

FILM: *Crazy Rich Asians*

by Earl P. Holt III

This is an intelligent, charming and entertaining film, which is far more interesting than its title might suggest. Its sophisticated plot contains elements of Giuseppe Verdi's classic opera, *La Traviata* ("*The Tramp*.")

A very attractive Chinese-American couple named Rachel and Nick have traveled from America to Singapore to attend the wedding of Nick's best friend, Colin. Nick plans to marry Rachel, but before proposing -- and while they are in Singapore -- he introduces Rachel to his family at a large dinner party given by his mother. Rachel is astonished to find that Nick's family is one of the wealthiest in all of Singapore, a fact he has kept from her. The opulence of their estate is truly impressive.

Nick's best friend Colin is "*Americanized*," and throws a bachelor party for himself aboard an offshore barge that's been lavishly and expensively decorated with furnishings that include many dancing girls in bikinis. It's quite a spectacle, and even involves fireworks, as if it were the Chinese New Year. (Some wealthy Singaporeans aren't shy about spending their wealth ostentatiously, which probably explains the film's title.)

When first introduced to his family, Rachel is very deferential to Nick's stern and formidable mother (*Eleanor*) and his elderly grandmother, the family matriarch. Yet, both women are wary of "*Americanized*" Asian girls who are much too liberated for their taste, or the Eastern culture in which they were raised. Both women feel "*Westernized*" Asians lack a reverence for Eastern traditions that have evolved over many millennia. One of those traditions requires that the families of bride and groom bestow their blessings prior to a marriage. Thus emerges the clash between Western freedom and Eastern tradition.



Meeting the Family

Rachel is a lovely, thoughtful, intelligent, and highly-accomplished girl, and quite different from the image Nick's mother and grandmother must harbor about ethnic Chinese girls who become *Americanized*. As a counterpoint to Rachel, one of her dearest friends **DOES** fit their stereotype: and, although kind, decent and a loyal friend to Rachel, she dyes her hair blond and often behaves in an overly-dramatic manner. **No Confucian stoicism for her!**



Upon first meeting Nick's family, Rachel is quite gracious and charming, and all appears to go well. However, Nick's family hires a private investigator to scrutinize Rachel's background, who quickly uncovers the fact that Rachel is the offspring of an extramarital affair by her mother, who emigrated to America from Singapore years before. This was shocking news to Rachel, whose mother never divulged significant parts of her past to Rachel. It would seem Eastern tradition requires that Rachel be held accountable for the sins of her mother. The matriarch delivers the sad news that Nick's family cannot bless their marriage.

In the film's most dramatic scene, a tearful and discouraged Rachel is about to fly back to America, but before leaving, she requests one final meeting with Nick's mother, Eleanor. Over a game of *mahjong*, Rachel calmly but defiantly stands up to Eleanor, and tells her that she will end her relationship with Nick in order to avoid creating a schism in Nick's family. She is clearly willing to sacrifice her own happiness for that of Nick, but she doesn't state this to Eleanor. Then, as if to punctuate her message, she defeats Eleanor at *mahjong*. Only afterward does Eleanor finally recognize that Rachel is a truly worthy match for Nick.



Mahjong Confrontation

Nick is so in love with Rachel that he intends to ignore his family's wishes and marry her anyway. He too has been educated in America, and is very much *Americanized* like Rachel. As Rachel is in the process of boarding her flight to return to America, Nick suddenly appears, gets down on one knee and proposes marriage to her right there on the plane! He then offers her an enormous Emerald ring belonging to his mother, which could only have come from Eleanor and thus signifies her blessing. With the film desperately in need of a little levity at this point, every woman on the plane screams for Rachel to accept Nick's proposal, which she tearfully does.



Nick's Proposal

The most powerful and moving scene in the film is Rachel's calm, respectful, but defiant confrontation of Eleanor, in which she informs Eleanor that she intends to end her relationship with Nick. However, Rachel makes it abundantly clear that she is only doing so to ensure *Nick's* future happiness, not because Eleanor or Nick's family have intimidated her, disapproved of her, or rejected her. It is in this scene where elements of Verdi's *La Traviata* emerge.

In Verdi's classic opera, a wealthy young man (*Alfredo*) falls in love with a courtesan (*Violetta*) and intends to marry her. However, after a candid conversation with Alfredo's father, Violetta recognizes their marriage would tarnish the reputation of Alfredo's family, and that it has already threatened the engagement of Alfredo's younger sister. Thus, Violetta bows out of her relationship with Alfredo and ends her engagement to him. Like Rachel in the film, she sacrifices her own happiness for the man she loves, even if that means losing him.

Curiously, there's an element of irony in a film set in Singapore -- including an all-Asian cast -- that borrows from the plot of a classic Italian opera to dramatize the clash between Eastern tradition and Western freedom. However, this irony merely adds sophistication and nuance to this excellent and entertaining film.

