

# (Mis)Representations of Asian in Two Comedies Chinese Burn and Fresh off the Boat: A Textual Analysis

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**Abstract:** While some representations of Asian in western media are real and objective, others are stereotypical and overgeneralized. Racial jokes and stereotypes in a comedy format are naturalized, which aims to generate laughter and amuse the audience. This paper uses Fiske's filmic theory to analyze character and narrative construction in two comedies: *Chinese Burn* (UK) and *Fresh off the Boat* (US). The historical reasons and ideologies behind racial representations in films and TV programmes are also discussed. The purpose of this paper is to call for diversified and realistic representation of Asian in global media.

**Keywords:** racial representation, stereotype, comedy, Asian

## 1. Introduction

In the western world, among different racial groups, such as black, Asian and White, racial stereotypes inevitably exist. Racial stereotypes can not only be commonly seen in daily life, but is also frequently presented in the media, such as in films and TV programmes. Although some stereotypes are true, some can be unfaithful or even racist. They can be both implicit and explicit.

### 1.1 Literature review

Fiske's *Television Culture* (1987) is of great help in analyzing the characters and narratives. He noted how an event can be televised through encoding. Reality, level 1, includes social codes such as appearance, make-up, environment, behavior, sound, etc., which are encoded electronically by technical codes. Level 2, representation, involves camera, lighting, editing, music and sound. They transmit the conventional representation codes. Level three, ideology, are organized into social acceptability by the ideological codes, such as race, class, patriarchy and capitalism.

### 1.2 Plan of the following chapters

This paper has three chapters. In the first chapter, I introduce the topic, existing theories and debates in the field. Chapter 2 is the main body of the thesis. In its three sections, cases from the two comedies are analyzed. At last, Chapter 3 concludes the paper.

## 2. Textual Analysis

### 2.1 Comedy and racial representations

The term "genre" means "type" or "category". According to different defining criteria, films and TV programmes can be divided into different genres. For example, when the defining criteria is intended effect, genre includes comedy, horror and thriller (Nelmes, 2003). Films are produced to entertain people and bring pleasure to them. In the same time, they are expected to reflect social problems. Comedies aim to make people laugh.

Stereotypes in comedy are important because they help to construct characters and stereotype-based jokes serve as a source of humor (King, 2002). Some scholars believe that in a comedic format, stereotypic representations are intentionally humorous and racial differences are naturalized through

stereotyping (Park, Gabbadon and Chernin, 2006; Bowes, 1990). Others, however, argue that racial jokes can possibly reinforce racism (Omi, 1989; Hall, 1990). As one of racial minorities in western countries, Asian faces certain stereotypes in the media industry. Levin's study (2017) shows that in Hollywood, Asian men are often relegated to roles as tech nerds, assistants, doctors, while Asian women are often relegated to masseuses and sex workers. In addition, Asian roles in films and television usually have a recognizable Asian accent. In the UK, the representation of East Asians tends to be stereotypical too. "Women are generally depicted as slim, petite, long-haired, submissive 'lotus blossom' types, prostitutes, or illegal immigrants, while East Asian men are portrayed as asexual or effeminate", an actress named Lucy Sheen said in Cheung's article (2018). Asian American actors rarely have the opportunity to play the leading role, even in Asian stories. Whitewashing in Hollywood, which refers to casting white actors to tell Asian stories, touches off debates. For example, Scarlett Johansson plays the leading role in *Ghost in the Shell* (2017), an anime classic. In *The Great Wall* (2016), Matt Damon plays a hero in the Song Dynasty in China. Asian actors calls for more diverse roles in the media industry.

Because of China's rapid development in the recent years, the country and its people attract increasing attention in the global media industry. Some of the presentation of China and Chinese people are true in films and television, while others are incorrect. For example, Hollywood blockbuster *The Amazing Spider-Man* (2015) provide a realistic and inclusive view of Chinatown, while *Pacific Rim* (2013) describes Hong Kong as a city of dishonest and uncivilized monster eaters. While Park, Gabbadon, and Chernin (2006) claim that racial jokes in comedy aims to create laughter, there is still a possibility that people are offended by racial stereotypes. In the recent years, in order to attract Chinese audience to win the Chinese film market, the number of positive and true representations of China and Chinese have been increasing in media. (Homewood, 2018)

Both of the two television programmes I intend to analyze, *Chinese Burn* (2018) and *Fresh Off the Boat* (2015), fall into the category of comedy. These two comedies have many similarities: they are produced and released in the same decade; staff with Chinese cultural background are involved in the production (Yennis Cheung and Shin-Fei Chenby wrote *Chinese Burn* and Eddie Huang is one of the producers of *Fresh Off the Boat*); they both tell the story of overseas Chinese who live in western countries; both of them contains various representations of Chinese and Chinese culture. However, the two comedies present Chinese people and their culture differently and include different stereotypes.

## 2.2 Introduction of the two comedies

### *Chinese Burn*

*Chinese Burn*, produced by BBC Three in the year 2017, is a British sitcom which tells about the story of three Chinese girls who live in London. Among them are one student, one actress and one Chinese restaurant employee. The comedy, written by two female Chinese script writers, Yennis Cheung and Shin-Fei Chenby, aims to smash stereotypes of Chinese girls in western world. The two writers also play two of the three Chinese girls in the programme. Unfortunately, the 25-minute pilot received serious backlash online after it was released and the sitcom was canceled by the BBC in 2018.

### *Fresh Off the Boat*

The American sitcom TV series *Fresh Off the Boat* follows the Huangs, a Taiwanese family in the 1990s. In the sitcom, the Huang family moves from Washington D.C. to Orlando, Florida to open a steak restaurant and to start a new life. The family, Eddie and his two younger brothers, their parents and their grandmother, need to find a way to fit in the new community and keep their Chinese traditions at the same time. *Fresh Off the Boat* has six seasons and has been nominated for a number of rewards. It has received mainly positive comments and is widely welcomed by different ethnic groups in the USA and the rest of the world. This dissertation focus on the analysis of the first season of the TV series.

## 2.3 Textual analysis

The following textual analysis of two comedies has three sections. According to Fiske (1987), as a discursive construct which reflects ideological positions and values, character is an critical type of textual analysis. Characters in programmes and films are related to not only textual relations, but also broader social relations. In the first section, major characters in the two comedies will be analyzed and compared in terms of racial stereotypes. Representations of Asian in the two programmes are also

discussed through narratives. Last, ratings of the two comedies on Twitter and IMDB is presented.

### 2.3.1 Characters

The production of images help television programmes to become “real” to some extent, as in the eyes of the audience, a characters represent a real person (Fiske, 1987). By calling upon their personal life experience of understanding real people, the viewers fill out the characters in their imagination. Both the production of characters and audience’s reading of them are ideological. A variety of techniques are used to construct characters, such as camera work, lighting, setting, costume and make-up. Suitable costume and make-up can help the presented characters to be more real and understandable for audience. They also suggest the identity and characteristics of the characters.

#### Case 1: Jackie and Jessica: Asian women

In *Chinese Burn*, Jackie, one of the leading characters, is described as an “angry, offensive alpha female”. As a struggling young actress from Hong Kong who came to the UK many years ago, Jackie is often requested to play roles of a prostitute or an illegal immigrant. Although Jackie is reluctant to play such roles, she feels there are no other options. In order to challenge the stereotype of submissive and conservative Chinese girls, this character is represented as a bold and confident figure. She wears a black shoulder vest, dark leather pants, and a lot of accessories, including necklaces, a nose piercing ring, rings of various styles, etc. She also wears heavy smoky eye makeup and dark lipsticks. Jackie’s choice of makeup and costume not only shows her personality, but also helps her to win more auditions. Although this character challenges the stereotype of submissive and quiet Chinese girl, it reinforces another one. Asian women (mainly Japanese women and Chinese women) are presumed to be sexy and exotic in western Europe and the USA, and Asian actresses rarely have the opportunity to play roles other than prostitutes and illegal immigrants in TV and theater (Uchida, 1998; Levin, S. 2017).

The reason behind this stereotype can be associated with orientalism. According to Edward Said (1985), “The relationship between Occident and Orient is a relationship of power, of domination, of varying degrees of a complex hegemony”. Uchida states that the term “oriental” is not only geographical and cultural, but also sexual. While the orient refers to the geographically distant, foreign land of devious cultural practices which is discovered and dominated, the devious, different and inferior women must be controlled and defined by the men. (Uchida, 1998). This image in the western mind is based on European’s experience in the colonies. Taking America as an example, the history of Chinese prostitution can be tracked back to the 19<sup>th</sup> century. (Okamura, 1976). At that time, a large group of Chinese men went to America to work as labors. Because of the high cost of travel and different languages and cultures, the labors rarely brought their wives with them. Many of them depended on Chinese prostitutes in Chinatown to satisfy their sexual needs (Takaki, 1989). Smuggled to the USA, these Chinese prostitutes later became illegal immigrants. Another factor that led to this stereotype is anti-Chinese action in the late 19th century. Chinese women were accused of spreading diseases, stealing the jobs of local whites, and sexual corruption. (Louie, 1975). In *Chinese Burn*, as a Chinese woman in the UK, it seems natural for Jackie to feel offended by this stereotype, especially after she has experienced racial discrimination in auditions. However, in one scene, she mocks Thai, Korean, South Asian and Japanese women by practicing different sexual moans for her coming audition as a prostitute. The scene is filmed by using extreme close-up. This code of camera emphasizes the important of the scene, which aims to impress the audience. Many audience may find the negative representation of Asian women expressed through Jackie offensive.

In *Fresh Off the Boat*, the leading female character Jessica, who is Eddie’s mother, is neither associate with prostitution nor an illegal immigrant. As an immigrant from Taiwan, she lives a happy and ordinary live, similar to many people. She is a middle-class mum who have three children and works as a real estate agent. Jessica is a competitive woman, and the leader in the Huang family. Being busy taking care of three sons and helping her husband Louis to run a steak house, Jessica presents an independent, well-educated, confident woman in the modern society. Comparing to Jackie, this character creates positive image in media industry and successfully challenged the stereotype of submissive, shy and quiet Asian woman.

#### Case 2: Huang Lo and Jessica: Asian accent

In *Chinese Burn*, Huang Lo owns a boba tea shop in the London Chinatown. He is the boss of Jackie’s roommate Elizabeth, one of the three Chinese girls who are the main characters in the comedy. In most times, this short and middle-aged man speaks with a heavy Asian accent. However, his accent keeps changing in the 25-minute pilot. In one scene he speaks with an Chinese accent, in the other he switches to British accent without any particular reason. In addition, his background story is not

showed in the programme, and his changing accent can confuse the audience. In films and television programmes, Asian actors are often required to put on an Asian accent. (Levin, 2017). It is a possible explanation for Huang Lo's changing accent.

Jessica is likely to be many audiences' favorite role in the sitcom *Fresh Off the Boat*. She has a slight Chinese accent, which seems to be a stereotypical representation at first. Accent can reflect a person's origin, educational background, ethnicity, etc. Members of particular religions, ethnic and cultural communities share certain identities and speak the same way. It is true that Chinese people who are of the same ethnic group and are non-native English speakers tend to have a similar accent. As for Chinese-Americans who grow up speaking English, generally they don't have a Chinese accent. However, in western films and TV programmes, Asian actors are usually required to put on an Asian accent, even when they are native English speakers (Cheung, 2018; Levin, 2017). While the representation of Jessica's accent seem to fit into this stereotype, the sitcom cleverly avoids it by providing the cultural reason behind. The viewers can gradually learn from the comedy that Jessica is an immigrant from Taiwan and did not grow up in American culture. It is worth mentioning that born and raised in America, her three sons speak English without any Asian accent, which reflects reality objectively. By providing a background story for the character, *Fresh Off the Boat* respects and values the origin and cultural identity of the minority group in mainstream western media.

Comparing to *Chinese Burn*, *Fresh Off the Boat* successfully challenges the stereotype of submissive and quiet Chinese woman, without reinforcing a different stereotype. Jessica is built as a confident, brave and warm-hearted figure. Although she speaks English with an accent, she is not afraid to speak up for herself in public. She is energetic, competitive and always tries to be the best. She has a good career and a lovely family. The construction of this character is highly successful, because we can relate her to our own life experiences. Fiske (1987) calls television "an essentially realistic medium" because it can construct a sense of reality. Jessica's life story becomes more real when we associate her with people around us, such as our friends and family.

#### Case 3: Eddie Huang: breaking down stereotypes

In *Fresh Off the Boat*, born in Washington and grow up in a Chinese-American family, the central role Eddie, aged 11, enjoys hip-hop music and admires rappers such as The Notorious B.I.G, who is very famous in the 1990s. Although his mother Jessica cannot understand her oldest son's hobby, he insists to dress, walk, and talk like a rapper. In the first scene in episode 1, season 1, extreme close-up presents Eddie trying hip-hop outfits in a shopping center: a pair of sunglasses, a bucket hat, a blue baggy T-shirt, a starter jacket, baggy shorts and sneakers. These typical hip-hop costumes instantly take the audience back to the 90s, and the close-up shot emphasizes Eddie's love of hip-hop fashion and music. Camera is not the only technical code which helps to shape the representation of character (Fiske, 1987). Music serves as another technique which helps to shape the character. Hip-hop music is not only played in the scene which Eddie feels 'cool' with the clothes, but also in almost every episode. The music acts as a constant reminder of Eddie's hobby. Eddie is "the black sheep in the family", because his two younger brothers are obedient and precocious. This unconventional representation of Chinese shows that the diversity of Asian characters in media is encouraged, and efforts have been made to break down racial stereotypes. As Johns (2017) quotes creator and showrunner Nahnatchka Khan, "the Huangs are always the ones who are telling the story, not the ones being looked at in a fish bowl and pointed at ...". As Chinese-American, Eddie certainly shares the ethnic identity. However, he should firstly be perceived as an independent individual who has equal right to have hobbies, study, and work, as any other people in the western society.

#### 2.3.2 Narrative

Apart from characters, narrative also serves as an important category of textual analysis. Comparing to films, television's "now-ness" makes suspense seem more real. In TV series such as sitcoms, it appears that the future is still unwritten, and the story invites viewers to "live the experience". (Fiske; Eaton, 1981). Narrative keeps the audience interested in the unexplained story. In this section, racial and ethnic representations of Asian, more specifically Chinese people are explored through analyzing the narrative in two comedies. A number of cinematic techniques are used to analyze the narrative.

##### Case 1: Chinese parenting style

In Season 1, Episode 2 of *Fresh Off the Boat*, the competitive mum Jessica holds high hope for her three sons. In order to ensure their successes in the future, Jessica is strict with the boys' grades. After Eddie receives straight "A"s in school exams, she decides that school work is not difficult enough. She has a talk with the principle of Eddie's school, asking him to make exams more difficult. As expected,

the principle turns down her suggestion. Being a worried mum, she tries to find a CLC (Chinese Learning Center) in Orlando, their new home. However, unlike their old home in Florida, Orlando does not have a large Asian population, thus does not have CLC. While the central role Eddie finally feels safe, Jessica announced that she plans to run her own CLC at home and educates her children after school. The flashback technique takes Eddie and the audience back to a classroom in the CLC in Florida. Sitting in a classroom full of students, the majority of which are Asians, he turns to the window and watches two white children about his age playing with jealousy. Sunlight outside of the window makes everything so perfect, but poor Eddie has to stay indoor and finish his class. Hermeneutic code creates the sense of past, present and future in television, and controls the flow to attracts viewers' attention (Fiske, 1987).

Elizabeth is another leading character in *Chinese Burn*. She works in a Chinese boba tea shop in Chinatown and dresses up as a boba tea figure to make a living for most of the time. Born in a family with a sister who is an outstanding surgeon, she is eager to prove herself to her parents. In this comedy, Elizabeth is described as a “desperate, self-loathing, failed Chinese daughter”. After a hard day at work, she takes off the suit and sits on the ground besides a homeless man. Then she starts to complain about her parents who want her to be the best in everything and says that “Chinese family are fucked”. As a child, she was forced to learn ballet, martial arts, piano and badminton. She blames her parents for the pressure and her unsatisfying job and life. As she complains, the camera gives two large rubbish bins near them a close-up, emphasizing her hard situation. Similar to Jessica being presented as a tiger mum, Elizabeth's complain can be associated with the ethnic stereotype of ambitious and strict Chinese parenting style.

The term ‘tiger mum’ was created by Chinese-American Law professor Amy Chua in her book, *Battle Hymn of The Tiger Mother*, which tells the story of raising her children to be high-achievers (Hau, 2015). This stereotype of Chinese parenting is partially true. In America, the book has generated discussion about its reinforcement of the stereotyping of Asian-Americans as a ‘model minority’. It generates America's anxiety of awaking China and the diminish of American power. (Hau, 2015). Many Chinese parents, especially those who live in urban area, have high hopes for their children and value education. It is normal for children to go to tutoring schools after class or on weekends. While parents believe it is for the benefit of their children, Hung's research indicates that many students he interviewed claimed to feel unhappy or stressed, rather than being grateful to their parents. He offers the following three explanations for Chinese tiger mums:

- A. the Chinese society values women by the children they raise. Children's achievement are seen as the result of the upbringing of their parents.
- B. believe ‘eating bitterness’ is necessary. Suffering is an honorable path to success.
- C. seems natural for parents to deprive children's individual rights and impose their own will on them.

(Hung, 2011)

Influenced by Chinese tradition and culture, oversea Chinese family tends to follow the same pattern. In the context of comedy, it may be fun to watch the naughty Eddie being trapped with mum and his brothers, trying to finish his homework. However, people may feel offended when Elizabeth being disrespectful to Chinese family.

#### Case 2: Crazy Rich Asian

In *Chinese Burn*, Fufu, Elizabeth's childhood friend, comes from a rich family from Taiwan. The pilot presents her as a “crazy rich Asian”, following by an explanation: “rich-ass nouveau-riche Asian who treats money like it's worthless.” Fufu comes to the UK to study fashion. On her first day in London, when asked to pay for taxi, she takes out a large role of bills. After she arrives at the other two girls' apartment, she calls it a poor people's place. Then she goes to shopping in London's luxurious department stores, and comes out with a pile of shopping bags. This ethnic stereotype is emphasized through warm yellow light and the decorated environment in department stores.

A Boston Consulting Group study in this year reported that China boasts more than 1.3 million households with “assets under management” worth at least \$1 million. In 2016, China ranked has the third largest group the USA. (Lu, 2017). However, it is worth mentioning that China is a country with serious income inequality. In the past five years, China's Gini coefficient remains to be 0.47, while the standard set by the UN is 0.4. Comparing to farmers who live in the countryside, people's income in large cities such as Beijing and Shanghai are way more higher.

Evidently, not every Chinese people is rich. This stereotype has been reinforced by media. For example, Canadian reality television web series, “Ultra Rich Asian Girls”. Introduces the life of rich

Chinese-Canadians. Similar to Fufu, Chinese girls in the reality show love shopping and showing off money. After watching TV programmes and news which contains misrepresentation and stereotypes of Chinese, it is easy for people to overgeneralize this ethnic group, and apply the stereotype on individuals of the group (Hughes and Baldwin, 2002). This stereotype has caused trouble for Chinese who live in or travel to a foreign country. Being perceived as the rich who have the habit of carrying large bills with them, they have a higher risk for theft and street robbery.

In *Fresh Off the Boat*, which is set in the 1990s, the Huangs are common middle-class. In season 1, episode four, Jessica's family who live in Washington D.C. is coming to visit the Huangs. At this time, Louis's steakhouse restaurant has just been opening for a month, and is not making a lot of profit. As for Jessica, she haven't started working at that time. In order to impress Jessica's family, and convincing them that they are living a wealthy and comfortable life, the Huang family make a lot of effort, such as getting a perm, which is a way of showing prosperity for Chinese in the 1990s. When the relatives arrive, the competition between Jessica and her sister Connie starts. Both of them try to find a better deal in the mall to impress their mum, the children's grandmother, whose favorite thing is to stretch a dollar. After trying and buying many strange clothes they neither want nor need, the two sisters finally decide to call a truce. This is not the only scene that shows Jessica's "cheap" character. In season one, episode one, she tries to save cost for her husband's restaurant by blocking the pepper bottles.

Contradict to the ethnic stereotype of rich Chinese in *Chinese Burn*, *Fresh Off the Boat* creates bargain-loving Asian images. The narrative generates laughter among the audience without offending them. Both Chinese and other ethnic groups find humor along ways. After all, everybody loves a good bargain.

#### Case 3: Creepy, emasculated Asian men

In *Chinese Burn*, Elizabeth's boss Huang Lo always wears old T-shirt and loose pants. He is a short, skinny, middle-aged single man who speaks with a heavy Chinese accent. He hits on Elizabeth many times at work and after she tells him that she is not interested, he continues to harass her. After Elizabeth makes a mistake at work and is fired, she tries to get her job back by agreeing to have sex with Lo.

Huang Lo's costume and appearance presents him as an unattractive Asian male, fitting into the unflattering stereotype of weak, geeky, unsexy Asian men in media (Chan, 2015). In the pilot, the three Chinese girls treat White and Asian men completely different. In another scene, a tall white man comes out of Elizabeth (Liz)'s bedroom, calling her by the wrong name 'Lynn', but she doesn't mind at all. Jackie even claims that she would not have sex with any Chinese man, because they make her feel 'dry'.

The misrepresentations in *Chinese Burn* not only dehumanizes Asian men, but also Asian women. People construct images of strangers and adversaries as "others", and dehumanization has been the most persistent mechanism for the construction. For example, in post-civil right era, the illegal immigrants are linked to objects in media and they belong to a racial or ethnical group that is perceived as less than human (Hancock and Jolls, 2013). In the contemporary world, dehumanization still exists. Perceiving Asian men as objects which does not have feelings, Chinese girls hang out with them only for free drinks in the bar, but would never accept them to be their boyfriends. For the Whites in the pilot, Chinese girls are easy to get to and seems to always willing to have casual sex with them. Unable to compete with White males in Chinese women's mind, and being perceived as unattractive, creepy and desexualized in general, Chinese men rarely have the chance to date or marry. These highly problematic representations and ethnic stereotypes of both Chinese men and women suggest white-worshipping and self-loathing. Being expected to write for both the majority White audiences and the minority Asians in the UK, this comedy written by Chinese seems to surrender to the dominant ideology to attract White audiences, and tries to comply it by repeating common racial stereotypes. Chinese Britons are the fourth-largest minority ethnic group in the UK, although they are often referred to as a silent or hidden minority in public life. They await for a platform to present their real culture value and identity. However, *Chinese Burn* seems to fail their expectations.

#### 2.3.3 Researching the audience

Apart from textual analysis, opinions of the audience also plays an important role in evaluating films and television programmes. Fiske (1987) noted the importance of involving the study of socially situated readers and the process of reading. Class, gender, race, age, nationality, religion, etc. of different audience are all factors which can influence audience's reading. Scholars hold different views

on viewers' reading. Hall (1980) argues that social situation of viewer should be valued. Viewers whose class is aligned with the dominant ideology tend to produce dominant reading of a text. On the other hand, viewers who find themselves in opposition to the ideology would produce contradictory reading. For the majority, their position is often somewhere in the middle. Generally, they accept the dominant ideology, but modifies it according to their own situation. Hall believes that the viewers would produce a negotiated text, which takes viewers' social differences into account based on the dominant ideology. Readers of popular television text often enjoy a diversity. Thus, the text is not fixed, but experiences readers' changes all the time (Hobson, 1982). Comedy falls into the category of TV series, which makes it flow more. Audiences are highly involved in the process, waiting for the mysterious ending which seems will never come (Fiske, 1987).

As the first comedy both written and played by Asians in the UK, *Chinese Burn* attracted many attention. However, after the transmission of its pilot, the sitcom was cancelled by BBC, for its misrepresentation of both Asian men and women. On IMDB (Internet Movie Database), a popular online database which provides various types of videos and information related to them, 346 users rated *Chinese Burn* 2.8 out of 10. In contrast, *Fresh Off the Boat*, the second American television sitcom starring an Asian-American family, received 7.9 out of 10, rated by 17168 users.

### 3. Conclusion

To conclude, racial stereotypes of Chinese in a comedy context can be funny or offensive for audiences of different social class, ethnic group, gender, etc. Everyone has his/her own perspective of reviewing scenes. Textual analysis and views of audience suggest the differences between two similar comedies, *Chinese Burn* and *Fresh off the Boat*. The former contains lots of negative racial stereotypes which both Asian viewers and White viewers find offensive, while *Fresh Off the Boat* successfully produces realistic and balanced representation of people of various ethnic groups. Asians in the world call for more realistic and educating films and TV programmes which reflect their ethnical culture and identities.

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