

# The Analysis of Overseas Chinese Stand-up Comedy

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## Abstract

**Based on the theory “inferential racism” of Stuart Hall in the article *Racist Ideologies and the Media*, this paper analyzes the themes and characteristics of overseas Chinese Stand-up comedy, which could be divided into three parts as the perspectives of audience, content and meaning. It also discusses the reasons for their popularity in the United States and the reflections caused by those overseas Chinese Stand-up comedy.**

## Keywords

**Stand-up Comedy; Overseas Chinese; Inferential Racism; Positional Consumption Theory.**

## 1. Introduction

In recent years, an old form of comedy became popular in China because of a famous TV program named *Rock & Roast*, which is more familiar to us with the name of *Talk show conference*. Actually, this form is called Stand-up comedy in the West, originated in English cafes in 18 centuries with only one performer standing on the stage trying to amuse the audience in limited time by the art of language.

In order to attract more audience, performers are good at finding themselves a position to resonate with them. It can be explained by the “positional consumption theory” that consumption reveals more about people than merely their own preferences for certain consumer goods. Thus, we could understand why the well known Stand-up comedy actress Mrs. Maisel’s story can still be popular almost 60 years later in nowadays. The mockeries of her own experience and evaluations of celebrities concludes the awakening of women’s independent consciousness. And lots of performers from LGBTQ group express their needs of recognition from the public. From this perspective, Stand-up comedies actually show different appeals from specific community by their representatives performing in front of the audience.

## 2. Analysis

### 2.1. Audience

For overseas Chinese Stand-up comedies, their audience also follow the “positional consumption theory” that they are satisfying three different groups during the performance.

Firstly, westerns want to satisfy their curiosity while they are acting. Because overseas Chinese have a different growing environment with them, so they wonder how Asian parents bring up their children and how do those young people from other culture consider their countries.

Secondly, from the consensus of other overseas Chinese, their same growing environment and living condition help them understand all the laughing points the performers told. However, their performance may not get such effect in mainland of China, for the “inferential racism” mentioned by Stuart Hall in his article *Racist Ideologies and the Media*. “These enable racist statements to be formulated without ever bringing into awareness the racist predicates on which the statements are grounded.”[1] For instance, plenty of Asian jokes based on racist premisses and propositions like “They are rejected by Western society because of their innocuous differences.”[1] So that most of the discrimination happened when people did not

realize. Even though it was not as serious as those vilification in words, those “inferential racism” behaviour could have more ironic and comic influence when people gave account of their experience in comedies.

So it comes the third aspect, the novelty from us domestic Chinese, we not only want to know the different living condition at home an abroad, but also like to hear the satire on foreign countries.

In conclusion, the West need those punch lines about stereotypes to confirm their prejudice and national superiority. However, overseas Chinese Stand-up comedians usually hide behind these self mocking jokes the irony of westerners’ absurd behaviors and views, so that they usually realize that their bias are actually jokes themselves, which can make the comedies entertaining but thought-provoking. At the same time, all Chinese can deepen the national identity in this process, which reflect the same Chinese culture and preconceptions from abroad.

## 2.2. Content

When we analyze the content of overseas Chinese Stand-up comedies, we will find that there are five common points they often mention.

The first two is very basic and common stereotype about Asians, “Asians look alike and are expert in Kung Fu” and “Asian food is delicious”. And then the “Strict Asian parents and elders” with their “Bookish Asian children good at Math ping-pong and musical instrument”. At last, comedians also frequently take the improper things that the West has done to China as the starting point of jokes, “Bamboo ceiling” “Colonization” and “China is the largest creditor of America” are the three most common topics.

From all those sentence, we could find that, even if their comedies are talking about racial discrimination of Asians, all the themes have no malice but mirror the reality objectively with much less spiteful than those “drugs guns and poverty jokes” related with black Americans.

## 2.3. Meaning

At last, when we analyze the deeper meaning behind overseas Chinese Stand-up comedies, we could start from two angles, which are pleasing the audience and changing the situation.

As a form of comedy, its primary goal is to make their audience burst out laughing. So there are two rhetorical devices they can skillfully use to make their text more humorous.

First is hyperbole, which they utilize to exaggerate the stereotype the West put upon Chinese. Stuart Hall held the point of view that in western society and media, “A deep and unconscious ambivalence pervades this stereotype.” Thus, the performers overstate those stereotypes to create an absurd effect. (Such as “Yes, it is true that all the Chinese learn Kung Fu from the processes defending themselves against fathers’ hitting.” In this case, the comedian then explain Chinese parents never abuse their children, but only punish them when they did things wrong.) Thus, the audience can know their inherent impressions on Asians are just a common cultural differences that should not be the reason of discrimination.

Then is innuendo that make the audience rethink on the situation why this situation exists. Lots of actors or actresses said in their comedies that almost all overseas Chinese parents want their children to be doctors. It seems ridiculous, but is the reality. In fact, they secretly satirized that the western society refuses to provide the equal salary and treatment for the hard-working Chinese, and the doctor is the only profession that can obtain money and status by own effort.

Stuart Hall disagree with the opinion that racist jokes are a sign of acceptability. And he also worried that the point of the joke depends on the existence of racism would reinforce the difference and normalize them through laughter. I agree that westerns like watching overseas Chinese Stand-up comedies standing on an arrogant point of view without admitting western society has accepted Asian immigrants. However, I think those comedians not only did not

ignore the existence of racial discrimination, but also expressed their appeals and protests in laughter to make more people hear and receive them.

They also tried to change the situation by giving the insulting words new explanation to remove their meanings of discrimination. Take “Lingling” as an example, it used to humiliate inflexible Chinese nerds who studying assiduously to occupy westerners’ jobs, but now it is more accepted as a synonym for “talented but still hardworking children”, which changed from a derogatory word to a commendatory word filled with positive meaning.

To summarize, overseas Chinese Stand-up comedies conclude their appeal to be heard that they did nothing wrong as foreign immigrants pursuing appropriate rights. People from different cultures are not inferior, but should be treated equally.

### 3. Conclusion

Instead of putting themselves and the audience in a high position to ridicule unilateralism, the performers begin with a kind of self ridicule, and then expose the embarrassment or absurdity of the other side of the West to get double funny effect. This is why overseas Chinese Stand-up comedies are more easily accepted by both Westerners and Asians at the same time, and can also reflect comedian’s appeal for anti discrimination in a relaxed atmosphere.

We could not deny that, in the past two decades, the implementation of American pluralistic cultural policy and the improvement of China’s international status have objectively provided a solid material foundation for the improvement of overseas Chinese cultural self-confidence. It is in this context that the absurdity of stereotype in the media and mass culture can enter the aesthetic level psychologically, and the sociological basis for the aesthetic of ethnic comedy can be constructed.

Therefore, we can not ignore the ideology and regard overseas Chinese Stand-up comedies as a simple pastime, but should research the profound meaning behind them.

### References

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