

# Chinese Cultural Identity Represented in Crazy Rich Asian Novel by Kevin Kwan

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## ABSTRACT

This research analyzes the Chinese cultural identity represented in *Crazy Rich Asians*, written by Kevin Kwan. It aims to identify the Chinese cultural signs and explore the representation of Chinese cultural signs in representing Chinese cultural identity in the novel. This research employs a semiotic approach by C. S. Peirce to represent Chinese cultural identity. *Crazy Rich Asian* novel is the primary source of data; the data taken is in the form of words, phrases, and sentences in the novel. The collected data is analyzed to identify the Chinese cultural signs and their representation. This research shows cultural signs, namely language used, body language, and family, which are Chinese cultural signs in the novel. These signs are identified based on legisign. The representation of Chinese cultural signs is examined by seeing the relationship between the sign and its object from three different perspectives, including the similarities (icon), the real cause-effect (index), and the general rules (symbol). The results of their representation show Chinese tradition, terms, history and environment.

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

Culture has cultural values that a group has believed of people as very valuable. These cultural values can be the base of formatting or creating an identity for a person or group. These abstract cultural values can be realized by cultural participants in forms often referred to as cultural features, such as art, language, and knowledge. These cultural features later signify unique cultural identity characteristics (Gilbert, 2010).

As one of the cultural features, literature is a product or media and signs of sharing culture (Miller, 2004). As a literary work, the novel can take a role in the function of literature as a medium and a sign of sharing culture. A novel is a literary work in prose with an extended storyline. This study takes a novel by Kevin Kwan as the primary reference material. It is *Crazy Rich Asians*. This *Crazy Rich Asian* novel was published in 2013 and reached its peak of fame when it became a best seller and then adapted into a Hollywood movie with the same title, *Crazy Rich Asian*. The novel's outline tells about the lives of rich people in Singapore, most Chinese, and focuses on a super-luxury wedding of a famous bride and groom. Nicolas Young, the main character in the novel, must return to his hometown, Singapore, from New York to become the best man at his best friend's wedding in Singapore. His return is followed by Rachel Chu, a young Chinese American woman, as Nicolas Young's lover to accompany Nicolas to the wedding. The arrival of Rachel Chu in Singapore makes a definite difference to the Singaporean characters, which causes the starting conflict in the novel.

Some previous researchers believed that the exact reason why Eleanor did not welcome Rachel Chu was because of the social class differences and cultural differences between Nicolas Young and Rachel Chu. Ulfa (2019) found that different social classes caused the conflict between Rachel and Eleanor. Most of the Singaporean Chinese characters, mainly, had a fear of Rachel Chu's consumptive nature as a middle-class person. They feared that Rachel only wanted the Young family's fortune and wealth. This was undeniable by looking at the highly consumptive nature of women to meet the needs of life, especially the lifestyles of the women who had been represented in the novel (Yit, 2018). They feared Rachel's intention to willingly accept the Young family's fortune and wealth (Rohmawati, 2018). Winatian (2019) found that Eleanor Young and the people around her thought and acted to represent their culture, clearly different from how Rachel and her family did. In the novel, Rachel Chu consciously shares American culture with Chinese culture when interacting with Chinese Singaporean characters (Chrisnanda, 2019).

Considering the cultural issues, this topic motivates this research to analyze the Chinese cultural identity represented in Kevin Kwan's *Crazy Rich Asia* novel further. Chinese cultural identity refers to the Chinese characters' sharing of their culture, especially Chinese culture.

This research is conducted to apply the semiotic theory of C. S. Peirce as the approach. This approach is suitable for analyzing cultural identity because it could help identify the cultural identity represented in the novel through cultural signs. The cultural signs are identified based on legisign (signs based on general laws). Then, the cultural signs can be analyzed for further representation of the cultural signs as providing further explanation or reasons found in the novel. The representation of the cultural signs can be analyzed from three different perspectives: the similarities (*icon*), the real cause-effect (*index*), and the general rules (*symbol*). Thus, this research focuses on identifying the Chinese cultural signs in the novel and analyzing the representation of the cultural signs by applying a semiotic approach conducted by C. S. Peirce.

## 2. METHOD

This study applied a qualitative descriptive research method to analyze the Chinese cultural identity in *Crazy Rich Asian* novel. Qualitative descriptive research is a method to explain a phenomenon by taking data in the form of words (Salma, 2021; Kothari, 2004). In order to analyze Chinese cultural identity in the novel, this research used a semiotic approach by C. S. Peirce, identifying Chinese cultural signs and analyzing their representation. The data was taken in the form of words, phrases, and sentences in the source of data, which was *Crazy Rich Asian* novel. The data was collected by critically reading the primary source, taking notes, highlighting the important information, and searching for relevant information related to the research topic. Then, the data collected was analyzed further by organizing, coding, and evaluating the data. These processes refer to connecting one data to another to find the theme, group the data collected, and evaluate all the data in forming more specific data information. Then, the data was analyzed by applying the approach, and the data was concluded.

## 3. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

The signs of Chinese culture found in this research were further divided into three parts: language used, body language, and family.

### 3.1. Language used

Although the novel is written in English as the main language of the delivery message, Kevin Kwan also explains various interesting things about the use of language by Chinese characters in his novel. The language often used by Chinese characters is English and Chinese, which assumes that all Chinese characters have bilingual capabilities. Chinese is also used as the language in giving names to objects.

The languages Chinese characters speak in conversation are English, Chinese, and Malay. English is more dominant than the use of Chinese. It can be seen from some data in the form of quotes taken from the novel.

...“Aiyah! So long I haven’t seen you. Bien kar ah nee swee, ah!” she exclaimed in Hokkien, cupping Rachel’s cheeks with both hands.

"She thinks you've become beautiful," Peik Lin translated, knowing that Rachel only spoke Mandarin. “Thank you, Mrs. Goh. It is so nice to see you again,” Rachel said, feeling somewhat overwhelmed.

She never knew what to say when someone complimented her looks. ...

“Come, come to the keet-chen. Makan time.” She clamped her bronze fingernails onto Rachel’s wrist ...

(Kwan, 2013:111)

This is the conversation between Rachel Chu and the Goh family. She arrived in Singapore and visited her Singaporean friend, Peik Lin, to have lunch with Peik Lin’s family. Peik Lin's mother welcomed Rachel warmly in English. Even though she was fluent in English, the use of Peik Lin’s mother was mixed with the other languages, which were Chinese in Hokkien accent and Malay. This part showed how Chinese Singaporeans spoke directly to Chinese Americans. Meanwhile, Rachel also spoke in English without any mixing languages.

Some of the data mentioned above showed that Chinese Singaporeans and Chinese Americans spoke English as their primary language in their daily lives rather than Chinese. However, even though they both speak English, these two groups showed different characteristics. For example, Chinese Singaporeans spoke English often mixed with Chinese and Malay. Chinese Americans spoke English without mixing other languages and without using figures of speech.

However, this did not mean that they did not speak Chinese at all in conversation. On the other hand, they also spoke in Chinese in certain situations, and sometimes, especially Chinese Singaporeans, mixed it with English or Malay.

Rachel decided to greet her in Mandarin, the only dialect she spoke, but before Nick could make proper introductions, she bowed her head

nervously at the stately lady and said, "It is such a pleasure to meet you. Thank you for inviting me to your beautiful home." The woman looked at her quizzically and replied slowly in Mandarin, "It is a pleasure to meet you, too, but you are mistaken. This is not my house." (Kwan, 2013: 141).

Here, Rachel brought out her ability to speak Chinese, particularly the Mandarin dialect, which was the only one she knew how to say, as she began to speak to the great-aunt Rosemary, whom she previously mistook for Nicolas' grandmother. In this way, Rachel mastered Chinese even though she only had one dialect, Mandarin. Rachel was talking to an older person, Nicolas' grandmother. The great-aunt Rosemary replied in Mandarin and politely replied in the same dialect.

Nick addressed his grandmother in Cantonese. "Ah Ma, I'd like you to meet my friend Rachel Chu from America." "So nice to meet you!" Rachel blurted in English, completely forgetting her Mandarin.

Nick's grandmother peered up at Rachel for a moment. "Thank you for coming," she replied haltingly, in English... (Kwan, 2013: 141)

Nicolas talked to his grandmother in Chinese, especially in Cantonese dialect, to introduce his girlfriend. It shows that Nicolas could speak Chinese as a Chinese Singaporean. Nicolas's situation here was the same as Rachel's; he used Chinese when talking to older people, namely his grandmother. However, because Rachel forgot to speak in Chinese and then spoke in English, Nicolas' grandmother responded. Kevin Kwan also uses the same method, not directly writing a conversation in Chinese but explaining it beforehand.

From these data, Chinese people, whether from Chinese Singapore or Chinese America, could speak in Chinese. However, judging from every conversation in the novel, the Chinese conversation was less spoken depending on the situation, such as when talking to an older person. Some passages in the Chinese language were spoken without special conditions and mixed with English or Malay.

Besides speaking in Chinese, Chinese Singaporeans also understood and spoke in Malay. Only a few words were primarily spoken in Malay by Chinese Singaporeans, who then mixed it with English or Chinese. The examples of Malay words spoken in the novel were makan, which meant eating; lobang, a Malay slang word meaning contact; and hun tum, which meant beating in Malay slang.

My grandmother arranged a small party at the last minute because her tan hua flowers will bloom tonight." (Kwan, 2013:137)

In this quote, Nicolas takes Rachel to a small party that Nicolas' grandmother holds to celebrate the blooming of her grandmother's tan. From this data, language, especially Chinese, was also used to name something that was not originally from mainland China. An example is tan has, a flower that blooms at night. Tan are known to have originated in Mexico and were brought to China in the 1600s (awkwardbotani, 2018).

### 3.2. *Body Language*

Signs of Chinese culture can be seen next in body language. Body language refers to the body gestures, eye movements, and body postures made by the Chinese characters in the novel. Kevin Kwan conveys some interesting body language throughout his novel, using Chinese characters.

"Rachel bowed her head and presented her gift of oranges." (Kwan, 2013:244)

The quotation above shows that Rachel was bowing to Nicolas' mother, Eleanor, whom she had met for the first time, while giving gifts in the form of oranges. Rachel also gave this greeting while bowing when she was introduced to Nicolas' other family, such as to the great aunt Rosemary (Kwan, 2013, p. 141), who initially thought Rachel was Nicolas' grandmother. Rachel's mother, Kerry, also reminded her daughter to bow her head properly (Kwan, 2013, p. 241), bowing as she had been taught, to Nicolas's parents when they were about to meet.

Felicity nodded at Rachel, boldly scanning her up and down. (Kwan, 2013:139)

Nicolas' aunt nodded as she was introduced to Rachel for the first time by Nicolas at Nicolas' grandmother's party. She nodded as she looked at Rachel's body from top to bottom. Nicolas' grandmother and mother did the same thing when they first met Rachel (Kwan, 2013: 141) (Kwan, 2013: 244).

### 3.3. *Family*

A sign of Chinese culture in the Crazy Rich Asian novel is family values. Chinese family values refer to the family background and the relationships between families. There is a striking difference in the family values of the two groups, Chinese Singaporeans and Chinese Americans.

"But who is she? Who are her people?" "I don't know precisely," Alexandra said. "How is it possible that you do not know the family when your son wants to take her as his wife?" Su Yi said in astonishment. "Look at Fiona here—we have known her family for generations. Fiona, do you know this girl's family?" (Kwan, 2013:294)

Considering the quotation above, family background was a serious matter for Chinese Singaporeans, especially when they had a relationship with someone else. It was depicted when Su Yi, Nicolas' grandmother, asked her daughter, Alexandra, about her grandson's fiancé, Kitty Pong. The grandmother was confused because she was not

informed that Alistair, her grandson, would marry a soap opera actress from Hong Kong. The first thing Su Yi asked was about Kitty's family, and then she was surprised at her daughter because she didn't know the family origin of a girl who would marry her grandson. Then, Su Yi added about the whereabouts of Fiona's family, one of her grandsons' wives, who knew Fiona's family well.

There are other examples of family background in the novel. When Su Yi had private time to chat with Rachel in the conservatory, she wondered about Rachel's family background (Kwan, 2013: 258). After learning about Nicolas and Rachel's relationship, Eleanor insisted on hiring a personal detective to investigate Rachel's family background. The Goh family also asked Rachel about her boyfriend's family background when they had lunch together (Kwan, 2013, p. 115).

"Oh, you do not have to do that. It's not important to me what sort of family he comes from," Rachel said.

"Nonsense, lah! Of course, it is important!" Wye Mun was adamant.

(Kwan, 2013: 116)

According to the quotation above, two interesting pieces of data were mentioned. First, it was about Rachel saying that her boyfriend's family background was not important to her. Second, Wye Mun replied to Rachel about their family background, which was important. Thus, it was found that Chinese Singaporeans, as explained before, consider someone's family background. However, Chinese Americans did not think the same way; they did not matter someone's family background. It was also supported by Kerry, who did not recognize Nicolas' background family until Rachel told her the truth (Kwan, 2013, p. 239).

"Nicky, I have not been in the position to make a single choice since I was born, and you know that," Colin said matter-of-factly.

...

"You know this merger has been choreographed down to the most minute detail, and this is how it will be. It's good for business, and anything good for business is good for the family," Colin said bitterly.

(Kwan, 2013:118-119)

In the data above, Colin revealed that his marriage was arranged for the sake of good fortune for the family. He also mentioned that he had no choice in his life, which was often regulated by his family by limiting his association and acting like someone who would be the successor of the Kho family.

Colin's statement was also supported by Sophia when she was chatting with Rachel at Araminta's bachelorette party. She said that children, especially daughters, have no choice before marriage (Kwan, 2013, pp. 215-216). The family also arranged the marriage.

"Yes, but Nicky does not realize how much damage he's done to his relationship with his grandmother. I trained him to never, ever offend her, but he hurt her terribly in Cameron Highlands...."

"Aiyah, Nadine, my whole life has been spent protecting him within my husband's family and positioning him as the favourite grandson...."

Hiya, I always knew sending him to England would be a mistake."

(Kwan, 2013:386)

Eleanor expressed her disappointment over her only son, Nicolas, who chose Rachel over his family. Eleanor consciously said that she had made life choices for Nicolas since he was a child, such as letting him live with his grandmother in a different house from his mother and telling him to get the best education in England.

According to Colin, Sophia, and Eleanor, parents had the right to determine their children's life choices in socializing, pursuing education, and choosing their partners. However, children were not allowed to make their own choices.

"... But I was never raised to believe that marriage was supposed to be my life's goal. My mother wanted me to get the best education first.

She never wanted me to have to wash dishes in a restaurant."

(Kwan, 2013:215)

Rachel shared her perspective on how she was brought up to focus more on her career than having to think about having to get married. Rachel realized that her mother influenced her to demand the best education and a promising career. Her mother also taught her about Chinese traditions, such as speaking Mandarin and greeting people of higher social status (Kwan, 2013: 241). In addition, Rachel had the choice to marry or not. She was free to choose her partner, not limited to what kind of family background that person is (Kwan, 2013, p. 116).

Nick paused, struggling for the right words. "We're just different.

We're much more formal with each other..."

(Kwan, 2013:52)

Nicolas's statement reveals his relationship with his parents. He claimed he must speak formally to his theme's emotions.

It would be just after dinnertime in Cupertino, and on the nights she wasn't at Nick's, Rachel would call her mother right as she was getting into bed.  
(Kwan, 2013:30)

It was depicted here that Rachel had a habit of calling her mother when they no longer lived together to share their conditions. In addition, Rachel also called her mother while she was in Singapore. However, there were too many obstacles, such as when Rachel attended Araminta's bachelorette party on a private island and after Rachel learned about her family background from Eleanor.

When Rachel was still in high school, her Asian friends were amazed to hear her calling her mother with a sweet ending (Kwan, 2013, p. 58). After Rachel noticed her friends' strange behaviour, she asked her mother about it.

The researcher focused more on the relationship between the sign and its object to find the representation of the cultural signs previously found. The relationship between the two signs and their objects had three different types of signs, namely icon, index, and symbol, to find objects from the signs that had been found. Therefore, this research applied these three methods to find the representation of Chinese cultural signs.

### 3.4. Language used

The representation of Chinese cultural signs, especially in the use of language by Chinese characters in the novel, can be identified in three ways: *icon*, *index*, and *symbol*.

The representation of language used as Chinese cultural signs was found to show Chinese cultural identity in the novel. The two signs are represented based on icons or seeking the similarity or likeness between the sign and the object. The use of English by the Chinese Singaporean characters with their accents, which was claimed to sound like a mix of English and Chinese, was written in some of their conversations in the novel. The writing of these words was a sign of language use, which carried similarities to the original English words. Then, there was also the use of language to name something, namely the use of Chinese when naming something that was not originally Chinese. The use of Chinese to name something was exemplified in the *tan huas* flower. The word *tan* has had the meaning of short life, which was taken to resemble the characteristics of the flower.

The representation of Chinese cultural signs, especially the language used, was found in the bilingual ability of Chinese Singaporeans and Chinese Americans. Chinese Singaporeans who could speak English and Chinese fluently, with Malay even in few words, were caused by the history of Chinese people in Singapore. The interaction between Chinese Singaporeans and Malay people and British colonies led them to learn other languages, such as English and Malay, for schools and trading. Meanwhile, Chinese Americans can speak both English and Chinese fluently because of the history of Chinese people in America and the environment in America. Chinese people's history in America refers to the Chinese immigrants who moved to America by having Chinese traditions and culture within them. They learned English because they stayed in America to interact with American people. The environment in America could affect Chinese people, especially those born or growing up in America, in interacting with American people. They learned the Chinese language and tradition from their family or Chinese relatives in America.

The language used, as the sign, focused explicitly on Chinese as the language they speak in the novel. These Chinese characters in Singapore and America could still speak Chinese well even though they did not live in mainland China. Chinese as a language was learned through family. Rachel learned Chinese from her mother, and Nicolas learned Mandarin from his grandmother. It meant that Chinese as a language must be taught to those of Chinese descent and be learned by those of Chinese descent. This exactly corresponds to traditional Chinese culture that pursues parents to teach their children about Chinese morality and children to obey their parents by learning Chinese morality (Wang, 2006). One example of Chinese morality is depicted in Chinese as a language. Thus, Chinese as a language was a sign symbol because it was the general law in the Chinese community that must be taught to their descent and learned from their ancestors.

### 3.5. Body Language

Body language refers to the body gestures, eye movements, and body postures that people do and have meanings behind those movements. In this research, body language is meant in the form of body gestures performed by Chinese characters in the novel *Crazy Rich Asians*, namely, bowing and nodding in greeting other people for the first time. These body gestures can be analyzed to seek their representation by seeking the similarity, *icon*, general rules, or *symbol*.

In the novel, bowing for greeting was practically done by Rachel when she met Great Aunt Rosemary and Eleanor for the first time. Her bowing head showed respect to someone of higher status, a great aunt and her boyfriend's mother, as it resembled the adjusted kowtow, especially the long bow. Eleanor said her gesture was like a geisha bow gesture, similar to a long bow. Meanwhile, nodding their head was practically done by Nicolas'

aunt, Su Yi, and Eleanor when they met Rachel for the first time. This gesture resembled the adjusted kowtow, especially the low bow, showing respect to someone with lower status. However, the nodding gesture was not precisely similar to the low bow. It was because a nodding gesture is an act to lower and raise the head only, but the low bow is supposed to lower the head and shoulder. As explained, the kowtow could be adjusted depending on the situation; the low bow could probably be adjusted too by Chinese Singaporeans when greeting someone by simplifying the bowing gesture into a nodding gesture. Thus, the nodding gesture given resembled the low bow.

The term kowtow is represented in the novel by Chinese Singaporeans and Chinese Americans when they greet others, especially Chinese people. Rachel practically did the long bow when she greeted great-aunt Rosemary and Eleanor. Eleanor explained that her gesture was like a geisha bow, similar to a long bow. It was what she must do according to the Chinese tradition she already learned from her mother, which was giving respect to people with higher social status. Nicolas' aunt, grandmother, and mother practically did the low bow when they met Rachel for the first time. They greeted Rachel by nodding their heads, not giving a bowing head. It was explained that the nodding gesture resembled the low bow according to the function. Thus, this gesture was adjusted by Chinese Singaporeans in order to give respect when they greeted someone else. This gesture was exact according to the term of kowtow, especially the low bow. They nod to give respect to someone with a lower social status, which is Rachel.

### 3.6. Family

Family, as the sign, is the term for the values within the Chinese family represented in the novel. The signs found in a family context are family background and the relationship between family members. The representation of these signs can be analyzed in two ways: *index* and *symbol*.

Family background became so important for Chinese people in Singapore because it represented the dignity and prestige of the family. This meant that the representation of Chinese family background based on the index was the dignity and prestige of the Chinese family. Kevin Kwan represents this in his novel by describing the wedding of Colin and Araminta and the relationship between Nicolas and Rachel.

The relationship between parents and children that pursued the principles of love and obedience was depicted in the novel. Chinese Singaporean and Chinese American families practically did it. However, they had different perspectives in applying the tradition. Eleanor did everything for her son, and she claimed that she knew the best future for her son. She lets Nicolas stay with his grandmother instead of staying with her so Nicolas can be closer to SuYi and become SuYi's favourite grandson. She also brought Nicolas to England to study, which she thought was the best formal education for her son (Kwan, 2013, p. 386). These signs represent Eleanor's love as a mother for Nicolas. On Nicolas's side, he obeyed her mother to live with SuYi and studied abroad in England.

Chinese Singaporean families also represented *filial piety* and respected their parents and ancestors. One example of filial piety was consulting all decisions to the eldest family member. It is depicted by Kevin Kwan in the novel, especially in the relationship between Chinese family members in Singapore. Eleanor decided everything for her only son for his future. The Colin's family also practised it. His grandparents and parents decided everything for him, especially whoever he must be friends with. He should be friends with Nicolas because of Nicolas' family name and Bernard because their parents cooperated in business. Even Colin did not like him being so mean to him and other people (Kwan, 2013, p. 193). Besides, his marriage with Araminta was also set by his family for both family sake (Kwan, 2013, p. 119). Besides the big decision made by the eldest family member, filial piety also required children to speak formally to their older family members, such as grandparents, parents, uncles or aunts, and older siblings. It was depicted by Chinese Singaporean people when they talked to their older family members. Nicolas also told Rachel that he spoke formally to his parents (Kwan, 2013, p. 56)

## 4. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION

The Chinese cultural signs in the novel are the languages spoken by Chinese characters, the body language explained, and the Chinese family values. The signs of languages spoken by Chinese characters in the novel show the bilingual ability of Chinese characters to speak both English and Chinese and use Chinese words to give names for something not originally from mainland China. The sign of body language in the novel shows the bowing of the head and nodding to greet someone who just met. The signs of Chinese family values show the importance of family background and family members' relationships.

The representation of language used as a cultural sign is based on icons, indexes, and symbols. The language used represents the similarities of English words and the characteristics of tan based on the icons. It also represents the history and the environment of Chinese in Singapore and America, based on an index, as the cause of the bilingual ability of Chinese people. Then, it represents the term Chinese tradition based on the general rules or symbols Chinese people use to teach their children Chinese traditions, especially the Chinese language. Body language signs, such as bowing head and nodding, represent kotow based on icons and symbols. The gestures of bowing head and nodding resemble two kinds of kowtow gestures: the long bow and the low bow. However, these

gestures also represent kowtow as the general rule for Chinese people when greeting others. Lastly, family values can be represented based on index and symbol. The importance of family background is caused by the dignity and prestige within Chinese families based on the index. Meanwhile, the relationship between family members represents the Chinese tradition of Wu Lu, which is a fundamental human relationship.

Thus, it can be concluded that Chinese cultural identity can be analyzed by identifying Chinese cultural signs and examining their representations in the Crazy Rich Asian novel. Chinese cultural signs found in the novel represent mostly Chinese tradition, terms, history, and the environment. Each group, Chinese Singaporeans and Chinese Americans, has similarities and differences in representing Chinese culture.

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