

Crazy Rich Asians changes everything

By Lindsey Bahr
AP Film Writer

LOS ANGELES — It's been 25 years since a major Hollywood studio released an English-language film with a primarily Asian cast. The last was Wayne Wang's adaptation of the generational tearjerker *The Joy Luck Club*, which was released in 1993.

But that dry spell is about to end with the release of the opulent romantic comedy *Crazy Rich Asians*. The film is based on Kevin Kwan's best-selling book about a Chinese-American woman who gets a culture shock when she meets her boyfriend's family in Singapore.

Veteran producer Nina Jacobson said that when she and her Color Force partner Brad Simpson (*The Hunger Games*) read Kwan's manuscript, they knew it had to be a movie.

"We just tore through it," Jacobson said. "It was so specific that it became really universal: Anybody who has ever faced in-laws who felt that they were not worthy of their beloved."

However, they knew the film would likely never survive the studio development process. They decided to have a vision, a script, and a budget to sell as a package before going to the marketplace. Warner Bros. would ultimately sign up to partner with them and release the film.

"Hollywood has done a bit of a disservice by not taking us into these worlds that we're just now seeing between *Black Panther* and things on TV," Simpson said. "There is a hunger for not just token representation but to really dive into the world of different ethnicities and races."

Meanwhile, Jon M. Chu, who would eventually sign on to direct *Crazy Rich Asians*, was hearing about this new book from family members. And he understood why. His last name is the same as that of the main character, Rachel Chu, and they're both from Cupertino. There's even a reference to his family in Kwan's book.

"I think a lot of Asian Americans go through the same journey ... I relate to having that dual cultural identity of being full-on all-American, all-California boy, but having a Chinese side to me," Chu said. "I remember going to Asia for the first time and there's a very specific emotion that you feel that's like, 'Oh, this feels like home but it's not my home and these people don't see me as being part of this.' Then when you're home you start to notice people may not see you as part of that either."

Having known Jacobson and Simpson for years, he knew they would "protect" the film and do it



CULTURE SHOCK. This image released by Warner Bros. Pictures shows (L-R) Michelle Yeoh, Henry Golding, and Constance Wu in a scene from *Crazy Rich Asians*, which opens in theaters August 17. It's been 25 years since a major Hollywood studio released an English-language film with a primarily Asian cast. The last was Wayne Wang's adaptation of the generational tearjerker *The Joy Luck Club*, which was released in 1993. But that dry spell is about to end with the release of the opulent romantic comedy *Crazy Rich Asians*. (Sanja Bucko/Warner Bros. Pictures via AP)

right. He signed on to transport audiences to an unbelievable world of wealth, privilege, and tradition — part Edith Wharton, part "Gossip Girl."

Chu brought on Malaysia-born screenwriter Adele Lim to give the script an Asian specificity and set off to assemble his dream cast. The worldwide search had casting directors looking in Canada, New York, Los Angeles, Beijing, Shanghai, Hong Kong, London, Australia, Singapore, and Malaysia. All had to be English-speaking — and have the right accents, too.

Constance Wu was chosen to play the lead, Rachel. They found an unknown to play her boyfriend, Nick, in Henry Golding, a handsome and charismatic TV host who had the perfect English accent to play the London-schooled heir, and landed on Michelle Yeoh to be his disapproving mother, Eleanor. But even this handpicked ensemble caused some consternation on the internet over the specific ethnicities and whether they matched exactly with what the book laid out.

Chu said that there's even a discussion is important. A film having a female Asian-American lead and also a majority pan-Asian cast is significant. A University of Southern California study found that 44 of the top 100 films from 2016 featured no Asian-American speaking characters.

"Since I've graduated from drama school, I never get to play the lead," Wu said. "The fact that Asian Americans never get to center the narrative means that their parts are always going to be not as whole and fleshed-out."

That made it an emotional experience for many on the set.

"Everyone had gone through the

process of what it's like to be an Asian American in Hollywood or around the world," Chu said. "You could see the difference between someone like Michelle Yeoh who literally said, 'I'm the majority where I'm from so I don't understand the plight that you guys are going through.' It was very shocking for her to see how it affected these young actors and how people would just cry on the set and how happy they were that they got to do this."

Jacobson described it as a "joyful sense of purpose that we all shared."

Wu, who is an outspoken advocate for Asian representation on social media, said the film is significant for differentiating the Asian experience and the Asian-American experience.

"You show that our culture is more than just skin-deep," Wu said. "You show our similarities and how we're different."

Although the film doesn't open until August 17, excitement is growing with the new trailer and some extremely positive reactions from an early screening in Los Angeles for the press.

"I hope people go see it because I think we have a great movie and if they go see it, it changes things," Chu said. "People have to show up. I guarantee four new stories of Asian Americans will be greenlit in two weeks if it comes out and does well. That's what's on the line and that's what I think is still up in the air."

"I think we have to take control of our own voice and our own story," he said. "And we won't be perfect, this discussion is ongoing the more stuff that gets made, the more discussion we can have about what we want. We just never had the privilege of having that conversation."

AP writer Marcela Isaza contributed from Las Vegas.

Jennifer Yuh Nelson breaks new ground

By Lindsey Bahr
AP Film Writer

LOS ANGELES — *Kung Fu Panda 2* director Jennifer Yuh Nelson was the first woman to solo direct an animated feature for a major Hollywood studio and the first woman of color to direct a film with a budget of \$150 million. While she has broken a number of glass ceilings, she insists she never realizes it until someone tells her.

"I go, oh, really? That's cool. I don't know. I don't think about it. I just enjoy doing the work," Nelson says.

Now, Nelson is taking another big leap, into live-action with the adaptation of author Alexandra Bracken's young adult novel *The Darkest Minds* for 20th Century Fox, which comes out on August 3. It's a transition that few in the industry make, from animation to live-action. But Nelson had always dreamed of working with the tangible.

The story imagines a world where teenagers develop mystical abilities, and fearful adults imprison them. Amandla Stenberg plays the lead, Ruby, who helps form a resistance group. Mandy Moore, Gwendoline Christie, and Bradley Whitford also star.

"The film itself is not going for the same dystopian young adult ride that people have gotten used to," Nelson says. "There is sort of an optimistic, empowering, friendship-driven story about kids who are facing some really dire and dark situations."

While Nelson might not rest on her laurels, she will occasionally stop to reflect on what she's been able to accomplish when she gets letters from students in film school or art school who admire her. They're often women.

"It's true there aren't that many people they can point to and say that person looks like me or has the same experience as me or want the same things as me and are doing what I want to do. They tell me it's encouraging to them to realize it," she says. "And that makes me feel really good."

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TALKING STORY IN ASIAN AMERICA

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Difficulty level: Easy #53949

Instructions: Fill in the grid so that the digits 1 through 9 appear one time each in every row, column, and 3x3 box.

Solution to last issue's puzzle
Puzzle #94213 (Hard)
All solutions available at <www.sudoku.com>.

6	9	7	4	2	5	3	8	1
1	3	4	7	9	8	2	6	5
8	5	2	3	6	1	9	7	4
5	4	1	9	3	7	6	2	8
7	6	3	2	8	4	1	5	9
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9	2	5	6	4	3	8	1	7
4	1	6	8	7	9	5	3	2
3	7	8	1	5	2	4	9	6

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