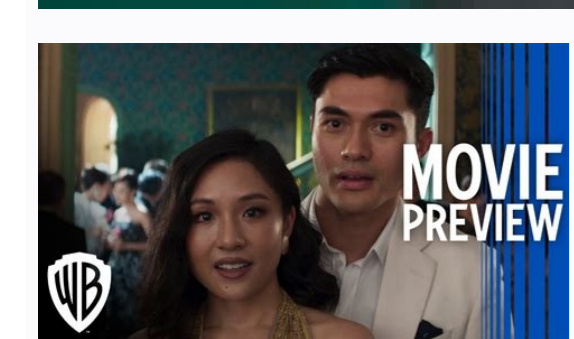
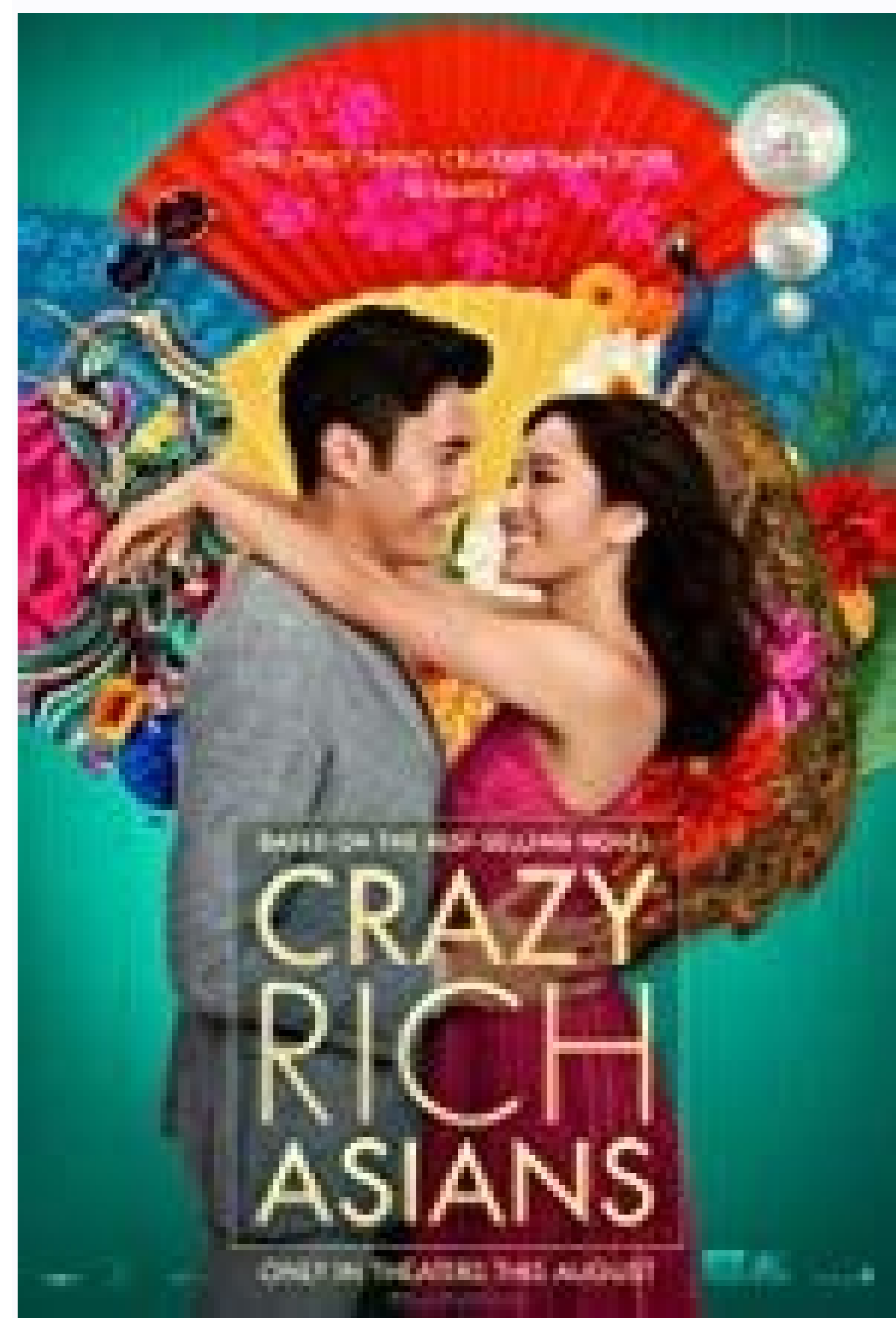
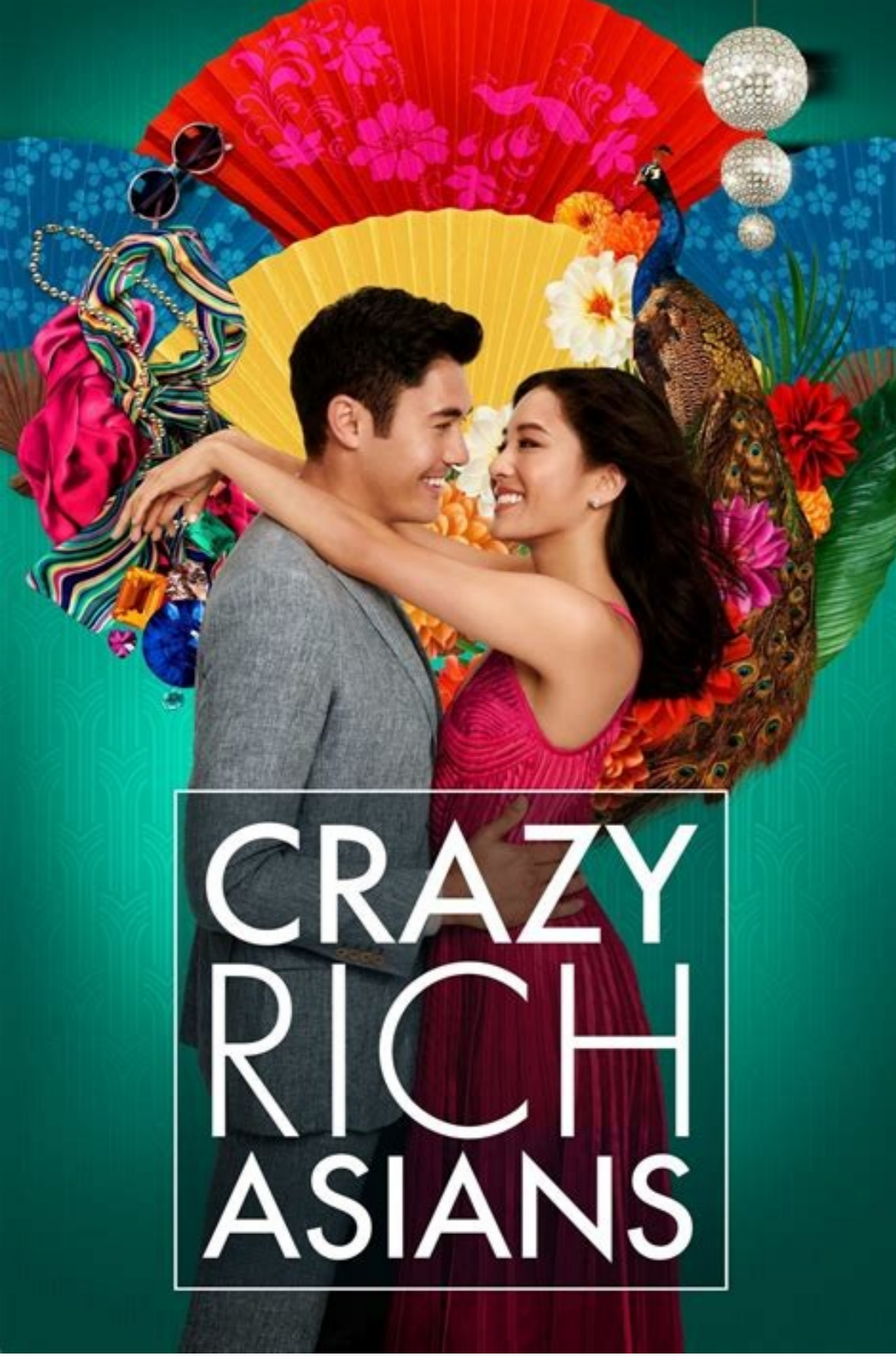


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Long before I saw Crazy Rich Asians last weekend, when it opened in Taiwan, I was reading everything I could about it. I read the novel first; not only did it make for fun summer-travel entertainment, it was a fascinating catalog of the near-infinite types of crazy rich Asians: old money, new money, Singaporean, Hong Kongese, mainland Chinese, ABC, tasteful, abusively tasteful, stuck-up, clueless, gaudy, gay. Then I started reading the articles: how it was going to change Hollywood; how to watch it like an Asian-American; how the novelist was wanted for draft-dodging in Singapore; how Michelle Yeoh supplied her own jewelry for use as the movie's engagement ring. (I saved Jeff Yang's great explication of the mahjong scene for after I'd watched the movie.) And I read with great interest the criticisms: that the movie is more relevant to Asian-Americans than to Asians; that it doesn't represent poor or middle-class Asians; that the movie is a step backward because it frames Asian achievement in terms of mainstream white values; that the movie excludes Singaporeans of South Asian and Malay backgrounds, except as servants. The articles (and social media posts) that interested me most, however, were those that questioned whether Crazy Rich Asians showed the real Singapore. It's a fair question: I mean, the Singapore of the movie did not look like the Singapore I experienced when I visited a lot back in 2004–2006. And the movie's Singaporeans did not really resemble my own Singaporean friends, although, to tell the truth, I haven't seen any of their jewelry collections—or their abs. (This guy, though, does have a lot of shoes.) Also, no one was sweating all the time, and I was sweating all the time. There is, however, a Singaporean movie, released in 1996, that does resemble the Singapore I know and love. It's called Mee Pok Man, and it was directed by Eric Khoo, who's generally credited with reviving the Singaporean film industry in the late 1990s. Mee Pok Man follows the life of a mee pok vendor (Joe Ng), a painfully shy guy who sells fishball noodles not at a hawker center, or to Anthony Bourdain types, but to low-lives and randos. No Michelin stars here! Mumbling and shuffling, he's obsessed with Bunny (Michelle Goh), a prostitute who frequents the stand but pays no attention to him. One night, she's hit by a car, and he rescues her (eh, sort of), bringing her to his apartment, where she falls into a coma and eventually... Oh god, you need to buy the DVD to find out what happens next. Trust me when I say that the ultra-strict rating it received was entirely justified. This is the Singapore I recognize. Not because my friends are all prostitutes, gangsters, and necroph— (Never mind!) But because this is the weird Singapore that I've run headlong into whenever I've visited: The pipe-smoking, middle-aged pimp with a plummy British accent, who politely inquired whether I might want female companionship for the night and, when I declined just as politely, returned to his tobacco. The wonderful Peranakan meals in the red-light district. The gay parties, with syringe-based liquor shots and fund-raising for tsunami victims, that one friend hosted at the end of 2004. The nightlife entrepreneur who rhapsodized over his mother's char siu and who'd drive with his pals in their sports cars into the kampongs of Malaysia in search of Singaporean food how it used to be (made with lard, not vegetable oil). Those bits and pieces of weirdness are everywhere in Singapore, hiding just under the surface and, I'd argue, undergirding the gleaming, sweat-free, billionaire's Singapore you see in Crazy Rich Asians. That kind of mainstream, fancy-brand, fundamentally boring Singapore can exist only because Singaporeans displace their weirdness elsewhere—hide it in their government-owned housing projects, behind the perpetual A/C, under a package of frozen fishballs. And I should note, by "weird" I don't mean truly weird. None of my Singaporean friends is truly strange. (Well, maybe this guy. Kidding!) By "weird" I really mean human—full of quirks and faults and obsessions and emotions, the very things that tourism-board movies like Crazy Rich Asians seeks to hide away in favor of easy materialism and neat rom-com narrative arcs. The sidewalks of Singapore may be sparkingly free of chewing gum, but underneath is dirt, like exists everywhere. Mee Pok Man—which I haven't seen since 1997, when it showed at the First Biennial Southeast Asian Film Festival in Phnom Penh, which was utter weirdness unto itself—is all about the dirt we hide from the surface, and from ourselves. And maybe Eric Khoo, the film's now-celebrated director, is the best example of all of this. Because he himself is the son of a billionaire, Khoo Teck Puat, a banker who owned boutique hotels, had 14 children, and died in 2004. Currently, the Khoo family is Singapore's fifth richest, their net worth is estimated by Forbes at \$6.7 billion. That kind of money buys a lot of fishball noodles—which would be a pretty damn weird thing to do. I bet someone in Singapore is doing it right now. This article was originally published on Medium.

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