Debunking Stereotypes Through Humor: Talk-story and Trickster Figures in Chinese Diasporic Comedies

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Abstract: East Asian diasporic comedians living in the US and the UK have always been associated with their racial identities and, consequently, either adopt or are forced to adopt racial stereotypes that alienate their performances. As a contribution to scholarship in Asian diasporic studies, media studies, and humor studies, this paper offers contemporary Chinese diasporic comedies as a case study into how Chinese comedians use these stereotypes to reclaim a voice. Comedians such as Ali Wong, Jimmy O. Yang, and Nigel Ng can use comedic mediums such as standup, comedy television series, and YouTube videos to address racialized East Asian stereotypes, empower the East Asian community through comedic counter-narratives, and educate the non-Asian public about their reality and culture. By doing so, these comedians adopt the incongruity in comedic discourse to demystify the East Asian/Asian American community to represent their current realities and the ones that belong to the older generation and situate it all in a global and historical framework. They debunk East Asian American sexuality stereotypes by performing the racial mundane. At the same time, they also ridicule these stereotypes through abjection humor or what I call "comedic trickster" figures to potentially challenge the existing power dynamics in the Western world. Instead of assimilating the Asian heritages and merging into the dominant white culture, these comics acknowledge their difference and address these racialized stereotypes.

Keywords: Asian Diaspora; Asian American; comedy; humor; stereotypes; stand-up comedy; television; performance; popular culture

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1. Introduction

A movie executive in Leland Cheuk's novel *No Good Very Bad Asian* explains that:

> Show business is like fine dining... You start with a white plate. You put the protein on it, and the protein is the black people, but at a fine dining restaurant, you barely get any meat, and it's on a very, very big white plate. Occasionally, you have a garnish or a drizzle of sauce, and that's your Chinese, your Japanese, your Koreans, your Southeast Asians, your Indians, your Arabs or whatever. What is important is that the plate is white, and the meat is black (Cheuk 97).

He explains this as he denies the Chinese American protagonist of the novel, Hor Luk Lee, the leading role in a script that he co-wrote. This message speaks to the long-standing tradition of US Hollywood films that excludes Asian Americans from mainstream media and racializes them through their exoticized stereotypes. They are depicted as potential threats to the stability of Western nations (yellow peril), docile working subjects (model minority), and most importantly, outsiders to the Western world.

As critics have pointed out for many years, East Asian Americans are regarded as perpetual foreigners who are inherently different from the mainstream US population. As a result, they are rarely featured in Hollywood films, and even when represented, their roles are often limited to side characters who embody existing East Asian American stereotypes (Yuen 6-9). This is not a single phenomenon in the US, but it is also present in the English Asia diaspora, as UK Asian actors also experience similar treatments. According to Sarita Malik and Darrell M. Newton, Asian representation in UK broadcasting is extremely limited; like their counterpart in the US, they, too, face racialized and Orientalizing marginalization. (Newton and Mailk 6-7).[1] On the surface, derogatory racial stereotypes are often associated with and may lead to systematic discrimination and racial hate crimes, as demonstrated in the longer history: from the 1882 US Chinese Exclusion Act; Japanese internment camps in states such as California and Arizona, and Arkansas during WWII; the killing of Vincent Chin; as well as the series of attacks on the East Asian diaspora worldwide at the start of the 2020 Covid-19 pandemic.

As a response to the racialized stereotypes, East Asian American and diaspora communities have adopted comedy and humor to tackle the problem, which is based on a long-running trend in ethnic comedy that involves racial and stereotypical jokes as a way to negotiate minoritized racial identity. According to Alan Dundes, the oppressed group often uses laughter "to deal with matters they could not otherwise easily face," and it is sometimes done through the implementation of gallows humor or what he refers to as "jokes made about and by the victims of oppression" (Dundes 15-19). This very idea is also echoed in John Limon's fundamental work on standup comedy, in which he associated Jewish standup comedy with abjection. To him, "the standing up of abjection—is the result . . . of his self-identification in an abjected race. He is not the sufferer of abjection, he is the abjection, the body that is repudiated yet keeps returning" (Limon 5). Standup comedians who identify as Jewish, Black, Muslim, Irish, and Asian employ jokes about their own race/ethnic group in their routines. They often use racial stereotypes or perceived racial images in their humor that potentially debunk these stereotypes through a comedic counter-narrative. Yet, the use of abject humor also runs the risk of reinforcing a

[1] According to Malik and Newton, the term 'Asian' in the UK generally refers to people of the Indian sub-continent, while South Asians are lumped into the category of Black. I am aware that I am primarily using scholarship on the US East Asians in this paper. This is because there is a lack of academic discourse on the UK East Asian population. One of my goals in this paper is to address this discrepancy and potentially add to the field by bringing visibility to the UK East Asians.

racial hierarchy, as people may associate comedic performances that incorporate heavily accented English and the embodiment of negative cultural traits with "yellow face."

However, when applied to Asian diasporic comedy, abjection should not be merely looked at as the art form's limitation. It addresses the difference between the East Asian diaspora and the West, separating the racial bodies from their white counterparts. Rather, as Ju Yon Kim suggests in her book *The Racial Mundane: Asian American Performance and the Embodied Everyday*, Asian American literature and performances exhibit the ambiguity of the "everyday behaviors [that] move between ordinary and exceptional," and "concomitantly harden, shift, and dissolve" racial boundaries (Kim 16). I believe that comedy also has the same obtrusive power, if not more, as it allows both direct discussions with the audience through comedic discourse as well as indirect narratives demonstrated in comedic performance. Other than assimilating into Western societies or remaining alienated from them, Asians, and in my study, Chinese Americans also have a third option: to redefine what Asians are.

Thus, the paper's intention is to establish a framework to examine how East Asian diasporic comedians or, more specifically, Chinese diasporic comedians use comedy to create an artistic redefinition of the East Asian image that challenges their stereotypes. They are able to create both the content and space that enable both East Asian audiences as well as audiences from other cultures to laugh at the ridiculousness of the existing social and political biases against East Asians communities. I argue that comedic forms — such as TV comedy and the more recently developed video genres such as YouTube and TikTok — also have the potential to address East Asian stereotypes. This is especially true for comedic sketches on YouTube, as it gives free and relatively unhindered access to a global audience less likely to be affected by the economic and geopolitical limitations of the Western world. In this paper, I will address how contemporary Chinese diasporic comedians, such as Ali Wong, Jimmy O. Yang, and Nigel Ng, are able to use comedic mediums such as standup, comedy television series, and YouTube videos to address racialized East Asian stereotypes, empower through comedic counter-narratives the East Asian community, and educate the non-Asian public about their reality and culture. By doing so, these comedians adopt the incongruity method, the speech acts that violate existing expectations in the audiences' minds, in comedic discourse to demystify the East Asian American community to represent their current realities and those belonging to the older generation, and to situate it all in a global/ historical framework. They also ridicule these stereotypes through abjection humor or what I call "comedic trickster" figures[2] to potentially challenge the existing power dynamics in the Western world. Instead of assimilating the Asian heritages and merging into the dominant white culture, they acknowledge their difference and address these racialized stereotypes.

2. Unpacking East Asian Stereotypes

This paper contributes to the lack of discussion on Asian American/diasporic comedy in academia.

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[2] See Pages 29-30 for definition.

Currently, there has been only one book-length study on Asian American comedy.[3] There are no previous studies specifically on East Asian diasporic comedy outside of the US, and only a few journal articles discuss Asian American standups and folklore.[4] By conducting this study, I add to the theoretical framework through the analysis of the contemporary Chinese diasporic comedian and their work, thus potentially exploring the possibility of using comedy to combat East Asian racial stereotypes and create a collective diasporic East Asian Identity.

Before delving into how East Asian diaspora comedians who are living in the US and the UK utilize stereotypical images in their comedy to combat these stereotypes, we have first to understand the nature of East Asian American/diasporic racialized stereotypes. Fundamentally speaking, the East Asian diaspora's struggle with stereotypes, racial formation, and white supremacy is also a struggle with one's own identity. They deal with racial stereotypes that generalize people to set traits that are mostly negative. The "yellow peril" stereotype is one of the most prevalent. The concept claims that East Asians are fundamentally different from the white US population and, thus, are regarded as enemies, barbarians, and, most importantly, racialized "Others" that are deemed unassimilable to the dominant culture and the state (E. Wu 11).

Moreover, this kind of alienation is also enforced onto individual bodies. One such example is East Asian sexuality: East Asian men are seen as effeminate and asexual in contrast to the idealized traditional Eurocentric male image that emphasizes traits such as assertiveness and strength, and attractiveness to women; East Asian women are objectified and regarded as hypersexual so as to fulfill the white male fantasy (Shimizu). Thus, the nature of stereotypes is hierarchical, as it is used to retain the dominant race's "superiority" through the minority "Other's" marginalization. However, East Asian diasporic stereotypes are more complex than mere disparagements because they have witnessed a drastic change in the 20th century. According to Ellen Wu, there exists a shift in Chinese and Japanese stereotypes from "unassimilable aliens" before the 1950s to "the model minority" after the mid-1960s (E. Wu 2). It ascribes positive traits such as intelligence, diligence, and class mobility to the group and hails it as a "model" for other minority groups to follow suit. To Wu, the model minority stereotype is invented for two reasons: to assimilate East Asian Americans while denying them full rights as Americans while also trying to use this image to disparage the African American community. This also has the potential to brainwash the East Asian community into thinking that they should behave in a way that demands no social changes and thus is favorable to the ruling ideology. Although this stereotype seems to uplift East Asians, it is weaponized for anti-Blackness and forces Asian Americans to adopt unrealistic expectations of themselves that eventually result in psychological problems such as depression.

According to several psychological studies on the Asian American community, no matter whether positive or negative, these racial stereotypes all possess detrimental effects. Alisa Tran and Richard Lee regard positive stereotypes as microaggression that causes a "depersonalization" effect on racial or ethnic groups, which may lead to negative "interpersonal relationships for Asian American young adults" and poorer mental health (Tran and Lee 484–88). David Eng and Shinhee Han even associated racial melancholia, the splitting of the Asian

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[3] Caroline Kyung Hong, "'Funny Asians': Comedy and Humor in Asian American Literature, Film, and Popular Culture" (ProQuest Dissertations Publishing, 2009), https://search.proquest.com/docview/304854211?pq-origsite=primo&accountid=9703.

[4] Such as (Kim; Yoshimura; Mudambi)

American psyche, with it as they argue that the Asian American community has based its identity on the model minority myth. Members from these groups are "seen by the mainstream as perpetual foreigners on the basis of skin color and facial markings" and are thus unable to "blend into the 'melting pot' of America" (Eng and Hab 345). In this sense, they are actively trying to live up to an idealized image that is artificially constructed for white supremacist propaganda and is impossible to realize (Danico and Ng 24–26).

Whatever the stereotype, East Asians are not fully humanized. In terms of gender, dehumanization means that East Asian men are imagined as asexual nerds who lack social skills, while East Asian women are exoticized as submissive lotus blossoms or hypersexual dragon ladies (Shimizu). These racialized and gendered East Asian stereotypes are widely perpetuated in TV series and films, such as *2 Broke Girls* (2011–2017) and *Austin Powers in Goldmember* (2002). Thus, model minority and the yellow peril racialized stereotypes are two sides of the same coin. While one uplifts and the other punches down, both are detrimental and thus need to be offered the same attention and effort to subvert them.

3. Incongruity in East Asian American Standup Comedy

One working and effective strategy East Asian diasporic comedians often adopt is to debunk racialized stereotypes through incongruity humor. According to John Morreall, the humor derived from the "incongruity theory" is based on "the perceptionof something incongruous—something that violates our mental patterns and expectations" (Morreall). Cynthia Willet and Julie Willet associate incongruity humor with recent animal behavior research on animal play, further developing this theory. To them, the incongruity humor or what they termed "mental puzzles" is potentially useful for "negotiating relationships and cultivating [both] social bonds [and] a sense of fairness and solidarity" (Willett and Willett 15–17). Incongruity humor has the capacity to make substantial social changes. It is especially prominent in challenging pre-established concepts such as racialized stereotypes since incongruity humor is based on the "discrepancy between abstract ideas and real things" (Morreall). Moreover, as mentioned by Chengyu Liu and Jing Cui's article on the humorous effects in satires, "The pragmatic function of 'creating humor is to break the ice and maintain harmonious interpersonal relationships.' Deliberate misinterpretation in the context of irony is used for different purposes by different communicators ... In many cases, they aim to maintain face and find a way out for themselves" (Liu and Cui 73). In a way, we can understand that the comedians who use incongruity humor are not trying to offend but rather to resolve the tension through satirical manners and jokes, thus ameliorating the stressful situation when discussing taboo issues such as race.

As a result, BIPOC comedians, such as Latinx and Muslim comedians, as well as feminists, employ this strategy to subvert racial and gender stereotypes. By addressing the stereotypes' absurdity, they challenge the existing social hierarchy with standup comedy, as ethnic comedians can tackle the problem through performativity and comedic speech. Lamiae Aidi's recent study on Arabic Muslim comedians in the US and UK also gives an excellent framework for how incongruity humor is used to subvert stereotypes. According to her, "Jokes employing incongruity are based on the premise that absurdity and juxtaposition of words and ideas drawing on pre-existing knowledge make people laugh" (Aidi 12). This notion is also relevant to the East Asian diasporic community. Though East Asian stereotypes are not the same as Arabic Muslim ones, they both fundamentally

work in stereotypes that reduce the target population into a generic, dehumanized type. Thus, to subvert the stereotypes, East Asian diaspora standups often use strategies like playful use of accents, autobiographical storytelling (talk-story) through comedy, and stage behavior that is either an exaggeration of or different from the prescribed stereotype. Consequently, they are able to demystify the reality of East Asian livelihoods as well as ridicule the stereotypes through absurdity, thus ultimately humanizing them.

The demystification process can be investigated in two ways: correcting the idealized and exoticized images and making the invisible visible to the public. Both can be observed in Jimmy O. Yang's standup special, *Good Deal* (2020), in which he actively addresses East Asian representation and stereotypical images since his entire performance revolves around incongruity humor. At the start, he reveals that even as a celebrity, he is not exempt from these stereotypes. O. Yang describes one unpleasant incident during which people commented on his penis size:

> "Jimmy, um, I'm just so glad the stereotype is not true. You don't have a small penis." I'm like, bitch, you understand you just insulted my entire race of people? But thank you. First of all, thank you for thinking that I have a small penis and we still had sex. You're the real MVP. You get two fortune cookies tonight, miss. But that's a fucked-up stereotype, right? That's not even true. That's a fucked-up stereotype. Everybody should have an average dick until proven guilty. I don't care how tall you are, what ethnicity you are, how big your hands are. Everybody started average dick: eight inches. And we go from there (*Good Deal* 6:00–6:57).

This is a prime example of incongruity humor as the joke includes three parts, a mutual understanding of pre-existing stereotype that East Asian men have smaller penises than men of other races, the buildup of O. Yang's own autobiographic story, and the final punchline that reveals the average dick size should be eight inches. Before audiences burst into laughter, they would have to understand the discrimination he had to go through. This kind of joke is the product of the "White Gaze," as the presupposition is that Asians have small penises. Yet rather than admitting to the bit and thus reinforcing it, O. Yang uses satire to shatter this idea by mocking the stereotype itself. Thus, what he is doing here is calling out the ridiculousness of this baseless idea by packaging it with comedic effects so that audiences can better accept his argument because this stereotype does not immediately affect them. Moreover, since these stereotypes do not apply to non-Asian audiences, they will inevitably cause disinterest within the audience if his criticisms appear hostile. This can also be seen in Nabilah Rachmadhani and Hermawati Syarif's paper examining Jimmy O. Yang's comedy as they state that O. Yang applied euphuism in his joke and, thus making his jokes more acceptable to the general audience (Rachmadhani and Syarif 340–341). The comedy here opens a gateway for him to discuss taboo topics. According to George Pacheco Jr. and David R. Nelson, "humor [is] a vehicle of persuasive messages [that] carries a significant amount of weight in transforming otherwise taboo issues and allowing for public dialogue" (Pacheco Jr and Nelson 147). By combining his own experience with comedic discourse, O. Yang is able to facilitate conversation on racialized East Asian stereotypes. Moreover, by calling the girl "the MVP" and saying she should be rewarded with a "fortune cookie," O. Yang pushes back on the stereotypical notion as well as calls out his partner's whiteness and her inability to do antiracist work without "rewards."

The incongruity humor in the "talk-story" method also exists in his bit about his father. Throughout the show, his father appears to be a recurring theme as he constantly brings up how he has influenced O. Yang's childhood. He jokingly narrated his father's brutal honesty about him being bad at table tennis and his emphasis that he should devote more time to his academics. The comedic factor O. Yang achieved is through the mimicry of his father's non-native expressions and heavily accented English. In one bit, he talked about how East Asian parents do not watch TV like Americans as the former is often judgmental and wants their children, who are better assimilated, to explain to them the mediums that are seen as distinctively Western, such as rap music. After the failed attempt to explain Lamborghini's significance in a rap video, Jimmy's father, Richard, asks him about another line:

> "Jimmya, what he means when he says, Your chick, she's so thirsty? What's that?" And I was like shit. Ummm, dad, he's making fun of someone's girlfriend, okay? It's saying that she likes attention from other guys, and she likes to do sex stuff with them. You know, like blow jobs and such. And he was like: "oh, ok, ok, yes, yes, yes. Blow jobs, okay. (Grunting noises) Jimmya, Jimmya, I'm thirsty too. So..." Like, oh god, no, it got lost in translation. It's disgusting (*Good Deal* 33:25–34:10).

However, the jokes about his father's failure to assimilate completely into the US should not be deemed as disparagement. What O. Yang is doing is acknowledging first-generation immigrants' efforts to understand US culture and the difficulty they face living in American society. Contrary to the common stereotype that depicts them as docile foreigners, O. Yang sets up a room that gives them a voice through a comedic narrative. According to Haiming Zhou and Wenli Fang, in order to make sure that a joke is understood in a cross-cultural context, one needs to set up a "mutual knowledge [or] common ground" for the audience of the other culture to fully appreciate the joke (Zhou and Fang 59–60). This is what exactly O. Yang is doing, as by telling his father's background before the bit, he sets up common ground for the audience through Talkstory, which makes the bit about his father more likable and effective (more easily understood by the non-Asian American audience).

In this way, he gives his father agency by bringing visibility to the daily interaction that is mostly invisible and demonstrates that first-generation immigrants can also be funny. By showing his father's sly, raunchy humor, O. Yang inevitably humanizes the first-generation immigrants. He brings the private into the public and gives his father a voice in English; O. Yang creates visibility to values that are common to first-generation East Asian Americans as well as enables them to engage in a broader array of careers. He presents his father to normalize their accents and customs, which are formally looked at as foreign.

In his autobiography, O. Yang openly claims that he does not believe that "accented characters reinforce the stereotype of an East Asian being the constant foreigner" because he was once an immigrant who did not know how to speak English himself (O. Yang 195). According to him: "there are real people with real Asian accents in the real world... My mission is not to avoid playing an immigrant; my mission is to make Asian immigrants as sexy as Ryan Gosling" (O. Yang 196). In this sense, O. Yang's incorporation of racialized accent stereotypes in his comedy highlights Asian cultural differences. He wants to demonstrate that Chinese Americans have their own unique cultures that are separate from the one that belongs to the mainstream white public. He defies the stereotypical identity others assign to the East Asian community and seeks to redefine the existing differences.

The talk-story method that he employs is a kind of re-storying of East Asian American masculine images that are intergenerational and also a dialogue about humor and diaspora.

Apart from the talk-story method, Asian diasporic comedians, such as Ali Wong, also adopt the incongruity method through the exaggerated image she constructed that is different from typical East Asian women stereotypes. In her standups, Wong tends to develop a persona away from the idealized lotus blossom stereotype that depicts East Asian women as docile and politically silent. Contrary to this notion, Wong's performance actually contributes to combatting the stereotypical image of East Asian women. In *Baby Cobra* (2016) and *Hard Knock Wife* (2018), Ali Wong used an image that deviates from the lotus blossom image stereotype as they are often seen as polite, reserved, submissive, and mute.

Wong's sexual jokes related to her body, sexual relationships, and breastfeeding sessions are all considered taboos outside American comedic discourse. She says that she has "nipples look[ing] like fingers, [that] you can spin DVDs on" (*Hard Knock Wife* -54: 30 - -54: 25). On another occasion, she also claims to have accidentally had sex with two homeless people, licked his husband's "ass" (*Hard Knock Wife* -58: 24– -58: 19), and gives a vivid description including exaggerated acting and facial expressions, of how her daughter "would yank her nipples back and forth like that bear fucking up Leonardo DiCaprio in the movie" while she breastfeeds her (*Hard Knock Wife,* -55: 06 to -54: 57). When describing the pain of breastfeeding, Wong mimics the horrendous scene of a bear tearing flesh from a body. Wong also employs "vulgar" gestures, such as grabbing her skirt right in front of her crotch while discussing the necessity for mothers to use adult diapers (*Hard Knock Wife*, -43: 26 to -42: 25). The terms and performances Wong employs are drastically different from the assumed exoticized submissive and mute Asian American woman. She is not just inviting her audience to laugh at herself and the bodily messiness of motherhood, but also the absurdity of the extreme views enforced upon Asian women/women in general. In this sense, she deconstructs the detrimental image manifested in the lotus blossom stereotypes while also addressing the hardship of being a mother.

Although her standup, accompanied by her performances, can be potentially regarded as abject humor (which I will discuss in more detail in the last section of this paper), I believe it is not the case since the humor here is not based on superiority humor. Abject humor in racial or ethnic comedy is based on the premise that you enact stereotypes that make you different and thus inferior to the audience. The audiences laugh because they deem themselves as the norm and thus superior. However, Wong's humor, on the other hand, descends from a long lineage of feminist comedy that ridicules toxic masculinity. She is breaking away from the traditional image that depicts women and mothers as quiet and lacking agency. The incongruity in this sense is twofold: it is based both on humorous acting and her comedic discourse. By poking fun at the patriarchal image, she conforms neither to submissive lotus blossom nor hypersexual dragon lady stereotypes. The description of her sexuality does not give her audience sexual pleasure since it debunks these images. Instead, the audience laughs with her and the bodily messiness of motherhood while also going along with how she rejects Asian hypersexualized stereotypes by literally showing, for example, how Asian women's breasts, as she explains in her skit about breastfeeding, is just another example of how messed up it is to be a breastfeeding mother.

4. East Asian Tricksters and Abject Humor

Apart from incorporating milder forms of humor, namely incongruity and mundanity, into their comedy,

East Asian diasporic comedians also use more drastic and obtrusive humor, called "abject humor," in their works. Although there are examples that existed well before the popularization of the term "Abjection" by Julia Kristeva, John Limon gave the first detailed description of "abjection" in standup comedy. In his view, "abjection" is "something miring your life, some skin that cannot be sloughed, some role (because 'abject' always, in a way, describes how you act) that has become your only character." To him, "abjection is self-typecasting" (Limon 4). This is relevant to Jewish American comedians; they are what Limon describes as an "Abject race" since their bodies and actions are under the white-dominant society's scrutiny. They are forced into typecasting careers that deny them their individuality, and they are reduced to generic stereotypes, incorporating accents into their standup.

Abjection humor is also not alien to East Asian American comedians since they also suffer from the same fate due to their racialized minority status. Karen Simakawa explains the East Asian American communities' "abjection" lies in their perpetual foreignness, as the population has a long history of being excluded from the mainstream Eurocentric American society both legally and culturally. She even goes as far as to state that "Asian Americanness functions as abject in relation to Americanness… The conceptual U. S. citizen-subject comes into being, in other words, through the expulsion of Asianness in the figure of the Asian immigrant" (Shimakawa 3–5). Thus, combining these two notions, it is not hard to see that the East Asian Americans and the East Asian diaspora's abject humor embodies stereotypical images and accented English that differentiates them from the Eurocentric "norm" and thus making them overlooked from major roles in mainstream media representation.

However, performances that contain stereotypes or abjections do not automatically entail a lack of agency. The incorporation of anaccent only implies that the actors are different from the social norms, but it does not necessarily mean that they are powerless in the face of discrimination based on their race. As mentioned above, comedic discourse has the obtrusive power that allows East Asian diasporic comedians to both educate and normalize their identity and culture and thus claim a space in the white-dominant society. This is effectively done through standup. Chinese diasporic comedians address stereotypes from an insider perspective so as to combat Asian stereotypes. As the abject object that serves as the counterpart to mainstream society, these comedians also use another strategy, "trickster humor," to tackle the issue.

This notion is derived from a long-standing Chinese tradition of using trickster archetypes and countertypes that are represented by traditional characters such as Monkey King, Sun Wu Kong, from *Journey to the West*, and Asian American adaptations such as the Kingston's Wittman Ah Sing as both have the potential "to attribute to the disruption [that] creates chaos, [unsettle] the balance and breaking the "order of things" and "challenge and dispel the essentialism, inequalities, and cultural reductionism that create stereotypes" (Sener and Demir). Combining this notion with abject humor, my definition of the Chinese comedic tricksters is thus: characters that unapologetically embrace their abjection (It is important to note that their abject status only exists in relation to the Western white supremacist normative values' assumed dominant status) and use it to their advantage. They defy definitions and are able to use their assigned abjectness to ridicule the assumed power relations between mainstream and East Asian communities, and thus turning their role from the "butt of the joke" to the "jokers." One such example is Jimmy O. Yang's character Jian-Yang in *Silicon Valley* because the actor manages to subvert the abject East Asian stereotypes by ridiculing his white counterpart's racist comments.

It is essential to note that "Jian-Yang" as a character does not end up as what is originally planned out. In

his autobiography, *How to American*, Jimmy O. Yang explored his humble beginnings as an extra in Hollywood in detail. In the Chapter "How to Silicon Valley," he addresses the harsh reality for East Asian American actors as he was not able to land a long-term acting job in 3 years. Around half of the roles he auditioned for from 2011 to 2013 were "nerdy" and involved an East Asian identity. *Silicon Valley* is no different from these choices, which is evident in the audition email O. Yang received:

> [JIN YANG] (20s) PLEASE SUBMIT TALENT WHO ARENATIVE BORN ASIAN THAT SPEAK ENGLISH. TALENT MUST HAVE GREEN CARD OR BE US CITIZEN WITH PROPER PAPERS. A resident at Erlich's incubator, Hacker House, Jin Yang is a tall, skinny **Asian** Tech geek who speaks in a THICK ACCENT with every other word being either s * * t, f * * ck, mother * * cker or dude. Role slate to start shooting approx. 3/2-3/5. POSSIBLE RECURRING GUEST STAR (O. Yang 153).

The requirement for the actor to be an Asian who speaks English and has a "Green Card or [is] US citizen with proper paper works" speaks to the history of Chinese exclusion in the US that put an over-emphasis on paper works and barred Chinese from becoming naturalized citizens of the state through legislations such as the Chinese Exclusion Act. O. Yang's role as "Jin Yang" or the future "Jian-Yang" is not a personal choice but an assigned role that was originally going to be only a temporary gig. As the recruitment advertisement states, what the show was looking for was nothing but a stereotypical "Asian Tech geek who speaks in a THICK ACCENT." And what makes O. Yang's character different from the mere stereotypical embodiment of an abject East Asian "buffoon" is that he does not regard his role as one.

As he explains in his autobiography when he was handed Jian-Yang's role, O. Yang describes it as an earlier version of himself: "something felt very natural about being Jian Yang. It was as if I'd been playing him for years" (O. Yang 163). Accordingly, O. Yang bases his acting on a comedic mimicry of his past self and inevitably expands it beyond caricature. During the scene when an angry man tried to physically assault him, Jian-Yang and the other tenants at Erlich's incubator, O. Yang improvised by following all the other tenants, chanting their own names "to force the assailant to acknowledge [them] as human beings" rather than "stand there in confusion," like he was supposed to do (O. Yang 163-164). Relating back to the grim situation of the East Asian community, both in reality and in TV/movie performances, Jian-Yang originally is a product of the ignorance of the white-dominant community, a skit character that should stay in the background, yet the final product what O. Yang delivers is like what he says, "acknowledged." He is using the limited resources that he has to bring Asian visibility into a world that ignores and casts both verbal and physical violence onto the Asian body because of the so-called "abjection." This humanization of the stereotypical character is what won him success and the opportunity to stay on the show, which made the later trickster figure possible. O. Yang made Jian Yang, not the other way around.

As the show continues, the character slowly transforms from a first-generation Chinese American programmer embodying the pushover male East Asian American tech nerd stereotype—limited English proficiency, an exoticized lifestyle, no comprehension of American social cues—into a trickster figure with some form of agency over the white-dominant Silicon Valley. This transformation is demonstrated through his interaction with Erlich Bachman, the owner of the innovation incubator. In the first two seasons, his apparent

"foolishness" derived from cultural differences results in the tenants' misunderstanding of Jian-Yang and Erlich Bachman's verbal abuses. After he finds out that Jian-Yang does not understand his instruction, Erlich always says "mother fuck[er]" as an insult toward him ("Fiduciary Duties" 3: 47–4: 07, "The Lady" 3: 06–3: 07). However, this is met with retaliation. In the third season, Jian-Yang openly calls out Erlich's racist attempt to terminate his contract with him through the transaction of a kimono (a Japanese tradition, not Chinese). When Erlich informs him about his eviction, he uses Erlich's words against him, citing tenants' legal protections, and manages to stay. During his extended residency, Jian-Yang constantly harassed Erlich verbally by prank-calling him and returning his insult. By doing so, he is able to assume the stereotypical idea that first-generation immigrants lack creativity, thus taking advantage of Erlich's assumption that O. Yang's ideas are ridiculous and unlucrative.

Moreover, Jian-Yang's success as a trickster figure can be observed through a comparison to Dinesh Chugtai, a Pakistani American engineer played by Kumail Nanjiani. As one of the only two recurring Asian American characters in the show, despite the fact more than half of the population in Silicon Valley is ethnically Asian (Sumagaysay), Jian Yang is much more successful in terms of subverting power dynamics than Dinesh because he is able to get back at Erlich. Like Jian Yang, Dinesh also suffers from the constant harassment. Although Dinesh is able to acquire the "American" status in comparison to Jian Yang because he does not have an accent and is a part of the protagonist's startup, he is not exempt from the Asian American alienation as he is denied both a successful love life and career. One such reason is that he is trying to live up to the American standard. He is actively mimicking the role of the model minority that cannot be realized. As a trickster, Jian Yang defies the rules assigned to him. And this freedom enables him to harass Erlich through childish verbal insults and pranks, which are normally deemed unacceptable and thus able to breach social boundaries.

An even more dramatic trait can be found in Nigel Ng's "Uncle Roger," a middle-aged male Asian comedic persona he created on YouTube, who wears an orange-colored polo shirt, speaks in a heavily Asian-accented voice, and addresses his audience as "niece and nephew." Although the character/persona might at first seem over the top and even borderline racist, He should not be perceived in such a way, as he not only provides a burst of lighthearted laughter but also redeems Asian or Chinese tradition. One best example is his series on cook show reviews of Asian or Chinese cuisines. In his first video, he reviewed the BBC food channel and criticized its Chinese fried rice recipe. Uncle Roger ridicules the procedure as he thinks that the recipe butchered the dish because it requires way too much water than needed, which is best demonstrated in his comments after seeing the chef draining the rice with a colander:

> What is she doing? Drain the rice- Oh my God. You are killing me, woman. Haiya- Drain the ri-. She is draining rice with a colander. Hai, how can you drain rice with a colander? This is not pasta! I have never seen anyone drain rice. If your rice too wet, you fucked up. Don't bring colander into your rice cooking haiya-. Get a nice rice cooker; don't mess with a saucepan like this lady here. Don't mess with a colander. If your rice is too wet, you re-cook the rice, no way to save wet rice (Ng 3: 55–4: 30).

Through these comments, he uses exaggerated acting and accent in his mockery of the BBC, which is deemed as an unbiased source of knowledge in the Western world. He is a trickster-like figure who does not obey

authority and takes pleasure in making fun of things that he thinks are ridiculous. In this sense, Uncle Roger is an Asian trickster who does not like the Westernization of Asian cuisine and wants to bring it down through the generation of collective laughter at the subject that he ridicules. He is giving his Asian and Western audience space and permission to mock the authority. As a result, the audience laughs with him rather than at him. His criticism of the Western take on East Asian fried rice can be regarded as a narrative against cultural appropriation since he is taking back the defining power by ridiculing the deliberate Westernization, or simply the "butchering," of Asian cuisine. As stated by a study on the cultural acceptance of Li Ziqi, a Chinese internet influencer who does Chinese cultural promotion, cross-cultural communication is heavily affected by the viewer's perception of the video as "Preconceptions, also known as stereotypes, are problems that began before communication has even started." (O'sullivan, et al. 43). Like O. Yang, Ng's video uses a tactic that viewers of other cultures can understand. Rather than falling into the trap of conforming to the language environment that is Western-centric, he smashes through the stereotype with skits that are both funny and educational.

Ng is fully aware of his Chinese identity. In an interview, when he is asked about whether he believes that his overtly provocative accent is racist, Ng responds that the reason why people might think this way is "the white gaze"— "If you look at the comments there (His videos ridiculing the Westernization of Asian fried rice by Jamie Oliver, a British celebrity chef), if someone is laughing at the Asian guy's accent, the comments will be (mimicry of racist phrase to the Chinese community), Asian guy so funny, Chinaman so funny. But most of the comments are actually quotes of the lines/jokes I have, which I thought is a pretty solid even without the accent… people are actually laughing at Jamie Oliver" (Nguyen 46:58–48:45). Although admittingly, Uncle Roger's comedic effect is partially based on his accent, and thus is guilty of potentially fueling the Chinese stereotypes that all Asians are bad at English, the accent itself does not automatically entail a lack of eloquence. Indeed, a 2023 study on Uncle Roger states that Ng's accented voice is constructing a Pan-Asian identity that represents a mockery of the Western world (Y. Wu 1–17). From my perspective, apart from the apparent mockery, Uncle Roger reverses that gaze from the Asian body onto the white video segment, thus enabling an "Asian gaze" (in comparison to the "White gaze") toward white colonialism and using their strategy against them. Therefore, these videos reverse the power dynamic of the English-speaking Asian diasporic community and the white-dominant society, making the Asian diaspora reclaim a voice that is long lost.

Moreover, it is also important to notice that the review format also gives him the ability to be the subject rather than the object. In traditional film settings, the viewing experience is simple, as it only consists of two parties: the viewer and the video text. It is like reading a novel, in which the dynamic is simple as the viewers are the subjects and the text and its characters are the objects. However, the review video format is much more since it at least contains three parties: the audience, the critic (or, in this case, the trickster figure), and the film in question. In review videos, breaking the fourth wall is no longer a technique but rather a norm. Thus, when accompanied by comedic effects, this medium can be a potent tool for addressing social problems and making commentaries that are more accessible to the public.

It is also beneficial to look at their performances or character portrayal through what Jo Yon Kim calls "theatrical character." She writes: "if the racialization of nonwhite bodies renders them theatrical, it is not because race is a role willingly played, and not only because such bodies become the objects of spectacle or surveillance. Both racialization and theatrical performance rely on a productive tension between what could be

termed the 'actor' and the 'role,' a doubling that is mediated by 'the eyes of others'" (Kim 8). All the performances above can be regarded as a portrayal of the "role" that depicts what others think is "Asian."

In a sense, East Asian American actors/actresses take up theatrical characters that embody absurdity not because they want to but rather simply because of their ethnic or racial identity as Asians. They are not given an option as their body is constantly under the "white gaze." They are only given two choices: to either fully abandon their Asian identity by mimicking what is considered the white mainstream (even if they are successful in adopting these traits, East Asian Americans can still not fully assimilate into the white American mainstream), or risk being racialized, exoticized, objectified, "Othered." However, Kim rejects the notion that the only possibilities for Asian Americans are to either assimilate or remain alienated by remaining ambiguous. These actors provide a third way: to redefine what is Asian. They are not objects that need to be defined but rather self-defining subjects as they wrest agency and fashion Chinese American and Chinese diasporic identities. All these actions or performances can be regarded as taking back a voice. The intention behind the exaggerated persona and acting is to emphasize its absurdity. Asian comedians who live in Western countries can utilize subversive comedy to debunk the stereotypical image.

5. Conclusion

Given the specific history of the East Asian diasporic community's marginalization and the complexity of their stereotypes, I have to adopt a non-American-centric theoretical framework to understand East Asian diasporic comedy. Here, I have proposed that Chinese diasporic comedians are able to adopt strategies, namely incongruity humor through talk-story in standups, and Chinese comedic trickster figures to provide a third way to imagine East Asian representation and thus re-story the East Asian diasporic racial formation. Comedians such as Jimmy O. Yang and Ali Wong use comedic discourse and absurd performances to educate others about the Asian communities' lives as well as debunk them through ridicule. This kind of obtrusion is effectively done through comedy, which is primarily only accessible to white actors, enabling East Asian actors to claim a space and normalize Asian American sexuality. Finally, Chinese diasporic comedians such as O. Yang and Nigel Ng can use trickster figures to harness the power of their assumed abjectness and thus disturb the existing social hierarchy that insists on white supremacist ideology. While there are some existing studies on Asian American comedy, the field is still generally unexplored. I believe the field deserves more attention and further analysis.

This paper is one of the first steps to theorizing East Asian English diasporic and American comedy. A potential research agenda can further develop the theoretical proposals of this paper, especially Chinese comedic trickster figures, and non-Chinese Asian diasporic (especially Japanese and Korean) comedy. I believe that it is possible to look at diverse mediums such as East Asian diasporic and American memoirs and fiction and explore the comedic factors it has to offer and how they are able to re-story the Asian identity and experience.

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