
**CELEBRATING THE EAST: THE CONTESTATION OF WHITENESS AND COLORED
IN JOHN M. CHU'S *CRAZY RICH ASIANS***

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ABSTRACT

Crazy Rich Asians is regarded as one of the movies that successfully represented Asians, regardless of all the controversy. One of the topics clearly presented in the movie is the contestation between the west and east. The dichotomy is resulted from the social construction of the western culture to maintain its superiority over the east culture. Since the movie seems to celebrate the east by portraying the Asian-Asians differently from the old stereotypes or old images of the eastern culture, but at the same time, this research finds that this movie overtly portrays the west as loveable or likable culture. The movie depicts the contrast between east and west through the story. This article is intended to analyze the contestation between east and west which is depicted in the movie. The movie is examined in how it depicts America as the west and Asia as part of the east. Therefore, deconstruction is used as the reading method to see what is behind it, the things that are not seen, related to how the Asians are portrayed in the movie. The finding of this research shows that there are double roles in the movie. The power of whiteness in the American movie industry somehow still brings impacts toward the contestation of whiteness and color.

Keywords: *America; Asia; Contestation; East and West; Deconstruction; Whiteness*

**Article information
(Filled by Editorial
Management)**

Received: 23 April, 2022

Revised: 18 October, 2022

Accepted: 20 October, 2022

DOI : <https://doi.org/10.22146/rubikon.v9i2.74297>

Available at <https://jurnal.ugm.ac.id/rubikon/article/view/74297>

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INTRODUCTION

In 2018, *Crazy Rich Asians* becomes one of the Hollywood movies that bring about a lot of controversy, especially for those who are of Asian descent. When the movie was launched for the first time, there is a huge interest coming from this group since it becomes the first modern story with an all-Asian cast and Asian American lead in twenty-five years, the first after *The Joy Luck Club* in 1993 (Ho, 2018). Many people are very excited to see that Hollywood seems to make a step forward in representing American diversity. Considering that all this time, Asians only have minor participation in the American film industry, therefore, this movie seems to bring fresh air for Asians. It can be seen from the number of actors, the roles given to them and also the number of filmmakers that contribute to the film industry. Benschhof and Griffin stated in their book that Asian Americans in Hollywood are always related to the stock Asian character which is always marginalized into supporting roles like villains, laundry workers, cooks, servants or railroad workers (2009, p. 160). Based on this statement, it explains that besides the number of Asians participating in the American film industry, the roles given to Asian actors are also very limited, usually all those roles that are regarded as accommodating whiteness ideology or old stereotypes.

In line with the previous statement, some scholars found the same pattern of stereotypes attached to Asian Americans. Those stereotypes mostly are negative. Asian characters often related to the stock characters like Fu Manchu and Charlie Chan types, conniving businessmen, gang members, brutal military officers, laborers,

cooks, dragon ladies, oriental detectives, drug kingpins, and Geisha girls (Marchetti, 1991, 1993; Wong, 1998). Some stereotypical characters can be seen from the development of Asian characters in some films such as in *The World of Suzie Wong* (1960) Suzie Wong is acted as an illiterate prostitute. Michelle Yeoh portrays a Bond Girl who is depicted as steely and controlled (1997). Meanwhile, in the 1985 *Year of Dragon*, Tracy Wu is portrayed as a seductive and mysterious woman. Another stereotypic character is played by Zhang Zhi Yi in *Rush Hour* (2001) as a henchwoman and a dragon lady who is dangerous, seductive and ruthless. Lastly, in 2013 *Wolverine*, Tao Okamoto is depicted as Mariko who seduces Wolverine and tries to separate him from his past love. Not only limited to the stock characters, but the participation of Asian Americans in the American film industry was also limited based on the genre of the film. Wong mentions that Asian Americans are often limited to a certain kind of film genre, those are adventure, crime and mystery, war and western (1998, p. 197). Based on this condition, it can be seen that the American film industry has a role in constructing the negative image of Asian Americans through the lens. Hollywood's ethnic representations were (and are) 'damaging, insulting, and negative' (Lopez, 1991, p. 404).

Concerning the negative construction of Asian Americans in the film industry, White Americans use it to put Asian Americans as "the other", meaning they emphasize the differences between White Americans and Asian Americans as a form of visual and narrative racism that privilege whiteness (Wong, 1998, pp. 73–75). By doing this, white Americans can protect their superior position and maintain Asian Americans in an

inferior position. It shows that the American film industry which is dominated by white Americans has strongly imposed Asian Americans' Other-ness through the narrative racism that privileges whiteness in visual form. Taking one of the famous quotations from W. E. Dubois saying that the problem of this era is the problem of color line (Brown, 2003), the power relation between White Americans and Asian Americans is rooted in the existence of whiteness norms. The norms of whiteness are everywhere and because of it, those who do not fit into it are considered "the other" (Dyer, 1997, p. 3). The influence of these norms in the American film industry has built barriers for the people of color to participate in this industry, either from their physical participation or from their representation on screen. The social construction of whiteness defines and limits people (Foster, 2003, p. 2). Therefore, the effect of whiteness toward the representations and also participation of the ethnic minorities in American movies is significant.

Another reason why White Americans put Asian Americans as the Asian other is that they feel insecure as they see Asian Americans as the mysterious Orient, a site of desire, violence, and intrigue, therefore becomes a threat to democracy and the principles of American capitalism (Browne, 1989, p. 29; Marchetti, 1993, p. 27; Wong, 1998, p. 174). The term Orient here is taken from the word Orientalism which is often used to explain the relationship between the west and the east. The term east and west is often used to describe the power relation between developed countries which refers to the west and underdeveloped countries which is called the east. This term was used formerly by Edward Said in his book which talks about postcolonialism (Said, 1977). In

his concept, he underlines the differences between the west and the east which can be seen as binary oppositions such as west vs east, strong vs weak, good vs evil, modern vs primitive as well as rich vs poor with the previous ones referring to the west. This concept also includes the categorization that based on skin color. The concept of color differences is also used to refer the differences between the east and the west, in which the east which related to exoticism refers to the people of color and the west which refers to the whites. This concept previously always attached to explain the effect of European colonialism which discuss the relationship between European countries and the colonies. However, after the *Empire Writes Back* (Ashcroft, Griffiths, & Tiffin, 2002), the influence of postcolonialism in the United States has started to be questioned although it still becomes a debate until nowadays, whether the concept of Orientalism can be applied to read the power relation between the United States and England kingdom or The European settlers with the native Americans or the power relation between White Americans and African Americans during the slavery era. Nevertheless, there is an argument stated that the major components of this debate are the applicability of the term postcolonial to the US postcoloniality as well as ethnic studies in general dan more recently the questioning of center-periphery models because of globalization and transnational capitalism (Schueller, 2004, p. 163). Therefore, the discussion on ethnic studies and center-periphery models is applicable in this context. Since this research concerns on the power relation between White Americans and Asian Americans, it is suitable to borrow the

concept of binary opposition especially those related to the position of west vs east.

Regarding the previous explanation, it can explain why there is a high expectation for the release of *Crazy Rich Asians*. It is regarded as a ground-breaking point of changes made by the American film industry in presenting diversity in American films (Adhitya & Kurnia, 2017, p. 25). This research is intended to see American society through a product of its popular culture, a film. It is conducted inductively since it started from an issue portrayed in the movie, and not to test any hypothesis. This research applies qualitative one because it deals with the data in the form of words, pictures and sound, not in the form of numbers; it is descriptive; it focuses on the process rather than the result, and it emphasizes interpretation (Bogdan & Biklen, 1992, p. 29–32). By emphasizing interpretation, Denzin and Lincoln state that this kind of research is suitable to be used in investigating social problems (2005, p. 2).

Data collection was based on data collection techniques according to Creswell (2007, p. 276–284; Rudy & Adhitya, 2022, p. 337). The first step is to process and prepare data. Then, a close reading of the film is undertaken to find data that are related to the topic, which means film scenes related to the representation of the east and west and their contestation in the movie. *Crazy Rich Asians* is used as the primary data source, while also relying on secondary data in the form of other films, news, articles, books and other sources related to the topic of discussion. In this essay, data analysis is done based on Derrida's method of deconstruction: this method suggests analyzing data by finding binary oppositions in the text, then reversing

binary oppositions to diversify the meanings of the text.

Based on the previous explanation, the analysis of this research is started by finding the binary oppositions that show the relation between east and west. The discussion is continued by analyzing the reversal of the binary opposition. In this step, the process of analyzing also includes the use of the old structure to be compared with the new structure which is depicted in the movie. The analysis is ended by formulating the undecidability as the result of the discussion. Undecidability brings a new construction of meaning which cannot be included either in the old or new structure. By using this method of analysis, the research is intended to show that meaning is not single, and that there will always be a different way of interpreting a text. As it is stated that media culture provides a form for the reproduction of power relations, in which very fluid and the contestation leads to the space and resource for struggle and resistance (Dirks & Mueller, 2007a, p. 116), this research focuses on the contestation between the east and west which is portrayed in *Crazy Rich Asians*. The discussion becomes very interesting since there have been high expectations from ethnic minorities group toward this movie because it is made by mostly Asians. This research intends to discuss how far ethnic minorities are celebrated in this movie to see the contestation between whiteness and color throughout the story.

DISCUSSION

Crazy Rich Asians is a movie adapted from a novel with the same title. This movie tells the story of an Asian American woman, Rachel Chu who is New York native born.

She is depicted as a beautiful woman with an astonishing achievement, being a professor at NYU and having a handsome boyfriend, Nick Young. The story is mainly about the clashes she has to face when she goes to Singapore to see Nick's family. The clash does not only related to the different classes but surprisingly also to the different cultures they hold. As a descendant of a Chinese American, Rachel has to accept that there are many differences between her family and Nick's family. Through the love story between Rachel and Nick, the movie carries the theme of east and west from the depiction of the characters and also the dialogues that appear in the movie.

Several binary oppositions can be found in the movie related to the theme, east and west. This theme refers to the contestation between east and west. The binary oppositions are good vs bad and beautiful vs ugly. In the old construction, the west is always regarded to be superior than the east. The west is always placed as the center, while the east is always at the periphery. Those binary oppositions are usually used to maintain the west position, as the one that is regarded to be superior.

Centering the East, Decentering the West

Concerning the previous discussion, differently, *Crazy Rich Asians* the movie presents the theme of east and west contrary to the old construction. The reversal of the binary oppositions showed by centering the east and decentering the west. America, as the representation of the west, which is always depicted to be superior is shown to be the bad one, on the other hand, Asia, which is usually related to inferiority, is depicted as superior to the west. Previously, Asians in

American films always lack representation or are attached to negative stereotypes. To know more about the negative portrayal of Asians in American movies, it is needed to put more discussion on the old structure of representation that is attached to Asian Americans. With the representation of Asian Americans portrayed in American Films, Asian Americans are often attached to some static images which are related to the practice of speaking broken English and "mysterious" customs, Asian women are depicted as dragon ladies, dominant women or prostitutes, while Asian men often portrayed as math whizzes, geeks or non-masculine character except when they have roles as martial artists (Nagaraj & Wen, 2020). This kind of depiction confirms the old structure that always put the east as inferior and the west as superior. *Crazy Rich Asians*, on the contrary, portray some Asian characters with bold characterization in contrast to their old stereotypes. In this movie, some Asians' portrayals represent good rather than bad.

The notion of how this film portrays Asians in this movie has started from the very first beginning of the movie. The depiction of Asia or the east as superior can be seen in this movie through the following quotations: "Let China sleep, for when she awake, she will shake the world (Napoleon Bonaparte)". The movie is opened with this quotation taken from Napoleon Bonaparte. From the quotation, it can be seen that Napoleon acknowledged the power of China, as he mentioned that the world will be shaken if the Chinese awaken. The quotation implicitly shows that China has great power and can bring a great influence on the world. The quotation can also be used as a clue that this film will show the power of China. The film provides some alternative portrayals of

Asians as it contrastingly differs from the old stereotypes. This research finds that the film shows some reversal of the binary opposition. The explanation of the reversal of the binary opposition is described as follows:

- **Good vs Bad**

The first reversal of binary oppositions that stands out in this film is seen through how this film depicts the different perceptions of American values. It can be seen from the scene that shows the first meeting between Rachel and Eleanor, Nick's mother.

Eleanor: self-made woman. She must be so proud of you. (Eleanor continues fiddling and fussing with the table, inspecting the food, coldly turning her back on the couple).

Rachel: well, she knows that I'm passionate about what I do, and she's always wanted that for me.

Eleanor: pursuing one's passions. How American. Well, your mother is very open-minded, not like here where parents are obsessed with shaping the life of their children". (Chu, 2018)

The quotation above shows the different perceptions between Rachel and Eleanor on American values. From this quotation, it can be seen that there are two different perceptions of American values, which is related to being a self-made woman, pursuing passions, and being open-minded. They mention these values when they talk about Rachel's mother. Rachel, who is an Asian American, finds that there is nothing wrong with American values. She thinks that American values have brought her to become what she is now. It can be seen from her statement "well, she knows that I'm passionate about what I do and she's always wanted that for me". Here, Rachel refers to her mother who let her decide what is best in

her life. She mentions proudly how hard her mother worked and also successfully raised her into what she is now. Contrastingly, this scene also shows that Eleanor differently sees American values negatively. It can be seen from her statement that seems sarcastic. Her statement "Self-made woman. She must be proud of you", can be seen as a satire toward the way Rachel was raised by her mother. Being a successful professor at NYU, Rachel's mother is regarded as ignorant, as in China, parents have an absolute role in raising their children. It can be seen from the words "Well, your mother is very open-minded, not like here where parents are obsessed with shaping the life of their children". Eleanor compares the word 'open-minded' and 'obsessed' with the way they raise their children. She uses the two words to overtly satire the values believed by the American people. The way Eleanor said "how American!" can be seen as a satire of the Americans' way of thinking.

Another quotation that also portrays the negative view of American values can be seen as follow: "Eleanor: You're a foreigner. American. And all Americans think about is their happiness." This quotation is taken from the scene when Eleanor explicitly refuses to accept Rachel as Nick's girlfriend. The reason why she sees Rachel negatively is that Rachel is an American. It shows that Eleanor has a negative belief toward All Americans as she said "and all Americans think about is their happiness". From this statement, it can be seen that Eleanor believes that all American values which are usually regarded as positive contrastingly mean negative for her. Pursuing passions, being a self-made and open-minded woman are usually seen as a strength by Americans to pursue their happiness. But here, in this movie, these values which are

related to individualism are depicted negatively as they are compared with Asians' values which center on family. To Eleanor, pursuing dreams, and being a self-made and open-minded woman is seen as a form of neglect or selfishness of a woman toward her family. It is also in line with Tocqueville's concerns about individualism. He stated that individualism in the long run will attack all others and lead to selfishness (Tocqueville, 2010). Instead of having a warm welcome for Rachel, Eleanor, therefore, shows her dislike toward Rachel. It happens because Eleanor thinks that although Rachel is a Chinese descendant, American values and culture have already brought a great impact on Rachel, especially on the way she behaves and thinks. From the dialog above, it can be seen that this film provides different perceptions of how America is seen by the outer world. American values that are usually portrayed as grand values are contrastingly depicted negatively in this movie. Although it is conveyed through the characterization/ portrayal of Rachel Chu, it gives more emphasis on how great are American values. It shows that Rachel is the only Asian descent woman who is portrayed as lovable or likable.

- **Beautiful vs Ugly**

The second reversal of binary opposition that stands out in this movie is beautiful vs ugly. This movie turns out to bring different meanings to the word beauty. One scene in the movie depicts this different meaning of beauty from the dialogue between Wye Mun, Peik Lin's father and her sisters when they have lunch with Rachel. The dialogues show the children want to get permission to leave the table.

Wye munah: "you haven't finished your nuggets yet, sweetie. Okay, there's a lot

of children starving in America, right? I mean, take a look at her. She's American. Huh? Really skinny. You wanna look like that? Twin girl: No. Wye Mun: "Then eat your nuggets" (Chu, 2018).

From the dialogues above, it is found that Peik Lin's family have a different perception of the meaning of beauty. It can be seen from the words "She's American. Huh? Really skinny. You wanna look like that?". This statement does not explicitly mention that being skinny is bad, but the way Wye Mun says it to threaten his twin daughter becomes a hint that being skinny is not good. It can also be related to the previous sentence that mentions "there's a lot of children starving in America". The word "starving" can be seen as a representation of poverty. Although he uses these words to threaten his granddaughters, so that they finish their meals, the message that skinny is not good is well delivered. It is proved by the answer of the twin that said "no" and directly finish their meals. Here, Wye Mun relates the word "skinny" with the word "starving" to decentering the word "skinny". Being skinny becomes not important for them. Instead of wishing to be skinny, the twin are shown as afraid of being skinny. Therefore, they then finish their meals. If it is related to the existence of the beauty myth that has influenced women around the world on how women accept the concept of beauty.

Concerning the previous discussion, it has already been mentioned that being skinny normally becomes one of the standards related to women's body goals, known as the beauty myth. Wolf stated that "the ideal was someone tall, thin, white and blond, a face without pores, asymmetry, or flaws, someone wholly "perfect" and someone whom they

felt, in one way or another, they were not” (2002, p. 1). The quotation mention that one of the standards of beauty considered perfect is thin. In this quotation, Wolf uses the words “someone whom they felt, in one way or another, they were not” to implicitly shows that there are some criteria that construct the concept of beauty and those who do not fulfill the criteria will be said as not perfect or not beautiful. This standard has already become the base construction of the meaning of beauty. Usually, being thin or skinny is important for women. Therefore, many women strive very hard to be thin by doing diet programs. It becomes one of the women’s body goals that is important so that they will be accepted as perfect. From this explanation, it can be seen that it is contrary to how Wye Mun and his two daughters’ concept of being skinny. When for most women, being skinny is very important, Wye Mun constructs skinny as a threat to his granddaughters. Rachel’s body is considered the representation of the beauty myth as she has a thin body. Rachel is assumed to be greatly influenced by the beauty myth as she has fulfilled some of the beauty myths.

Based on the previous discussion, it can be seen that this film provides some reversal of center-periphery on the relation between west and east. The west, in this context, America which is usually in the center contrarily is put on the periphery position. On the other hand, the east which is usually on the periphery, in this film seems like the center of the story. It can be stated that the reversal of binary oppositions as an alternative representation of Asians, is a form of resistance that was intentionally brought up by the minority film workers. It appears as a protest to their old structure of representations that are mostly negative. As

stated by Foucault “where there is power there is resistance”(1978, p. 95). Hence, the effort of minority film workers to create alternative representations for them is counted as their resistance toward the whiteness ideology that greatly influences the American film industry. Dirks and Mueller also added “without a critical resistance against these images, we can have no hope for racial equality in the United States or globally” (2007b, p. 126). This finding answer the question of why there are many positive responses toward the new construction of the east which is portrayed in the film. It can be seen from some responses on social media and also from the web. Some of the audiences see this movie as an answer to their prayers to have an alternative view of their portrayal in movies. However, besides the reversal of the binary oppositions, this research also finds that this movie still portrays old stereotypes related to Asians.

Undecidability between East and West

The undecidability shows that besides those of the reversal of binary oppositions, there are some points from the movie that cannot be easily put into the division of the binary oppositions. As has been discussed previously, *Crazy Rich Asians* is one of the movies that provide an alternative representation of Asian through the story. It can be seen from the discussion on the reversal of the binary oppositions found in that movie. However, after several times of readings, it turns out that instead of only criticizing the old stereotypes, this movie at the same time also maintains the superiority of America. It can be seen from several data taken from the movie.

When American values are questioned in the movie through the dialogues between Rachel and Eleanor, it is seen that American values are put into the periphery since it is regarded as not good. The thing is that when it is seen closely, the movie also provides a hidden message from the representation of Rachel and other Asian women. This movie strengthens the difference between being Asian American and Asian. Starting from the different perceptions of the values they believe in, this movie looks like put America as the periphery, but overtly shows the superiority of this country. For example, regardless of the existence of binary opposition reversal, the movie depicts Asia as a very rigid society which hard to accept different values. It can be seen from the way Eleanor refuses to accept Rachel as her son's girlfriend. From the previous discussion, it can be seen that Eleanor dislikes Rachel regardless of her achievement as a young professor at NYU. Eleanor says "you will never be enough" (Chu, 2018). This quotation shows that Rachel's success is not important to Eleanor. No matter how hard Rachel works, Eleanor will always see her as a foreigner that has been raised with different values of life. By creating such kind of relationship, this movie wants to bring the fact that the relationship between Rachel and Nick who comes from different social class will be only accepted in America. It emphasizes the American value of "equality" as it has been stated in the Declaration of Independence, which becomes the basis of their belief that men are created equal. Therefore, everyone deserves to be successful in their life. By contrasting these values, this movie also wants to underline that only in America that Rachel's success is appreciated as her achievement. She is seen as someone

that has already succeeded to change her life with her hard work. Thus, it can be understood that Rachel's characterization is built actually to highlight American values by depicting Rachel as part of America.

How this movie portrays the Asian women characters also needs to be criticized. The way this movie depicts Asian women is very in contrast to Rachel's characterization. While Rachel is depicted as a very independent, smart, elegant woman, Asian women in this movie are portrayed as women who like gossiping, bullying and money oriented. It can be seen in several scenes in the movie. For example, the scene when the news about Nick that will take his girlfriend to Singapore spread in only seconds. Coming from a different social background, Rachel's identity becomes a target of Asian women in Singapore. They are gossiping her as they thought that she does not deserve Nick Young. This also leads to another scene that shows Rachel getting bullied by some girls when they have a bachelor party for Araminta. What makes it interesting is that the way Rachel reacts toward them is surprising. All of these scenes underline Rachel's characterization as a smart, independent and elegant woman. Rachel becomes the only lovable Asian woman in this movie. Hence, through the contrast portrayal of Rachel and other Asian women, this movie seems to emphasize the differences between Asian women and Asian American women. Similarly, how this movie depicts an Asian mother and an Asian American mother is also full of intrigue. Although this movie seemingly resists American values. In the end, the portrayal of Eleanor and Kerry, Rachel's mother, is contrastingly interesting. Asian mother is portrayed as dominant, over-ruled, and

overprotective mother meanwhile, Asian American mother is depicted as a more open-minded, liberated and supportive mother.

From the two points above, it can be seen that although at first impression this movie brought a new alternative to Asian representation, in the end, it turns out that this movie still cannot resist the influence of whiteness ideology. This movie resists the old stereotypes but at the same time, it also maintains the old stereotypes of Asians. The discussion in this part shows that there is no clear division between the binary opposition, good vs bad. The one that is depicted as good at the same time shows the quality of bad. On the other hand, the one that is portrayed as bad at the same time also depicts the quality of being good. Hence, it can be concluded that this movie shows an undecided quality that leads to the notion that although made by the majority of ethnic minorities, this movie still cannot totally escape from the influence of whiteness ideology. It is seen from the way this movie covertly highlights American values although seemingly it resists them. This situation can be explained with the following quotation: “Nevertheless, resistance in this schema remains contained in the sense that one system of domination is substituted for another. The framework is the same - only the details differ” (Jadallah & El-Khoury, 2016, p. 232). The quotation mentions that the effort in resisting the old structure will lead to another kind of domination system. In this movie, it can be seen from the way this movie elevates the Asian American characters by lowering the quality of other Asian characters. For example, this movie only presents the Chinese as part of Asians that can be successful financially. Other Asians like Melayu and also Hindi are less represented in

this movie. The only Hindi characters in this movie appear as Nick's house guards (Adhitya & Wulandari, 2021, p. 28).

From this point of view, it can be concluded that this movie plays two roles for the audience. The first role is that it becomes the realization of the dream of Asian Americans to see an alternative to their representation in a movie. At the same time, this movie still also accommodates white taste since it turns out that this movie covertly elevates American values (Adhitya, 2015, p. 100). It proves that American popular movies are still greatly influenced by the white patriarchal ideology. In addition to that, this movie also underlines the difference between being Asian and Asian American in terms that Asian American characters being portrayed as more lovable than all the Asian characters. As Indriani (2015, p. 63) concluded that movies are intentionally made to create a conception that it will clean up the black history of the relationship between white Americans and minorities and confirm that Hollywood is still powerful and thus able to determine market demands. Therefore, the result of this research underlines that although there have been some improvements in the structure of Asian representation in the movie, the impact of whiteness norms in the American film industry cannot be denied.

CONCLUSION

After having the discussion, this research findings underline the double roles of this movie as part of American popular movies. Since this movie provides some scenes that seemingly reversing the binary oppositions, it can be claimed that this movie is regarded as a form of resistance toward the old structure of Asian representations in American movies.

It plays a role as the realization of the dream for Asians to have different representations in American popular movies. However, after a deep analysis done on the data, it turns out that this movie also shows a great influence of whiteness ideology. Although in some parts it seems like giving hope for the ethnic minorities of new alternative representation, in the end, this movie still plays its old role by maintaining some old stereotypes covertly. It also creates a new domination model by depicting the distinction between the characterization of Asian Americans and Asians to strengthen the superiority of Asian Americans over Asians.

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