
**Humor about the Lives of Asian Immigrants in the US in
*Ronny Chieng: Asian Comedian Destroys America!***

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ABSTRACT

This article explores humor about the lives of Asian immigrants in the United States as depicted in *Ronny Chieng: Asian Comedian Destroys America!* (2019). The article is conceived through qualitative discourse analysis approach to examine how Chieng utilizes comedic techniques to highlight the challenges and contradictions of Asian immigrant experiences in the US through thematic analysis, the study identifies key themes in Chieng's performance: cultural differences on American consumerism, admiration and dissatisfaction, racial marginalization, and family expectations. The analysis applies Berger's humor theories to understand the construction of humor criticizing American society. By employing exaggeration, irony, language play, high-energy delivery, and reversal, Chieng not only entertains but also provides a platform for the audience to engage with their lives through comedy. The study concludes that humor serves as a powerful tool for discussing Asian immigrant experiences, breaking stereotypes, and fostering empathy. Chieng's stand-up comedy show demonstrates how narrative comedy can be an effective means of social criticism, bridging cultural divides while making complex issues more accessible to broad audiences.

Keywords: *Asian immigrants; comedy; humor; Ronny Chieng; the US*

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INTRODUCTION

Asian immigrants in the United States experience a complex reality shaped by cultural adjustments, structural issues, and social integration (Liana, Adhitya, Kristiawan, 2025, 25). The US Census Bureau (2022) reports that Asian Americans are the fastest-growing racial group in the country, with many arriving as skilled workers, international students, or family-sponsored immigrants. However, despite their economic contributions and high levels of educational attainment, many Asian immigrants face discrimination, stereotyping, and cultural misunderstandings (Lee & Zhou, 2015).

One of the key issues is the perception of Asian Americans as a "model minority", a stereotype that assumes they are generally successful and do not need to face struggles like other immigrant groups. While apparently positive, the stereotype is in fact negative, as it ignores economic and social inequality among the Asian American community (Chou & Feagin, 2015). For instance, while Indian and Chinese Americans have high median household incomes, other groups like Cambodian and Laotian

immigrants experience poverty rates exceeding the national average (Pew Research Center, 2021).

Asian immigrants also face challenges in the workforce. Despite their educational qualifications, many encounter barriers such as workplace discrimination, the "bamboo ceiling", a term used to describe the barriers that prevent Asian Americans from advancing to leadership positions), and difficulties with cultural communication styles (Gee & Peck, 2018). A study by the Economic Policy Institute (2021) found that Asian Americans are underrepresented in executive and managerial roles in the US workforce. Language barriers, cultural differences, and racial biases can hinder immigrants from fully integrating into American society.

A report by the Migration Policy Institute (2021) found that 35% of Asian immigrants experience difficulties due to language proficiency, which affects employment opportunities and social interactions. Moreover, there are higher academic and career expectation pressures for Asian immigrants, normally due to parental expectations and

community perceptions. A study by Kim and Hou (2021) found that 72% of Asian American college students in their first generation reported extreme pressure to be academically successful due to parental expectations. This expectation, while leading to higher educational achievements, also explains mental health concerns since Asian Americans claim lower rates of seeking psychological help due to cultural stigma surrounding mental illness (Wong et al., 2017).

Many Asian immigrants struggle to balance their native cultural values with American societal norms. This cultural duality is also frequently explored in stand-up comedy, a comedy performance using a monologue style of storytelling where the comedian must convince the audience to follow the topic being discussed. In a stand-up comedy show, the Asian comedian highlights the absurdities and contradictions of trying to fit into American society while maintaining his/her cultural roots. Humor becomes a coping mechanism for navigating microaggressions, stereotypes, and generational conflicts within immigrant families (Nakamura, 2020).

Ronny Chieng is one of Asian comedian who is well-known across continents for his

humorous materials about living as an Asian immigrant in the U.S. (Nurhantoro, et al, 2024), His performance, including in *Ronny Chieng: Asian Comedian Destroys America!*, can be seen in Netflix. In this stand-up comedy show, Chieng highlights cultural differences, stereotypes, and the challenges of assimilation. It is similar to common stand-up comedy shows that seem to discuss light humor themes, but there are also serious issues to be revealed (Adhitya, et al, 2022). This study explores Chieng's humor about the life of Asian immigrants in the US focusing on his humor that highlights the challenges and contradictions of Asian immigrant experiences, the key themes in his performance, including cultural differences, stereotypes, consumerism, and identity struggles, and the construction of humor from an Asian immigrant perspective that criticizes American society.

METHODOLOGY

The article was conceived through a qualitative research approach with a discourse analysis method. According to Creswell and Poth (2018), qualitative research aims to "explore and understand the complexity of human behavior, experiences, and interactions". The research examines how humor is built up in a stand-up comedy show *Ronny Chieng: Asian*

Comedian Destroys America! regarding the experiences of immigrants in the U.S. The approach allows an in-depth exploration of comedic techniques, rhetorical strategies, and thematic representations of Asian immigrant life in the US in a comedic context.

The primary data source for this study is the Netflix stand-up comedy show *Ronny Chieng: Asian Comedian Destroys America!*. This stand-up comedy show serves as the main text for analysis, as it directly presents Chieng's comedic narratives, language choices, and performance style. Additionally, secondary sources such as theories, reviews, research articles, and academic discussions on stand-up comedy and immigrant humor were consulted to provide contextual understanding.

DISCUSSION

Thematic Analysis of Humor in Immigrant Experiences

Ronny Chieng: *Asian Comedian Destroys America!* reflects multiple aspects of the Asian immigrant experience: cultural differences on American consumerism, admiration and dissatisfaction, racial marginalization, and family expectations. Each theme is articulated through comedic

exaggeration and satire, drawing attention to contradictions that immigrants face in adapting to U.S. life.

One major theme is cultural differences related to American consumerism. Chieng ridicules Amazon Prime culture by escalating demands to absurdity.

Now. Prime Now. Break into my house... and put the food I ordered in my mouth... and help me chew it! And then push it down my esophagus with a stick. And then pull the feces out of my anus for me now. (Chieng, 2019: 00.07.10 - 00.07.40)

The grotesque imagery critiques excessive consumption, reflecting the outsider's amazement at U.S. abundance. For immigrants from societies where efficiency and frugality are valued, American wastefulness appears both fascinating and absurd. Kuipers (2008) notes that humor often highlights cultural contradictions; here, laughter exposes the irrational extremes of consumer culture.

Another theme is the contradiction between immigrant admiration for the U.S. and Americans' dissatisfaction. Chieng emphasizes how immigrants revere America as "mei guo" [a beautiful country] and the "NBA of nations," only to discover Americans saying,

The New York subway sucks.
Los Angeles traffic sucks.
Statues suck. Standing sucks.
Kneeling sucks. Congress
sucks. Republicans suck.
Democrats suck. Independents
suck. Elon Musk sucks.
Netflix ... (Chieng, 2019:
00.11.20 - 00.12.05)

This irony dramatizes the dual
perspective of immigrants:
idealization of the U.S. as a
dreamland versus frustration
with its shortcomings. Lee and
Zhou (2015) argue that this
tension defines much of the
immigrant narrative, where
admiration coexists with
disillusionment.

Chieng also explores racial
marginalization through satire.
In the joke that Asians could
serve as "objective referees"
when stating

Right now, we're like 5.6% of
the population. Okay? We need
to get the number right up.
Need more Asian people in
this country. I'll tell you
why. Because we are the only
objective referees... in the
ongoing race war... between
white and black people.
(Chieng, 2019: 00.14.50 -
00.15.20)

he satirizes the exclusion of
Asians from dominant racial
discourses. This joke reflects
what Kim (1999) describes as
"racial triangulation," where
Asian Americans are positioned
as outsiders in a Black-White
racial framework. Humor becomes

a way to reclaim invisibility by
turning it into a position of
authority.

Family expectations are
ridiculed through the stereotype
of Asian parents wanting their
children to become doctors only
for the money and prestige, as
he says,

I know because my parents
were the same way. They just
wanted us to be doctors. It
was like this obsession. They
just wanted us to be doctors.
And it's insidious as well,
because when Asian parents
want their kids to be
doctors, helping people is,
like, on the bottom of the
list of reasons. (Chieng,
2019: 00.28.40 - 00.29.05)

Chieng further highlights the
paradox that Asian parents never
see doctors themselves, as they
just want to take people's
money, despite glorifying the
profession. This exposes the
contradictions of the model
minority stereotype, echoing
Chou and Feagin's (2015)
observation that such
stereotypes create pressure
while obscuring inequality.

There are several humorous
themes employed by Chieng in his
stand-up comedy. The themes
about cultural differences on
American consumerism,
admiration and dissatisfaction,
racial marginalization, and
family expectations illustrate
the tensions of immigrant life

while critiquing American society from an outsider-insider perspective.

Comedic Techniques and Performance Style

The stand-up comedy show also requires Chieng's mastery of comedic techniques and a distinct performance style that enhances the delivery of his immigrant-centred narratives. By combining exaggeration, irony, language play, high-energy delivery, and reversal, Chieng transforms personal and cultural observations into memorable comedic commentary.

Chieng often exaggerates situations to absurd extremes, such as when he critiques internet addiction.

Like, in 50 years, we're gonna look at the internet the same way we look at smoking right now. It's going to be like, "Man, I can't believe 50 years ago, we just let pregnant people use the internet. What were we thinking? Pregnant people were just using the internet. We'd use the internet in front of babies. We'd let babies use the internet." Yeah, in 50 years, we're gonna have special areas outside buildings where you can use the internet. Internet designated zones 50 feet from every entrance. Don't bring the internet indoors. (Chieng, 2019: 00.03.20 - 00.04.10)

By equating the harmless act of browsing with second-hand smoke, he creates comic hyperbole that highlights the irrational dependence on technology. This exaggeration emerges laughter by blowing reality out of proportion to expose hidden truths.

Irony also pervades Chieng's commentary on American abundance, for example, in describing food and packaging waste. Chieng mocks how every restaurant provides too many napkins.

So much stuff. So much... So much packaging. Oh, my God! The packaging in America. Everything here is triple-bagged. Right? You order anything to eat at any restaurant, they give you 50 napkins. You throw away 80. Yeah, in America you throw away more napkins than you took. Just breaking the laws of reality... with the abundance. Every restaurant you go to in America, you just make it rain napkins every day. A glass of water, five napkins. (Chieng, 2019: 00.09.00 - 00.09.20)

The irony lies in the contrast between immigrant frugality and American excess. Using irony Chieng targets consumer habits not through direct scolding but by mocking the illogical extremes of everyday life.

Chieng plays with language to reveal cultural differences like

when talking about Chinese greetings during New Year. He points out,

Even during Chinese New Year, the biggest holiday for Chinese people, Chinese New Year, when we see each other during Chinese New Year, the way we greet each other is we say, "gong xi fa cai," or "gong hei fat choy" in Cantonese. I'm sure you've heard that, at least peripherally, "Gong xi fa cai." Gong xi fa cai means, "Hope you get rich! That's not "Happy New Year. (Chieng, 2019: 00.39.40 - 00.40.10)

In this case, comedy arises from highlighting cultural semantics and translations. The humor stems from the incongruity between Western holiday greetings, which emphasize happiness, and Chinese ones, which foreground wealth.

The stage presence in the stand-up comedy show also contains high-energy delivery. For example, while recounting dietary restrictions at his wedding, Chieng impersonates guests listing absurd allergies,

Excuse me, Ronny! Excuse me! I can't eat figs! Excuse me, Ronny. I can't eat red pepper. Green pepper is fine, but red pepper makes my mouth red. Excuse me, Ronny. I can't eat fried garlic. Does this have fried garlic? I have to pick the fried garlic out of the bok choy. Excuse me, Ronny. I can't eat

lettuce. This san choy bau is wrapped in lettuce. I can't eat it! From the same person. Yo, dietary requirements is a serious issue. Okay? It's a medical condition. It means if you eat this, you could die. It's not license to tell me what textures you don't enjoy. (Chieng, 2019: 01.11.10 - 01.12.00)

His rising volume, physical gestures, and incredulous tone transform a common anecdote into a hilarious performance. The humor comes from mocking the disproportionate seriousness with which trivial food preferences are treated.

Reversal is also a central technique employed in the show. When reflecting on the absurdity of having three weddings for the sake of parental pride, Chieng says,

Because Asian parents have to brag, okay? And I know every parent has to brag. I'm not trying to take anything away from anyone. I'm just saying Asian parents also have to brag, and, like, weddings is how they do it. Like, Asian weddings for baby boomers, Asian baby boomers, it was the original Instagram, okay? It is how they catch up with everybody. It's how they get the likes. It's how they get the dopamine hit. It's how they leave comments. Why so skinny? Why so fat? Why aren't you married? Why don't you have a baby? What's wrong

with your balls? (Chieng, 2019: 01.08.10 - 01.08.40).

Chieng parodies generational behavior by likening parents' bragging rights to our modern social media validation. This reversal, where elders are portrayed as the real attention seekers, subverts stereotypes of Asian parents as conservative and dignified, showing them instead as competitive status-chasers.

Chieng's comedic techniques: exaggeration, irony, language play, high-energy delivery, and reversal, are in line with Berger's humor categories. These techniques enable Chieng to critique both American and Asian cultural practices while entertaining a diverse audience, demonstrating how stand-up comedy functions as both social commentary and cultural negotiation.

Social Impact of Chieng's Humor

Chieng's stand-up is more than just entertaining as it can be social commentary that puts immigrant life as the center that is both relatable and humorous. His comedy challenges dominant narratives about immigration and promotes cross-cultural understanding. Through humor, he normalizes the challenges and contradictions of immigrant life, making them more accessible to wider audiences.

His performance also promotes a broader discussion on cultural integration, privilege, and systemic preconceptions. By presenting the immigrant perspective in a humorous but insightful way, he fosters empathy among diverse audiences. Furthermore, his humor defies stereotypes with the presentation of the complexity of immigrant experiences rather than reducing them to stereotypes.

Chieng's humor also serves as both entertainment and a medium for social critic. His life as an immigrant, a subject of humor makes marginalized experience visible, promoting empathy and discussion among diverse audiences. His satire challenges mainstream narratives about immigration, questioning policies and stereotypes in an accessible manner. By making immigration-related themes humorous and relatable, Chieng's stand-up contributes to broader discussions about diversity, identity, and cultural integration in the US.

CONCLUSION

Ronny Chieng: Asian Comedian Destroys America! shows how stand-up comedy reflects and critiques Asian immigrant experiences in the U.S. Humorous materials, such as cultural differences on American consumerism, admiration and

dissatisfaction, racial marginalization, and family expectations, illustrate the contradictions of immigrant life. Through satire and exaggeration, Chieng transforms these struggles into humor that resonates across audiences. By combining comedic techniques, exaggeration, irony, reversal and code switching with a high-energy performance style, Chieng provides visibility to immigrant voices, critiques systemic contradictions, and fosters solidarity through laughter. His comedy thus operates as both entertainment and cultural intervention, reshaping how Asian immigrant identity is perceived in American society.

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