unbalanced, due to its unreasonable mold of characters, resulting in a characterization that seems like a replica of stereotypes of Asians. As a classic colonialism argument of "Europe's collective daydream of the East," [7] the film plays out a conflict between a mother-in-law and daughter-in-law imbued with Western-centered ideology.

3.1 Conflict Between Mother-in-law and Daughter-in-law Intensified by Characterization

Mother-in-law

Eleanor Young is the heroine's boyfriend's mother. Throughout the film, whether it's the scene of the kitchen where she first meets her daughter-in-law or the scene where the family makes dumplings together at their flashy dinner table, the audience can clearly grab her shrewd, controlled characteristics. These major scenes are almost always "inside" the family, even the first scene where the Young Family traded the hotel, all of which means that Eleanor's character is created within the family relationships and binds

with the concept of “family”. Thus she is only the power-holder of the family. So it’s easy to understand the hostility of a woman who is fully committed to her family towards a potential home wrecker, Rachel. However, this character is rather flat and stereotypical, and the audience can only see one side of Eleanor and the inevitable contradictions that come with that flat side.

Western-centralism is the root of Orientalism, and Orientalism is a generated discipline. Western Orientalism can only be the West’s speech, writing and fabrication of the East. Specifically, in Western writing about the East, there are both deliberately highlighted and deliberately obscured parts. The obscured part of the film is Eleanor’s self-expression apart from her family, which overly contrasts Eleanor’s stubbornness towards family, thus weakening the potential features of this character, leaving her conservative and family-oriented characteristics only. From the perspective of reception, it seems rather rigid, and also leads to the conflict itself also seems deliberate. The conflict between the mother-in-law and daughter-in-law is initially caused by Eleanor’s dissatisfaction. Because of the flatness of these characters, the conflict also seems flat. To be specific, Eleanor’s dissatisfaction with Rachel lies only in her inability to care for her family. This single reason makes the conflict between the characters unnatural.

Daughter-in-law

As the heroine’s friends say, Rachel is a typical “banana” who looks Asian but whose values are almost shaped by the West. In *Culture and Imperialism*, Said suggested that the story is what colonial explorers tell about distant lands, and it becomes a way for colonized peoples to affirm their own identity and the existence of their own history [6]. As an essential American person, Rachel is independent, and rational and dares to love. However, the conflict she experienced with her boyfriend’s mother in Singapore was irrational. The conflict is irrational because it consists of the strong hostility of one side and the other side as the mere offended. Essentially, Rachel and Eleanor do not wrestle with personal and family conflicts. Instead, Rachel chose to walk away when faced with the conflict. Thus, the surface plausible conflict becomes, under the influence of the factor of characterization, essentially a one-sided challenge launched by Eleanor against Rachel, and even the challenge does not essentially challenge Rachel herself.

In the last conversation between Eleanor and Rachel, Rachel says, “Maybe for the first time in my life, I know I am.” In the conflict with Eleanor, Rachel does not let the challenge change her but instead confirms her existence as an independent American, free from the Chinese family. All her good qualities have been defined by her long education in the United States, and this journey has been more like an experience to enrich her life.

3.2 The Contradiction Between Mother-in-law and Daughter-in-law Intensified by Cultural Conflict

The stereotype created by Western Centralism is not only reflected in the characterization between Eleanor and Rachel, but also in the cultural differences, which is another important reason for the conflict between mother-in-law and daughter-in-law. Nevertheless, the cultural differences are women’s attitudes and thinking under the Western imagination of the oriental culture: the eastern mother-in-law will reject the girls from western

culture, demanding daughter-in-law give up the pursuit of individual worth to serve their families, constantly control and interfere with their children's love and suppress and break up any love that cannot meet the family's requirements.

Rachel and Eleanor meet for the first time in the film. Rachel gives Eleanor a typical American hug. Eleanor's surprised expression shows her disapproval and confusion towards her daughter-in-law Rachel, implying the beginning of the cultural clash. While wrapping dumplings, Eleanor says, 'If we don't pass traditions like this, they will disappear. God forbid, we lose the ancient Chinese tradition of guilting your children.' On the surface, it refers to the tradition of making dumplings in the film, which in fact shows Eleanor's attitude towards returning to family. After that, the film expresses the Oriental patriarchal culture embodied in the film perspective through Eleanor's behavior of forsaking Cambridge studies and then dedicating to the family and the words 'I withdrew from university when we got married.... For me, it was a privilege'. But there is a natural value difference between Eleanor in oriental culture and Rachel, who pursues love bravely in American liberal culture "But for you, you might think it's old-fashioned. But all this doesn't just happen. It's because we know to put family first, instead of chasing one's passion, 'Because I had no idea the work and the sacrifice it would take...'. But having been through it all, I know this much. You will never be enough."

The film projects the image of the eastern mother-in-law under the Western ideological myth narrative as a microcosm onto Eleanor, fixing the female value in the eastern culture on returning to the family and running the family well. Therefore, Eleanor firmly believes that the choices rooted in cultural differences make Rachel unable to become a qualified daughter-in-law of an eastern family. At the same time, Rachel only has the appearance of Oriental woman, but she grew up in the United States and accept American thought. She has the spirit of breaking the boundaries of Western centralism and class stereotypes, as well as a strong sense of female consciousness and independence, and refused to 'imprison' women at home. This has become the source of why the contradiction between mother-in-law and daughter-in-law runs through.

Whereas, the conflict between mother-in-law and daughter-in-law shaped in the film does not stem from the real culture itself, but from the continuous influence of western centralism [9]. The film makes an unreasonable comparison between women in the old Chinese culture and women in the new American culture to amplify the conflict between Eleanor and Rachel. A patriarchal society before the 20th century, where women were marginalized, othered, and lacked discourse power, then requirements for women to return to families, putting their families first. Theory of Cheng-Zhu proposed 'the three obedience and four virtues (confusion ethics) imposed on women', namely 'obey your father at home, obey your husband after marriage, and obey your son when your husband dies', which bound women to the family, and women themselves believed that their value should be acquired from their family and make selflessly contribution to it. Consequently, When the feudal patriarchal family chose the daughter-in-law, the daughter-in-law was required to be family-centered and sacrifice herself for the family, just as Eleanor asked Rachel. In fact, the patriarchal system and anthropocentrism in early American society also dominated. Like China, 'freedom' and 'human rights' were only in the male environment, and women were relegated to the family. Rachel's individualism is ecofeminism that emerged in the 1970s when patriarchy and patriarchy gradually

dissolved [1]. This consciousness is contemporary with the Eastern women who have increased their status and self-awareness since the 21st century. Oriental mothers in the new era gradually respect their children's freedom of marriage and love and do not take the return of the daughter-in-law to the family as an important criterion for accepting her.

However, the conflict between the mother-in-law and daughter-in-law in the movie is apparently a clash between the Western culture represented by Rachel and the Eastern culture represented by Eleanor, but it is a misalignment of the times and concepts, a deformation of the conflict between the mother-in-law and daughter-in-law, and a cultural distortion of stereotypes in the process of perceiving the "the other" [4]. Hence, this conflict primarily derived from the hegemony of discourse under Western centralism.

4 Reconciliation Between Eleanor and Rachel Under the Discourse Hegemony

As a modern romantic film with considerable success in the U.S., *Crazy Rich Asians* has received very lukewarm public praise and box office income in China. Viewers on Weibo, Douban and other mainland social media platforms have bluntly stated that the film consciously or unconsciously distorts or even vilifies Chinese culture [5]. At the same time, some domestic mainstream media believe that the key reason for the film's dismal feedback is the lack of cultural genes within the film that mainland Chinese audiences can generally accept. When Rachel first arrived at the home of her friend Peik Lin Goh, audiences could find the Goh family were of Asian descent, but their house was very westernized in a decorative style. Visitors could see the golden fountain as soon as they entered the glorious replica of the Hall of Mirrors in Versailles interior, or the tableware full of fine cuisine. Everywhere revealed a rich atmosphere. However, at the dinner table, Mr. Goh joked about Rachel with the cheap word "poo-poo," pointing at her and discussing the face and body of American women, and did not show respect to Rachel after knowing that she has a boyfriend. P.T. Goh, across from Rachel, took two pictures of her face with his phone without permission. These plots here were designed to show the warm hospitality of Singapore Chinese. Still, the movie presented the audience with the impolite wording of the Lin family, which inevitably gave the foreign audience the wrong impression that the wealthy Chinese were uneducated profiteers or nouveau riches. Therefore, this Hollywood film essentially created a discourse hegemony. The strong position of the West in the international arena has led to the capitalist ideology becoming culturally dominant. This ideological penetration is exported outward through more indirect and covert ways (such as books and audiovisual products) under the Western-centric perspective, causing foreign audiences to misunderstand Chinese culture and Chinese people. Through the general feedback of Chinese audiences, it can be seen that the adapted film *Crazy Rich Asians* has influenced the original Eastern ideology and culture in its plots, bringing a wrong impression to Western audiences and causing a discourse hegemony resulting in discomfort and resentment to Chinese audiences.

At a superficial level, *Crazy Rich Asians* show and analyze the difference between the core of Eastern and Western cultures to the audiences through the central conflict of confrontation between Eleanor and Rachel. When the film ends with a happy ending in

which Eleanor, a wealthy mother-in-law, who represents the traditional Asian civilization of the East, and Rachel, a university economics professor, symbolize the values of Western thought, the two separated cultures are brought together. At one hour and forty-one minutes in the film, Rachel is proposed to by Nick, but she rejects his choice to leave his family to start a new life with her in New York. After that, she challenged Eleanor in a mahjong parlor, proving her attitude and strength by launching a counterattack in a Chinese game and the Oriental way before leaving Singapore. "I'm not leaving' cause I'm scared or because I think I'm not enough. Because maybe for the first time in my life, I know I am." She understood that she loved Nick too much, so she did not want him to be hurt by his family because of herself, and she did not want him to spend his life resenting his loving mother. At this point, Rachel stood in a stance of a family she had never been in, gave up the love she had always sought, and began understanding the critical element of "family" in Eastern culture. Meanwhile, after weighing and considering, Eleanor understood and accepted Rachel into the Young family. In the plane proposal episode, the ring Nick took out was the ring Eleanor wore when she got married, symbolizing that Eleanor had accepted Rachel and that Rachel would no longer suffer the pain of Eleanor being belittled by Ah Ma. In addition, the second part of this essay mentions that Eleanor's character is based on and is tied to the concept of "family." Nevertheless, in the end, Rachel and Eleanor looked at each other at the party. Eleanor just smiled at her, then turned around and exited the lively party, implying that the rest of the time was left to them. She would not interfere with the relationship between Rachel and Nick. Eleanor and Rachel, who represent both cultures, put themselves in each other's positions, no longer clinging to their original positions and choosing favor of each other's cultural connotations, ultimately achieving the delightful happy ending in Oriental films.

Although *Crazy Rich Asians* has made an enormous breakthrough in casting with an all-Asian cast, the discourse hegemony and colonial ideology dominated by the U.S. and the West are still profoundly present in the thoughts of this Hollywood film. The film quickly resolved the central conflict between Eleanor and Rachel that had shaped the whole movie through a mahjong table at the end, which made audiences feel superficial and out of touch with reality. In the movie's most classic mahjong showdown episode, when Rachel asked why "you didn't like me the second I got here," Eleanor clearly said, "you're not our own kind of people." It was not because Rachel did not have a wealthy background or because of her mother, but because "you're a foreigner, American. And all Americans think about is their own happiness." From the character's expression, audiences can find that Eleanor looked straight at Rachel with a relaxed and frank demeanor; she spoke to Rachel in the tone of an elder who has been hiding something in her heart all along. In other words, she thought Nick and Rachel could not get long-lasting happiness after being together, because only Easterners understand how to maintain a family instead of just enjoying themselves. This plot shows that the essence of the conflict between Eleanor and Rachel is a matter of cultural identity recognition. Eleanor did not trust the Chinese American Rachel; therefore, she showed full of prejudice against her from the very beginning of the film. However, after the mahjong game, Eleanor, who has always been a strong and self-conscious woman, gives in and allows Rachel to join the family. This concession represented that East Asians have finally given up following traditional values when facing free will under the Hollywood ideology that dominates

the film [3]. The female protagonist, Rachel, was Asian but grew up in the United States and was influenced and nurtured by Western culture. Therefore, her boyfriend in the film brought her to Singapore, not to return to her familiar living environment in Asia, but as the spokesperson of Western thought to “colonize” this rich and fertile land with her power. Regardless of the process, Rachel did reap the rewards of freedom and love at the end of the film in a happy and harmonious ending; she received the approval of her future mother-in-law. Behind this reconciliation, there is a symbol of the ultimate triumph of the individual will of America over traditional Asian thought, and it was easy to figure out the superiority of Western civilization from a Western-centric perspective.

5 Conclusions

By analyzing the conflict between Eleanor and Rachel in *Crazy Rich Asians*, this essay finds that the film was shaped based on the expectations of American and Western audiences and is still essentially dominated by Western values. A detailed character analysis reveals that the film uses the image of a Chinese American to promote Western individual independence and liberalism, forming a stark contrast and cultural clash with the old-fashioned, family-oriented traditional concept of the East. In addition, the ideology of discourse hegemony is present in the film, and the central conflict between the mother-in-law and daughter-in-law highlights Western-centric civilizational superiority and contempt for Asia. The seriousness of the Western-centric ideology can be seen from different feedbacks of the film in the Eastern and Western markets. Therefore, to resist Western-centered superiority and discourse hegemony, Eastern countries need to enhance their cultural status in addition to the nationals having more cultural communication concepts and cultural confidence. Changing stereotypes is hard work, and there is still a long way to go to eliminate Western misconceptions about the unrealistic ideal of “Crazy Rich Asians” in cross-cultural communication.

Admittedly, the current study does not focus on the identity of the discrete Chinese in *Crazy Rich Asians*. As a representative of a typical Chinese American grown in America but has a Chinese mother, Rachel’s complex cultural identity also deserves to be explored in depth. In future studies, it is also worthwhile to start from this point and analyze the conflicts between Eleanor and Rachel more deeply from the perspectives of ethnic differences, East-West cultural conflicts, and Chinese self-identity.

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