

Destination Storytelling Singapore: *Crazy Rich Asians* (2018) and the Constructed Global Audience

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ABSTRACT

This article examines deployments of the film *Crazy Rich Asians* (2018) framed and reframed as a case of Singapore's destination storytelling 'success' in both ethnographic data and published media. We analyze the interinstitutional production of destination storytelling as a professional practice that draws on media development, place/destination branding, and tourism promotion as its conditions of possibility. We argue that the destination-storytelling success in the case of CRA is constructed as a function of the film's recognition by 'global' audiences, a category framed as intersubstitutable with both Western and American. This global audience qua Western/American viewer is further constructed as eminently distractable, perpetually in need of new settings to consume, making Singapore's destination storytelling success a potentially temporary, fragile achievement. This case emphasizes how local/global contrasts and acts of accommodation that purport to bridge them are not given in advance, but rather come into being via contextually situated, comparative scaling projects.

Keywords: branding, image, local/global, media development, scale, Singapore, tourism promotion

INTRODUCTION

On 30 January 2020, a representative from the Singapore Tourism Board (STB) took the stage at an annual destination storytelling conference and awards ceremony held in Bangkok, Thailand. Titled "Tourism Boards Leveraging Film: Singapore," the presentation was a case study of one of the STB's recent successes in 'destination storytelling': the film *Crazy Rich Asians* (dir. Jon M. Chu), a 2018 romantic comedy that, in addition to making headlines as the first Hollywood film to feature an entirely Asian-heritage cast since 1993's *The Joy Luck Club* (dir. Wayne Wang), was set in Singapore. The case study presentation began, however, with the *Jurassic Park* films. Even though the films were wrong on many details, the speaker asserted, they nevertheless dominate global perceptions of what dinosaurs were like: "So, what I want to tell you is that movies are a very powerful tool. You can shape the way that people think, look, and see, and feel... and it gives the audience a very personal connection" (Choo 2020a) The topic of the talk, the speaker continued, was about how STB – whose job it is to "market and showcase Singapore" (ibid) – uses film to do just that. This served as a segue into two clips of *Crazy Rich Asians* (CRA).

The first short clip began with an exterior shot of a plane flying above clouds. The view faded to a world map, as an arcing line moved from the U.S. to Southeast Asia. The view zoomed in as the line terminated at Singapore's Marina Bay. The scene then cut to a moving aerial shot of the Singapore skyline viewed from the southeast, moving from Marina East toward the three towers of the famous Marina Bay Sands integrated resorts and casino complex. An onscreen title spelled "Singapore" in red and white letters. The scene then cut to Changi Airport, with a map of Singapore visible in the foreground. Once the first clip ended, the presenter continued: "Immediately in those few seconds, you know where Singapore is on the map. That is a very important thing for us as a tourism board, because people in the Western countries unfortunately are not so savvy on Asia (ibid)."

After a brief pause, the speaker asked, rhetorically: "Ok, what can we do in Singapore? (ibid)" This introduced a second clip. In it, the main CRA characters were shown driving along the highway from the airport to the city center. They ended at the open-air hawker center in the historic Lau Pa Sat Festival Market, where the viewer was bombarded by a fast-paced series of rapid-cut, close-up shots of food in various stages of preparation. The clip ended with lead actor Constance Wu's character visibly delighted by an unseen food item. The presenter once again took to the stage: "So, this scene is one of my favorites in the movie. It has everything that a destination marketer wants in these few minutes. Literally, once we've seen this scene" – dramatic pause for emphasis – "all sold." The presentation ended with the logo and tagline for the Singapore destination brand, *Passion Made Possible*, emblazoned in red neon.

Later, during a cocktail reception, one of the authors approached the presenter and asked why the Board had chosen *Crazy Rich Asians* as their case study, since many people in Singapore and Asia had a lukewarm-to-negative response to the film. The reply: "To be blunt, we don't care about this reaction. The film was a destination storytelling win in the U.S. and U.K. markets, which is what we were going for (Choo 2020b)."

Given this response, we ask the following: What are the conditions of possibility for constructing *Crazy Rich Asian* as a destination storytelling 'success,' and how is an image of Singapore generated across multiple scales to create this destination storytelling success? Rather than taking destination storytelling as possessing a coherent, determinate, self-evident referent (whether a set of professional practices, the durable products of those practices, or the like), this article examines destination storytelling as an interinstitutional nexus among 1) media-development strategy – the overt state policies and public-private partnerships designed to encourage media industries' growth and sustainability; 2) place- or destination branding – a corporate-style marketing and communications regime applied to the commoditized image of a locale; and 3) tourism promotion, which promotes branded place and destinations, but via a narrow focus on leisure travel. As it is enacted in Singapore, destination storytelling orients toward an imagined global audience (a sense of 'global' that, as the opening vignette shows, generally refers to a Western consumer).

Destination storytelling, then, emerges from two institutional strategies carried out across the three aforementioned institutional domains: first, a "Made-with-Singapore" media strategy, and second, the marketing and management of the *Passion Made Possible* place- and destination brand. As we will elaborate in greater depth later, "Made-with-Singapore" is a category deployed by Singapore state's media development apparatus, referring to an ostensibly new approach to local/global media-production partnerships. *Passion Made Possible*, meanwhile, is the latest slogan in a branding campaign designed to showcase the presumed passions of everyday Singaporeans, a value proposition held to encompass both the unique image of the place, and to drive tourism and investment.

Yet while *Crazy Rich Asians* is a film set in Singapore, "Made-with-Singapore," and adapted from a literary work of Singaporean authorship (at least as far as citizenship is concerned),¹ it was not, for many self-positioned Asian or Singaporean viewers, a Singaporean film. In other words, this case involves not a straightforward accommodation of the 'global' to the 'local' (reframing or re-presenting media originating outside Singapore), nor a modification of local products to global sensibilities (telling an ostensibly Singaporean story to non-Singaporeans); rather, it highlights the fact that local and global are contextual scales (Carr and Lempert 2016). Though *Crazy Rich Asians*' success is constructed by the representative via its having reached a global audience, this audience is not fixed, with 'global' sometimes indexing all Western locales, sometimes all locales outside Singapore, but more often an imagined American gaze. Moreover, the global audience, variously constructed, is cast as fickle, as

perpetually seeking new, non-Western (local) settings to consume. We argue that, as an instance of destination storytelling success, *Crazy Rich Asians* coordinates a range of interinstitutional sites and ideological interests in both production and reception, variably scaling destination Singapore as local, global, both, or neither according to the interests that ideologically structured the film and its discursive surround. This has important implications for theorizations of the heterogenization–homogenization dynamics of glocalization as a modus operandi of the space–times of globalization (Robertson 1997). Our study brings into relief the fact that, like local and global, ‘glocalization’ is always perspectival, deployed as a resource in ever-shifting ways.

The remainder of the article proceeds in four sections. First, we provide an overview of the theoretical and historical background on which we draw, and outline the features of the practices of destination storytelling that animate our analysis. Second, we give an overview of the narrative construction of histories of Singapore’s media industries, articulated locally as the shift from “made-*in*-Singapore” to “made-*with*-Singapore.” Next, we detail changes over time in place- and destination-branding practice leading up to, and following from, the 2017 launch of *Passion Made Possible*. Lastly, we analyze the construction of Singapore as a storytelling *setting* – as opposed, for instance, to a character or narrative genre – in efforts to attract the attention of a mercurial audience ambivalently and alternately cast as generically foreign, or particularly American.

BACKGROUND

Scaling ‘Local,’ ‘Global,’ and ‘Glocal’ Destinations

In claiming that local and global are perspectival, contextual scales, we draw on anthropological and other social-scientific scholarship that begins with the perspective that scale “is process before it is product” (Carr and Lempert 2016, 4). This approach does not presume scalar distinctions in advance, whether analytic or empirical. Rather, it attends to the “culture and politics of scale making” (Tsing 2000, 330), which works through “complex, heterogenous, and sometimes far-flung assemblages” (Carr and Lempert 2016, 10). Scale always involves situated evaluations at sites of ideological work (Gal and Irvine 2019, 21-23), enacted via the deployment of models for comparison that organize interpretable distinctions: space, time, number, degree of encompassment (Gal 2016, 92), etc.

Local/global, in this view, is one among many models for comparison, even if it is a highly naturalized, valorized model (Tsing 2000, 330). As a scalar process, globalization involves more than the dynamics of cultural homogenization or heterogenization – a constructed binary that operates as an “essential ingredient of contemporary capitalism” (Robertson 2000[1992], 173; see also 1997). Rather, while acknowledging its intensified “articulations between... cultural forms and practices, [...] proliferation of

seemingly novel forms of identification, and new ways of negotiating difference” (Palmié 2013, 464), globalization is a site of ideological work, used as an ideological frame for interpreting a range of processes and phenomena. Similarly, the glocal, enacted through acts of “accommodation” – activities that point to both the interconnections (and power asymmetries) across differently scaled positions (Dreisbach 2018, 62) – also comprises ideological work. Accommodation is accomplished through deployment of models for comparison, not the jumping or blending of a priori scales.

Questions of the global and the local are particularly important when it comes to understanding how discourses of migration, tourism, marketing and destination-storytelling mobilize the concept of destination. More specifically, the concept of destination – both as it is used by destination-storytelling professionals, and as it has been dealt with in studies of migration and tourism – draws on and entails the presumption of a divide between a (contextually constructed) local and its contrastive opposites. The question of what localities count as a destination often grounds implicit or explicit hierarchies between or among destinations. Destination serves as a figure for the articulation of desire, as well as for articulating the shifting moral, socioeconomic, and geopolitical personhood(s) of the desiring individual:² not all places are deemed worthy of becoming destinations, and not all destinations confer the same values onto the subjects whose mobilities are constituted in and through the desire for and pursuit of destinations.

In the sections that follow, we track how Singapore is differentially and hierarchically scaled as a destination across sites of official, state-led, nationalist narration and mediatized discourses about Singapore’s ‘crazy rich’ status. We then focus on the scalar processes mobilized through historical and present representations of Singapore’s media industries and institutionalized image-management practices in and around *Crazy Rich Asians*.

History and/as the ‘Singapore Story’

Widespread, official narratives about Singapore describe it as an unlikely success existing at a confluence, or contradiction, of global flows. Emerging from an originary trauma of a forced separation from the Federation of Malaysia in 1964, which cut the city-state off from key resources, like water (Newman and Thornley 2005, 247; Kaplan 2016), Singapore is narrated as having nevertheless risen to attain a globally enviable state of socioeconomic advancement. It is also narrated as having attained a similarly enviable degree of harmony in spite of its population diversity. As of 2019, official census records documented 76.01% Chinese, 15.00% Malay, 7.47% Indian, and 1.53% Other, demographically categorized via a standardized, institutionalized racial model known as CMIO (PuruShotam 1998). Despite being framed as a mere statement of demographic fact, Chinese majority in Singapore has driven racialized narratives of the city-state’s embattlement vis-à-vis its Malay-Muslim neighbors

(Rahim 2010, 60–62): thus, “race categories were politically constructed to [constitute CMIO] ‘multiracialism’ as both a national character and a national ideology... [Other minority groups] played a critical symbolic and substantive role in rendering Singapore as a multiracial society. Without them Singapore’s racial composition and politics would be one of the majority/dominant [Chinese] and the minority/subordinate Malays” (Chua 2017, 130).

The narrative of survival against long odds, of triumph in the face of adversity, and of meteoric socioeconomic and geopolitical rise is referred to in Singapore as the “Singapore Story.” A key component of civic-education pedagogies (Baildon and Afandi 2017) and ritualized state rhetoric, the Singapore Story is designed to instill in Singaporeans a sense of pride in the place’s meteoric, “unlikely” (J. C. Perry 2017; M. Perry, Kong, and Yeoh 1997; Liow 2015) rise from “Third World to First,” as the title of a memoir by founding Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew would have it (Lee 2012; see also Holden 2001; 2017).

Rather than accepting such assertions that Singapore is forever vulnerable, yet steadily developing due to the foresight and meritocratic commitments of the People’s Action Party (Thum 2017), the political party in power since the granting of self-rule in 1959, we instead follow critical scholarship in a range of fields that emphasizes these narratives’ constructed, mythic status. In asserting that such narratives are myths, scholars in Singapore have followed Roland Barthes in explicating how interpretations made to seem natural or commonsense in Singapore are historically constructed, and are mobilized in the service of power (Loh, Thum, and Chia 2017). The authority of these myths derives from institutionalized, broadly recognizable ideologies operative at a range of sites. Ideology, in this view, is neither false consciousness, nor sets of beliefs that are – or must be – explicitly articulated as propositions. Rather, we follow linguistic anthropologists in treating ideology not as a product, but as a process – as something that people *do*, not something that people *have*. As a process, it is a “productive... part of people’s creative interpretations of their situation and part of their consequent social action” (Gal and Irvine 2019, 14). Ideology is analytically recoverable through an attention to ideological work: events of interpretation that actively make social life in ways that could be otherwise. We analyze the construction of Singapore, both as a place, and as an imaginary constructed across local, regional, and global scales, in terms of the ideological work mobilized in service of its representation.

Crazy Rich Singapore?

As mentioned before, *Crazy Rich Asians* was lauded (largely by U.S. media and cultural producers) as an onscreen victory for Asian-American representation. Yet this critical acclaim was matched by backlash from a range of positions. For many in Singapore and throughout Asia, the film – like the book on which

it was based – was the latest instantiation of the Asian-American myth of the Model Minority, projected onto Singapore at a transnational scale (Hong 2018). Other commentators were quick to point out how *Crazy Rich Asians* “gets Singapore wrong,” from featuring north-Chinese traditions that never actually took hold in Singapore to the fact that a great deal of footage was shot in Malaysia. Critics also pointed to the Sinification of Singapore in the film through the erasure of non-Chinese personae (K. Han 2018).³ For many critics self-positioned as voicing a reflexively local, Asian or Singaporean stance,⁴ *Crazy Rich Asians* is an American romantic-comedy mobilizing a familiar trope of (Asian) tradition versus (American) modernity, in which Singapore is subsumed in the production of a globalizing Western imaginary and (re)constructed as nothing more than what communications studies scholars have called a tourist utopia (Simpson 2017) – a space of exception available for global-cosmopolitan consumption-as-self-fashioning.

This kind of critique was explicitly responded to in promotional media circulated by the Singapore Tourism Board and mediatizing institutions like *Channel News Asia* as well as more implicitly, by the *Straits Times*, Singapore’s state-owned journal of record:

CNA’s Genevieve Low (GL) interviews Jon Chu (JC) and Henry Golding (HG) on *Crazy Rich Asians* not being “Singaporean” enough (15 August 2018)

GL: But I have to say, though, there will be detractors who will tell you, this is not the Singapore we know, and this is not... So what would you say to them?

JC: Yeah. I mean, I think that it would be like that Bruce Lee quote about pointing to the moon. Don’t pay attention to the finger, cause you’re gonna miss the moon... Movies [are] just one vehicle to get to a place where we all need to get to.

HG: This is a movie, we can only highlight certain things, it’s a story of exaggerated characters. It’s *fiction*, it definitely isn’t the Singaporean life that we all know and love, but again, this is meant to entertain (Channel News Asia 2018).

Unlike commentary by STB representatives on the power of films to shape perceptions and understandings of reality, such commentary instead insisted that film is selective, nonrealistic, and nonserious. Critics are thus positioned as taking the film too seriously or expecting too much.

The Straits Times, meanwhile, published several pieces showcasing the stories of real-life ‘crazy rich Singaporeans’ to suggest that *Crazy Rich Asians*’ representations were less far-fetched than detractors claimed. An article titled, “How Real is Crazy Rich Asians’ Portrayal of Singapore?” – subtitled “[e]ntrepreneur... says scenes of glamorous shopping... are accurate, while socialite describes opulent parties in the movie as spot on” – featured quotes from Singapore’s ultra-rich on how personal shopping, lavish parties, and private jets are commonplace for them (Cheow 2018). The contextual divides among these critiques and their responses should be clear: for Asian Americans, in light of

histories of oppression and erasure of people of Asian descent, the film was touted as a representational victory. Meanwhile, in Asia, it was not considered Asian, and in Singapore, it was not viewed as Singapore(an) – that is, it was not deemed to be broadly representative of the immense variety of Singaporean identities and life experiences.

SINGAPORE'S MEDIA LANDSCAPES

Media's Golden Age and Discourses of Decline

Crazy Rich Asians' impact on filmic representations of Singapore as a destination must be considered in relation to the "Made-with-Singapore" media development strategy that grew through decades of attempts to build a robust Singaporean film industry. The failed 1963–1964 merger with Malaysia haunts constructions of self-identification in Singapore, a haunting that is especially overt in dominant narratives about Singapore's media industries, commonly described as doomed to forever remain an insular, local market. Before the failed merger, Singapore was in the heyday of what is referred to as a "Golden Age" of Malay-language cinema based in Singapore. Singapore's independence was followed by a dearth of new titles until the 1990s' renaissance of Singaporean-produced films. Government efforts to grow the media industries only became a policy priority in the late 1980s, with the production of several iterations of plans and strategies in the decades leading up to the current "Made-with-Singapore" strategy. Narratives of decline from a past golden age are thus discursively mobilized in Singapore government attempts at continually developing media industries through strategies like "Made-with-Singapore."

Media Developments: From "Made-in" to "Made-with"

"Made-with-Singapore" frames a new temporal direction from a previous developmental strategy, "Made-in-Singapore," which focused on Singaporean-made media products. Beginning in 2018, both S. Iswaran, Singapore's Minister of Communications and Information (MCI), and Joachim Ng, director of the Singapore Film Commission (SFC) began to publicly declare a shift in the Singaporean government's strategy for managing the local film industry. When explicitly asked in 2020 about a policy pivot from "Made-in" to "Made-with-Singapore," Ng affirmed: "You're correct. For 20 years it was about 'Made in Singapore'. We'd film in our [public-housing] flats and our hawker centers, telling our own stories, with our own talent. The idea of 'Made with Singapore' is more collaborative" (Sanders 2020). The framing of "our own stories" articulates the stories' local-ness as a feature of their settings, filmed in the Singaporean 'heartlands' and featuring 'heartlanders.' Both heartlands and heartlanders are local categories for representing average or everyday Singaporean personae and spaces in contrast with the

cosmopolitan (Lim 2018b, 24). It should be noted that such films' narratives tend to be Chinese-Singaporean middle-class dramas, even if other personae and spaces are sometimes featured (consider the recent film festival successes of *Ilo Ilo* and *Wet Season/热带雨*, dir. Anthony Chen, 2013 and 2020).⁵

Both the rhetorical shift and the emphasis on 20 years of a now-past "Made-in-Singapore" strategy were linked to the SFC's 20th anniversary celebrations in 2018, treated as an opportunity to reevaluate governmental media strategy. Across different documents and interviews, the supposed newness of "Made-with-Singapore" was articulated in its collaborative, global-cum-international or regional focus and its shift away from stories exclusively oriented toward a local Singaporean audience. Instead, films would tell regional and global stories for regional and global audiences. 'Regional,' in SFC and MCI documents and interviews, referred to both the Southeast Asian region – institutionalized through Southeast Asian co-production grants – but also to a broader notion of an Asian region, as seen in announcements focusing on 'Asian storytelling.' The category of 'global' was less clearly defined, but tended to refer to a generalized, wide reach. The locality of past media production was focalized and contrasted against the new globality of "Made-with- Singapore."

Though it is difficult in general to determine the national scope of many media productions, as critiques of the idea of a national cinema show (Lim 2018a), this is particularly the case in Singapore, where so-called national film industries have always been highly interconnected with other national film industries. During the Golden Age, most of the on-screen talent came from areas throughout British Malaya, most major studios were built and run by Chinese investors with bases in the mainland and Hong Kong, and many Indian and Filipino directors and writers were brought into Singapore. From 1965 until the 1990s, feature film production largely involved foreign film companies coming to Singapore to use it as a setting. Even during the 1990s, during the renaissance of Singaporean film production – which Ng characterized as an era focused on "Made-in-Singapore" – Italian and Chinese investors built two film sets cum amusement parks in Singapore in partnership with the Singaporean government to feed their collaborative filming needs (Uhde and Udhe 2009). Narratives about newness also led, in many cases, to the erasure of South Asian and South Asian-diasporic media. This occurs in multiple forms, such as the erasure of Bollywood (Yue 2009, 272-274) or Kollywood (Velayutham 2008, 175-176) films that feature Singapore as a setting, or the erasure of Tamil-language television and film (Sankaran and Pillai 2011, 280-281 ff) produced in and about Singapore for diasporic audiences.⁶ In other words, narratives that focus on newness belie the fact that many of the supposedly new developments – collaborative productions made to circulate both within and beyond Singapore – had already been occurring.

Narratives of newness also belie the fact that government policy in the 1990s and early 2000s reflected similar strategies as "Made-with-Singapore." Besides 1990s emphases on partnership with

foreign firms and investors to build sets and studios, the first policy plans by the newly created Media Development Authority, *Media 21: Transforming Singapore into a Global Media City*, emphasized international co-production as part of the strategies to grow local industries (MDA 2003). Further policy emphasized the generation of Singapore as a new “media hub” for the region (T. Lee 2016), reinventing a classic narrative about Singapore as an ideal trading hub and intermediary, a key trope in the Singapore Story. “Made-with-Singapore” may bring agencies together in new ways, but the narrative on which it rests draws on longstanding narrative representations of Singapore. In the case of *Crazy Rich Asians*, “Made-with-Singapore” largely meant that government statutory boards collaborated with *Crazy Rich Asians* producers. This support was in part financial – Singaporean newspapers reported that government agencies gave financial assistance of an undisclosed amount to the *Crazy Rich Asians* production team – along with assistance in securing locations and connecting producers with Singaporean talent. A STB representative noted that governmental agencies were encouraged to assist in these ways because they saw that the film planned to highlight Singaporean “attractions... culture and diversity... [and] food,” a checklist of items described by the spokesperson as necessary for presenting not only Singapore, but any destination. Overall, the assistance given to *Crazy Rich Asians* by STB and SFC was framed as a reasonable price to pay for the ability to promote the image of Singapore on a global stage.

IMAGE-MANAGEMENT AND *PASSION MADE POSSIBLE*

Branding Singapore as Place, Destination, and Professional Activity

As Singapore brand expert Koh Buck Song put it in a book widely accepted as the definitive (practitioner–theorist) account of Singapore’s brand, “without nation branding, there would be no Singapore” (Koh 2011, 27). Like discourses of Singapore’s rise to “unlikely” power, narratives of Singapore’s brand trajectory champion the place’s ability to shed its earlier image of sterility, lack of unique character, and authoritarian governance⁷ and garner a new image as a “hip, sexy place of wealth” (Chan 2019) in just a few decades.

The Singapore *Passion Made Possible* brand is one point in an historical series of efforts at crafting representations of the place as desirable in various ways, whether as a site at which British gentlemen could build professional credentials pre-WWII as members of the Crown Colony’s Malayan Civil Service (Thum 2017, 25–26); as a colonial-era holiday locale (M. L. Han 2003); or as a tourism utopia for hypermobile, global-cosmopolitan consumers in the present (Goh 2017; Simpson 2017). Historical and present efforts at managing the image of the place coincide with the hundreds of social-engineering campaigns (Seng 2013) designed to remake Singapore in ways that anticipated and responded to an imagined foreign (usually, but not always Western) gaze. These range from the Courtesy Campaign

designed to make Singaporeans friendlier, to language standardization and dialect-eradication campaigns (Rubby 2001; Bokhorst-Heng 1999). Further, the “Garden City” campaign (later, “City in a Garden” and today, “City in Nature”) is designed to enforce a sense of visual order through urban greenery (H. Han 2017) and convince foreigners that Singapore is a safe place for investment and business (K. Y. Lee 2012, 188). It bears noting that the top source countries for Singapore’s tourist arrivals are Indonesia, China, and India, but destination hierarchies projected both in and outside Singapore mean that different strategies are entailed when the constructed audience is framed as internal versus external to an Asian region. That is, there is a greater perceived need to accommodate and entice non-Asian tourists to view Singapore as a desirable destination, and audiences constructed as Western have been the subject of a great deal of overt attention in public discourses since Singapore’s independence (as well as before).

This longstanding concern over Singapore’s image has come together with a global rise in place branding practice, which has driven, and been driven by, the formation of a new, transnational expert-professional elite (Aronczyk 2013, 38-40). As branding is increasingly seen as necessary for success in the global economy, states are called on to recognize and legitimate branding professionals’ expertise, but their legitimacy is increasingly judged according to their ability to brand and market like a state (Nakassis 2013, 119; see also Woolard 2016; Mazzarella 2003). In Singapore, the rise of branding and the emergence of *Passion Made Possible* reflects this broader shift in statecraft and governance.

Making *Passion Made Possible*

The link between place branding and destination storytelling is not merely hypothetical or analogic. The Singapore Tourism Board (STB) presentation described in the introduction consistently deployed the *Passion Made Possible* “visual identity,” an industry term of art referring to color palettes, typography, logotypes, layouts, and rhetorical strategies that emblematically materialize the brand. The visible presence of *Passion Made Possible* was not trivial, either: the presence of the brand’s graphic-visual fractions implicitly framed the subject matter of the presentation as a token – or specific instance – of the brand type, linked in turn to a generalized brand ontology: “[T]he cultural and legal notion that things such as brands exist and... have [particular] properties as specified, and policed, by [the various] institutions” that govern them (Nakassis 2012, 628). The brand was a key structuring principle of the STB presentation’s aesthetics and communicative strategies.

Launched in August 2017, *Passion Made Possible* was officially described as a “unified brand beyond tourism” managed by not only the STB but also the Economic Development Board (EDB) (Singapore Tourism Board 2017).⁸ Like “Made-with-Singapore,” *Passion Made Possible* also articulated a stage theory of historical development: as it was narrated by STB and EDB at the brand launch, the co-

management relationship between the two Statutory Boards itself signaled a growing recognition of the centrality of global tourism promotion to Singapore's economy. The year 2018 saw a record high of 18.5 million tourist arrivals – meaning that tourists outnumbered Singapore's approximately 6 million non-tourist residents by a factor of three to one – and SGD\$27.8 billion (USD\$20.3b) in tourism receipts, comprising just under 4% of total GDP (Singapore Tourism Board 2019). As described in a statement on "brand values," *Passion Made Possible* "is at its heart an articulation of the spirit of Singapore and its people. It celebrates the stories of the big local heroes, but also the everyday Singaporean's" (ibid). The STB and EDB's co-management relationship was also described in the statement as a new stage in branding, shifting away from tourism as such, and toward a newfound valorization of the local and ordinary.

Developed by a local boutique firm, The Secret Little Agency (TSLA), the brand's development involved extensive feedback from over 4,000 Singaporeans through surveys and focus groups. However, for many Singaporean and non-Singaporean commentators at the time of the brand launch, the brand's use of 'passion' was strange, even wrong. Of all the top-of-mind associations that people had with the place, passion was not one; in fact, passion was already strongly associated with many other places (a respondent working for a tour company asserted, for instance, that passion was obviously a more apt description for Latin American or Mediterranean locales). Such outcry has died down since 2017. For our purposes, what is important to note about the brand's launch and subsequent circulation is the fact that local and global constantly shift in response to perceived consumer expectations, even as they were treated as stable, scalar referents comprising a new stage in Singapore's image-management.

THE CONSTRUCTED GLOBAL AUDIENCE AND SINGAPORE AS STORYTELLING SETTING

Destination Storytelling Singapore

The category of 'destination storytelling Singapore' indexes a destination brand that operates within both a tourism-promotion framework and a generalized political economy of place-images; it also indexes a category of media-professional practice. In this way, both branding and media development both animate, and are animated by, destination storytelling. In the process, destination storytelling enacts a politics of difference, projecting both transnational and local value-hierarchies between Singapore and consumers of Singapore's image. The annual Destination Storytelling Conference and Film Awards 2020 was one of two such industry-focused events attended in-person by one of the authors (Babcock) prior to global COVID-19 lockdowns. The Destination Storytelling Conference and Film Awards, which launched this analysis, are a site at which media productions – both feature-length motion pictures by major studios, and industry driven productions in a range of genres (television

advertisements, digital video, mobile applications) – are recognized for their achievements in the field. As a formal event genre, the award show/conference format comprised panel discussions, trade shows, and events variously referred to as keynotes, master classes, or case study presentations. The January 2020 event in Bangkok hosted approximately 200 attendees, primarily industry professionals outside state tourism promotion boards.

Like other industry conferences, this event was both a form of tourism and a site of professional identity-formation (Getz 2008): professionals attend the conference both for business purposes and for the chance to travel to a city like Bangkok, Thailand. Though granting an award was framed in the event as indicating the quality of a media work itself, it also served as a performance of a professional self, indexing the evaluator as a legitimate judge of the quality of a work. Further, it was an opportunity for recognizing and elevating particular locales as deserving of recognition, which similarly indexes the persona of the legitimate evaluator as much as it indexes purported qualities of places and place-images. For this reason, our analysis of the event in this article has tacked back and forth between the broader frameworks that intersect with the event itself – first, the global emergence of place and destination branding as expert-professional practice; and second, media-industry development as national (or other) development.

Constructing the Mercurial Global (American) Audience

Despite critiques over the Sinification of Singapore in *Crazy Rich Asians* (in terms of both characters, language-use, settings, and narrative devices), STB's *Crazy Rich Asians*-citing promotional media was meticulous in its avoidance of references to China, at least at the level of denotational text, that is, at the level of the referential-and-predicational content of what is said or written (Silverstein and Urban 1996). While formal interviews and other adjacent promotional content involving the film's cast and creators insisted that *CRA* showcased Singapore to a global audience, reportage on media strategy in Singapore shows that a performed concern for global audiences indexes anxieties surrounding the Western – and more particularly American – gaze, a gaze nevertheless taken to be easily distracted or exhausted.

We return to the Destination Storytelling Awards Ceremony and Conference 2020 with which we opened this article, and the first *Crazy Rich Asians* scene discussed in the STB presentation:

So, this is one of the scenes in the movie *Crazy Rich Asians* and immediately in those few seconds you know *where* Singapore is on the map. That is a very important thing for us as a tourism board, because people in the Western countries unfortunately are

not so savvy on Asia, **some still think Singapore is part of China...** or somewhere else (Choo 2020a; boldface added).

Ignorance of Singapore's global location is framed in this statement as an intervention into ignorance about Asia generally. The scene's success, as described in the STB presentation, lay in its correcting the ignorance of people residing in "*Western countries*" (ibid).

The anxiety over Singapore's potential association with China can be further seen running through various other STB-produced media. Between late August 2018 and early January 2019, the STB released a series of videos named "Crazy Rich Experiences in Singapore," featuring *Crazy Rich Asians* Singaporean cast members Tan Kheng Hua (as Kerry Chu), Janice Koh (as Felicity Young), and Fiona Xie (as Kitty Pong). Running between two and three minutes in length, the videos were structured around actors' visits to businesses framed as exemplifying the passions and love – à la *Passion Made Possible* – in *Crazy Rich Asians*' plot. The videos are comprised of dialog between cast members and business owners, as well as narration and monolog by cast members. The imagined audience is recoverable from implicit cues throughout the promotional videos: first, the fact that various facets of life in Singapore – like Peranakan⁹ cuisine, handicrafts, and aesthetics – are overtly explained (all are things with which Singaporeans would be presumed familiar); second, in that China and Chineseness are referenced only via references to local cultural mixing, or references to times and locations past.¹⁰

In the 20 August 2018 episode, "Crazy Rich Experiences in Singapore with Tan Kheng Hua," Peranakan furniture, cuisine, and clothing are described in terms of explicit temporal markers that locate China and Chineseness in a discursive past, both determinate – e.g. "Chinese traders *200 years ago*" – and indeterminate – e.g. "Chinese *back then*" and "Chinese *forefathers*." Chinese language and cultural forms are treated via their ostensible mixing with other Malay and European forms in the bodies and lifeways of the Singaporean Peranakan community, and distanced from associations with the present-day People's Republic. Similarly, in a 7 January 2019 episode, "Crazy Rich Experiences in Singapore with Janice Koh," Janice Koh interviews a Singaporean jewelry-maker Choo Yilin. Though the jewelry on display during the video is made of jade, and features design elements like clouds and peonies, Koh and the jewelry-maker repeatedly describe the jewelry as expressing "*Asian* heritage and motifs." This is despite the fact that, for many Singaporeans, the jewelry would be taken as an obvious embodiment of Chinese aesthetics. The fact that the video – whether through the careful management of the talk of its featured participants, or as a function of the editing and post-production process – deals with Chinese-linked phenomena in this way suggests that anxieties expressed in the STB presentation (that Westerners think Singapore is part of China, or somewhere else) also animated the production of the STB video series.

Framing in terms of global or Western audiences generally (counterposed to the local) belies the fact that, more often, the concern lies with a more specific imagined audience: Americans – whether those who think Singapore is in China, or those in need of ‘fresh’ media locales. Yet celebrations of Singapore’s ‘fresh, new and exciting’ status entails a parallel recognition that such destination images can be exhausted. When acknowledged, such recognition focuses primarily on the opportunity dimension, not on images’ exhaustibility vis-à-vis the mercurial character of the global audience. A 2019 article in the Hong Kong-based *South China Morning Post* exemplifies this tendency. Titled “‘A Hip Sexy Place of Wealth’: Singapore’s Appeal as Film and TV Location Growing in the Wake of Crazy Rich Asians,” the article described both *Crazy Rich Asians* and the HBO sci-fi smash-hit *Westworld* Season 3 (2020) as examples of “Made-with-Singapore” media-strategy success. An executive at a Singaporean production house was quoted explaining why this success had been possible:

The cityscapes of... Tokyo and Hong Kong have been filmed too often, leaving American film and television productions seeking new backdrops... The box-office success of *Crazy Rich Asians* definitely opened the eyes of the world to Singapore... Filmmakers are always looking for something fresh, new and enticing, and Singapore has not been featured much globally compared with [other] Asian cities. (Chan 2019)

The article toggles back and forth between two referents, framing them as parallel: “American film and television productions seeking new backdrops,” in the first instance, and later, “the world.” The article addresses the matter of Hollywood hegemony, but it does so only briefly. Similarly, in other reportage, various participants’ and creators’ overt acknowledgement of *Crazy Rich Asians*’ American-centric focus is downplayed or disavowed, subsumed under the fact that an American audience is still global, since it is not local.

In a 15 August 2018 *Channel News Asia* interview with Genevieve Low, director Jon Chu described the film as being structured according to the character Rachel Chu’s perspective:

This is about a girl, Rachel Chu, going on her own personal journey, who’s an Asian American going to Asia for the first time, and everything is through her perspective, which is different from the book. [Author Kevin Kwan is] from Singapore, so he had a very different perspective... [A]s a director you have to choose what your entrance is and what your audience is, and I knew what I wanted to share with people from *all* around the world, but it’s particularly my friends and family from America, to take them into Singapore the way I experienced Singapore (Channel News Asia 2018).

While Chu (the director) acknowledged that his directorial choices structured the film around a particularly Asian-American perspective, he nevertheless hedged by insisting that this creates a point

of entry for viewers “all around the world.” In spite of this, in both news reports and *CRA*-adjacent promotional media, the viewing habits and desires of an imagined American viewer – measured by searches on Google and travel websites after *Crazy Rich Asians*’ release – are presented as evidence of the film’s global success in destination storytelling.

During a later session at the Bangkok Destination Storytelling event, titled “Leveraging a Movie to Position a Hotel: Lebua at State Tower,” Deepak Ohri, CEO of Lebua Hotels and Resorts – one of many locations featured in the film *The Hangover 2* (2011, dir. Todd Phillips) – addressed the exhaustibility of place images: “We are still riding the wave from... after we first amazed audiences with the view from Sky Bar. Now it’s still a destination... but we can’t exactly show the place in another film” (Ohri 2020). Yet places like New York City, Los Angeles, or London are not exhausted in the same way. However, destination storytelling practitioners often attributed this to the qualities of the cities themselves, rather than (for instance) to the structuring of Western-driven global media hierarchies and differential ascriptions of cultural capital. When asked about what comes next, after Americans cease to find Singapore fresh, new and enticing, participants at destination storytelling events often dismissed the question as still too early to say.

CONCLUSION

This article has analyzed destination storytelling as it is constituted at the intersection of place-/destination branding, tourism promotion, and media development in Singapore. Through our central subject – analyzing recognition of *CRA*’s success by destination storytelling professionals, state tourism boards, and media reportage – we have sought to explicate the discursive construction and multiple, competing viewpoints out of which Singapore’s destination-storytelling success is made. As we have shown, this success is oriented toward an imagined American gaze and set of media-consumption habits, which are also sometimes broadened to stand for more generalized Western or global audiences. Such constructions – of both the terms of success, and the methods of its pursuit – constitute the image of Singapore as an exhaustible resource, as something that appeals to mercurial global (read: usually *American*) audiences by virtue of the fact that it is temporarily new and fresh. Crucially, destination storytelling success does not lie in convincing people to go to Singapore, but rather in making Singapore into a destination: a place that people can imagine themselves going to, and to which they desire to go.

The concern for novelty broadly articulates both the construction of media-development strategies of “Made-with-Singapore” and the *Passion Made Possible* brand: both ideologically narrate temporal trajectories that selectively characterize what exactly is new as part of a process of contextually constructing local and global in ever-shifting ways. We have argued that destination storytelling in

Crazy Rich Asians demonstrates that even seemingly foundational empirical matters and theoretical framings – what counts as a media industry, or what count as local, global, or something in-between – need to be considered not only quantitatively or abstractly, but also ethnographically, in terms of the situated connections, comparisons, and acts of differentiation people make within and across sites of ideological work.

NOTES

¹ Author Kevin Kwan was born in Singapore, yet it was broadly publicized that 1) he currently has a warrant out for his arrest for defaulting on his mandatory national military service obligation; 2) he has twice unsuccessfully applied to renounce his Singaporean citizenship; and 3) he has not lived in Singapore since age 11.

² In migration studies, destination is often a place with respect to which one plans, prepares, and calculates futures (Chu 2010), though it is also the target of forced migration which vary along gendered, racialized, and other lines (Indra 1999/2004). This has a moral dimension as well, which becomes especially clear when traditional ‘source’ locales instead become ‘targets,’ seen in anxieties over Asian tourists in Western locales (Pearce and Wu 2017), or racist-xenophobic responses to the European refugee crisis (Holmes and Castañeda 2016). The moral dimensions also become apparent in studies of guest-host roles in tourism encounters, where local residents play host to members of a mobile, elite global consumption class (Smith 2012).

³ This is aside from the problematic exception of the silent Sikh guards outside a family mansion who terrify Constance Wu’s and Akwafina’s characters onscreen; Henry Golding’s character can also be heard ordering food in Malay (*Bhasa Melayu*) during the hawker center scene shown during the STB case-study presentation.

⁴ Emphasizing this as a voicing project avoids presuming authorial identities in the social worlds beyond various texts. As it is used by linguistic anthropologists, drawing inspiration in turn from literary criticism, *voices* are recognizable social personae that can be enacted linguistically and para-linguistically – a concept distinct from, yet overlapping with, notions of “character” or “individual” (Agha 2005; Silverstein 2003).

⁵ *A Land Imagined* (2020, dir. Siew Hua Yeo), *Shirkers* (2018, dir. Sandi Tan), *Pop Aye* (2017, dir. Kirsten Tan), and *A Yellow Bird* (2016, dir. K. Rajagopal) are notable exceptions, however.

⁶ The fact of Singapore’s longstanding use as both a setting and site of production for South Asian and South Asian diasporic film is rhetorically downplayed in talk by destination storytelling professionals. Despite these industries’ overall greater number of productions and higher box-office grosses, these professionals describe such media as “not mainstream,” standing in overt contrast to the more desirable kind of success represented by Singapore’s appearance in “mainstream” – that is, Hollywood

– films like *Hitman: Agent 47* (2015, dir. Aleksander Bach), *Independence Day: Resurgence* (2016, dir. Roland Emmerich), and *Crazy Rich Asians*.

⁷ This perspective was made (in)famous through media like author William Gibson's 1993 *Wired* article "Disneyland with the Death Penalty," or the general fetishization of Singapore's supposed chewing gum ban.

⁸ Previous STB campaigns focused more narrowly on touristic advertising campaigns and slogans, from *Instant Asia* in the 1970s, offering Singapore as an "exotic... melting pot of Asian cultures" (Chang and Yeoh 1999, 104), to *New Asia – Singapore* in the 1990s, promoting Singapore's "fusion between modernity and dynamism, on the one hand, and a traditional 'Asian soul' on the other" (105), to *Uniquely Singapore* in 2004 and *YourSingapore* from 2012 to 2017, which were similar to one another in that they promoted Singapore as affording endlessly reconfigurable, individually customizable experiences.

⁹ Singaporean Peranakans are a group linked to migration histories and exogenous marriages between migrants from China and residents of the Malay Archipelago (Hardwick 2008).

¹⁰ Promotional media produced to leverage the popularity of *Crazy Rich Asians* was primarily produced in English. Our searches of other STB-produced promotional media found only one Mandarin-language editorial piece making overt references to *Crazy Rich Asians*, which existed as a translation of an English-language piece on hawker centers and other dining establishments featured in the film (Singapore Tourism Board 2020). The piece made no reference to China/Chinese-ness (aside from describing some foods as Hainanese or Cantonese, for instance).

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