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Cultural Homelessness Shown Through Music

Cultural Diversity and the Blending of Cultures in
the Soundtrack of Crazy Rich Asians

Bachelor's project in Language Studies with Teacher Education
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Summary:

The Hollywood film *Crazy Rich Asians* (2018) is an adaptation of the novel (2013) written by Kevin Kwan with the same title. This paper analyses how the music presented in the soundtrack of the 2018 adaptation accentuates important themes from the novel, such as cultural homelessness and a blending of cultures, in addition to how this is presented to the audience through the music. There is an overall focus on how music in general and the specific examples from the soundtrack may influence the audience's experience and emotional response when watching the film.

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Introduction

“Adaptation from page to screen turns a novel into a soundtrack. In that respect it hands the text over to the composer as much as the scriptwriter” (Davison 212). When reading a novel, music is rarely of major importance to the text and does not influence our reading experience. However, when literary work are adapted into movies and screenplays, music is one of the most essential and influential aspects used. It is important to remember that adaptation is an interpretation of preexisting material, and music is therefore a helpful tool to enhance important aspects from the novel. Furthermore, music also has the power to make the adaptation add to the original novel by creating powerful and diverse experiences. Moreover, music is not only a helpful tool to elicit emotional and sensual experiences, but it can also distinguish the adaptation from the authentic novel, and thus make it stand on its own as an interpretation of the author’s original work. Music is a cultural product that evolves in sync with its cultural surroundings (Davison 212). Thus, music has the cultural influence to steer an adaptation in the director’s vision regarding time, place and setting. Therefore, music is a tool that can influence both the formal context and the representation of the social context in an adaptation (Davison 222).

A recent adaptation that reflects the powerful differences music can create is the adaptation of *Crazy Rich Asians*. The novel was released in 2013 and is written by Kevin Kwan. However, Kwan’s story had its real breakthrough with the 2018 Hollywood adaptation directed by Jon Chu. Critics have called it revolutionary with its all-Asian cast and groundbreaking soundtrack, and the movie received much praise for finally bringing Asian representation to the big screen by integrating Eastern culture without relying on Western stereotypes (Fung). The main conflict in this story is the underlying conflict between East and West, essentially the struggles that occur when identity and cultures blend together. This struggle is something that can be reflected in the soundtrack created specifically for this movie. Every song in *Crazy Rich Asians* blends American and Asian culture by using a combination of popular English songs recomposed with Chinese lyrics sung by Asian performers and classical Chinese songs to create a familiar yet unfamiliar and culturally appropriate setting.

Jon Chu explained that the soundtrack was carefully crafted with the intention to give audiences a sense of how it feels to be Asian American, thus giving the audience a unique opportunity to understand the main character and her struggles (Emmanuele).

The effect of the musical choices presented in the adaptation of *Crazy Rich Asians* demonstrates how music can influence emotions, scenes, setting and a deeper understanding for the underlying actions in the plot. These aspects will be further explored by investigating various ways in which the music manages to represent the cultural struggles of the film's characters. Additionally, specific scenes from the movie will also be closely examined in order to understand how the musical choices are intended to influence the audience's emotional investment and the technical benefits of using music.

Thus, the thesis statement for this paper is: *How is the soundtrack presented in the adaptation of Crazy Rich Asians used to accentuate the aspect of cultural homelessness and a blending of cultures?* In order to properly answer this, I plan on focusing on two particular songs from the soundtrack that highly influence and affect the scenes in which they are used. The first song is called "Money (That's What I Want)" and is performed by Cheryl K. This song can be found in the very beginning of the film when the scene shifts from young Nick in London and fasts forward to the audience's introduction to an older Nick and Rachel in New York. The second song is played at what is arguably the very climax of the conflict in the movie. This is when Rachel is supposed to leave Singapore and Nick follows her to the airport and proposes after getting his mother's blessings. The song played during this scene is Katherine Ho's interpretation of the Coldplay song "Yellow."

The effects of music

Before analyzing the examples from *Crazy Rich Asians*, it is beneficial to develop a better understanding for why music is such an important aspect of screen adaptations. It is no secret that music is a necessary part of any movie. However, the actual effects of the music may be more influential than most people are aware of. Music has the power to alter and affect our experience of the movie in numerous ways. It can influence our experience of the plot,

characters, and our emotional response in ways we are not even conscious of (Davison 212). It is important to remember that each song and every score is carefully chosen to serve a purpose for the movie and the story its creators wish to convey to audiences. No performance or musical composition is coincidental. Moreover, it is important to remember that music itself is a product that is influenced by culture, and the music presented in *Crazy Rich Asians* is a telling example of this. The film blends Western and Eastern culture in both the score made for the movie and in the innovative soundtrack. The mixture of classical Eastern instruments and familiar Western compositions sets the tone for the movie in a way only music can. From the very beginning, the music has created a clear mood by offering indications of characters' emotions, culture and core conflict. Therefore, music amplifies what can already be seen and gives it a new layer (Davison 213).

The focus on blending the different cultures is one of the most important aspects connected to the various types of music presented in the film. Brian Tyler, who created the score soundtrack for the film, has explained that the score intends to communicate the theme of identity throughout his merging of musical elements from both Eastern and Western culture (Hart). This builds a cultural bridge between the East and West. Moreover, this auditory transfer of communication manages to direct the audience's attention to the conflict between the two cultures (Vitouch 70-71). This blending of cultural elements is also one of the most distinctive features on the film's soundtrack, which will be the main focus for the analysis.

With this understanding, one can therefore argue that music is one of the most important aspects of any screen adaptation. It essentially ties the social and formal context of a movie together. As the definitions above portray, music is able to create a bond between the audience and the fictional world created on screen (Davison 222). This bond is not only beneficial, but it is necessary. If one wishes to reach a broad audience, one must familiarize the core issues of the movie in a way people can relate to on different levels, and music is an effective way to do so, and the emotional response and psychological effects elicited by music are among the most efficient ways to engage an audience.

Psychological effects elicited by music

Throughout our day-to-day lives, most people are exposed to music in some way. However, what most people might not know is that music has a substantial influence on functions related to emotion regulation and mood changes. It might be intentional; many people use music to vent strong emotions and for calming down, while other effects such as increasing alertness and focus might happen unconsciously. Therefore, music clearly has the influence to induce subjective feelings, behavior and emotional relations connected to objective bodies of art (Baltes, et al). Something unique about music is that these responses are universal for everyone, regardless of gender, age and ethnicity. Naturally, this is something that is taken advantage of when creating a movie. However, although music is a powerful instrument to produce certain responses from an audience, it must be used appropriately to elicit the desired reactions.

The screen adaptation of *Crazy Rich Asians* then, has a carefully crafted soundtrack and a score soundtrack specifically composed for the movie and its scenes. The reason for this can be connected to the various effects of different types of music. Music alone, for instance, has different effects on an audience compared to music combined with a visual scene. Additionally, melody also elicit different responses than music with lyrics. A study conducted in 2011 researched differences in psychological responses connected to the effects of music. First the subjects were exposed to the music alone, then they were exposed to the same music but with knowledge of the sad plot and lastly, they listened to the music while watching the scene it was played in. When listening to the music alone, participants showed psychological and physical responses connected to positive emotions. However, after being introduced to the plot and listening to the music a second time with the newfound knowledge, the positive emotions were substantially reduced and negative emotions were heightened, especially sadness. The last variable showed that watching the scene combined with the music increased the emotions present from the second round, thus indicating that the emotions present in the scene can be musically induced in the audience. Using music appropriate for the scene involves the audience in a way that goes beyond the visual dimension (Baltes, et al).

Another study conducted in 2006 explored the different effects between using melody alone and melody combined with lyrics. This is particularly relevant for a film like *Crazy Rich Asians*, which has a whole score soundtrack in addition to the regular soundtrack. Music's ability to communicate emotions is special because the components it consists of can be processed separately and thus enhance different responses. Overall, the study found that the lyrics of a song have a greater ability to affect the emotional response of an audience than the melody alone (Ali & Peynircioglu 512-513). However, it was also demonstrated that although lyrics enhance the overall emotions elicited by the melody, this was only the case for negative emotions. In terms of positive emotions, the lyrics did not elicit any substantial changes in physical or psychological responses. The melody, however, managed to enhance positive emotions, which indicates that melody also has a great influence on music-induced emotions. Thus, the need for a regular soundtrack and a score soundtrack is understandable, because of their influence on the different spectrums of emotions (Ali & Peynircioglu 528-529).

Arguably, the musical choices made by the creators was one of the most influential aspects of this movie's success. By taking familiar songs and giving them a whole new dimension with authentic lyrics connected to the film's social context and a score with substantial Eastern influence, a unique entryway into the story was created. The music introduces the audience to a world that is relatively unfamiliar and creates an entry into this world and culture through the soundtrack that is presented in the film. Therefore, the music makes the audience experience the same feelings as Rachel and connects her journey to the audience's journey.

[Analysis of the soundtrack](#)

A central and recurring theme throughout the movie is the clash between opposites, such as the cultural conflict between East and West, the power dynamic between traditional and modernist thinking, and the clash between duty and passion. All of these conflicts can be connected to Rachel and the struggles she experiences when she is introduced to the elite society of Singapore and Nick's mother. The underlying themes of conflict and struggles she experience throughout the movie are also expressed through the music (Chu). The following examples illustrate how the adaptation utilizes music as a medium to express the aspect of cultural homelessness throughout the film.

“Money (That`s what I want)” – Cheryl K

This song was originally sung by blues singer Barret Strong and was first released in 1959. However, many people are more likely to recognize this song because of the cover famously done by the Beatles a decade later. Moreover, the cover done by Cheryl K is performed with both English and Mandarin lyrics and thereby familiarizes the audience with the core themes of the movie from the very beginning. The symbolic meaning behind the dual lyrics mixed with the scenes where it appears is not coincidental. The song itself reveals an upcoming conflict between East and West, and who is going to be involved (Chu). The song is introduced in one of the first scenes and can be dissected into four important parts. The first part of the song is when we are introduced to Eleanor and young Nick (00:03:03-00:03:36). The song itself is about money and wealth and this is exactly what we get to see during this scene. This is the first indication the audience get of how wealthy and powerful the Young family truly are. The scene is set in 1995 and shows how Eleanor buys a hotel when she is denied accommodation for the night because of her ethnicity. Furthermore, the song starts playing during the moment it is revealed that she is the new owner of the hotel as she is about to be thrown out. The part of the song that is played during this scene is performed with Mandarin lyrics.

The next scene cuts straight to the current time and shows a frame of Rachel (00:03:47-00:04:52). As the audience is introduced to Rachel, the Mandarin lyrics slowly fades away and eventually disappears altogether. Furthermore, we are introduced to an older Nick Young. As he enters the frame the lyrics appear again, but in English (00:04:53-00:05:03). After introducing the film`s protagonists and antagonist the last scene for the song appears with Nick and Rachel together. The song is still performed with English lyrics before it fades down and the story begins. The subtle changes in the song throughout these scenes is a great indicator of the upcoming struggles Rachel is going to experience, because the song introduces one of the main aspects of the movie, namely identity. This song, and the director`s use of it offers an implicit critique on associating money and wealth with personal value. The reason for this is because the song and its content are thoroughly integrated with the film`s plot. The name of the song is: “Money (That`s what I want)”, and a great portion of the film`s conflict stems from wealth, and economic and cultural background. The song therefore offers an insight into the upcoming conflict.

The contrasting themes that are introduced in this song is the root for Eleanor`s disapproval of Rachel, and therefore offers a gateway into the heart of the conflict from the very start. Rachel has been brought up in an environment where emphasis on money and wealth has been minimal. It is therefore a huge shock to both her and her identity when she is introduced to the upper class in Singapore where money is equal to status and value. Moreover, the use of this song offers a new dimension to the scene because the upcoming conflicts regarding money, background and identity are implicitly implied throughout the song (Chu).

The use of dual lyrics in this song is undoubtedly the most important aspect to mention. The switch from Mandarin to English lyrics symbolizes both a meeting between two cultures and the act of building a bridge between the various cultural associations belonging to these cultures (Emmanuele). Moreover, the different stereotypes and associations connected to these two cultures are the building blocks for Rachel`s struggle to find her own identity. The gradually fading Mandarin lyrics when the scene shifts to her has multiple meanings. First, it indicates that she is distanced from the wealth and the traditional aspects that viewers come to associate with Eleanor. Secondly, it also indicates that Rachel is not entirely Asian enough. She has grown up in the US and has therefore acquired Western values and norms. On the other hand, her mother is an Asian immigrant with knowledge of another language and culture, which she has passed on to Rachel. The scene with no lyrics therefore symbolizes that she is not entirely Western nor entirely Eastern. Thus, she fits neither culture. This foreshadows Rachel`s upcoming struggle with finding her place in a world that is not accepting of her multicultural identity.

Additionally, the lyrics itself and the song`s overall placement in the scene also offers a great deal of information. An example of this can be found during the introduction of Eleanor and Rachel`s characters at (00:04:03). As the scene shifts from Eleanor to Rachel`s introduction, the mandarin lyrics that can be heard are: “your love won`t satisfy me, I need money” (Lyrics translate). This can be interpreted as Eleanor`s disapproval of Rachel regardless of her unconditional love for Nick. Rachel is not worthy of her son because of her background. Moreover, the song is therefore informative in several ways. First, the song offers an insight into Rachel and Eleanor`s characters and helps us to better understand them.

Second, the song manages to subconsciously prepare and alter the audience`s attention towards the upcoming conflict (Ali & Peynircioglu 512).

The next frame of the song is another important symbol of the conflict between the East and the West. This is when an older Nick appears. The first time we see Nick he is with Eleanor and the Mandarin version of the song is playing, but when we are introduced to the current Nick, the English version of the song is playing. These lyrical changes throughout the song can be understood as a union between the East and West, and thus also symbolizing Rachel because she functions as a visual representation of the union between the East and West. The song is therefore a musical introduction to the core conflict of the movie. The song is also played a second time during the ending credits, and therefore frames the film. However, the last time it is used it is with slightly rearranged composition, all English lyrics and with a rap feature from Awkwafina. This use of the song creates a sense of fulfilment. The root of the conflict, which was cultural identity, turned out to be the very solution. Rachel and her multicultural identity managed to build a bridge between an increasingly Western influenced Nick and his traditional Eastern family (Chu).

This song serves to heighten the audience`s awareness of the cultural differences and how they affect the different characters, especially Rachel, who is caught in the middle of two cultures who both resonate with her on different levels. The key element from the song used to achieve this is the dual lyrics. By using different languages for the various introductions, the song manipulates the audience`s interpretation of the visual story. Moreover, research has shown that music is able to elicit semantic memory. This is a type of memory that can be understood as common knowledge; thus, it is a memory based on knowledge we have acquired, not experienced. The combination of how the visual scenes and the elected music function together therefore has the ability to influence our overall experience of a scene (Tan, Cohen, Lipscomb & Bashwiner 236). Furthermore, by using a song that plays on the audience`s semantic memory, the director is able to exploit and maximize the effect of our preexisting stereotypical associations. This creates a distinctive framework that ensures that the scene and its significance is not misinterpreted in addition to obtaining an emotional response from the audience.

Moreover, the song`s lyrical duality unconsciously brings up our stereotypical associations and heighten the gap between East and West (Tan, Cohen, Lipscomb & Bashwiner 253-254). Thus, making the audience predisposed to notice Rachel`s difficulties with identity as the story progresses.

“Yellow” – Katherine Ho

One of the most acclaimed moments from the film is one of the more serious covers, which takes place at the very climax of the movie. The song, originally performed by Coldplay, is reworked into a suitable Mandarin cover, which plays when the major conflicts are resolved (Chu). The director`s decision to use this song can be connected to the core element of the movie, namely identity. In an interview he explains that in addition to needing an emotional song that could create the powerful effects necessary for the ending scenes, he also wanted a song that could deliver a deeper meaning. Moreover, he explained how the word “yellow” often is associated with a negative connotation for Asians and Asian culture. The decision to use this song during the turning point therefore symbolizes taking ownership of one`s identity in a multidimensional manner. Naturally, this applies to the characters in the movie, but it also applies to every person watching who has ever felt insecure about themselves because of their ethnic background (Li). Furthermore, by actively reshaping the connotation of the title they manage to add another layer of meaning to the song. The use of the song in the scene enhances our focus on the beauty of yellow. The song can therefore be understood as a symbol of acceptance. Rachel comes to terms with her identity and accepts that she is a mixture of both cultures and Eleanor decides to accept Rachel for who she is. Similarly, the director has expressed his wishes for the message of acceptance to transcend the screen and inspire audiences to accept themselves as well (Li).

The song starts playing at the point in the story when the rising action of the plot is concluded, and the climax begins (01:48:05) (Hockrow 14). Rachel is about to leave Singapore and Nick behind; their split has created a wedge between Nick and his family because of their involvement in the breakup and Astrid is at a crossroads in terms of her marriage. However, the situation gradually turns as Astrid gathers up the courage to leave her husband and live as her authentic self, and Nick proposes to Rachel with Eleanor`s ring, finally revealing her

approval of their relationship (01:49:56). It is important to note that the song is played with lyrics as everything is seemingly negative for the characters before the lyrics disappears as the conflict is about to be solved. The lyrics return as all of the conflicts are resolved and the scene cuts to an engagement party celebrating the union of Nick and Rachel (01:52:35).

The effect of using the lyrics in this manner confirms the director's intention to take ownership of the negative connotations and turning them into something positive. Furthermore, this is also an important aspect of the wording in the lyrics because the Chinese version of the song that is played during the scene centers around the word "happiness", which differs from the lyrics presented in the original version where the word happiness is not mentioned. This emphasizes the symbolic meaning of how accepting yourself is the road to happiness. Because, as the conflict resolution portrays, once the characters stand up for themselves and confront the people who made them unhappy, they are free to be themselves (Li). The song itself is used as a tool to intensify the symbolic action of blurring the lines between East and West. Once Rachel has gathered a sense of who she is and embraced it, she is finally accepted for who she is. She is no longer out of place, because she has realized that she can be both Asian and American, she does not have to fully conform to either culture. The song can therefore be understood as a symbol of cultural diversity. The use of a familiar song altered with Mandarin lyrics has the power to serve a pragmatic function of appealing to a diverse multicultural audience (Fung).

The song serves as a form of dual communication that transcends from the screen and into real life. The themes of clashing cultures and the blurring of these lines are a recurring theme throughout the soundtrack, and this is especially evident by looking at the use of languages and the alteration between melody and lyrics in scenes. Moreover, recent studies have shown that melody is more efficient in terms of eliciting emotional responses compared to lyrics (Ali & Peynircioglu 530). Thus, by using a song that is familiar to the audience outside of the cinematic experience it is more likely that an emotional response will be sonically induced, because of one's personal associations related to the song. This allows for a broad interpretation. However, by adding the Mandarin lyrics, the creators manage to narrow down the possibilities of interpretation (Davison 214). This combination therefore creates a magnified emotional experience but adds a new layer that enhances their awareness of the

characters and their struggles. The resolutions to the movie`s conflicts are therefore carefully crafted around the song to heighten the feelings and thus creating an emotional climax.

Conclusion

In this thesis, I have explored how the use of music in *Crazy Rich Asians* has been used to accentuate the theme of cultural homelessness through its emphasis on cultural diversity and the blending of cultures in its soundtrack. In order to accomplish this, different technical aspects, such as the psychological and technical effects of using music, have been investigated in order to examine the examples from the film`s soundtrack. The musical aspects presented in the adaptation of *Crazy Rich Asians* opens up for a unique experience of the characters, cultures and conflicts we are introduced to (Davison 222). Overall, the music is used to exemplify the crosspollination of the Eastern and Western cultures and sonically include us as an audience on Rachel`s journey East, as she and the audience simultaneously experience the cultural challenges presented in the plot. The soundtrack has earned the stamp of being groundbreaking according to critics because of the creators` emphasis on appealing to a Western audience by providing a representation of Eastern culture based on accuracy and inclusivity as a means to essentially blur the lines between the East and West in real life as well (Li). This transcending effect from screen to real life is something that makes the music from *Crazy Rich Asians* praiseworthy according to critics. Furthermore, by looking at the themes of the screen adaption and how this is reflected in the artists used and songs performed on the soundtrack, the creators have generated a heightened focus on representation and identity and how this is presented in popular culture (Fung).

As this thesis has established, the effects of music are a substantial influence on all screen adaptations. Music`s ability to generate and influence emotions create an added dimension to the adapted version and creates an emotional experience that separates the film from the book. The correspondence between watching a scene unfold with the actors` portrayal of the characters, and the effects elicited by the music ensures that important information is effectively conveyed to the audience (Baltes, et al). Overall, the soundtrack presented in *Crazy Rich Asians* creates a layered experience that resonates with everyone who has ever struggled with identity or feeling out of place.

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