

## Asians in Hollywood: Representation in 2018 and Beyond

By Oscar Kim Bauman

Asian representation in Hollywood is having a moment. While director Jon M. Chu's *Crazy Rich Asians* has received a majority of the media attention, there are in fact three major studio films currently in theaters featuring Asian leads.

The aforementioned *Crazy Rich Asians*, released by Warner Brothers, features a multinational all-Asian cast and explores the dynamic between Asians and Asian-Americans.

*Searching*, directed by Aneesh Chaganty and released by Sony Pictures, stars John Cho as the lead of a thriller that packs in tension and unique filmmaking alongside distinctly Korean-American touches.

Finally, *A Simple Favor*, directed by Paul Feig and distributed by Lionsgate, features Henry Golding, also of *Crazy Rich Asians* fame, as an English professor of English origin who finds himself tangled in a mystery surrounding the disappearance of his wife.

Each of these films incorporates the cultural identity of its Asian characters to a different degree, and in doing so, creates a diverse blueprint off which future representation may grow.

Based on the book of the same name by Kevin Kwan, *Crazy Rich Asians* follows Chinese-American professor Rachel Chu, played by Constance Wu, as she is introduced to the obscenely wealthy Singaporean family and friends of her boyfriend Nick Young, played by Henry Golding.

*Crazy Rich Asians*, while a lighthearted romantic comedy, also incorporates deeper themes. At its core, the film addresses issues of the cultural conflict between Asians and Asian-Americans, and how common ground may be found between these groups.

The film, though critically praised and commercially successful, has also been controversial. One of the primary issues raised before the film's release was the issue of its multi-ethnic ensemble playing a cast of entirely Chinese-Singaporean characters.

While most of the film's actors share the same Chinese ethnicity as their characters, there are several exceptions. Awkwafina, who plays Goh Peik Lin, is of Chinese and Korean descent. Ken Jeong, who plays Peik Lin's father Goh Wye Mun, is also Korean-American. Sonoya Mizuno, who plays Araminta Lee, is of Japanese, English, and Argentinian descent. Nico Santos, who plays Oliver T'sien, is Filipino-American. Most notably, Golding, the film's leading man is of Malaysian Iban and English heritage.

These casting decisions have lent themselves to multiple discussions. First is the question of how appropriate it is to cast an actor of one Asian ethnicity as a character of another. Critics of the practice say it encourages the stereotype that Asians are interchangeable, while supporters point to the fact that white actors frequently play characters of various European ethnicities with little question and ask why Asian actors can't do the same.

The second question is of particular concern to the casting of Golding and Mizuno-- can multiracial Eurasian actors play Asian characters? Opinions on this issue are more nuanced. While some universally oppose doing so, none universally support it. By and large, the deciding factor seems to be whether the actor "looks Asian," a criterion that is highly subjective and can vary greatly based on any number of factors.

Both issues were brought up last year in a controversial interview by actor Jamie Chung. Chung, who is Korean-American, said she was denied a chance to audition for *Crazy Rich Asians* as she was told the film was only looking for "ethnically Chinese" actors. She pointed out

the apparent hypocrisy in the studio's final decisions regarding casting, calling the casting of Golding "bullshit."

Chung's comments received much backlash, and she later apologized to Golding. Much of the criticism accused Chung herself of hypocrisy, noting that she herself had played a Chinese character, Mulan, in the show *Once Upon a Time*.

"This is a very long-standing debate, and the same questions come up every single time," said English Professor Betsy Huang, Director of the Center for Gender, Race, and Area Studies in an interview over the phone. "If we want to have only those who self-identify as Chinese or Chinese American play a Chinese or Chinese American character, we need to decide how we define 'Chineseness.' I think it's a very difficult thing for anyone to begin to say 'we can only have this type of person play this type of character.'"

Another recent example of Asian-American representation in Hollywood, *Searching*, is unique in two aspects. It is one of the first films to take place entirely on computer screens and the first of the form to achieve critical acclaim. Beyond that, its casting of Cho as lead David Kim makes it the first mainstream Hollywood thriller to feature an Asian-American lead.

In addition to Cho, the rest of the fictitious Kim family is played by Korean-American actors: Joseph Lee as David's suspicious stoner brother, Peter, Sara Sohn as David's tragically deceased wife, Pamela, and most centrally, Michelle La as David's mysterious missing daughter, Margot.

The film features subtly authentic touches of the Kim family's Korean roots. An opening scene features Peter cooking a kimchi stew, Peter and David refer to their parents by the Korean words "eomma" and "appa." David is briefly seen texting his mother in Korean. Margot's

experiences at school as a quiet, studious piano-player with little social life is one that may be familiar to many Asian-American viewers.

Ultimately, the film could have chosen to cast the Kim family as one of a different race and the script would only require minor rewrites, leaving the narrative intact. However, in an interview with *We Live Entertainment*, Chaganty declared that “we wrote it for John Cho. We had a Korean American family, an Asian American family in mind and it was just John Cho from the top.” Films like *Searching* form a crucial part of representation. They feature Asian-American characters whose ethnicities, while not being centered, are not erased either.

While something like *Crazy Rich Asians* works as an effective breakthrough moment, the future of Asian Americans on film may look much more like *Searching*. Rather than highlight their race in every appearance, Hollywood films could allow Asian-Americans to take on roles that any other American actor could play.

*Searching*, while successful domestically, was an even bigger hit in South Korea. The film made almost as much at the Korean box office as it did at the American one, in a country with a population less than a sixth of the size of that of the United States. Headlines on Korean news sites emphasized excitement among the Korean public to see an ensemble of Korean-Americans on film.

*Crazy Rich Asians*, while higher grossing than *Searching* overall, made a much smaller percentage of its gross in Asian markets. Some writers attributed its relative underperformance overseas to its cultural specificity; the film is specific to the experience of a Chinese-American becoming acclimated to Chinese Singaporean wealth and may have been less relatable to an

Asian audience than *Searching*'s more familiar premise. "Because [*Crazy Rich Asians*] is that specific in its premise, it doesn't travel to other groups," said Professor Huang.

*A Simple Favor*, a comedic-tinged thriller from director Paul Feig, features a more complicated type of representation. The film's marketing largely centers its two white leads: Anna Kendrick and Blake Lively. However, in the film itself, Henry Golding, as Sean Townsend, the husband of Lively's character Emily Nelson, takes on a role equally as prominent.

Townsend's race is not a theme of the film. In fact, it isn't brought up at all. The only defining background to the character is his English nationality. While actors of Asian descent play Townsend's son, Nicky, and Townsend's unnamed mother, their race is never referenced. It is easy to imagine the role of Sean Townsend was originally intended for a white actor, likely one of Hollywood's many archetypically handsome British men.

While Golding's appearance in *A Simple Favor* is undeniably representation, the question remains of if it is good representation. On one hand, Sean Townsend is essentially a white character in all aspects other than the actor playing him. Conversely, someone of Golding's background could very conceivably live a lifestyle akin to Townsend's.

The casting of Golding as Townsend could "expand people's notions about what a British person looks like or is," said Professor Huang. "When the writer wrote this role and gave the character an Anglo name, it a question for the writer and the audience, when we think about a Brit, do we assume it is a white Brit by default?"

Certainly, when are presented with a character with an English name and accent, most of us picture a white person. Conversely, to cast Henry Golding in this role is in no way culturally inaccurate-- he himself is a multiracial Asian man, but also has an English name and accent, and

is of English descent. Beyond acknowledging American multiculturalism, representations of Asian characters in Hollywood can serve to illuminate the diversity of other countries as well.

Feig has been vocal about his choice to cast Golding. In an interview with the *Hollywood Reporter*, he said “movies have to be a mirror on our society. Our society is beautifully diverse and beautifully inclusive.” Golding has also already been cast as the lead in Feig’s next project, *Last Christmas*, set for 2020.

While for the time being, Henry Golding’s future in Hollywood is set, the future for Asian representation overall is less certain. Only time will tell if major studios will continue to put out films that depict Asian characters in leading roles, and what type of depictions will exist.

Although Golding is a new talent, much of the Asian talent in Hollywood is already there, simply waiting to be utilized properly.

Chaganty, in an interview with *Vulture*, said that he cast Cho because “he’s a movie star through and through and does not have the roles that he deserves.” There are likely many Asian-American actors out there who, like Cho, are not afforded opportunities to showcase their talents onscreen.

Professor Huang also pointed to director Justin Lin as an underappreciated Asian-American talent. Lin, popularly known as the director of films in the *Star Trek* and *the Fast and the Furious* franchises, also directed *Better Luck Tomorrow*, a well-reviewed 2002 drama which featured an all-Asian cast that included Cho.

The future of Asian representation in American cinemas, while uncertain, has great potential. With three different takes on representing Asian culture and characters on display in *Crazy Rich Asians*, *Searching*, and *A Simple Favor*, a stronger framework now exists to be built

off of in future films. The success of these films proves that the talent and the audience to make these films succeed exists. The fate of representation now rests in the hands of the studios.