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Crazy Rich Asians: Bringing Americans to Singapore

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The Singapore Tourism Board hit jackpot with the film, but is Hollywood's depiction of the island accurate?

The most searched term on Google in the U.S. one day before the Trump-Kim Summit on June 12, 2018 was: "Where is Singapore?" Little did anyone know that two months later, those online queries would take on a whole different angle with the release of Crazy Rich Asians, a Hollywood movie set in Singapore based on a novel written by American-based Singaporean author Kevin Kwan.

The movie, which became one of the top-grossing romantic comedies of all-time, not only became an invaluable tourism marketing vehicle for the island state, it became one in a market where Singapore was not a particularly popular destination: North America.

"Singapore is relatively well known in Asia," reflects **Lionel Yeo**, former CEO of the Singapore Tourism Board (STB). "Our investment in the hosting of the Singapore Grand Prix over the past decade had exposed a lot of Europeans to the modern metropolis that Singapore has become and our world-beating lifestyle offerings, as the F1 fan base is strong in the UK and key European markets like Germany.

"However, it is still challenging to reach major segments of the North American markets, outside of the gateway cities on the eastern and western coasts."

COMING FROM AMERICA, WELCOME TO SINGAPORE!

According to the STB, Singapore was the 10th most popular Asian destination for Americans from 2011 to 2014 with the top five being China, India, Japan, the Philippines and Hong Kong. So when the producers of Crazy Rich Asians approached the STB for access to filming locations on the island in 2017, Yeo was all for it.

"STB assessed that it was worthwhile to facilitate their shooting in Singapore as this film had the backing of a major Hollywood studio (Warner Brothers), which provided some assurance that the quality of the film would be high," recounts Yeo, who left STB shortly before the film's release in August 2018. The Singapore Film Commission (SFC), part of the statutory board Info-communications Media Development Authority (IMDA), provided financial support via grants which promote "productions with original intellectual property that highlighted Singapore talent in credited roles and infused data and/or digital technologies into content for distribution on new and/or digital platforms."

While prominent Singaporean landmarks such Marina Bay Sands, CHIJMES, and Newton Hawker Centre were featured in the film, the exposure afforded Singaporean actors could not be overstated. Local thespians Tan Kheng Hwa, Pierre Png, and Fiona Xie among others all made appearances, with the latter slated to play a major role in the sequel China Rich Girlfriend. **Lynette Pang**, Assistant Chief Executive (marketing group) of STB:

"Due to the large Singaporean cast and crew involved in the production, STB is also focusing our marketing message around our home-grown talents and personalities as they are a key anchor of our 'Passion Made Possible' brand. The film shines a spotlight on them, and how they are making their passions possible on a global stage.

As the movie was set in Singapore and showcased Singapore's culture, food and attractions, it provided a natural conversation opening about the real Singapore and piqued interest in visiting the country. While it might not have been possible to immediately quantify returns from the movie, STB does expect the exposure to help bolster greater global awareness of our destination, and this could potentially attract more visitors over time."

BOUQUETS...AND BRICKBATS

Early numbers appear to justify that optimism. 2018 saw a 14 percent year-on-year increase in American visitor arrivals to Singapore, the largest increase amongst the top fifteen visitor arrival markets. According to STB, organic searches on Google about Singapore by Americans surged by more than three times during the movie's release in August 2018. There was also a 110 percent increase in searches for Singapore on Orbitz, a travel fare aggregator and meta-search engine website.

The portrayal of Singaporean society, however, riled some natives. The near-absence of non-Chinese characters and the excesses of the 'crazy rich' lifestyles featured in the movie were criticised for being unrepresentative of Singapore. Others were disappointed that although the film was touted as a milestone achievement in Hollywood for Asian representation, Singapore's racial diversity was not accurately represented. A BBC article written by a Singaporean author commented, 'Crazy Rich Asians, in its eagerness to further its representation goals, is misrepresenting Singapore and using it as a mere 'backdrop' for Asian-American fantasies'.

But with the movie launching a global franchise that has thrusting Singapore into the market it has long tried – and failed – to penetrate, has STB's vision of city branding created resonance or dissonance with the local audience? Does it matter so long as visitor numbers and spending continue to climb?

This is an adapted version of the SMU Case, "[Singapore's 'Crazy Rich Asians' Experience of City Branding](https://cmp.smu.edu.sg/case/4006)", part of the SMU case collection. To see the full case, please click on the following link: <https://cmp.smu.edu.sg/case/4006>

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