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**AMERICAN DREAM IN THE EYE OF ASIAN IMMIGRANTS:
A GENETIC STRUCTURALISM ANALYSIS OF KEVIN KWAN'S
*RICH PEOPLE PROBLEMS***

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Abstract

East, South, and Southeast Asians are often treated inferiorly in the U.S. Aggregately, the COVID-19 pandemic has brought racial issues against them to the surface. Thus, literature on and/or about inferior minorities needs to be written by authors who belong to them. It is because literary works are not created in a vacuum. External factors have a hand in their creation. Kwan's *Rich People Problems* serves as the closure for the *Crazy Rich Asians* trilogy. As a Singaporean-born author who immigrated to the U.S., he is exposed to the American Dream myth. This research then aims to discover how he internalizes it in the novel. Employing Goldmann's Genetic Structuralism, it operates the structuralism approach through the Marxist lens. It utilizes Kwan's social class to determine his worldview manifested in the structure of the novel. While the novel is the source of primary data, his biography collected from relevant sources becomes secondary data. His take on American Dream crystalizes in form of the characterization and plot of the novel. He appends the characters with backstories and improvements. They are embedded with determination, perseverance, hard work, loyalty, and reinvention, revamping their poor beginnings into rich entrepreneurs, experts, employees, and trophy spouses.

Keywords: authorial biography, characterization, plot, social mobility, worldview

Introduction

At the end of 2019, the world saw an epidemic outbreak in Wuhan, China turned into a global pandemic. Its spread affected people around the globe. The most affected ones are the Chinese living in the United States. Scientifically, the novel virus causing the pandemic is named SARS-CoV-2, while the disease it caused was called Covid-19. However, the 45th President of the United States of America, Donald Trump, used "China virus" and "Kung flu" when referring to the virus and its symptoms (Bredemeier, 2020; Lee, 2020).

His rhetoric stigmatizes the Chinese, in particular, and Asian ethnicity, in general, as the carriers of the virus. It provoked an aggressive 'Asian Hate' reaction in many states. An 89-year-old Chinese woman in New York City, which is famous as a cosmopolitan city (Budiman & Guiz, 2021), was slapped and burned by two harassers. Meanwhile, in Los Angeles, California, the state with the most ethnically

Asian population (Morfin, 2019), an 84-year-old Thai immigrant, died after being violently pushed to the ground during a morning walk. Another incident involved the only member of parliament of Asian descent in the Kansas legislature who was physically threatened for carrying the coronavirus (Cabral, 2021).

Despite both immigrating from their respective continent, Asian Americans are seen as 'the other' by White Americans. For example, the Chinese have long become the targets of systemic discrimination. The Chinese Exclusion Act, passed in 1882, barred Chinese people from entering the U.S. This federal law greenlighted racism toward the Chinese and other Asian ethnicities (Perry, 2014, p. 243).

Racist prejudice gets inevitable, which in turn creates social inequality and favoritism against Asian immigrants. For instance, the success of European Americans from rags-to-riches is dubbed the 'American Dream'. Meanwhile, the same story achieved by East, South, and Southeast Asian immigrants is pinned as a 'model minority' (Okimoto, 2014, p. 198). The term triggers tension and pits Asian immigrants against other racial minorities, such as African Americans and Latin Americans.

Besides, East, South, and Southeast Asian immigrants are both lacking representation and misrepresented in media, literature, and arts with 'yellow face' and 'yellow peril' stereotypes (London, 2014, p. 177; Yeats, 2014, p. 268). This depiction undermines their position politically and culturally. It is thus imperative for East, South, and Southeast Asian stories to be told based on their own experiences and perspectives.

Palpably, Asian Americans are a crucial part of American history. However, the number of literary works written by Asian-American authors as compulsory reading at schools is still scant (Lew, 2014). Their stories deserve to be categorized as canonical literature in the American anthology. As cultural artifacts, their works are as important as the Puritan literature or the slave narratives.

It is only in the last decade that the works of Asian-American authors started getting recognition. Viet Thanh Nguyen's *The Sympathizer* won the Pulitzer in 2016. Three years later, Susan Choi's *Trust Exercise* won the National Book Award (Yu, 2020). Not only praised by critics but their works are also loved by readers, placing them on the 'Best Seller' lists.

A best-selling novel written by an Asian-American author is even adapted into a movie. It is Kevin Kwan's *Crazy Rich Asians*. Published in 2013, the novel was then followed by *China Rich Girlfriend* in 2015 and *Rich People Problems* in 2017 (Ho, 2018). The trilogy revolves around the Young family with Shang Su Yi as the matriarch.

Continuing the first two novels, the fate of the characters in the novel is settled in the third one. One characterization to easily see how far they have developed along the plot is regarding wealth. There seems to be an arc drawn in those characters as the story unfolds. This development is both interesting and important to analyze, especially concerning the characterization and plot, as intrinsic elements, with the author's background, as an extrinsic element.

Before this article, there are three studies on *Rich People Problems*. Dwijayanti, Nababan, and Wiratno (2021) studied assertive speech that represents *Bald on Record* politeness strategies. Meanwhile, Purnama and Ningsih (2021) discuss family conflicts between characters using a sociological approach and social action theory. In addition, Adhitya and Wulandari (2021) analyze the

representation of Indonesia both as a nation and a state in the trilogy. The novelty of the article lies in its focus: analyzing Kwan's worldview reflected in the structure of the novel. To achieve this objective, it employs the theory of Genetic Structuralism.

Lucien Goldmann's genetic structuralism

Genetic Structuralism is coined by Lucien Goldmann. According to Faruk (in Helaluddin, 2019, p. 4), the theory merges structuralism and Marxism. Structuralism considers literature as an autonomous structure consisting of elements that support each other systematically in creating meaning. This approach is contradicted by Marxism which approaches literature through historical materialism, which structuralism ignores. To understand literature, genetic structuralism makes a linkage between the intrinsic element as a coherent entity to its author as the extrinsic structure (Swingewood & Laurensen in Hafshah, 2016, p. 17).

The theory uses six concepts: 'human facts', 'collective subject', 'worldview', 'structuration', 'whole-part', and 'comprehension-explanation' (Faruk in Nurhasanah, 2015, p. 138). On an ontological basis, Ratna (in Shinta, 2021, p. 3916) categorizes literature as a product of human facts that are social. Every element that structures literature has a meaning deriving from an author's goal. This goal is determined by the historical, social, and cultural situation of the society in which the author lives.

Authors are not secluded, independent individuals. They are a part of society. They represent their social group as collective subjects (Faruk 2013, p. 63). Goldmann (in Faruk, 1999, p. 15) specifies the term as a social class in a Marxist sense because it has been proven in history as a group that has created a complete and comprehensive view of life. It has also influenced the historical development of mankind.

In creating their work, authors act as a trans-individual subject who transcends their capabilities as a member of society by raising the issue of their social class (Goldmann in Fernando, Mulawarman, & Rokhmansyah, 2018, p. 73). To comprehend a literary work thus needs to include its author. Otherwise, comprehension will be absent of the characteristics of ideas and beliefs held by the social class. While in fact, these characteristics construct their collective worldview.

Worldview is the class consciousness that unites individuals into a class that has a collective identity (Goldman in Jayanti & Mustofa, 2020, p. 25). According to Goldmann (in Faruk, 1999b, p. 33), literature, however, is not the reflection of a real and existing collective consciousness. Instead, it is the culmination of a high level of coherence from tendencies specific to certain groups. It is a consciousness that must be understood as a dynamic reality directed to a certain form of balance.

As class consciousness, worldview then unites individuals with the same historical background into a class that has a collective identity. It also distinguishes one social class from another (Ridha, 2013, p. 3). It is because worldview forms the structure of the relationship among social classes with the era and society in which these sociocultural situations arise (Goldman in Jayanti & Mustofa, 2020, p. 25). Since worldview is abstract, one of the ways to see its concrete form is by way of literature.

Goldmann (in Suciati, 2013, p. 69) believes that there is a homology between the structure of literature and the structure of the society in which it is created because both structures are the result of the same structuration. Authors are not passive individuals whose existence follows the structure that grows in society. On the other hand, they play an active and creative role in self-actualizing their feeling and thinking. Because the quintessence of literature is imaginative, comprehending literary works as an entity that reflects reality is disputable. The similarity of events and problems in the literary world with reality in the real world lies in the structure (Kurniawan, 2012, p. 109). It is this structural homology that in genetic structuralism is mediated by the author's worldview. The homology can be illustrated in the following figure.

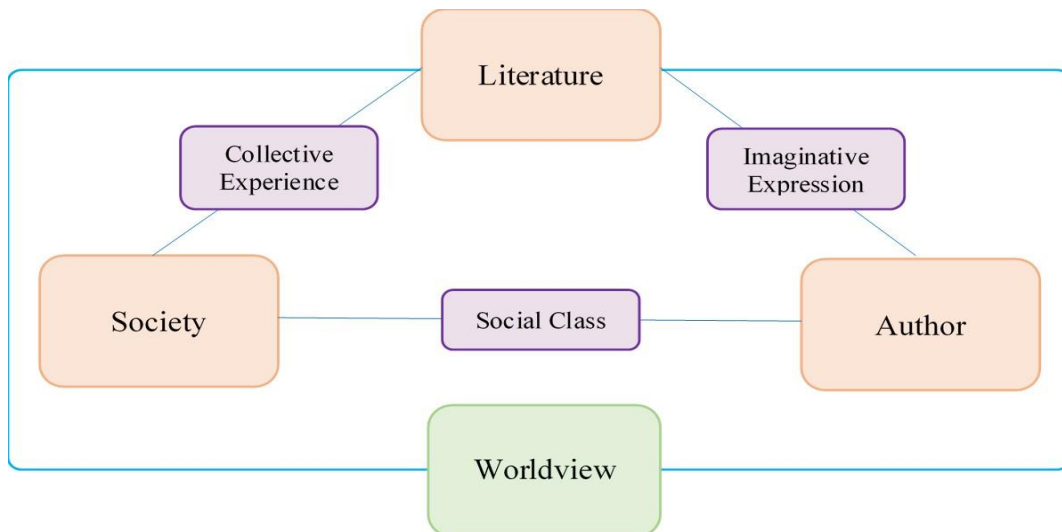


Figure 1. The homology of genetic structuralism

From those four concepts, Goldmann (in Kurniawan, 2012, p. 114-5) then developed a dialectical analysis with two complementary concepts: 'whole-part' and 'comprehension-explanation'. The 'whole' as the totality of a literary structure is employed to understand its 'parts'. On the other hand, they are also needed to be interpreted to achieve the 'whole' meaning. This dialectical concept does not only stop at the 'part' and the 'whole' of literature but also moves to the structure of society. At this stage, the 'comprehension-explanation' is used. While 'comprehension' is the attempt to comprehend the 'part', 'explanation' is the attempt to get the meaning of the 'part' by placing it in a larger context of the 'whole'. which refers to the integration of the structure of the literature with the social structure of society (Goldmann in Yulianto et al., 2017, p. 715-6).

Intrinsic Elements

In the early stages of analysis, information about the author is utilized as a conceptual hypothesis to understand the coherence of the literary structure and the societal structure. It is thus necessary to build a worldview model to hypothesize the 'whole' structure of literature through intensive reading on the 'part' of a work, which is the intrinsic elements. According to James (in Bennett & Royce, 2004, p. 60), the intrinsic elements that define each other are character and plot.

Characters are individuals who both live in and give life to literary works (Wicaksono in Harun & Biduri, 2019, p. 12). They are essential because they are the objects of identification for the readers to relate to and connect with. Authors describe their characters physically, mentally, intellectually, morally, and historically. The characterization can also develop as the plot of the story unfolds (Griffith in Larasati 2012, p. 19).

The plot is the arrangement of the sequential events in the story to trigger certain emotional and artistic effects. Theoretically, the stages of a complete plot begin with an exposition, followed by rising actions, to then reach the climax, before turning to fall actions and ending with a resolution. However, plotting can be arranged in a linear, nonlinear, parallel, circular, and interactive sequence (Layfield, 2022).

Based on their relation to the plot, characters are divided into main characters, who are at the center of the story that moves the plot, and supporting characters, who appear concerning the main character (Nurgiyantoro, 2018, p. 259). Moreover, characterization and plotting influence each other. Because one event is caused and/or causes another event to occur, the causality of the plot drives the development of the character. Simultaneously, the characterizations also contribute to the flow of the story (Kurnianto, Haryono, & Kurniawan, 2019, p. 33).

Extrinsic elements

Genetic structuralism combines an objective study of the intrinsic elements with a historical study of its genetic determinants, that is the author. Hence, it is crucial to know the author's biography to identify the social class. *Rich People Problems* is written by Kevin Kwan, who was born in Singapore in 1974. He was born into a wealthy Chinese family.

Kwan's great-grandfather, Oh Sian Guan, was a director of the Overseas-Chinese Banking Corporation (OCBC). His paternal grandfather, Dr. Arthur Kwan Pah Chien, was an ophthalmologist who graduated from Edinburgh University and was knighted by Queen Elizabeth II. His maternal grandfather, Rev. Paul Hang Sing Hon, was the founder of Hinghwa Methodist Church. Meanwhile, his father is an engineer, and his mother is a pianist (Lundquist, 2017).

While living in Singapore, Kwan attended the Anglo-Chinese School. As his family emigrated to Texas, U.S., he enrolled at Clear Lake High School. He earned his B.A. in Media Studies from the University of Houston-Clear Lake and B.F.A. in Photography from Parsons School of Design (Christensen, 2013).

While visiting Asia to meet relatives, he realized Asians still view the world conservatively. This contestation shows the difference between Asians living in their homelands and those who migrated abroad. Living nearly four decades in the U.S. must have exposed Kwan to the American way of thinking. The American Dream myth, which emphasizes the opportunity for the poor to be rich, appears to have colored his works (Adhitya, 2015, p. 25-7).

Method

A descriptive, qualitative method was employed in this article. This method analyzes literary works without experimental manipulation (Ahmadi & Kartiwi 2020, p. 157). Focusing on empirical evidence, the research data are language features, in form of words, phrases, sentences, and paragraphs. Based on the source,

the data were divided into primary and secondary data. The primary data was the intrinsic elements taken from Kwan's *Rich People Problems* published by Doubleday in 2017 and the extrinsic elements in the author's biography. Meanwhile, the secondary data were taken from referential books, journal articles, and other publications on the theory of genetic structuralism and the sociocultural facts about Asian immigrants in the U.S.

The research instruments were the researchers themselves. Researchers played a paramount role in all of the stages, from identifying the problems to concluding (Sugiyono, 2017, p. 102). The data were collected by note-taking technique. The novel is read carefully and repeatedly.

The collected data were then analyzed using content analysis. It was a systematic technique to parse the details of the content of a literary work in interpreting its meaning (Darmasetiadi, 2021, p. 121). Content analysis was applied objectively to the intrinsic elements so that the structure of the work could be revealed. The structure was interrelated with the extrinsic elements, which were approached historically, to formulate a structural homology between the two literary elements. From this in-depth explanation of the researcher's interpretation, the worldview manifested in the novel can be revealed.

To ensure the validity of this article, four tests were used, namely credibility, transferability, dependability, and conformability. For the data to be credible, the researchers ensured that the data collected were factually present in the novel. The transferability was high because the findings could prevail in other sociocultural contexts or situations. Because this research had a clear analytical construct, dependability could be fulfilled because other researchers would be able to follow the stages in this article for their future research. Meanwhile, conformability was achieved as this article was disseminated at an academic conference and published in an academic journal. It thus passed the editing and peer-review process strengthening the validity of this article (Mekarisce, 2020, p. 147-51).

Findings and Discussion

The main goal of employing genetic structuralism is to discover the author's worldview manifested in their work. The homologous relation between imaginative expressions in literature and real-life experience in society thus serves as the emphasis of analysis. The two entities are bridged by the author, who belongs to a certain social group. Every social group has a collective consciousness rooted that can influence the way people in it think and behave (Goldman, 1977, p. 17).

Rich People Problems is written by Kwan, who, despite being born in Singapore to a wealthy Chinese family, spends his adolescence in the U.S. Both countries have fundamental differences in various aspects of life, most notably their racial demography and economic system. In Singapore, Chinese ethnicity is the majority. On the other hand, the Chinese and other Asian ethnicities are the minority in the U.S. Besides, Singapore is a state-capitalist country with a Shared Values philosophy. It puts communitarianism over individualism. Meanwhile, the U.S. is a capitalist country with egalitarianism. The belief places all Americans, regardless of their background, in an equal position. It then allows them to have the same opportunity in pursuing their dream and succeeding in life as long as they have determination (Wyman, 2015, p. 2).

It can be hypothesized that as an Asian immigrant living in the U.S. Kwan is profoundly exposed to the American Dream myth. Being in a different society with a distinct perspective on seeing the world during those formative years can give a lasting effect. How it affects him can be felt within the characterization and plot. As Goldman (1980, pp. 11-12) states, there is a correlation between the author and the elements in the work they create.

Throughout the trilogy, Kwan has created the main characters of Chinese ethnicity imbued with the American Dream characteristics. There are Rachel Chu, Kerry Chu, Goh Wye Mun, and Sophie Khoo in the first novel (Adhitya, 2015, p. 73). He continues this characterization in the second installment. It can be seen in both the recurring and newly-introduced characters, such as Michael Teo and Bao Gaoling, respectively (Adhitya & Kurnia, 2017, p. 25).

In the third one, Kwan extensively applies the American Dream arc to the supporting characters as well. Those characters, who are merely mentioned in passing in the first two novels, are given more storylines. By using flashbacks, he provides background stories ahead of them linked up with the main characters. They subsequently have more involvement and contribution to the plot. As the story is ending for good, he also elaborates on their destiny. The Wu family are the characters that can be scrutinized to evince the American Dream materialization.

Charlie Wu is Su Yi's future grandson-in-law, whom her granddaughter, Astrid Leong, marries at the end of the novel. However, her family disapproves of their relationship because their beginning is necessitous "Wu Hao Lian's father used to sell soy sauce on a bicycle!" (Kwan, 2017, p. 39). Meanwhile, his wife's

... entire childhood was spent at the Endau concentration camp in Malaysia. Her family was forced to grow all their own food, and they almost starved to death. I'm sure that's why my mother is the way she is now. She makes her cook save money by buying the discounted, three-day-old bread from the supermarket ... (Kwan, 2017, p. 381)

Charlie's father, Wu Hao Lian, "first made his fortune in the early 1980s" (Kwan, 2017, p. 202), "took his tech company public" (Kwan, 2013, p. 323), and at that point, the Wu Microsystems has been "built over the last thirty years" (Kwan, 2015, p. 161). Therefore, "the Hong Kong Wus weren't deemed worthy enough by those snooty Singaporeans!" (Kwan, 2017, p. 38) because they are perceived as the New Money.

The path Kwan specifies for Hao Lian as a self-made man is through entrepreneurship. American Dream urges entrepreneurial ideas. Combined with the capitalist economy, those ideas are facilitated to grow as real businesses. When his son takes over, "Charlie has created one of the most admired companies in the world" that every "new phone—the screen, the casing, I'm sure at least half the components are manufactured by Wu Microsystems!" (Kwan, 2017, p. 39). For his success in "run Asia's biggest tech company!" (Kwan, 2017, p. 13), the media dubbed him the "Hong Kong tech tycoon" (Kwan, 2017, p. 155), "tech billionaire" (Kwan, 2017, p. 37) "tech titan" (Kwan, 2017, p. 130).

Kwan, as an immigrant himself, experiences firsthand leaving home in hope of a new and better life. He understands that both moving to a foreign country and starting a business involve taking risks. According to the U.S. Small Business

Administration (Kosten, 2018), this risk-taker quality prepares them for entrepreneurial challenges. In 2019, “44.6 percent, or 223 companies, in the Fortune 500 were founded by immigrants or their children ... brought in \$6.1 trillion in revenue” (New American Economy, 2022).

Moreover, American Dream is rooted in the Protestant faith. In his 1630 sermon, Winthrop dictates, “when there is no other means whereby our Christian brother may be relieved in his distress, we must help him beyond our ability” (Heimert & Delbanco, 2009, p. 84). This Calvinist work ethic enables capitalism, where small businesses create entrepreneurs who then become employers opening job vacancies for others. In addition, Kwan makes being an employee an equivalent for the characters to attain American Dream. It is evident in Dr. Malcolm Cheng.

Married to Alexandra, Malcolm is Su Yi’s son-in-law. One would have thought that he, being the husband to the youngest daughter of the most established family in Singapore, must come from a similar upbringing. In contrast, he is defined to be “a complete nobody from Hong Kong”, who, unlike “an Aakara or a Leong”, was not born “with a respectable surname” (Kwan, 2017, p. 164). Malcolm and Alexandra live in “a very basic three-bedroom flat”, where their youngest son, “Alistair had to share a bedroom with his brother until he went to college” (Kwan, 2013, p. 307), and “the cramped toilet” has “no lock” (Kwan, 2013, p. 64).

Malcolm’s characterization embodies perseverance. It then enables his humble circumstance to be made improved.

Alix ... said through gritted teeth, “I’m glad I married your father. He may not have inherited an empire or been born a prince, but for me, he is far more impressive. He built himself up from nothing to become one of the world’s leading cardiologists, and his hard work has sent you to the best schools and given us a lovely home.” (Kwan, 2017, p. 164-5)

His life advancement allows him to financially provide for his family with “a higher standard of living” (Wolak & Peterson, 2020, p. 968). It also grants him a great deal of reverence from his peers and relatives.

Malcolm Cheng was one of Asia’s most respected heart surgeons and had only recently retired as the chief of the Cardiology Centre at Hong Kong Sanatorium. Professor Oon was one of his protégés, and he was keeping close tabs on Su Yi’s condition. (Kwan, 2017, p. 161)

Kwan uses education as a catalyst for Malcolm’s American Dream. The majority of Americans concur that higher educations are essential to equip them with the necessary knowledge and skill to improve their lives (Lazerson, 2007, p. 1-3). While Malcolm’s educational achievements earn him a white-collar profession, Kwan also applies a similar success story to blue-collar workers. It can be exemplified by the character of Lee Ah Ling.

Ah Ling is one of Su Yi’s many servants. Although she comes from an impecunious family in Mainland China, she is described with the American Dream trait. It is evident as she is determined to overcome hardship in her life.

She had always dreamed of seeing the world beyond her village, and she didn't care if it meant leaving her family. She was leaving a difficult home—a father who died when she was twelve and a mother who seemed to have resented her since the day she was born. (Kwan, 2017, p. 57)

Kwan assigns her purpose as the drive to leave “her tiny village on the outskirts of Ying Tak when she was just sixteen, taking a boat from Canton to an island far away in the Nanyang, the Southern Seas” (Kwan, 2017, p. 57). Landed in Singapore, she is “brokered to work for a family called the Tays” which serves as “a training ground” for “some sort of unspecified test” (Kwan, 2017, p. 58) before being sent to work for the Youngs at Tyersall Park.

Furthermore, Ah Ling is portrayed as a hard worker. As a result, her position keeps increasing.

Over the next sixty-three years, she rose from being one of twelve junior maids to become one of the Young family's most trusted nannies—having helped raise Su Yi's youngest children, Victoria and Alix, and then in the next generation, Nick. Now she was the head housekeeper, overseeing a staff that at its peak reached fifty-eight but for the past decade had remained at thirty-two. (Kwan, 2017, p. 59)

Her hard work pays off because when Su Yi passed away, her name is included in her will. It reads, “\$3,000,000 to my housekeeper LEE Ah Ling, who has served my family with excellence and devotion since she was a teenager” (Kwan, 2017, p. 258). The inheritance she receives changes the course of her life.

“I think I will go back to China, for a year at least. I want to build a house in my old village, and spend a little time with my family. My brothers are getting older, I have so many new grandnephews and grandnieces who I have never met. Now I can finally be the rich old auntie who spoils them.” (Kwan, 2017, p. 118)

Kwan rationalizes the ‘from-zero-to-hero’ arc by highlighting Ah Ling's “work ethic” sustaining her “to last long” (Kwan, 2017, p. 61) working for Su Yi. Reciprocally, American Dream stresses how hard work can be the principal in acquiring future rewards (Porter, 2010, p. 535). Her life progress is synonymous with the rags-to-riches myth. From her destitute origin, she fled to be a servant to then winds up as a millionaire in her old days.

Nevertheless, the journey of social mobility does not necessarily involve menial work. A character named Kitty Pong arrives at her opulent destination in a glamorous fashion, even though her life begins from an arduous background.

To think that Pong Li Li, the daughter of sanitation workers in Qinghai, had achieved such great heights at the relatively young age of thirty-four (although she told everyone she was thirty). Not that any of this had been easy—she had worked nonstop her entire life to get to this place.

Her mother had come from an educated middle-class family, but she had been banished with her family to the countryside during Mao's Great Leap Forward campaign. (Kwan, 2017, p. 30)

Similar to what he does to Ah Ling, Kwan also prescribes Kitty escaping her birth land in Mainland China as the ultimate way of escaping poverty. She originally sets her mind on education as a vehicle of escape. However, her educational voyage is a rough sail.

But she had instilled in Kitty that getting an education was the only way out. All through her youth, Kitty studied extra hard to always be the top in her class, top in her school, top in her state exams, only to see her one chance at a higher education get snatched away when some boy with all the right connections was awarded the only slot to university in their entire district—the slot that was rightfully meant to be hers. (Kwan, 2017, p. 30)

Kwan initially characterizes Kitty as “the Hong Kong starlet” (Kwan, 2013, p. 290), and “a soap-opera star who runs around in skimpy clothes” (Kwan, 2013, p. 335) “that clung to her body like sausage casing” “with her engorged nipples clearly showing through” (Kwan, 2013, p. 268). It is only in the last installment that another layer of her characterization is peeled. He provides flashbacks that intellectualize her character.

He also enacts societal realities as an obstacle to Kitty. China is a Communist country with a Confucian and patriarchal society (Gilmartin, 1993, p. 240). This condition becomes adversity for women to thrive in life. She understands that she will not succeed via the traditional path. She pivots to exploiting her beauty and femininity. She gets involved with Su Yi through her grandson, Alistair. She then dumps him for a “billionaire” (Kwan, 2015, p. 24), Bernard Tai, whom she later divorces to marry “one of China's premier industrialists” (Kwan, 2017, p. 300).

But Kitty didn't give up, she kept on fighting, moving first to Shenzhen to work at a KTV bar where she had to do unspeakable things, and then to Hong Kong, landing a bit part in a local soap opera, transforming it into a recurring role after becoming the director's mistress, dating a series of rather inconsequential men until she met Alistair Cheng, that cute, clueless boy who was much too sweet for his own good, going with him to the Khoo wedding and meeting Bernard Tai, running off to Vegas with Bernard to get married, meeting Jack Bing at Bernard's father's funeral, divorcing Bernard, and finally, at long last, marrying Jack, a man who was truly worthy of all her efforts. (Kwan, 2017, p. 30)

As time goes on, American Dream is not only achievable through education, entrepreneurship, and executive employment. Since Hollywood Golden Age, being an actor is considered an immediate shortcut to prosperity. Aspiring actresses traveled to Los Angeles, working as waitresses, hoping to catch their big break as movie stars (Banerjee, 2022; Kubincanek, 2017). Kwan adopts this fairytale for Kitty's characterization.

Tantamount to the Hollywood actors leaving their past behind, Kwan also contrives Kitty to reinvent her persona. Starting her acting endeavors in Hong Kong, she claims to have come from “a good Taiwanese family”, changing her name, look, and “distinctive northern China accent” (Kwan, 2013, p. 37-38) with “the fake accent and fake breasts and fake everything” (Kwan, 2013, p. 202). Notwithstanding, Kwan utilizes Kitty being “one of Asia’s fastest-rising stars” (Kwan, 2013, p. 39) as a stepping stone for her to climb the social ladders. The efficacious course for her reaching a life full of fortune is by marrying up.

Kitty knew that all this royal treatment was because she had arrived in Paris this time as MRS. JACK BING. She wasn’t just the wife of some random billionaire anymore, she was the new wife of China’s second-richest man, one of the ten richest men in the world....
And now that she had provided him with his first son (Harvard Bing, born in 2013), she could do anything she damn well pleased. (Kwan, 2017, p. 29-30)

One of the aftermaths of patriarchy is gender inequality. Having less opportunity for higher education and equal employment leaves hypergamy as the only route for women to grasp the American Dream (Steichen, 1983, p. 92; Cashdan, 1996, p. 135). With her determination to flee the ill fortune in perpetuity and elevate her children into an upper stratum, Kitty marries someone of a higher socioeconomic class twice.

Furthermore, it is not only those of Chinese ethnicity whose hard work is made to fruition. Supporting characters of other Asian ethnicities are also treated with American Dream characteristics. Setting the majority of the story to take place in Singapore, Kwan also concocts Su Yi’s employees working at the “friggin’ palace” (Kwan, 2013, p.), Tyersall Park, to have come from neighboring countries. Su Yi’s attendants can be utilized as an instance.

Who were those two women in matching silk dresses standing like statues behind her?” Rachel asked.
“Oh, those are her lady’s maids.”
“Excuse me?”
“Her lady’s maids. They never leave her side.”
“Like ladies-in-waiting? They look so elegant.”
“Yes, they’re from Thailand, and they were trained to serve in the royal court.”
“Is this a common thing in Singapore? Importing royal maids from Thailand?” Rachel asked incredulously.
“I don’t believe so. This service was a special lifetime gift to my grandmother.”
“A gift? From whom?”
“The King of Thailand. Though it was the last one, not Bhumibol the current king. Or was it the one before that? Anyway, he was apparently a great friend of my grandmother’s. He decreed that she must only be waited on by court-trained ladies. So there has been a constant rotation ever since my grandmother was a young woman.” (Kwan, 2013, p. 138)

Lady’s maid is a position for lower-class women whose responsibility is related to their female employer’s appearance. They usually start as a housemaid

(Chaubel, 2017, p. 17). Two Su Yi's lady's maids previously had training in the Thai royal court since they were children. Being a gift from The King of Thailand, they are "trailing behind her" (Kwan, 2017, p. 80) every time and everywhere, including beside her deathbed with an "oxygen tank and several other medical devices" are "dutifully being guided" (Kwan, 2017, p. 200).

Several doctors and nurses huddled over a bank of computer screens, analyzing every blip in their VVIP patient's vital signs, while Su Yi's Thai lady's maids hovered just by the doorway, ready to spring into action should their mistress bat an eyelash. The minute they saw Prince Taksin approach, they dropped to the floor, prostrating themselves. (Kwan, 2017, p. 88)

Kwan awards their devotion in form of inheritance both lady's maids receive upon Su Yi's passing.

\$1,000,000 to each of my dear lady's maids Madri VISUDHAROMN and Patravadee VAROPRAKORN along with the antique Peranakan gold-and-diamond bracelets labeled for them in the Tyersall Park vault. (Kwan, 2017, p. 258)

In the first two installments, they were merely addressed as "Su Yi's lady's maids" (Kwan, 2015, p.). Their names are revealed for the first time in Su Yi's will. Lady's maids customarily work for a house until they are retired. When the lady of the house passes away, they will customarily work for the daughter of the house (Chaubel, 2017, p. 25). Therefore, Kwan mentioning them by name can be construed as a sign of the American Dream toward freedom. With them being millionaires, they no longer have to work in service for the rest of their lives. Akin ending befalls upon Su Yi's Captain Vikram Ghale as well.

Vikram is a "Nepali" (Kwan, 2017, p. 119) Gurkha, "the deadliest soldiers in the world" (Kwan, 2013, p. 122) native to the Indian Subcontinent. He has been guarding Tyersall Park since he was young.

In all his years of working for the Young family as the head of security, ... interviewed and hired him for the job thirty-two years ago ... (Kwan, 2017, p. 118)

During the turbulent years before and after independence, Gurkha Contingent was formed under the Singapore Police Force. Displaying skill and bravery, Gurkhas are renowned as disciplined and dedicated troops (Parker, 2005, p. 390). Kwan endows comparable reputes for Vikram, as he is greatly loyal to Su Yi, even until her final days.

Vikram felt a lump in his throat, but he continued to speak. "Ah Ling, I swore an oath—a Gurkha's oath—to protect and serve Mrs. Young with my life. I feel like I would be betraying her if I didn't see that her wishes are followed. ... "Well, it's my duty to make sure that happens. Even if I lose my job." (Kwan, 2017, p. 170)

At her funeral, Vikram is assigned as “the lead pallbearer” of “Su Yi’s casket” (Kwan, 2017, p. 243). His undying loyalty is then rewarded with an inheritance. Moreover, he is the only Gurkha whose name is listed in the will.

\$500,000 to my head of security Captain Vikram GHALE, who has diligently protected me since 1983. I further bequeath to him the Type 14 Nambu pistol given to me by Count Hisaichi Terauchi preceding his departure from Singapore in 1944.

(Eleanor: *Wah, so generous! I wonder if Old Lady knew that he made a fortune with his day trading?*) (Kwan, 2017, p. 258)

Once Gurkhas, like other soldiers, retire, they largely rely on their pension. To make matters worse, it is widely known that Gurkhas’ pension is smaller than national troops (Parker, 2005, p. 334). However, as he inherits a sum of Su Yi’s money and prized possessions, finance will not be an issue in his retirement days. Besides, he invests his salary cleverly, accumulating an extensive stock-market portfolio.

“Vikram, how much money have you made on my stock tips over the years? Sino Land, Keppel Corp, Silverlake Axis. Hnh! I swear to God I am never going to give you a single tip again. I made you a rich man, and this is how you repay us? *Mangkali kow sai!*” (Kwan, 2017, p. 119)

Kwan ascribes Vikram’s discipline and dedication as an upward-mobility ticket. In his line of work, those able to live above their means are typically corrupt (Shinkman, 2022). Therefore, molding an honest soldier who devotes his life to his employer for success designates his intent of characterizing and plotting his character to seize the American Dream.

Conclusion

Literature is not crystalized in a vacuum. Extrinsic factors contribute to how its intrinsic elements are created. Kwan internalizes American Dream in form of characterization and plot in his trilogy. In *Crazy Rich Asians* and *China Rich Girlfriend*, he focuses on the acquisition of the American Dream by Chinese immigrants pushing forward the ‘model minority’ stereotype. In *Rich People Problems*, he also agglutinates the myth to the supporting characters, despite their South and Southeast Asian origins. By appending them with backstories and life progresses, they develop from static and flat into round characters. Regardless of where they reside, he equally conduces those characters opportunities in improving their socioeconomic condition. He embeds them with determination, perseverance, hard work, loyalty, and reinvention to revamp their humble backgrounds into self-made entrepreneurs, highly-educated professionals, dependable employees, and trophy spouses. His take thereupon represents the Asian immigrant perspective on American Dream.

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