You Joking Me? or *It's Really True*: The Comedy of Asian Accents

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Abstract

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The line between comedy and offence is often muddled. The funny and unfunny can appear identical to one another. This is especially the case when it comes to racial stereotype humour, which may sound very much like racist mockery. My thesis focuses on the comic value and harms of English spoken in an Asian accent, particularly East Asian (Chinese, Japanese, Korean) accents. Drawing on Elaine Chun's work identifying "mock Asian" as a variety of English "that indexes a stereotypical Asian identity" (263), I analyze the use of mock Asian in fictional representations of East Asians on screen. Beginning with Gedde Watanabe's (in)famous performance of Long Duk Dong in the film *Sixteen Candles* (1984), I also consider the vernacular and dialectic stand-up of Margaret Cho in *Notorious C.H.O*. (2002) and Jimmy O. Yang in *Good Deal* (2020) before turning to the L.A.-based Malaysian comedian Nigel Ng and his accented alter-ego Uncle Roger. Finally, I propose that the relationship between Asian-accented English representations and modern Asian identity construction may be especially clearly illuminated in relation to the linguistic category of "Chinglish."

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To my family: Words fall short of expressing my gratitude. 多謝 (*o die*). Your unwavering support–emotional, financial, physical, and creative–has been the bedrock of my success. Your gift of humour has been a constant source of strength and joy.

To my partner, AJ: Thank you for accompanying me through every all-nighter, for catching every frantically scribbled idea, and for countless hours of brilliant and terrible comedy. Your love, laughter, and unwavering support have been my anchor throughout this journey.

Dedications

This one is for the misfits, the jesters, the clowns, and the butt of the jokes. For those who laugh through tears and cry with unbridled mirth. To all the funny people out there who find healing in humour. There is no greater currency than a laugh that cuts through the darkness.

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Introduction

So fake that it's funny or so funny that it's fake? Bad taste or belly laugh? Accents are a supposedly honest indication that the person speaking belongs to a particular place, social class, or group. But attitudes regarding accents vary: they may be seen as a tool, a code, or a door. And some are more prone to scrutiny when singled out for mockery. Relying on a non-standard dialect to mark racial otherness is widely decried as weak or cheap comedy, but sometimes more complicated meanings are in play. As Matthias Pauwels elaborates in "Anti-racist Critique Through Racial Stereotype Humour," racial humour and the "comic enactment of racial stereotypes always creates both racist and anti-racist meanings" (87). This thesis is especially interested in exploring how minority comedians may elicit anti-racist laughter when they perform accents that evoke racial-cultural stereotypes.

When I hear myself speaking, I am often aware of the bow-like twang of Toisanese against my tongue, disciplined by French and English as it has been. If I deliberately clip my articles when I shift back into English, this helps to dig me out of a linguistic slurry, simplifying the process of communicating even without knowing the right Toisanese words. Strawberry, *mot*? Straw-berry. *Si do be lei*. I'm furtive when I talk like this in public. With my half-white face, I don't want to sound like a racist spitting half-broken half-spoken Chinglish at my family at the grocery store. Why do I feel it all? The bad taste of a cheap mock Asian accent makes my stomach turn. I remember the kids who called me *Ni Hao* at school. Making fun(erals) of the song in our speech. Are some accents too ugly to redeem?

As a dutiful son, I talk to my family about my academic writing. I try to explain my thesis. My mother is indifferent to Margaret Cho and loves Ali Wong ("She's so not PC"), even though both perform similar kinds of observational comedy and raunchy humour. My mother's

sister, my YeeYee, isn't a fan of Cho or Wong, dislikes stand-up in general, and especially dislikes John Pinette's accent comedy. But in the kitchen, when they bump into each other, they ironically spout "sorry *lah*" at each other in increasingly exaggerated tones before dissolving into laughter. As Lauren Berlant and Sianne Ngai point out in "Comedy Has Issues," there is an "analogy between the experience of humor and aesthetic judgment as such; both remind us of forms of intersubjectivity we usually don't think about but that we rediscover as presupposed by our very compulsion to make jokes and judgments in the first place" (235). What we consider aesthetically pleasing and funny depends on the time and place, the atmosphere, the intent, the delivery, and our positionality. If, in the words of feminist humour theorists Cynthia Willett and Julie Willett, "the tacit rule of comedy is punching up, not down" (10), what happens when we punch across at ourselves? Where do those punches ricochet?

The title of this essay is actually based on two experiences I had with my PoPo.[1] The first experience involved her responding to my sister's boy trouble with an exasperated "You joking me kid!" in an attempt to translate an expression 有冇搞錯呀 (Hoisan-wa: *nei mo gao choi lah*, which means something like *Are you serious? Are you kidding me? What's wrong with you?*) then following up with the Toisanese[2] expression 真個係 (*jing gu ha*i, which means *It's really true* which is generally used to stress the importance or truth of what the speaker is saying).

It's probably time now also to address the fact that I am the product of a Welsh-English father and a Chinese-Canadian mother. My mother's paternal family has been in Canada for (at

[1] Popo 婆婆 is the appellation for my mother's mother or maternal grandmother.

[2] Toisanese (alternatively: Hoisan-wa, Hoisahua, Toisanhua), a Yue Chinese dialect native to Taishan (the Mandarin name) but spoken throughout the region of Sze Yup (lit 'four counties'), which encompasses the four former counties of Taishan, Kaiping, Enping, and Xinhui located on the west side of the Pearl River Delta in Southern Guangdong province.

least) four generations, and yes, my white father is an immigrant. In the context of North American identity politics, I am a fun list of acronyms, another LGBTQIA+ POC. Still, I'm thin, obscurely racial, and ambiguously gendered in a fairly marketable way. (I should know I modelled in a national anti-hate campaign in 2017.) Practically speaking, what this means for me in Canada is non-Indigenous people telling me I look like I'm First Nations or Inuit, others sweetly assuming I speak Spanish, and getting asked why I don't spell my name *Zakariyā*. I feel like a chameleon amidst a constitutionally multi-cultural nation and a convenient body on which all kinds of people can project their aspirations for inclusion in a "what a beautiful mixed baby" kind of way. Moving through the world like the promised future of a mixed middle class—of Canadian marriages of white picket fences and white jasmine rice—breaking away from our cultural trauma and our white guilt—and building a third culture, a new culture that can celebrate, shame, soothe, and pick and choose from between the whitest and darkest parts of itself. When I was younger, I asked my mother, "Are we (my sister and I) really Chinese?" to which she replied, "Of course you are." I objected, "Dad isn't Chinese," and she said, "Your mom is Chinese, you speak Chinese, you're Chinese. Not like the [second] cousins—a bunch of Twinkies,[3] Chinese outside, white inside." I was so afraid that if I lost my tongue, I might be worse than processed American junk food; I would be white inside and out, so I swallowed it. She and I laughed. This is probably why I often used to describe myself as "more or less" Chinese, more Chinese than non-Chinese, and less Chinese than *Chinese*.

But what does it even mean to be Chinese? Ien Ang reflects on this question in "Can One Say No to Chineseness? Pushing the Limits of the Diasporic Paradigm":

[3] There is a variety of food-related metaphors (banana, coconut, Twinkie) which refer to Asians who are derided as "yellow (or brown) on the outside, and white on the inside" and accuse them of being overly "assimilated" or "acculturated" in Western society. The internalized racism perpetuated by these colour-based cultural metaphors is "influenced by a transnational dominant white western supremacist ideology" that equates whiteness with Western society and culture (Trieu 4).

> Scholars have always been bewildered by China. The intricate empirical multifariousness and historical complexity of the country is hardly containable in the sophisticated (inter)disciplinary apparatus and theoretical armory of Western researchers. Language, culture, civilization, people, nation, polity—how does one describe, interpret, and understand China, that awesome, other space that has never ceased to both fascinate and infuriate its dedicated scholar (225).

Beyond the definitive "otherness" of China's status within the apparatus of Western scholarship, how scholars define China is frequently contested. This complexity is further shattered by diasporic perspectives that fail to uphold the norm of "the essential Chinese subject" as "belonging to the Han race, being born in China proper, speaking Mandarin, and observing the 'patriotic' code of ethics" (228). Ien Ang argues that "Chineseness is not a category with a fixed content—be it racial, cultural, or geographical—but operates as an open and indeterminate signifier whose meanings are constantly renegotiated and rearticulated in different sections of the Chinese diaspora" (225). "Chineseness" is a "discursive construct—as opposed to something natural," one based on the resonance of subjective experiences, but in this case ultimately one that de-centres, the diasporic experience of being Chinese in a century of transnational migration.

I am English-Chinese-Canadian: Chinese in a way that only happened here on these lands and waters of so-called Canada, with one foot in imaginary China and another in the shadow of the British Empire. My weekends in Montreal's Chinatown and my childhood summers in southern England. I have never been to Asia. I have never been to the People's Republic of China, Hong Kong, Macao, Taiwan, Singapore, or Malaysia. I was never taught Mandarin or Cantonese; I cannot read "simplified" or "traditional" Chinese. I write my name. My chopsticks are long, unfinished, square-sided, and blunt. In my first year of college, in front of the entire

class, a professor asked me if I'd ever eaten a dog. I celebrate the New Year twice. I bow thrice before my ancestors' graves. And I return once again to the words of Ien Ang: "If I am inescapably Chinese by *descent*, I am only sometimes Chinese by *consen*t. When and how is a matter of politics" (242). Which tongue do I laugh in? Which parts are laughing? Where do the laughs come from? If I sometimes feel guilty for laughing too hard at a joke told in an accent that I recognize—guilty for knowing a part of myself will never be held to account by others—what kind of laughter does it elicit in those who do not recognize it all?

Guided by Cynthia Willett and Julie Willett's desire to "unmask cruelty excused as mere amusement ('it was just a joke')" and "expose humor's underlying power plays together with its strategies for talking truth" (2), I turn to their feminist revisions of the four prevailing theories of humour to begin to make sense of the laughter derived from racial stereotype humour. As Celeste Yim documents in her 2017 piece "Why People Still Laugh at Asian Accents: An Investigation," for many people, "the Asian accent is a mark of inferiority" and the "attachment comedy has to accents is necessarily driven from shame; it's easy to laugh at inferiority." Superiority theory, according to Willett and Willett, would dictate that the amusement that audiences derive from accents is necessarily about linguistic prestige, a pleasure derived at the expense of others, from "a reinforcement of the other's inferior social status or as a means to reaffirm and enhance one's own social standing" (5). But superiority theory cannot account for the simply punny, surprising, absurd, or unexpected laugh. In the eighteenth century, relief theory shifted attention to the possibility of "a comic venting of emotions through a hearty laugh," but prevailing Western mind-body dualism, which understands laughter as mechanical action, has failed to attribute much purpose to laughter besides a "feel-good moment" (5). Drawing on Mikhail Bakhtin's theory of the carnivalesque, Willett and Willett recast relief theory as a "cathartic, biosocial

catalyst, and thus as a major player in an easily unsettled political terrain" and identify the "energy and power that subversive comics reclaim from repressive and authoritarian climates" as a means to "decolonize our selves while strengthening our social and political force" (12). It can be freeing to revoice and reappropriate words and terms that have historically been used to insult and essentialize.

Incongruity theory, which emerged around the same time as relief theory, has retained its prominence over the last several centuries. Unlike relief theory, which links humour to feelings of "bodily and emotional relief," incongruity theory locates humour in the "pleasant surprise that occurs through the violation of normal mental patterns" (13). A problem with an approach to humour that prioritizes "mental jolts," however, is that it elevates the "rational mind" and keeps "emotions at a distance" (13). The "first-brain" approach to humour, which prioritizes cerebral or puzzle-like understandings, does not only "distance the mind from the body politic and its belly laughs" but it also fails to account for the social dimensions of laughter (14).

Based on the work of linguist Tom Veatch, Benign Violation theory (BVT) was developed by Peter McGraw and Caleb Warren as an extension of incongruity theory. Accordingly, BVT, as theorized in "Benign Violations: Making Immoral Behaviour Funny," suggests that "anything that is threatening to one's sense of the how the world 'ought to be' will be humorous, as long as the threatening situation also seems benign" (McGraw and Warren 1142). BVT postulates that in order for there to be humour, three conditions must be met: (1) a situation is a violation, (2) the situation is benign, and (3) both perceptions occur simultaneously ("Benign Violation Theory"). Their website, *The Humor Research Lab* (HuRL), cites "unusual accents, most scenes from the Borat movies" as two examples of humorous violations of cultural norms. But what makes an accent "unusual?" What makes this unusual accent "funny"? Is it the initial surprise of hearing

"non-standard" English, and the opportunities for mispununtiation and double-entendres? One of the main criticisms of BVT is that it tends to gloss over the specificities of "distance." As Leo Kant and Elisabeth Norman argue in "You Must Be Joking! Benign Violations, Power Asymmetry, and Humor in a Broader Social Context," though BVT emphasizes psychological distance in hitting the "sweet spot" of benign violation, it fails to address "social distance" adequately (1). Kant and Norman find that "different perspectives" in a given situation (i.e., the distance between the joke-teller and the joke-listener and their respective distances from the joke) may include possible power asymmetries or cultural differences (1). Persistent disagreement exists in the "border zones" about whether attempted violations of expectations and norms are truly benign or malign (Kant and Norman 1).

A fourth theory of laughter and humour discussed by Willett and Willett situates their origins in social play. This theory of humour as social play prioritizes the fact that people laugh far more often in group settings than alone. Willett and Willett note that the social function of laughter as a bonding agent can be witnessed in response to "tickling by a friendly other," a response that humans share not only with apes but also with other nonhuman critters (15). Is "social" distance something that can be easily mapped out in a table or a graph? Why do people laugh at things they don't "think" are funny? As Willett and Willett point out, the best answers come from synthesizing the prevailing theories of humour and doing away with mind-body dualism to understand how humour operates on many intersecting and distinctive senses and sensibilities.

Chapter 1: America Love Me Long Duk Dong

My first language was Hoisan-wa but the first accent I ever heard was my father's public school accent, the old Queen's English. The first time I heard *Me love you long time*, it wasn't

from the lips of a Vietnamese sex worker (Papillion Soo Soo) in Full Metal Jacket; it was from my PoPo. I don't think she was referencing the Kubrick film; she was just playfully communicating her affection to me—I wanted to laugh—but how could I tell her that she might as well have said, *Me so horny*? It would have evoked the same shameful rush of anger in me. Why can't my grandmother tell me that she loves me without it calling to mind the hypersexualized stereotypes of Asian (and Asian American) women as "Lotus Blossoms," "Dragon Ladies," or "studious female nerds"—whose bodies are the exotic objects of fantasy and eternally othered (Seethaler 117, Chou 21)?

The term Asian has historically referred, and can still refer, to many of the same things as "Oriental" once did. It's an invisible divide and a catch-all category, a continent, and a tag for pornography. As Edward Said argued in *Orientalism*, Europe has continually feminized the Orient: "Orientalism itself... was an exclusively male province. Like so many guilds during the modern period, it viewed itself and its subject matter with sexist blinders. This is especially evident in the writings of travellers and novelists: women are usually the creatures of a male power-fantasy. They express unlimited sensuality, they are more or less stupid, and above all they are willing" (207).

The white Eurocentric binary ideology that Said describes in Orientalism holds up the "masculine" West as the protector of the "feminine" East, and the vantage from which "otherness" is projected. In *Asian American Sexual Politics*, Rosalind Chou points to Orientalist dynamics as the "root of Asian emasculation" for men and the "marginalized femininity" of Asian women in America (11). Chou argues that although Asian Americans share some of the same racialized experiences in the face of white supremacy, these experiences manifest differently across gender, class, and sexuality. At the same time, Chou notes that though "racial

stereotypes can and do change over time," ultimately their "meaning remains the same—people of colour are inferior to whites" (9). She states that "Asian American women have consistently been constructed as sexually available for white men," and images of "sexually available" Asian women, which frequently centre East Asian women, to the exclusion of South Asian and Southeast Asian women, have been globalized through mass media (9). This eroticization and fetishization have consistently relied on the stereotype of Asian women as "'whores'" (16).

Chou charts a "different shift" in the gender stereotypes affecting Asian American men, noting that "unlike other men of colour in the United States…they, exclusively, have gone through an emasculating, castrating process" (9). Chou refers to the scholarship by historian Ronald Takaki to outline how male Chinese immigrants to North America in the nineteenth century were described using racist, anti-Black language. For instance, in a call to exclude Chinese immigrants, the editor of the *San Francisco Alta* stated that "Every reason that exists against the toleration of free blacks in Illinois may be argued against that of the Chinese here" (cited in Chou 10). Takaki argues that negative stereotypes used to characterize African American/Black men as "[H]eathen, morally inferior, savage and childlike… lustful and sensual" were levelled against Chinese men (cited in Chou 10). In *Stranger Intimacy*, Nayan Shah asserts that "[W]hite Americans and Canadians feared labor competition, interracial marriage and sexual seduction, and disease" (20). These white insecurities manifested in the political debates, fiction, and newspapers in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries: "fears of Chinese men kidnapping white women and addicting them to opium and of Japanese and Filipino men courting and seducing naïve European immigrants and other white women" (20). Shah argues that the discursive frenzy around the need to "protect white women and girls from ethnic Asian men prompted miscegenation legislation throughout the West" (20).

However, this sexually threatening image of East Asian men eventually "disappeared from discourse and, like a pendulum, has swung to the opposite end of the spectrum" (Chou 9). While some scholars argue that the shift in the stereotype of Asian masculinity arose from their "feminized labour" in the "domestic realm" of restaurants and laundries, this argument neglects the contributions of Asian men to agriculture and the construction of the railroad (10). Chou instead proposes that hegemonic Western constructions of masculinity focused on "size" as a measure of "sexual dimorphism," as well as Western notions of Orientalism, contributed to notions of Asian male emasculation and desexualization (60). This created a stereotype of Asian male impotence that in turn reinforced the depiction of Asian women as sexually available. Though Orientalist dynamics differ across gender lines—from hyper- to hypo- sexualization—the extremes they represent are used to reductively confine Asian experiences of love and sexuality in the service of white hegemony. Some utterances have endured and essentialized for many decades. In "Those 5 Words," Thuc Nguyen traces the origins of *me love you long time*. The inescapable phrase was culturally immortalized in 1989 when the *2 Live Crew* track "Me So Horny," which samples Papillion Soo Soo's oozing female vocals from the aforementioned film, hit #1 on the Billboard Hot Rap Tracks and #26 on the Hot 100 (Kaufman, Nguyen). Nguyen notes the pervasiveness of the phrase in mainstream media from movies and animated sitcoms like *South Park*, *Family Guy*, *40 Year Old Virgin*, and *Tommy Boy* to songs by Fergie, Nelly Furtado, and Mariah Carey. Nguyen traces how a phrase that specifically stereotyped Vietnamese women developed into a more general racist shorthand that became a way to put down any "Asian-looking woman virtually unchecked." She argues that because of the specificity of the attack—the association of Asian women with accents and sex work—"only women of the Asian diaspora should be reclaiming it." Nguyen interviews Bing Chen, founder of Gold House

Collective, a self-described "cultural ecosystem that unites, invests in, and champions Asian Pacific leaders to power tomorrow for all," who observes that: "Stereotypical mockery seeks ownership. Phrasing like this compartmentalizes how communities are spoken to, how they're (mis)treated, and, therefore, what they are capable of achieving within the 'owner's' system. But to paraphrase Toni Morrison, definitions do not belong to the defined—they belong to the definers. Halting the persistence of racist sentiments isn't just incumbent on the perpetrators—it's up to us [the people who are stereotyped by them]." Despite such cogent critical analysis, *me love you long time* probably won't disappear overnight. While now fully divorced from the context of the Vietnam War, the phrase is still deeply embedded in an Orientalist framework that upholds hegemonic understandings of the East as a feminized "other" apparently available to be exploited by the Western "you" she addresses.

It might be tempting to think of accent comedy as a relic of the past. Consider the widespread criticism of Mickey Rooney's yellowface[4] portrayal of the myopic bucktoothed Mr. Yunioshi in the 1961 cult classic *Breakfast at Tiffany's*, for instance – a portrayal that both Mickey Rooney and director Blake Edwards "publicly expressed regret for fashioning" (Phruksachart 94). In *Hollywood Goes Oriental* Karla Rae Fuller unpacks the implications of yellowface performance and the various critical responses towards Rooney as Yunioshi upon the film's release. The *Motion Picture Daily* praised the actor's performance as "good for several slapstick laughs" (191), and the *New York Times* described it as "broadly exotic" (Weiler). Reviews in *Variety* and the *Hollywood Reporter* noted the offensiveness of Rooney's "caricature" (191-192). As Melissa Phruksachart documents in "The Many Lives of Mr. Yunioshi" in the

[4] For detailed documentation of yellowface on stage (and, to a lesser extent, on screen) and its history, see Esther Kim Lee's *Made-up Asians: Yellowface during the Exclusion Era* (2022). For a specific examination of yellowface, minstrelsy, and vaudeville, see Krystyn R. Moon's *Yellowface: Creating the Chinese in American Popular Music and Performance*, *1850s-1920s* (2005).

summer of 2011, protest arose over a free screening of the film in a New York park (94). Rather than switching out the film, the programmers responded by preceding the film with a short documentary on the history of yellowface produced by the Media Action Network for Asian Americans (MANAA) (94).

Although Hollywood's yellowface castings have been denounced and reconsidered in recent decades, the stereotypes persist. The fact of the matter is that Asian actors have also been and still are complicit in perpetuating unsavoury stereotypes in their onscreen portrayals. One notorious example is Gedde Watanabe, a Japanese-American actor, who impersonated the accent of a Korean acquaintance to portray a Chinese foreign exchange student, Long Duk Dong, in the 1984 rom-com *Sixteen Candles*—the first in a series of coming-of-age films by director John Hughes. For readers unfamiliar with the Donger, does *Ooh sexy girlfriend?* ring a bell? Watanabe's character's name, Long Duk Dong, is itself a standard "unfortunate translation" joke about how Asian names resemble English sexual slang (e.g. Fook Mi and Fook Yu from the 2002 film *Austin Powers in Goldmember*). Naming an Asian male character "Long Dong" plays with the stereotype that "Asian men have small penises" (Chou 60-61). This particular race-based sexual stereotype, in conjunction with the stereotype that Black men have large penises, silently casts white penises and, by extension, white bodies as normative (Grov et al. 225). Dong is a Chinese foreign exchange student in suburban America who speaks in broken English and regularly gets called "a Chinaman" by the white characters. Every one of his entrances onscreen is mysteriously accompanied by the clang of a gong.

Alison MacAdam's special series for *NPR* entitled "In Character" examines fictional characters who have left a mark on American culture. In MacAdam's words, the mark Dong has

left is more of a “stain.” *Giant Robot*[5] co-founders Martin Wong and Eric Nakamura describe how the taunts they heard at school were shaped by this character. "If you're being called Long Duk Dong," Wong explains, "you're comic relief amongst a sea of people unlike you.” Worse, says Nakamura: "You're being portrayed as a guy who just came off a boat and who's out of control. It's like every bad stereotype possible, loaded into one character.” Watanabe himself confesses that “most people know me as Long Duk Dong...which is still hard for me to say” and admits he was a “bit naive” about performing in his breakout role. Kevin Smokler interviewed Watanabe for *Vulture* in 2014, thirty years following his infamous performance as Dong. Smokler defends Watanabe’s performance by emphasizing the sheer number of stereotypical characters in the film, “the blonde queen bees, the uptight grandparents, the bratty little brothers, the Greek in-laws” and the fact that they all serve to make Samantha “Sam” Baker’s (Molly Ringwald) “very normal desire for a great 16th birthday and a handsome boyfriend seem that much funnier.” While I, and many other people, have cringed at the Donger, this interview raises an important question about how much responsibility for the stereotypical character should be placed on Watanabe’s shoulders. “I feel bad for the guy in the end because he's had to live with the fact that all these Asian-American men hate him," says Nakamura and as Wong adds: "It's baggage for him just like it's baggage for us” (MacAdam).

In “Racial Accents, Hollywood Casting, and Asian American Studies,” Shilpa Davé draws on Kristen J. Warners’s scholarship on colourblind television casting to explain how, historically, industry executives, producers and casting agents have tended to privilege “physical difference or the visual contrast with the dominant white characters,” and how Hollywood in

[5] *Giant Robot*: formerly a bi-monthly punk-minded Asian & Asian-American pop culture magazine which ran from 1994-2010, and currently exists as an online retailer and art gallery @ https://www.giantrobot.com/.

general has tended to define "progress in diversity…at the level of skin colour" (143). So-called "colourblind" casting is facilitated by privileging "race-neutral" or white characters, so that when actors of colour are cast, the backstory and dialogue fail to reflect ethnic or racial experiences (143). The general lack of diversity in representation or the overemphasis of racial or ethnic characteristics are to blame for very limited roles available in Hollywood for Asian American and other nonwhite actors. Asian American actors therefore face unemployment or they compromise by taking on a stereotypical or awkwardly racially neutral role "in the hope it will lead to a successful series with good money and exposure or wait for (or create) another role that allows for some variety and flexibility" (143). When it comes to the use of accents in these limited roles for Asian actors, they may reinforce dominant hierarchies of racial difference, upholding white supremacy and perpetuating notions of Asian "otherness."

But can we disavow accents completely? Do accents always serve as a painful reminder of how some people fail to see beyond them? Is it possible to skillfully reclaim them? Stereotypes are cultural shorthand, a convenient generalization. In comedy, stereotypes can sometimes subvert expectations, recasting perceived "otherness" as a familiar point of reference and allowing people "in the know" to recognize and represent themselves to one another. Can we be goofy, lewd and irreverent without making a Dong of ourselves?

Chapter 2: Standing Up, Chinking Out, and Speaking Up

I was cancelled in 1994, so I'm kind of safe? Like, I was cancelled so long ago, it's like: I invented the cancellation. I started the cancellation.

—Margaret Cho[6]

[6] See "Comedian Margaret Cho: 'I Invented the Cancellation."

A more celebrated example of accent comedy is in Margaret Cho's groundbreaking 2002 special *Notorious C.H.O.—Filmed Live in Concert*, which features a seven-minute-long bit, "Daddy Gay Story," in which Cho impersonates her mother in a thick Korean accent. Cho's stand-up represents a turning point in the history of Asian representation in English language comedy. Cho's comedy has been described as "loud," "unapologetic," and "messy" (a euphemism for controversial). In a 2015 interview for *Salon*, Kevin Wong opens his interview with Cho by admitting his discomfort with Cho's comedy. He references a specific joke at the 2015 Golden Globes in which Cho parodied a goose-stepping North Korean complete with accented English. The moment made him laugh but also made him "worry what non-Asians will think." Cho responds by tying the controversy to the experiences she had with white ABC producers getting offended by the reclamatory title of Eddie Huang's *Fresh Off the Boat* and their desire to rename the show "*Far East Orlando*." She claims that white people shouldn't feel offended by

> Asian caricature and react on behalf of people of color. What I found interesting was that I was the only Asian American person at the awards. I was the most Asian American thing about the awards! There were no nominees… I think Julie Chen was in the audience, but that was the only one I saw...There's no [Asian] presence at these awards shows. Almost ever. That is, to me, more offensive than whatever I'm doing. I was acting on behalf of myself and [this problem of] Asian silence and Asian invisibility when dealing with something that's very big.

Wong observes that for Cho it seems a given that Asians wouldn't be offended, that "they would get it." He presses her to talk about the possibility of people misinterpreting her caricature and the pressures that come with belonging to a so-called "model minority." She responds by saying

that she "can't think that far in advance" and reiterates, "It's not like we have that much visibility... Every image becomes so vitally important, because we're really not given that many jobs or opportunities to speak. So, you don't think about it that much. I'm also from a different generation; I'm just grateful for anything I get. I don't know what I'm doing. And I'm sure it's fine." Wong acknowledges that Cho's perspective certainly seems "less exhausting" than metacognitive second-guessing about being the absolute "best Asian." He concludes that the image of an Asian person parodying Asian people and making jokes is certainly a preferable alternative to watching a white person tape their eyes back and speak in an accent that makes it clear that they've never deigned to listen ("White People"). That Cho bravely makes a mess and lets the rest figure it out is a sentiment shared by Elaine Chun in "Ideologies of Legitimate Mockery: Margaret Cho's Revoicings of Mock Asian," which also contemplates that faking an accent is a privilege afforded to Cho by virtue of her identity.

Cho's specific mélange of Asian and LGBT humour resists assumptions that there is any "right way" to be queer and Asian. As Cho claims in *Notorious C.H.O.*, "I never saw an Asian on television or in the movies, so my dreams were somewhat limited. I would dream maybe someday I could be an extra on M*A*S*H. Maybe someday I can play Arnold's girlfriend on Happy Days. Maybe I could play a hooker in something. I would look in the mirror and practice *Sucky-fucky two dollar. Me love you long time*" (41:32-42:40). Cho's bit illustrates how the lack of representation of Asian American women in the entertainment industry stunted her ability to envision playing anything other than very limited roles and indirectly alludes to the failure of her own cancelled sitcom *All-American Girl* as well as the simultaneous pressure she felt from network executives to be a "bankable" lead and from Korean-American community leaders to be a "good representative" and a "good role model." Willett and Willett argue that "queer humor

treats intersectionality to the cathartic dynamic of energy and eros that Foucault, like Collins and Lorde, has called freedom" (43). They describe Cho's identities as "intersectionality, and then some" (43), proposing that by overplaying the stereotypes of Asians in America, Cho "asserts her agency and undermines the stereotype" (43). When asked if she is gay or straight, Cho throws all dichotomies out the window and insists she is neither but instead a "slut" (quoted on 43).

When performing her "Daddy Gay Story" bit Cho resembles Richard Pryor in her physicality: the mock Asian accent contorts Cho's body and features throughout her delivery. For some audiences, her performance style harkens to a dark era of stereotypes and tokenization. For others, it revels in the opportunity Asians now have to mock themselves. *Notorious C.H.O.* opens with interviews of Cho's fans outside the venue, many of whom express appreciation by repeating her jokes. The fan interviews are featured alongside separate interviews of Cho and her parents. Outside the Paramount Theatre in Seattle, fans brandish signs with slogans like "Cho4Pres," "Cho Hag," and "Slut Pride" (16:43). A masculine Asian fan blinks rapidly at the camera, "WHY YOU EYE SO BIG THEY SO BIG THEY LIKE DIS" then giggles. "Her doing her mother is my favourite character," another (blonde and presumably white) fan says. Before the camera cuts back to the previously featured masculine fan yelling, "DON'T MARRY WHITE MAN!" and vigorously shaking his head. Another fan announces, "I'm gonna do her [Margaret Cho] when she tries to do her mother—," but he is abruptly cut off by a reel of Asian women saying, "…I'm sure that we have the same mother" (18:25). The special also includes separate interviews of Cho and her parents who talk about the risqué nature of their daughter's performance:

Mrs Cho: She's joke of me. The way I'm talking, my accent, you know. And she, she makes a very good impression of me." (18:52-58).

Mr Cho: It's really embarrassing, you know, to listen to her joke in some sense because she's talking about sexual matters, which you do not talk about in front your children or your parents. But on the other hand, this is the matter that is so close to all of us, right? There's something to think about. Something to be laughed at, right? I don't think there's anything to be embarrassed about, right [laughs]?

Mrs Cho: Right. [chuckles] (19:23-56)

Meyer underscores the high degree of polysemy in Cho's cultural commentary and comedic rhetoric. From a "western" vantage, Cho is critical of anti-Asian racism in America, while from a "Eastern" vantage, Cho "is American culture" and her performance is "potentially foreign to Asian culture" (285). In this way, Cho's comedy rejects the binary view of American and Asian identities. Her mock Asian accent alongside her exaggerated facial expressions (squinting) convey a stereotype of Asian women with slanted eyes (286). She positions herself as American by contrasting her more relaxed voice and features with those of her mother. Yet this stereotype still serves a subversive function. As Chun demonstrates in her analysis of Cho's mock Asian, certain characteristics are unique to the accent Cho performs as her mother (270-272).

In "Daddy Gay Story" Cho recounts a conversation with her mother about gay people: "I always thought my mother was conservative but she had a really interesting attitude toward gays: *Because, I think everybody a little bit gay. You know, if you have a friend and you like your friend so much you don't know what to do, that's kind of gay*." (48:00-47) When Cho speaks as her mother (*italics*), she employs her "mock Asian" accent rather than her standard American

English. Cho's joke about her mother thinking everyone is "a little bit gay" resists typical colonial oppositions between the West as tolerant of difference and the East as uncivilized (Meyer 286). In their essay entitled "You Gotta Get Chinky with It!" Laury Lowrey and Valerie Renegar address how Cho's humorous approach to race has been the focus of backlash from Asian Americans: some of her "predominant critics come from within the Korean and Korean-American communities" (3). Lowrey and Renegar examine the development and performance of Cho's most memorable character: "her impression of her traditional, conservative, Korean mother" (4). They highlight what they call the "bicultural otherness" of Cho's identity and comedy, her ironic essentialization of Asian identity, and her use of self-deprecating stereotypes to convey a unique perspective that may "deconstruct or reinforce" stereotypes depending on the audience perspective (23).

Notorious C.H.O. certainly paved the way for subsequent waves of Asian comics, including Atsuko Okatsuka, Ali Wong, Nora Lum (Awkwafina), Irene Tu, Jenny Tian, and Robin Tran, to express themselves from numerous "subject positions: Asian, American, woman, queer, etc." (Meyer 288). Like Cho, Okatsuka, Wong, Lum, Tu, and Tran observe the tensions and affections between familial generations: they tell jokes about immigrant parents, language barriers, and cross-cultural misunderstandings. But few if any of this next generation of comedians play the same sort of accented characters that led to Cho's fame in the late 90's and early 00's.

On the other hand, more recently, some comedians and other entertainers have been rewarded for successfully mastering an Asian accent. Jimmy O. Yang's breakout role as the disagreeable Mandarin-accented Chinese tenant, Jian-Yang, in the HBO comedy *Silicon Valley* has led to various other projects, including a part in the 2018 movie adaptation of Kevin Kwan's

bestselling *Crazy Rich Asians*, a memoir entitled *How to American: An Immigrant's Guide to Disappointing Your Parents*, two self-produced stand-up comedy specials, *Good Deal* in 2020 and *Guess How Much?* in 2023, and a lead in Taika Waititi's episodic adaptation of Charles Yu's award-winning novel *Interior Chinatown*. In *Good Deal*, Yang addresses his accented portrayal of Jiang-Yang in his opening bit about Asian representation in Hollywood:

> I don't know if you guys remember this, just three years ago, there was a movie called *The Great Wall*. [sparse audience laughter and oohs] Starring Matt Damon. [audience chuckles] It was a real movie. It was Matt Damon in ancient China fighting dragons and shit, and everybody spoke English? [audience laughs] I said, what the fuck is this? But you gotta understand. I'm not mad at Matt Damon, OK? He's an actor. That's what he does for a living. That's how he gets a check. I get it [x2]. If somebody were to offer me a lead role in a movie called "Mount Rushmore," [audience laughs] I would play the shit out of George Washington, you know what I mean? [audience laughs, cheers, and claps] No shame in my game. I'll play George Washington Carver if they let me. [audience laughter, gasp] That's a black guy, by the way. I don't know if you know.
>
> [audience laughter]
>
> Gotta represent, man! I see a lot of people out here in the streets; they want to come up to me but they not really sure… [audience laughing] There's a lot of debate amongst their friends; they're like, "Hey man, are you sure that's him?" [audience laughing] "If we go up there, we really gotta be sure. [imitates a fan pointing] Because if we go up there and it's not him, we're gonna look super racist."
>
> [audience laughing]
>
> Are you sure that's not Ken Jeong?"

[audience laughs]

"I don't know. It kind of looks like Ali Wong. I don't know. "

[audience laughter increases]

And then they come up to me, and it's always the first thing they say, "Hey man! Aren't you Jian-Yang from that show *Silicon Valley*?"

[audience cheers]

Thank you, thank you. I appreciate that. Yeah, I am. And then they're like, "Oh shit! I didn't know you speak English in real life!"

[audience gasps]

Like it's called acting motherfucker! Like, did you really think Matt Damon was Chinese? Like what's wrong with you?!

[audience laughter]

I don't know what the disconnect is like. A white actor does a British accent; he's a thespian, he wins an Oscar. If I do a Chinese accent I'm automatically from the 'Old Country.'

[audience groans and laughs] (1:45-3:48)

Yang calls out the way whiteness is centred in Hollywood's narratives about Asia when he mocks Matt Damon's performance of a white mercenary in a fictionalized "Ancient" China. Noting the absurdity of such casting, Yang compounds that absurdity by imagining a scenario in which he is cast as a Black or white historical figure. He points out the double standard that attributes the success or failure of accented performances by white actors to their individual talents (or lack thereof) while any believable Chinese accent by an Asian actor is not even understood as a performance at all. Taken together Yang's bit addresses several stereotypes

simultaneously: the myth that all Asians look alike, the mishmash of Asian ethnicities in Western media, and the feminization of Asian men.

The racialized desexualization of Asian men and the pressure to "be a good Asian everywhere" are further examined in later jokes (4:50):

> Everywhere I go, I got to represent. Even day-to-day shit, even the bedroom I got to represent. [audible ooh, audience gasps and laughs] After I hooked up with this one girl, this is what she said to me. She was like, Jimmy, um I don't know how to tell you this but you're the first Asian guy I've ever been with. I'm like, OK. [audience laughter] What do you want, a fortune cookie? [audience laughter increases, claps] Like, wha? [gestures at himself] Like, what do you want? She acted like she just unlocked a new character on *Street Fighter* or some shit. [audience laughter] Why do you feel the need to say that? This one girl said this shit that was so disrespectful. This is what she said to me after we hooked up. She was like, Jimmy, um I'm just glad the stereotype's not true. [audience groans audible ooh] You don't have a small penis. I'm like, bitch, you understand you just insulted my entire race of people? [audience laughter] But thank you. [audience laughter increases] First of all, thank you for thinking that I did have small penis, and we still had sex. [audience laughter] You're the real MVP. [audience laughter] You get two fortune cookies tonight, miss. [audience laughter increases, cheers] Thank you. But that's a fucked up stereotype, right? That's not even true. That's a fucked up stereotype. Everyone should have average dick until proven guilty. [audience laughter] I don't care how tall you are, what ethnicity you are, how big your hands are. Everybody should start at average dick, 8 inches. [audience laughter] And we go from there. (5:22-6:00)

Asking "What do you want a fortune cookie?" Yang invokes a specifically Asian American treat and common courtesy dessert, raising questions about how stereotypes animate our desires. Yang also points to the commodifying nature of stereotypes, implicitly comparing his body to Chinese food or a character from a game and genre known for its stereotypical representations. Another racist post-sex comment Yang plays with is a backhanded compliment about the size of his penis. When a partner attempts to "uplift" him by way of a contrast with racial stereotypes, she disparages his "entire race of people" in the process. Yang calls this partner a "bitch," then thanks her and offers her "two fortune cookies," dynamically escalating then diffusing her dehumanizing "flattery." In Yang's closing joke, he calls for all penises to be deemed "average" until proven "guilty." In proposing a standard of eight inches, Yang acknowledges the hypermasculine absurdity of all jokes about dick size.

The real-life repercussions of Yang's accented performance are evidenced in the racist fan interactions he comedically (re)narrates. Though some of these interactions are spurred by the audience's familiarity with Yang's performance as an accented character, many others reveal pre-existing prejudices and general ignorance. Yang juxtaposes descriptions of meeting fans in real life with humiliating post-hookup conversations, illuminating the way anti-Asian racism and stereotypes regularly influence both distant and intimate relationships. Is mining the behaviour of fans and potential romantic/sexual partners for comedy a form of complicity? Arguably it is, but my own sense is that it is more of a comic callout: "thank you for the love but fuck you (for fucking me) too."

So what does it mean that Yang has performed with an accent? In a 2018 interview for the *HuffPost*'s Kimberly Yam, Yang compares Asian to Asian-American experiences, which have informed his decision to play accented roles:

> Even in Hollywood, in acting in general, there's this discussion of character representations and ethnic representations. I know some actors who will not even audition for a role with an Asian accent. I empathize with that but I completely disagree with that because that's the same kid who didn't want to hang out with me in high school or middle school — that Asian-American kid who didn't want to hang out with the foreign kid because they think it makes them look bad. I understand the whole constant foreigner stereotype but for me it's important to portray immigrant characters like Jian-Yang and Danny Meng with humanity. It's maybe a better thought to change the perception of an accent than to avoid it all together. I take offense [when people don't go for parts with accents] — it's like saying, 'I'm better than my immigrant brother with an accent.'

Here Yang adopts the offensive position. He connects the aversion to Asian accents with the privileged American experience. Like Cho, he makes use of accents when speaking in the voices of his immigrant parents in his stand-up:

> But then after I graduated, I didn't want to do, like, econ or finance. So I went up to my dad, I was like, Dad, I don't wanna do any of this. I want to go try and do stand-up. He was like, [vocal breathiness] *what's a—what's a stand-up? You mean like a talk show?* I was like, yeah, sure talk show, whatever you want to call it, OK. But I want to go pursue my dreams. And he was like, *no. Pursue your dreams how you become homeless*. I was like no, no, Dad, Dad, It's—things are different now. We're in America, OK? In America, we're supposed to do what we love. He was like, *no*. [audience laughs] *Everyone does what they hate for money and use the money to do what they love*. [audience applause and cheers] (*Good Deal* 30:35-31:16).

Yang's use of an accent to depict the character of his father distances him from his Chinese family and their immigrant expectations and aligns himself with the idealized American dream. He characterizes himself as a person wanting to pursue a career that he can't even really be bothered to translate in contrast to his father's old-world pragmatism. The punchline, in his father's accent, delivers the wisdom that life in the United States *isn't* different. What Yang has viewed as an East v. West problem is really a question of idealism v. realism. Yang's father's comeback spurs cheers from the audience. But his viewpoint is ironically undermined by Yang's presence on stage, doing what he loves and succeeding at it: proving his father wrong. However, by the end of the bit, Yang's father will steal the last laugh, as Yang explains how his father has followed his own showbiz dreams to a role in the successful mainland Chinese sitcom *Xiao Ba Ba*, and upstaging his son. The trajectory of Yang's accented father-persona, a representation of the "othered" immigrant perspective, intersects and parallels Yang's own American success story. In this way, Yang playfully subverts stereotypes of immigrant parents as joyless and dreamless hard workers.

Chapter 3: Accent Comedy for the Internet Era: The Rise of Uncle Roger

I first saw an Uncle Roger video on *YouTube* during the first COVID-19 lockdown. Amid the global pandemic, many performers, comedians, and actors found their usual performance venues closed and their livelihoods compromised. Many, like Nigel Ng, turned to the internet, uploading sketches and podcasts and workshopping all kinds of jokes on social media. Ng's stand-up earned him a nomination for the "Best Newcomer Award" at the 2019 Edinburgh Fringe Festival. However what really launched his career was a video of him in the character of Uncle Roger criticizing a fried rice recipe titled "Uncle Roger DISGUSTED by this Egg Fried Rice Video (BBC Food)." The character was one of a roster of characters that Ng had been developing

on his podcast, including a smutty late-night radio DJ and an Asian parody of a right-wing talk show host, Nunchuck Jones. Uncle Roger, as he first emerged, was a sitcom character by writer, comedian, actress Evelyn Mok, Ng's former *Rice To Meet You* podcast co-host ("Keep Screwing Up"). Uncle Roger is essentially Ng with his leg up on a chair, wearing an "unfashionable" dad-like orange polo shirt and speaking in a mostly Cantonese accent peppered with Malaysian slang. He is always critical, but ultimately well-meaning. The original "weejio"[7] has well over 39 million views, and his regular uploads have earned him over 10 million *YouTube* followers and 11.1 million on *TikTok*. With the success of Uncle Roger Ng has hooked brand deals, a restaurant (FUYIOH! It's UNCLE ROGER) in his birth city of Kuala Lumpur[8], and collaborations with celebrity chefs like Gordon Ramsay, Nick DiGiovanni and Martin Yan and celebrity performers like Jimmy O. Yang, Simu Liu, and Jeremy Lin.

In an interview with Andrew Limbong for *NPR*, Ng notes that he combined three winning formulas: the YouTube reaction video, character comedy plus "something relatable like food." Despite the obvious appeal of Ng's comic formula, Uncle Roger is not uncontroversial. In the video description of his own *YouTube* video about egg fried rice, chef and cookbook author J. Kenji López-Alt preempts comparisons to Uncle Roger: "I don't like that [Ng's] schtick seems to give a free pass to people to imitate stereotypical Asian speech patterns and pronunciation (especially as it's almost always non-Asians doing the imitating). It's ugly, it's yellowface, it's not funny, and it promotes anti-Asian racism at a time when Asians are already being heavily discriminated against."[9]

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[7] All of Ng's "Uncle Roger" descriptions use the spelling "weejio" instead of video. e.g The video entitled "Uncle Roger vs CHINA - THE HAIYAA SPECIAL" features the description "This my last weejio…"

[8] See "Uncle Roger Start A Restaurant... And Break World Record."

[9] See "Chicken and Egg Fried Rice | Kenji's Cooking Show."

Similarly, in her op-ed for the *Hong Kong Free Press*, Kat Wolseley argues that Ng's comedic schtick is "throwaway racism." Among Wolseley's numerous concerns are 1) the fact that the "Chinglish accent" isn't Ng's "real" voice; 2) that Ng's content requires "no grey matter" or, in other words, it's unsophisticated or lowbrow comedy; 3) that Ng's stereotypical presentation, his fresh-off-the-boat late-boomer character, is "a Chinese stereotype pulled directly from the 1970s," that is not just reductive with respect to Asian experience in the West but "sets back racial discussions by decades." Wolseley regards Uncle Roger's broken English and pseudo-expertise in woks and rice as a caricature that turns Asians into "one-dimensional beings who live in a parallel cultural bubble." Uncle Roger fans would cite a variety of character details, and Ng might argue that the character is "modelled after [actual] people I see at *kopitiam*, coffee shops, in Malaysia…The know-it-all middle-aged Asian men who sit here, a little bit arrogant [but] ultimately very kind" ("Asian Not Asian" 40:44-41:00). But Wolseley is convinced that Ng's character is not only the laziest, most superficial kind of comedy, but tacitly validates racist mockery: "Consider this: the next time a dimwit walks up to an East Asian chanting 'rice cooker' and 'haiyaa' and asks for a bowl of rice, it is going to be acceptable because a yellow person validated this on his viral videos seen by tens of millions of people." Wolseley, like López-Alt, decries Ng's character as Asian minstrelsy that panders to racists who welcome all opportunities to externalize their private disdain through public laughter.

Ng's comic persona has been banned on Chinese social media. In a short clip from 2023 entitled "Uncle Roger vs CHINA —THE HAIYAA SPECIAL," which currently has over 2.4 million views, Uncle Roger asks an audience member where they're from. When the fan replies "Guangzhou, China," Uncle Roger replies "China. Okay. Good Country [x4]" while making a face then remarks that in fact he has no choice but to say this now because "all the phones

listening (x2).” Uncle Roger taps his phone belt and says, “Long live President Xi” (x2), laughing that doing so will have raised his social credit score. He then asks if he has any audience members from Taiwan. When some audience members cheer, Uncle Roger quips, “Not a real country (x2)” (vs China 1:00). In character, he feels emboldened to mock both Taiwan and the PRC, to play “both sides” in the conflict of “One China” politics, ruffling feathers in a bit that targets the authoritarianism and surveillance of the CCP (“Cancelled by China” 36:14). These bits led to the suspension of Ng’s accounts on the Chinese social media platforms *Bilibili* and *Weibo*. *Weibo*, where Ng had more than 400,000 followers, announces: “The user has been banned from posting as he has violated relevant laws and regulations” (Lin and Davidson). The clip promoting Ng’s special wasn’t posted to either of those platforms. In Ng’s view, his ban was due to “nationalist” users reporting on his Chinese accounts and he remarks that, as a consequence, he “probably won’t be able to go to China or Hong Kong in the indefinite future” (“Cancelled by China” 38:43). But when asked about this censorship, Ng shrugs, “there’s a very trendy term in Mandarin called *rǔ huá* (‘insulting China,’ or ‘humiliate China’ simplified Chinese: 辱华[10])…in the anti-China country circles…humiliating China is the thing everybody goes through because they’re [the CCP] so sensitive. There are three things in life that you do: you were born, you humiliate China, and you die” (“Cancelled by China” 39:44-40:04). In an interview with chef Josh Scherer of Mythical Kitchen entitled “Uncle Roger Eats His Last Meal,” Scherer notes that “Communist parties tend to lack humour occasionally.” Ng, as Uncle Roger, responds, “See, isn’t it nice to be white?” “Yeah,” responds Scherer, “I can just say that.” Uncle Rogers continues, “No problem. Any country let you in. You joke about North Korea? North Korea still let you in.” (14:05-14:15). As Ng astutely observes, it doesn’t matter whether

[10] See Barclay Bram’s “Generation N”: The Impact of China’s Youth Nationalism” for a deeper analysis of online culture’s influence on Chinese youth nationalism and public apology.

he was born in Malaysia, lives in the global North, or resides in the Western world; anything he says about China is more closely scrutinized because of his Chinese ethnicity. He doesn't get to choose his face, but he can play with his accent.

Andrew Limbong's article on Uncle Roger also includes the opinions of NY chef Brian Tsao, who initially felt trepidation and concern over Ng's accented character but was ultimately won over by Uncle Roger's crusade against "MSG misinformation" and, as Tsao puts it, his position as an "ally in the fight against Western chefs giving Asian cooking a bad reputation. Uncle Roger calls out the bulls*** in the exact accent that's meant to demean us. So in many ways, I feel like it's empowering" ("Keep screwing up"). At his best, Uncle Roger comedically insults and appraises Western chefs like Jamie Oliver (a favourite target), Nigella Lawson, and Rachel Ray. Uncle Roger also lampoons institutions like the BBC for their poorly researched attempts at representing Asian food (and, by extension, Asian culture). When Uncle Roger calls Jamie Oliver, *Jamie OliveOil* to make fun of the celebrity chef's use of a traditionally Mediterranean oil and popular Western ingredient in Southeast Asian food, Oliver's culinary authority is as slippery as the mock Asian that facilitates Uncle Roger's pun ("HATE Jamie Oliver" 0:12-16).

In an interview for the *Asian Not Asian* podcast hosted by Fumi Abe and Michael Nguyen, Ng explains and addresses what it means for him to perform an accented character:

> "There's authenticity there. The way I speak. The repetition that's very familiar. The way I repeat my words, the way the English is broken, that's how I spoke when I was growing up in Malaysia, before I learned proper grammar. The words I use, you know, it's Malaysian slang. In Cantonese, in Hong Kong, in China, in Taiwan, it's *aiyah* but in Malaysia, it's *haiya*, so people know there's authenticity there…One challenge I have is Malaysian slang

> tends to have a lot of foreign words in there like *lah*, *loh*, *ma*. So there's a bit of a challenge to do an accent without using foreign words, so that's why there's also a bit of Cantonese accent…to make it a little more accessible" (41:24-49).

In Ng's opinion, Uncle Roger's authenticity as a character lies in the fact that he represents more than Ng's own accented experiences: he is rather an extended amalgamation of transnational observations funneled into a familiar but unfamiliar persona. Ng also addresses what he views as predominantly "Asian American" concerns over his accented performance, which he refutes by emphasizing his own "FOB" (Fresh Off the Boat) status[11] and arguing that Asians offended by his accented comedy have been unduly influenced by the "white gaze" and so are afraid that most people are laughing at them instead of laughing with them. In Ng's words: "I do get why Asians in the Western world get nervous right because you are, you know, maybe people yell at you from outside a moving car, and they're like 'ching chang chong go back to China'—so everybody has…maybe people have a bit of that [in mind]…when I see comments asking 'is Uncle Roger racist?' or 'he's doing racist accent' a lot of it stems from what—sorry to get all academic— I call the 'white gaze.' There's this common sentiment that when you do an accent white people are laughing at you not with you. That seems to be a very common sentiment, right? " ("Asian not Asian" 47:00-47:41). Ng points out that "you can be racist without doing the accent" and that he would rather do an accent than "sound white and put Asian people down" ("Asian not Asian" 50:07-09). Ng, like Cho, equates not seeing the humour in his caricature as a characteristically white preoccupation. He aligns unlaughter and offence with Asian fear of being hypervisibile in a predominantly white society. The white gaze is a concept elaborated and

[11] Ng first left Malaysia in 2010-2011 to pursue university studies in Illinois. He graduated from Northwestern University in 2014, eventually moving to London, England, to work as a data scientist before pursuing work as a full-time comedian in late 2019. He relocated to Los Angeles in 2023 ("Asian Not Asian" 11:43-14:00).

popularized by the Nobel-prize winning American novelist Toni Morrison to describe the pressure towards self-censorship she felt as a Black author. It can be broadly summarized as the idea that the observer of any work of art is generally by default presumed to be white. The white gaze refers to the conscious and unconscious pressure on artists of colour to explain themselves and their work to dominant white audiences.[12]

But Ng's attempts to de-centre whiteness are undermined by his conflation of dominant English accents (Southern English, Canadian, American, Australian) with whiteness when these ways of speaking are, in fact, shared by Asians and non-Asians alike. Ng's claim that he refuses to "sound white" covers over the compromise that he is actually making: he would rather take on a stereotypical accent when making jokes about Asians than reinforce the diction of white supremacy which has been and still is continually policed by white elites. Moreover, Ng believes that his mock Asian performance are divisive only because of how stereotypes are perceived by Asians in America. He claims that he created Uncle Roger to make his parents laugh:

> So when I [first] did stand up in Malaysia last year, I spoke like this on stage, and my parents came. They saw me, but they didn't really laugh because their English isn't that great. And I speak in this neutral accent; it's quite Western and it's quite fast—so they don't get it at all, but then they saw Uncle Roger they understood everything. My sister sent me an insta[gram] story: they were all sitting in the living room together, and my mom was laughing, and dad was laughing. […] They're all laughing, and it was just—I teared up when I saw it y'know the first time you make an Asian parent laugh ("Asian not Asian" 59:12).

[12] See Toni Morrison's comments as part of The Connecticut Forum, in conversation with Frank McCourt and moderator Juan Williams, on May 4, 2001.

For Ng, the Uncle Roger accent and the character are more accessible to Asian viewers than English-language stand-up comedy. The character reminds Ng of home and "how we talk to each other when we let our guards down" ("Keep screwing up"). The mock Asian accent is for Ng a channel for the playfulness and sense of familiarity that he hopes will connect him with observers.

Asia's global rise since the 1980s, and especially China's rapid transformation from a semi-colonial, semi-feudal state to an economic superpower, has propelled international mobility and Western anxieties. As Sylvia Ang and Val Colic-Peisker elaborate in "Sinophobia in the Asian Century," the "much debated decline of the 'West' and the rise of Asia and China are reconfiguring ethno-racial power constellations" (719). In "Racialized (Im)mobilities: The Pandemic and Sinophobia in Australia," Sylvia Ang and Fethi Mansouri similarly note that while "anti-Asian forms of racism are not altogether new phenomena," the global COVID-19 pandemic has led to a "sharp rise in anti-Asian (particularly anti-Chinese) racism worldwide, facilitated by global characterizations of the COVID-19 virus as a 'Chinese virus' or 'Kung flu'" (161). Maybe the Uncle Roger phenomenon reflects a widespread yearning for a familiar and familial caricature. Maybe he makes us feel as though we are all his "nieces" and "nephews" at a time when Asianness and Chineseness are both targets and topics of global political debate. Maybe Asians and non-Asians share a desire for satire about aspects of Asian cultures that so many of us cherish, like food and family. Oh, and, of course, the inevitable shit-talking and complaints.

But when does the use of accents become lazy humour? Especially in shorter formats that court regular uploads to avoid losing audience engagement (see: relevancy), performers are beholden to shadowy algorithms and huge anonymized audiences. Andrew Limbong notes,

"When [Ng and I] met for this interview in the middle of four sold-out shows in New York City, I'd forgotten to ask if he wanted to bring his orange polo for the photo shoot. He brought it with him anyway." Uncle Roger is as much a brand as he is a character, and Ng isn't shy to point out that "Uncle Roger and Nephew Nigel share the same bank account" ("Keep screwing up"). I wonder if the accented character and his signature polo will, like Watanabe's Long Duk Dong, eventually become another awkward piece of baggage in the long list of Asian punchlines.

For now, however, there is evidently demand in Hollywood, on the stand-up stage, and online sketch comedy for Asian accents. As Berlant and Ngai propose in "Comedy Has Issues," "What we find comedic (or just funny) is sensitive to changing contexts. It is sensitive because the funny is always tripping over the not funny, sometimes appearing identical to it" (234). This begs the question of whether THE accent is a type of humour Asians use to "restore their identity and empower their community" or whether it reinforces entrenched stereotypes of Asians in the West as perpetual Others (Seethaler 118)?

Chapter 4: Who (really) Talk Rike Dis?

There is a wide range of accents among English speakers, some as specific as Scouse, others encompassing an entire continent like Australia. What if I talk rike this? Toggle some R's and L's around. When writing about mock Asian accents in this piece, I'm talking about an apparently Asian accent that actually only exists to be performed, an accent that is meant to signify difference as clearly as the colour of your skin, the colour of your hair, or the shape of your eyes. In the Introduction to *Indian Accents*, Shilpa S. Davé theorizes the performance of accents "as a means of representing race and particularly national origin beyond visual identification" (2). While speaking English is a global privilege, speaking it with an accent

indicates difference and highlights the many kinds of marginalization that speakers of English as a foreign language may face (2).

As a speaker of several languages, I am aware of the range of my own accents. In English, I catch tones of my father's BBC English mixed with the cadences of American television, and Canada's unique English-North American in-betweenness. My French is Québecois: hints of *joual* helped me fit in growing up in the Laurentians, and stand out in Francophone Alberta. My PoPo has told me that she wouldn't speak Mandarin because others can always hear her Southern Chinese inflection. "Even in Cantonese, they hear that I speak Hoisan-wa."

L.A.-based comedienne Jenny Yang believes that the stigma surrounding accents will only dissipate when accents are more widely and appropriately used in the entertainment industry: "To erase…accents only reinforces the value system that the dominant culture judges us by [and] to shame each other for the very thing that makes us who we are. That accented population is a part of us, and if we honour it, it can't be used against us" (Yim). The fact of the matter is that a "genuine" Asian accent could be inflected by the sounds of Mandarin, Cantonese, Vietnamese, Japanese, Korean, or Hindi. What Hollywood seems to mean by an Asian accent is "To talk with generic broken English." Maybe if directors knew what they were asking for they would say "Gimme some Chinglish, Cantonese style." Chinglish, akin to Spanglish and Franglais, is a mix of Chinese and English. Joan Pinkham's definition in *The Translator's Guide to Chinglish* (2000) defines Chinglish as "that misshapen, hybrid language that is neither English nor Chinese but that might be described as 'English with Chinese characteristics'" (2-3). Whereas Yanchang and Runqing (1989) define Chinglish as "speech or writing that show the interference of Chinese influence" (cited in Zhao et al 2-3), Zhao et al. note that "although

understanding may not be a problem, Chinglish is considered unacceptable" (3). As Eric S. Henry notes, in "Interpretation of 'Chinglish': Native Speakers, Language Learners and the Enregisterment of a Stigmatized Code," scholarly attempts to distinguish and differentiate Chinglish from "China English" —"correct English that adheres to English norms" while reflecting "China's unique culture and characteristics in its content" (Zhao et al. 2-3)—problematically "enregister Chinglish as a stigmatized linguistic code" to English language learners (Henry 670).

Joel Heng Hartse cites the common saying *long time no see*, as a triumph of Chinglish: that is, the "less-respected, presumably error-ridden version of English in China, not the more refined 'China English' proposed by some scholars" (62). As Heng Hartse documents, *long time no see* seems to have been adopted into mainstream English primarily as a jocular imitation of a non-native English speaker. However, the phrase now serves as a "marker for what Chinglish may become, and in this way, it does the work some linguists have attempted: to convince young Chinese speakers that their English is not bad, or broken, or 'too Chinese' for their interlocutors to tolerate" (Heng Hartse 64). As Hartse observes:

> Most people now believe *long time no see* is one of many Chinese terms that has been legitimately borrowed into English, and that it can lead the way to mainstream acceptance of Chinese English usage that was previously derided as illegitimate. But the discourse around long time no see legitimizes Chinglish and is part of a growing movement to do so; one of my own students in China wrote about Chinglish in an English journal entry: 'I have the right to speak English this way.'' (64-65)

The right to express English differently informs the words of Filipino poet Gemino H. Abad: "The English language is now ours. We have colonized it, too" (cited in Jingxia 28).

If "comedy…is meant to help us figure out what lines we desire or can bear" (Berlant and Ngai 235), then I am ready to carry the cross for Chinglish. Chinglish is a beautiful thing. Isn't it at least a little bit Chinglish to "chow down," or act "gung-ho," or talk about "brainwashing"?[13] Chinese has given English so many beautiful words. And similarly English has given Chinese languages many beautiful words. Hoisan-wa doesn't have a word for cheese so we call it "*chi si*" instead of "dairy curd" because that sounds much less like instant food poisoning. One of the most significant differences between Chinese and English is syntactic. While English is a language of hypotaxis in which grammatical relations organize sentences, in a quest of subjugating order, Chinese languages are frequently organized by parataxis, meaning that sentences are structured by logic relations (Jiangxia 34). The difference lies in how thoughts are organized and reproduced. So when certain entertainers describe accents as a tool "to create identification within the audience, not just ridicule," the identification also occurs on the level of the familiar cultural thought patterns (Yim).

The discourse surrounding Chinglish is a "discourse on modern Chinese identity" (Henry 670), the discourse around Asian-accented representation is a discourse on modern Asian identities. If we speak a certain way at home or within our community, how do we account for the shame and anger of seeing that way of speaking amongst kin reproduced publicly? How should Asian accents be represented in a world where more and more Asian people learn and lay claim to the English language? The "non-serious" frames of mock Asian belie its intimate connection to anti-Asian racism. Yet the meanings of various mock Asian accents depend on a "variety of ideologies about race, nation, community membership, and linguistic legitimacy," which might imbue such performances with the potential for social critique (Chun 286). Are we

[13] Words of Chinese origins according to the *OED*.

making fun of how Asian tongues are molding English in the Anglosphere, or are we laughing at privileged Anglo ears untrained at listening to anyone else? Ultimately, in the contentious and sometimes offensive vernacular of comedy, mock Asian performances can still be sites of authentic Asian representation each of which navigates several competing Asian majority and Asian minority experiences on an increasingly globalized stage.

Finally, for these accents to be truly funny, I do think their speakers and audiences also need to be serious too, at least some of the time. We need to accept mock Asian voices not just as funny voices but also as voices of authority, subversion, and power. And we need to give ourselves space to interrogate, in all seriousness, why we might sometimes laugh at them. I think of the words of *Kim's Convenience* actress Jean Yoon, whose character on the show, Umma, speaks with a heavy Korean accent: “We have a knee-jerk reaction to accents, but it's not so simple sometimes. The laughter can come from the authenticity and the humanity of the moment” (Yim). Accents invite interpersonal and intercultural negotiation. When the woman who named me says, “Me love you long time,” I laugh, and I cry, and I know that she has loved me for lifetimes. Sometimes we’re joking, but often we just want to be really true.

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