

Crazy Rich Asians: Responses to movie reveal incongruence

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The Hollywood film *Crazy Rich Asians*, set in Singapore, has ignited heated discussion. Forum letters, online commentaries and social media posts have highlighted concerns around issues of racial representation, the rich-poor class divide and national service obligations.

What do the responses, both online and offline, say about us as a society?

To us, the reactions to these diverse issues have been an interesting study into what different Singaporeans see as cherished – might we even say sacrosanct – aspects of our national identity.

The reactions also reveal a particular contradiction. Despite Singaporeans' willingness to air their views on certain issues, these beliefs may not necessarily translate into action in their daily lives.

National identity is a complex issue to pin down: What constitutes identity is fluid, changing and sometimes contested.

Among the most vociferous complaints is that the film is not an accurate portrayal of Singapore's multiracial diversity – even though *Crazy Rich Asians* is based on a novel and is produced as a Hollywood romantic comedy and not, say, a documentary about Singapore.

In the movie, the main characters are all Chinese, leading some to say this accentuates stereotypes that this is a "Chinese country" and that the upper echelons of power and wealth are from the majority race.

Such views likely spring from a belief in the value of multiracialism. People may espouse such values. However, our analysis of four nationally representative surveys conducted between 2012 and 2017, and reaching over 10,000 Singaporeans, has consistently shown that day-to-day preferences and prejudices along racial lines are very much alive in Singapore.

These could range from parents



A scene from the movie *Crazy Rich Asians*. The reactions of Singaporeans to the issues raised over the film have revealed a particular contradiction – despite Singaporeans' willingness to air their views, these beliefs may not necessarily translate into action in their daily lives, the writers say. PHOTO: WARNER BROS

perpetuating racial stereotypes in conversations with their children to employers adopting discriminatory hiring practices, and Singaporeans making racially insensitive comments in their daily interactions.

Crazy Rich Asians, essentially a satire on the culture of excess by the privileged 0.01 per cent in society, also feeds into the ongoing conversations Singapore is having over class divides and a widening income gap.

The ostentatiousness on display in the film irks many. Still, while middle- and high-income Singaporeans are discomfited by the economic inequality in real life and the movie, the large majority

still cling to practices that entrench class privilege and serve to widen the income gap.

Better-off parents (quite rightly wanting the best for their child, it must be acknowledged) still allocate substantial amounts of their household budget to tuition and enrichment activities for their children. Our research has shown that this expenditure rises as one's household income increases.

Other parents who can afford to do so also buy homes close to elite primary schools, so that their children can gain entry to these schools in earlier Primary 1 admission rounds.

Apart from multiracialism and inequality, *Crazy Rich Asians* has

also revealed another cherished aspect of the Singapore identity.

NS – or, to be more exact, completing one's obligations to serve – is one institution that many Singaporeans seemingly feel very strongly about.

Author Kevin Kwan's failure to complete his NS obligations has led to questions over whether the Singapore Tourism Board was aware of this but went ahead with lending its support to the movie so as to raise the country's international visibility. (Mr Kwan, who left Singapore when he was 11, subsequently became an American citizen. He is also the movie's executive producer.)

Whether his contributions to the

arts and cultural field can be constituted as "national service" – as with the sacrifices and achievements of Singapore's athletes, musicians and talents in other fields – is a topic that will constantly be revisited. For now, the Government is standing firm on its policy that all male citizens must complete their NS obligations.

One camp's view is that this private matter should not detract from Mr Kwan's success as a writer and his role in elevating Singapore's stature through the movie. As one former diplomat wrote on Facebook: "We should wish (Mr Kwan) well, even as we wish Kwan getting his just deserts one day." Others feel aggrieved that he did

not fulfil his obligations like every other male citizen.

Despite grumblings over the NS issue, there have been no mass boycotts of the movie. Instead, likely piqued by the intense media coverage before and in the early days of the film's release, many Singaporeans have chosen to feed their curiosity and fork out money to watch Mr Kwan's product.

Our purpose in highlighting the debates around representation, inequality and NS obligations has not been to take sides on these issues. Rather, we are more interested in pointing out how these disparate issues show that despite our relatively young age as a nation, there are values, norms, institutions and hallmarks of Singapore society that we variously stand up for.

Still, for most of us, we cannot say that our behaviour matches our talk. We protest about the lack of representation of minorities but our actions seldom include efforts to be more inclusive in our friendship circles. We worry or express outrage at economic inequality but we are unlikely to agree to pay higher taxes so that better redistribution of resources is possible. We gripe about Mr Kwan's failure to fulfil his NS obligations but a fair number of us willingly parted with our money and two hours of our time to be part of the ongoing conversations with friends and family about the movie.

Perhaps these reactions should not be surprising. The majority of Singaporeans have been known to adopt a pragmatic approach in many areas of life. The pursuit of material well-being and fulfilment of personal needs, to them, often trump other social ideals.

The Singaporean is arguably, at his or her core, pragmatic, utilitarian and a realist. Our responses to *Crazy Rich Asians* might just have provided the world with a window into the Singaporean psyche. Some might even think us crazy.

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