

## Performing a sense of belonging: East Asian comedians in France

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### The Australian Journal for French Studies

DOI:

<https://doi.org/10.3828/ajfs.2022.29>

Published: 01/10/2022

Peer reviewed version

[Cyswllt i'r cyhoeddiad / Link to publication](#)

*Dyfyniad o'r fersiwn a gyhoeddwyd / Citation for published version (APA):*

Ervine, J. (2022). Performing a sense of belonging: East Asian comedians in France. *The Australian Journal for French Studies*, 59(4), 376-390. <https://doi.org/10.3828/ajfs.2022.29>

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## **Performing a sense of belonging: East Asian comedians in France**

### Introduction

Much has been written about the relations between comedy, identity and power, and Leon Rappoport has argued in his discussion of Lawrence Mintz's work that minority groups' uses of humour can symbolize processes of identity negotiation and be indicative of their social status. Rappoport states that Mintz "suggested a four-stage scheme that fits the African American experience, as well as that of other ethnic groups" and described the four stages in the following terms:

In the first stage, Jews and blacks were simply the targets of heavy-handed ridicule by those in power over them. During the second stage, this ridicule was to some extent internalized, and their humor became self-critical. Mintz describes this third stage as "realism". This refers to the period when Jews and blacks used deception and covertly made fun of their oppressors among themselves. The fourth stage is more or less where we are now, when Jews, blacks, Hispanics, Asians and others have come full circle and use humor to directly confront and ridicule those who formerly ridiculed them.<sup>1</sup>

Given that Rappoport argues that Mintz's study of Jewish humour establishes a structure that can be used to categorise other minority groups' use of humour his work provides a potential means of situating the types of humour displayed by East Asian comedians in France. However,

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<sup>1</sup> Leon Rappoport, *Punchlines: The Case for Racial, Ethnic, and Gender Humor* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 2005), pp. 99–100. See also: Christy Davies, *The Mirth of Nations* (New Brunswick: Transaction Publishers, 2002), pp. 1–16.

it will be important to consider specificities of French stand-up comedy and its much shorter history in France compared to the United States. During recent decades, discussions about humour, race and identity in France have often focused on the *Jamel Comedy Club*. This television programme – and the Parisian comedy venue of the same name – have helped to boost the careers of many comedians in France who are from ethnic minorities and/or grew up in the country's *banlieues*, and consequently has played a role in the process of identity negotiation. Its launch on Canal+ in 2006 owes much to French television channels' desire to feature more young people from visible minorities within the *paysage audiovisuel français* following the *banlieue* unrest of the previous autumn.<sup>2</sup> The *Jamel Comedy Club* was initially broadcast in an early evening half-hour slot on Canal+, and presented by the well-known actor and stand-up comedian Jamel Debbouze. Debbouze acted as MC and introduced a series of up-and-coming comedians who performed short routines. Although the show was ground-breaking in terms of the prime-time exposure it provided for stand-up comedy on French television, it also symbolised continuity given that sketch-based shows or other entertainment programmes on Canal+ had previously helped comedians from minority backgrounds to become more prominent. Key examples include the hospital sitcom *H* that ran from 1998-2002 and starred Jamel Debbouze, Eric Judor and Ramzy Bedia, as well as the short call-centre sketch show *Service après-vente des émissions* that ran from 2005-2012 and featured Omar Sy alongside Fred Testot.

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<sup>2</sup> See: Nelly Quemener, *Le Pouvoir de l'humour : politiques des représentations dans les médias en France* (Paris: Armand Colin, 2014), p. 104; Laurent Béru, "Des codes pour rire. Le cas de l'émission télévisée *Jamel Comedy Club*." *Communication & langages*, vol. 159, no. 1, 2009 : 43–55 (p. 104).

As I have argued elsewhere, media coverage of the *Jamel Comedy Club* has sometimes ignored the fact that not all the performers were from the *banlieues* and/or ethnic minorities, and over-simplified the project's relationship with urban culture.<sup>3</sup> Furthermore, the comedians whose performances were most discussed were often those of West African or North African descent, and there has not been as detailed analysis of the socio-cultural significance of the routines by the stand-ups who had East Asian roots. This mirrors the way that academic research into racism in France has generally tended to devote greater attention to its impact on people from North Africa and West Africa rather than those from Asia.<sup>4</sup> Given that journalist David Dawson also argues that humour generally does not receive much attention within "research projects studying cross-cultural communication between China and the West",<sup>5</sup> this article will help to fill several gaps within the international study of humour and communication as well as that of racism, diversity and discrimination in France. After briefly assessing the origins and socio-cultural significance of the *Jamel Comedy Club*, I will examine the careers of several performers of East Asian descent who appeared on the show. This discussion will focus on how performers of East Asian descent seek to both engage with and move beyond stereotypes. Although several of the comedians' Asian roots are from Cambodia or Vietnam (both of which are former French colonies), the stereotypes with which they engage generally concern China. This appears to stem from the way that fears of China's growing economic power has led to members of the East Asian diaspora in France being perceived as Chinese by

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<sup>3</sup> See: Jonathan Ervine, *Humour in Contemporary France: Controversy, Consensus and Contradictions* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2019), pp. 99–101.

<sup>4</sup> Ya-Han Chuang, *Une Minorité modèle? Chinois de France et racisme anti-Asiatiques* (Paris: Éditions la Découverte, 2021), p. 9.

<sup>5</sup> David Dawson, "The Joke's On All of Us", *The World of Chinese*, 16 April 2016, <https://m.fx361.com/news/2016/0110/4657017.html>. Accessed 26 August 2021.

the French “quels que soient leurs rapports réels à la Chine” and frequently being “réduits à une apparence et un couleur de peau qui les font passer pour des Chinois et donc perçus comme des individus menaçants”.<sup>6</sup> However British-Malaysian comedian Phil Wang’s observation that ‘Chinese’ constitutes an ethnicity as well as a nationality provides another explanation as to why some performers with connections to Asian countries other than China may refer to themselves as Chinese.<sup>7</sup>

The main performer on which I will focus in this article is Frédéric Chau, who was born in Ho Chi Minh City in Vietnam in 1977 to parents from the Chinese minority community of Cambodia; his parents emigrated to France when Chau was six months old and settled in the Paris area. This type of trajectory was common between the mid-1970s and mid-1980s as persecution carried out by the Khmer Rouge led to a new generation of East Asian migrants arriving in France from Vietnam and Cambodia.<sup>8</sup> After working as a model and then as a steward for Air France, Frédéric Chau emerged on the French comedy scene in 2005. I will argue that the way in which Chau presents himself within his stand-up routines is highly paradoxical when analysed alongside the way he describes his childhood and sense of identity in his 2015 autobiography *Je viens de si loin*. I will also argue that other French comedians of East Asian descent, such as Bun Hay Mean, Luigi Li, and Sony Chan, exhibit a more confident form of self-presentation and engagement with stereotypes, and that this symbolises the increasing confidence and socio-political engagement of younger members of the Chinese and

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<sup>6</sup> Ya Han Chuang. *Une Minorité modèle? Chinois de France et racisme anti-Asiatiques* (Paris: La Découverte, 2011), p.132.

<sup>7</sup> Phil Wang. *Sidesplitter: How to be from two worlds at once* (London: Hodder Studio, 2021), p. xiii.

<sup>8</sup> Chuang, p. 10.

East Asian community in France. In order to frame the performances of these artists within a relevant historical context, I will begin by outlining some of the key issues that emerge from the history of Chinese and East Asian communities in France. Then, I will assess the way in which Frédéric Chau has sought to engage with questions concerning his East Asian routes via his stand-up performances, his autobiography and interviews, and discuss the paradoxes of his career in cinema. I will then assess what the performances of other comedians of East Asian descent – such as Bun Hay Mean, Luigi Li, and Sony Chan – demonstrate about the relations between humour and power, and especially what they show about the status of East Asian communities in France.

### **Chinese and East Asian communities in France and their representation in popular culture**

In French, the expression “c’est du chinois” refers to something which is incomprehensible or sounds like gibberish. This illustrates the way that China and the Chinese are sometimes perceived as mysterious and hard to read, even though there is a history of Chinese people – and other East Asians – moving to France that can be traced back over a century. The sociologist Simeng Wang has mapped out “trois grandes vagues d’immigration chinoise vers la France”.<sup>9</sup> The first of these occurred in the early twentieth century when 140 000 people from the Zhejiang province, and notably Wenzhou, arrived in France to boost the workforce during the First World War.<sup>10</sup> The second happened from 1975 onwards following “l’explosion des mouvements nationalistes et des émeutes urbaines dans les pays de l’ex-Indochine (Cambodge,

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<sup>9</sup> Simeng Wang. *Illusions et Souffrances: les Migrants Chinois à Paris* (Paris: Éditions Rue de l’Ulm, 2017), p. 29.

<sup>10</sup> Wang, p. 29.

Laos et Vietnam)”, and many members of this generation acquired French nationality.<sup>11</sup> More recently, a third wave since the late-1990s has stemmed from economic factors making a move to Europe more appealing for people from traditionally industrial parts of North East China.<sup>12</sup> The migration trajectories of the families of the three main comedians discussed in this article can be situated within the second of these waves.

In recent decades, members of East Asian communities in France have encountered significant examples of racism and sought to organise in response to these developments.<sup>13</sup> 2010 was a key year during which the Chinese community assembled to protest against racism. This happened notably in Belleville – an area of Paris associated with the Chinese community – in response to racial abuse and violent attacks; it was followed by another demonstration in central Paris the following year that raised the profile of anti-Chinese racism in France. As Chuang notes, these actions indicated an evolution in the means of protest and communication by members of the Chinese community; in 2010 many of the protest banners featured slogans written in Chinese whilst many more were written in French at the following year’s demonstration in central Paris.<sup>14</sup> The death in 2016 of Chaolin Zhang – a Chinese tailor in Aubervilliers – who was killed in what was deemed a racist attack by anti-racist groups SOS Racisme and MRAP (Movement against racism and for friendship between peoples) again brought into stark focus the issue of anti-Chinese racism in France, and in particular the Paris

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<sup>11</sup> Wang, p. 29.

<sup>12</sup> Wang, p. 30.

<sup>13</sup> Chuang, pp. 6–7.

<sup>14</sup> Chuang, pp. 137–8.

area. The comedian Frédéric Chau, whose will be discussed here, was one of several public figures who spoke out against racial prejudice.<sup>15</sup>

In the years following the death of Chaolin Zhang, voices of people of Asian descent in France have become more audible in the public sphere. The Grenoble-born writer and cultural commentator of Cambodian descent Grace Ly broadcast a web series called *Ça reste entre nous* in 2017 and 2018 that focused on the lives of people of Asian descent who live in France. Her 2018 semi-autobiographical novel *Jeune Fille modèle* explored anti-Asian racism via its focus on a teenage protagonist of Chinese-Cambodian roots who is struggling to fit in both at school and within her family.<sup>16</sup> Ly also discusses questions of Asian identity in the fortnightly podcast *Kiffe ta race* that she hosts alongside the writer and anti-racist activist Rokhaya Diallo. Despite this emergence in France of new spaces where Chinese and East Asian identities have become more visible, recent years have also seen several French stand-up comedians of non-Asian descent attract criticism for performing material based on crude stereotypes of Chinese people. This notably occurred in November 2016 during a stand-up show by Gad Elmaleh and Kev Adams entitled *Tout est possible* that was broadcast live on television channel M6. The show included a sketch called *Les Chinois* where the pair – dressed in Asian costumes – spoke broken French in exaggerated Chinese accents, and was heavily criticised by French people of Asian descent.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> See Chuang, pp. 200–208.

<sup>16</sup> Grace Ly. *Jeune Fille modèle* (Paris : Fayard, 2018). See : Floriane Valdayron, “Avec son roman « Jeune fille modèle », Grace Ly œuvre pour une meilleure représentation des Asiatiques en France”, *Les Inrocks*, 18 November 2018. <https://www.lesinrocks.com/cheek/grace-ly-jeune-fille-modele-roman-314613-18-11-2018/>. Accessed 24 March 2022.

<sup>17</sup> See: Sarah Lecoivre. “Gad Elmaleh et Kev Adams accusés de racisme à cause d’un sketch diffusé sur M6”, *Le Figaro*, 22 December 2016. [https://tvmag.lefigaro.fr/programme-tv/gad-elmaleh-et-kev-adams-accuses-de-racisme-a-cause-d-un-sketch-diffuse-sur-m6\\_01959dfc-c814-11e6-adad-3999a46f423c/](https://tvmag.lefigaro.fr/programme-tv/gad-elmaleh-et-kev-adams-accuses-de-racisme-a-cause-d-un-sketch-diffuse-sur-m6_01959dfc-c814-11e6-adad-3999a46f423c/). Accessed 24 March 2022. The sketch in question caused further controversy when Elmaleh and Adams show *Tout est possible* was re-broadcast on French television in 2018 by the channel W9.



The Covid-19 pandemic has led to increased hostility towards people in France who are Chinese or perceived to be Chinese, and has often been based on images of China and Chinese people representing a threat.<sup>18</sup> Nevertheless, the last two decades have also seen increasing educational, cultural and business links between France and China. From October 2003 to July 2004 France organized a series of events as part of a Year of China and from October 2004 to July 2005, China celebrated its own Year of France. As Simeng Wang notes, this helped to facilitate university exchanges and France became an increasingly popular destination for Chinese students.<sup>19</sup> Despite this, visions of China within French cinema during this period have often retained a clichéd air of mystique. Étienne Chatiliez's 2001 comedy *Tanguy* tells the story of the eponymous 28-year-old protagonist who is reluctant to move out of his parents' house and postpones a long-awaited trip to China. Tanguy teaches Chinese language and history at a Parisian university whilst writing a doctoral thesis about ancient China. His interest in Asian civilization means that he seems to have a Chinese (or occasionally Japanese) proverb ready for all situations. This superficial engagement with East Asian culture evokes a mystical and exoticized image of the Far East. Tanguy ultimately does travel to China and the film concludes with an epilogue which sees him living in Beijing with his pregnant Chinese wife Mei Lin and her parents. This resolution suggests that Tanguy has settled in China due to the continued existence of a model of family life – spending longer living under the same roof as one's parents – that is quite different from in France.

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<sup>18</sup> See: Chuang, pp. 9, 210

<sup>19</sup> Wang, pp. 32, 61–62.

A more crassly stereotypical vision of Chinese culture is evident in Nicolas Benamou's 2011 comedy *De l'huile sur le feu*, which focuses on the rivalry between a North African kebab shop and a Chinese restaurant in the Belleville area of Paris that is well-known for being home to a large Chinese population. Stereotypes abound from the start; the Chinese restaurant owner speaks French with a very strong Chinese accent and restaurant staff perform karaoke. Their neighbours at the nearby kebab shop refer to Chinese people eating dogs and the Chinese restaurant owner brands his kebab shop counterpart a terrorist as he is "arabe". However, the potential for reconciliation emerges via a relationship between two younger workers at the restaurants. Pierrick, who works at the Chinese restaurant, tries to impress kebab shop worker Nadia by making "un couscous aux nems" that symbolises culinary and cultural hybridity. Despite a fire almost destroying the Chinese restaurant and Pierrick coming close to taking his own life, the film ends on an optimistic note symbolizing reconciliation as the staff from the two restaurants unite to perform karaoke and sing lyrics such as "acceptons la différence".

### **Stand-up performances of Chinese and East Asian identity: the case of Frédéric Chau**

Although there were several performers of North African and West African descent in the initial series of the *Jamel Comedy Club*, Frédéric Chau was the only comedian of East Asian descent to appear in the first four seasons. This level of representation is significant when it comes to questions of visibility and power dynamics. Chau also stands out from several of his *Jamel Comedy Club* contemporaries due to his comedic influences and the way he has performed his sense of identity. Many of the comedians in the initial series – including some who were not from ethnic minority backgrounds – cited North American comedians such as Richard Pryor and

Eddie Murphy among their comedic influences. This was consistent with the programme featuring a form of stand-up that was more akin to what exists in North American and the United Kingdom rather than what had previously been seen in France. Although the *Jamel Comedy Club* represented a departure from France's traditionally more sketch-based comedy, it is performers from this more established branch of French comedy that Frédéric Chau cites as influences in his autobiography. He recounts a family holiday in his mid-teens during which he climbed a tree to be able to see Jean-Marie Bigard, Muriel Robin and Pierre Palmade perform at a festival in Charente-Maritime.<sup>20</sup> As a member of a diverse, young group of comedians seen as having rejuvenated the French stand-up comedy scene it may seem paradoxical that Chau cites among his influences three mainstream white French comedians. However, it mirrors the aforementioned way that black American comedians influenced the careers of *Jamel Comedy Club* performers from a range of different racial and ethnic backgrounds. This range of comedic reference points among members of the troop remains an under-discussed aspect of the group's diversity.

The significance of Chau's comedy performances also stems from him initially tailoring his material to the expectations of an implicitly white French audience, or at least an audience whose knowledge of East Asian culture was based around familiar stereotypes:

Je savais ce qui était drôle : le choc des cultures, l'alliance des contraires, comme un Arabe et un Chinois dans une cour de récréation. Je puisais l'inspiration dans mon adolescence – les râteaux avec les filles, les souvenirs d'humiliations. Mais, pour faire

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<sup>20</sup> Frédéric Chau, *Je viens de si loin* (Paris : Philippe Rey, 2015), pp. 149–150.

rire la salle, il fallait que j’adopte son point de vue, le point de vue des dominants. J’ai donc utilisé – pour mieux les détourner – tous les préjugés des blancs sur les Asiatiques : les nems, le karaté, Bruce Lee, l’informatique. J’ai passé des heures à la Fnac, à feuilleter des manuels à l’usage des Français en Chine : *Négociier avec les Chinois. Les Nouvelles règles de business en Chine*. J’en ai encore plusieurs, chez moi, stabilotés, annotés. En fait, j’étais comme un étranger qui écrit sur sa propre communauté.<sup>21</sup>

The stereotypes that Chau evokes in the words above suggest that he was presenting a simplified version of his otherness by portraying himself as Chinese rather than someone of Vietnamese and Cambodian parentage. However, it is worth recalling British-Malaysian Phil Wang’s observation that ‘Chinese’ can be seen as both a nationality and an ethnicity.<sup>22</sup> More broadly speaking, Chau’s referencing of recognisable stereotypes in his routines mirrors the approach of other ethnic minority comedians in the *Jamel Comedy Club* and can potentially be explained by Alec Hargreaves’s argument that “it is unquestionably difficult to penetrate mainstream markets without adjusting in some degree to the codes and expectations of majority ethnic consumers”.<sup>23</sup>

However, what is paradoxical about Chau’s dependence on stereotypes about Chinese identity is that he also talks in his autobiography about how meetings with producers and journalists at the time of his initial involvement with the *Jamel Comedy Club* made him aware of

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<sup>21</sup> Chau, pp. 196–7.

<sup>22</sup> Phil Wang, p. xiii.

<sup>23</sup> Alec Hargreaves. “The contribution of north and sub-Saharan African immigrant minorities to the redefinition of contemporary French culture”. In, Forsdick, Charles and David Murphy (eds.), *Francoophone Postcolonial Studies: A Critical Introduction* (London: Arnold, 2003), pp. 145–154 (p. 154).

his lack of connection with his roots. Furthermore, his autobiography makes clear that Chau's childhood frequently saw him seeking to "camoufler [ses] racines asiatiques" and define himself in opposition to stereotypical expectations:

Dans les lieux publics, l'arrivée d'un groupe de Chinois me faisait faire quatre pas en arrière, de peur d'être associé à eux. Je redoutais d'avoir à répondre de la culture chinoise. Je n'ai jamais aimé le karaoké, encore moins ces feuilletons qu'adorait mon père des moines shaolin, des sabres et du kung-fu. Enfant, je rêvais de Michael Jordan, le plus grand basketteur de tous les temps, de Ludivine, une petite fille dans ma classe en primaire, qui était d'un blond californien avec les yeux bleus.<sup>24</sup>

These reminiscences have similarities with attempts to assimilate that are found in *la littérature beure*, and especially in Azouz Begag's *Béni ou le paradis privé*. In this novel, the protagonist prefers being called Béni rather than Ben Abdallah as it provides an easier means for him to fit in.<sup>25</sup> Similarly, he seeks to flatten his curled hair in order to hide his North African roots.<sup>26</sup> His infatuation with a white French girl called France becomes a further symbol of his quest for assimilation and is reflected by phrases such as "entre France et mon père, j'ai chosi la blonde" and "tant pis, j'veis décidé d'aller vers France".<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> Chau, p. 15.

<sup>25</sup> Azouz Begag. *Béni ou le paradis privé* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1989), pp. 35, 43-4

<sup>26</sup> Begag, p. 143.

<sup>27</sup> Begag, pp. 110, 161.

It could be argued that Chau's referencing stereotypes from which he had previously sought to distance himself is logical if read as an attempt to ridicule these stereotypes. However, Mireille Rosello argues in *Declining the Stereotype* that using a stereotype to mock the premise(s) on which it is based is problematic as it "involves a minimum, if unconscious, yet unavoidable element of allegiance".<sup>28</sup> Andrew Stott has gone further by stating that "watching a parade of stereotypes [...] affords the comfort of confirming an audience's prejudices".<sup>29</sup> Although many of the comedians who have participated in the *Jamel Comedy club* have ridiculed racial stereotypes, there have also been times when performers have exploited crude stereotypes of groups such as Pakistanis and Romanians that have not been represented in the troop. These absent minorities have thus been unable to participate in the intercultural dialogue that involves groups mocking each other due to being targets of jokes without also becoming tellers of jokes.<sup>30</sup>

Large parts of Chau's performances on the *Jamel Comedy Club* involved him exploiting clichés about Chinese people in France. On his first appearance, he began by speaking in an exaggerated Chinese accent and repeated this on subsequent episodes when pretending to establish dialogue with Asian audience members. His routines also evoked performing in Chinese restaurants and illegal textile workshops – two stereotypical working environments for people of Chinese descent – and being disowned by his dad due to wanting to be a comedian rather than an astronaut. However, Chau also used his appearances on the *Jamel Comedy Club*

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<sup>28</sup> Mireille Rosello, *Declining the Stereotype: Ethnicity and Representation in French Cultures* (Hanover, NH: University of New England, 1998), p. 71.

<sup>29</sup> Andrew Stott, *Comedy: the New Critical Idiom* (New York and London: Routledge, 2005), p. 44.

<sup>30</sup> See: Jonathan Ervine, *Humour in Contemporary France: Controversy, Consensus and Contradictions* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2019), p. 117.

to comment on attitudes of white French people to minority groups. Indeed, he asked the white members of the audience present at his initial appearance if they were scared because there were “beaucoup d’Arabes et de Noirs dans la salle”. On a subsequent appearance he described himself as “le premier comique chinois de France, à part Michel Leeb”, ironically referencing a white French comedian who caused controversy during the 1980s by dressing up as highly stereotypical representations of Chinese and black people in his routines. Chau’s routines also drew on the image of China as a world power, notably when he joked that Chinese people frequently smile because – in addition to knowing what really goes into nems – there are 1.4 billion of them and “on va vous niquer la gueule!”. This idea that Chinese roots are a source of power provides East Asian comedians with a means of turning the tables on ethnic majority spectators, and – as we will see later – has also been utilised by East Asian comedians in the United Kingdom and the United States.

Although focusing on his Chinese identity allowed Chau to focus on this identity as a source of power, it appears that he left the *Jamel Comedy Club* due to becoming frustrated about feeling his performances were perpetuating French stereotypes about being Chinese. Frédéric Chau is also a rare example of a comedian involved in the show who described it as *communautaire*.<sup>31</sup> In this context, *communautaire* has been used by certain critics to suggest that the sketches were overly focused on specific communities in France (i.e. specific ethnic minority groups) and thus at odds with the universalist ethos of French Republicanism. Several of Chau’s fellow performers from the initial series of the *Jamel Comedy Club* contrastingly

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<sup>31</sup> Simon Gonzalez, "Le Jamel Comedy Club trop "communautaire" ? Frédéric Chau critique les sketches "clichés" de la troupe", *Télé-Loisirs*, 25 June 2019, consulted 15 July 2021, <https://www.programme-tv.net/news/tv/235206-le-jamel-comedy-club-trop-communautaire-frederic-chau-critique-les-sketchs-cliches-de-la-troupe-video/>.

argued that their humour was universal rather than community-specific.<sup>32</sup> Furthermore, one could also argue that the way in which *Jamel Comedy Club* comedians' comedic influences cross racial and ethnic boundaries provides reason to question the notion that the group produced forms of *humour communautaire*.

### **From the stand-up stage to the big screen: Chau's move to cinema**

During his time as a stand-up comedian, Chau's routines at the *Jamel Comedy Club* sometimes mocked highly stereotypical depictions of Chinese people in French films. On stage, he commented "si tu ne sais pas faire du karaoké, de l'informatique, ou des nems, tu peux te faire foutre". Many clichés are indeed present within popular contemporary French films that feature Chinese characters, and several examples have already been discussed here.

Furthermore, the vast majority of these films were made by non-Asian directors without the involvement of scriptwriters of East Asian descent. Given Frédéric Chau's criticism of depictions of Chinese characters in French films and his decision to abandon stand-up comedy due to feeling he was helping to perpetuate stereotypes, much of his subsequent film career has been somewhat surprising. The highest profile films in which Chau has appeared are Philippe De Chauveron's *Qu'est-ce que l'on a fait au bon dieu?* and its sequels *Qu'est-ce que l'on a encore fait au bon dieu?* and *Qu'est-ce que l'on a tous fait au bon dieu ?* These comedies focus on four daughters in a conservative white French family who fall for men who are respectively Muslim, Jewish, of Chinese descent, and of West African heritage. Furthermore, Raphaëlle Moine has argued that "the use of stereotypes, and mockery of them through comic repetition are the

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<sup>32</sup> See: Ervine, *Humour in Contemporary France*, pp. 110–112.



virtually exclusive driving force of the film". She has added that "in order to show the racism of the characters and deride them, *Qu'est-ce que l'on a fait au bon dieu?* constantly has them blurt out ethnoracial stereotypes that stigmatise Arabs, Jews, Asians, blacks and whites alike".<sup>33</sup>

Chao, the character played by Frédéric Chau, is married to Ségolène and teased in the original film by his brothers-in-law about Chinese people being supposedly hard to read; he responds by saying that Chinese people's business skills have allowed them to take over entire parts of Paris. In the second film, Chao is unable to travel to China with his wife after his mother-in-law doctors a photo to make it look like Chao has attended a pro-Tibet rally. In the third film, several jokes based on Chao's Chinese origins mock the racism of his white French father-in-law Claude. On a visit to China, Claude and his wife Marie have dinner with a couple that they mistakenly believe to be Chao's parents. The fact that the husband looks very different to Chao's father – having long hair as opposed to being almost completely bald – ridicules the perception of Claude (and his wife Marie) that all Chinese people look alike. Chao's parents stand out from those of the husbands of Claude and Marie's other daughters on several levels. Notably, they speak French with a stronger accent and exhibit Asian tourist stereotypes via their use of a camera and selfie stick on a visit to the Château de Chambord. When Claude sees a visiting German art collector, Helmut, as a potential replacement partner for his daughter Ségolène despite his previous antipathy towards Germans further underlines, his anti-Chinese prejudice is reinforced. Claude treats Chao's Chinese descent as something that makes him an especially different and undesirable other among his four sons-in-law, and someone

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<sup>33</sup> Raphaëlle Moine, "Stereotypes of class, ethnicity and gender in contemporary French popular comedy: from *Bienvenue les Ch'tis* (2008) and *Intouchables* (2011) to *Qu'est-ce que l'on a fait au Bon Dieu?* (2014)", *Studies in French Cinema*, 18: 1 (2018), 35–51 (p. 47).

who he would happily see removed from his family via a divorce. Although the film invites audiences to laugh at those who believe in racial stereotypes and seeks to ridicule prejudice, in her discussion of the first film in the series Moine argues that this approach to clichés surrounding race and ethnicity is potentially problematic:

from a strictly textual point of view, the status of the racist remarks in *Qu'est-ce que l'on a fait au Bon Dieu?* turns out to be far from clear because their enunciation is the key impetus behind the comedy and the characters often conform to the stereotypes that stigmatise them (for example, the Asian son-in-law who does indeed always turn up punctually). As a result, it seems difficult not to take them literally in good faith.<sup>34</sup>

Chao, Frédéric Chau's character in *Qu'est-ce que l'on a fait au Bon Dieu?*, conforms to positive stereotypes associated with people of Chinese descent, and his middle class status means that he and the other lead male characters in the film constitute so-called "good immigrants".<sup>35</sup> This image is similar to the "model minority" perspective on Chinese (and other East Asian) communities in France that Ya-Han Chuang sees an obstacle to their integration within French society. Chuang states that the "model minority" notion has the potential to both obscure the racism and prejudice faced by Chinese communities in France and make them a target for those who resent their perceived successful integration and supposed economic prosperity.<sup>36</sup> This concept is referenced in Grace Ly's previously mentioned 2018 novel *Jeune Fille modèle*.

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<sup>34</sup> Moine, 48.

<sup>35</sup> Moine, 48.

<sup>36</sup> Chuang, pp. 6–7, 12, 206.

Frédéric Chau was also the lead actor and a scriptwriters for Julien Abraham's 2019 film *Made in China*. Chau played François, who seeks reconciliation with his Chinese relatives in Paris as he is about to become a father. François's indifference to his Chinese origins mirrors Chau's attempts to distance himself from his East Asian roots during his own childhood. The film seeks to explore generational and cultural differences and is more nuanced than the three *Qu'est-ce que l'on a fait au Bon Dieu?* films. Nevertheless, François's best friend Bruno frequently expresses stereotypical views about Chinese people and is very casual with his use of the term 'Chinois'. Bruno mocks François for not knowing his way around the 13<sup>th</sup> arrondissement of Paris (which is home to a large Chinese community) and refers to *Gangnam Style* singer Psy as "un Chinois" even though he is Korean. François's family play on Bruno's prejudices by telling him he is eating dog meat when he joins them for a family meal. François himself uses a deliberately exaggerated Chinese accent near the start of the film to avoid a driving fine by pretending not to be proficient in French. This mirrors the type of accent that Frédéric Chau used at the start of his initial appearance of the *Jamel Comedy Club*.

#### Other East Asian comedians in France

Although Frédéric Chau was the only comedian of East Asian descent to appear in the first four series of the *Jamel Comedy Club*, several others have featured in subsequent series. One of the most prominent is Bun Hay Mean, who has performed under the stage name 'Le Chinois marrant'. This name seems to designate being Chinese and funny as an unlikely combination, or portray Bun Hay Mean as proof that people who are Chinese can be funny. Despite his stage

name, Bun Hay Mean has been described in *Le Monde* as being “d’origine sino-cambodgienne”<sup>37</sup> and – at the time of writing – is referred to on his Wikipedia entry as “un humoriste français d’origine chinoise et cambodgienne”<sup>38</sup>. Bun Hay Mean was born in Bordeaux in 1981, the son of a Cambodian father and Chinese mother who fled Cambodia in 1977. On his initial appearance on the *Jamel Comedy Club*, his material focused on some familiar Chinese stereotypes – such as karaoke – but was less centred on these than Frédéric Chau’s initial routine. Much of what Bun Hay Mean talked about on stage concerned diverse areas of Paris such as Barbès and the Goutte d’Or so could be seen as a sign of him participating in a form of intercultural dialogue. It is, however, somewhat paradoxical that he presents himself as “un Chinois” yet has also criticized the way that, for many people in France, “tous les Asiatiques sont des Chinois”.<sup>39</sup> In a 2019 stand-up show at Le Grand Rex in Paris that was filmed for television, Bun Hay Mean focused on some similarly stereotypical themes to Frédéric Chau. This included karaoke, sweatshop labour, and China’s role as a global power. At times, Bun Hay Mean goes further than Frédéric Chau in the way in which he seeks to exploit French stereotypes of the Chinese. Rather than just mocking them and/or responding to them with jokes about the global power of China, he also seeks to invert the stereotypes by turning them back on the French. This is particularly evident when he discusses the stereotype that Chinese people have narrow eyes:

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<sup>37</sup> Sandrine Blanchard, “Le “Chinois marrant” et l’effet Dieudonné”, *Le Monde*, 13 January 2014. Available online at: [https://www.lemonde.fr/scenes/article/2014/01/13/le-chinois-marrant-et-l-effet-dieudonne\\_6002648\\_1654999.html](https://www.lemonde.fr/scenes/article/2014/01/13/le-chinois-marrant-et-l-effet-dieudonne_6002648_1654999.html) [accessed 7 November 2019].

<sup>38</sup> See: [https://fr.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bun\\_Hay\\_Mean](https://fr.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bun_Hay_Mean). Correct as of 24 September 2021.

<sup>39</sup> Sandrine Blanchard. “Le “Chinois marrant” et l’effet Dieudonné”.

Il y a plus d'Asiatiques que vous dans le monde. Je ne suis pas bridé, vous avez des yeux ronds. Pour moi, le monde est peuplé de hiboux ! Qu'est-ce qu'il y a de si étonnant avec vos gros yeux ?

Bun Hay Mean's frequent reference to white French people as "des hiboux" reverses the othering of Chinese people by making white French people the other. Furthermore, he demonstrates awareness of the "minorité modèle" image of Chinese people in France that is evoked by sociologists such as Ya-Han Chuang, and criticises French people for going too far with their positive stereotypes about Chinese people. The idea that being Chinese constitutes a norm is something that he conveys from the very start of his show, which he begins with an address to the audience: "Ma tête vous fait rire? Il faut vous habituer, je suis le futur. Vous aurez tous ma tête un jour!". Within his show, Bun Hay Mean expresses frustration at being seen as an 'other' within France despite having been born there. However, he talks about how discovering *le théâtre d'improvisation* in his early teens helped him to feel more accepted. He ends his show by arguing that stand-up comedy involves acceptance and tolerance, and – unlike Frédéric Chau – rejects the idea that it is *communautaire*. Addressing a diverse audience, he states "regardez autour de nous, le stand-up est ni communautaire ni générationnel" and concludes with a message of tolerance by stating "il faut s'aimer les uns les autres".

When Luigi Li was first introduced to the audience of the *Jamel Comedy Club* on Canal+, Jamel Debbouze described him as having "un prénom italien, un nom de Chinois et une tête de Mexicain". In his initial appearance, Li focused on stereotypical topics such as Chinese restaurants. However, one aspect that differentiated him from Frédéric Chau and Bun Hay

Mean was his desire to state from the start that he was not Chinese. On his first appearance he commented:

Je suis asiatique [...] Moi, je suis Vietnamien, attention, pas Chinois, cela n'a rien à voir. Nous les Vietnamiens, on n'aime pas les Chinois. C'est un peu comme les Français et les Arabes ou le reste du monde avec les Arabes.

Although the routine cited above involved Li mocking French attitudes towards “Arabes” in a similar manner to Frédéric Chau and Bun Hay Mean, it also stems from a more nuanced sense of East Asian identity than that which emerges from simply referencing well-known stereotypes about Chinese people. Nuanced and hybrid forms of East Asian identity have also been explored by other comedians of East Asian descent in countries such as the US and the UK. Examples include Michael Yo, whose 2018 Amazon Prime special *Blasian* focuses on his combined black and Asian roots, and in particular cultural differences between his African-American father and Korean-American mother. Wonho Chung provides another perspective on hybridity in his 2014 Netflix special *Live in New York* that he performs in Arabic. In this show, he describes growing up in a Korean-Vietnamese family in Jordan and how his fluency in Arabic shocked many of his fellow students at university in Amman who saw him as “that Chinese dude”. British-Malaysian comedian Phil Wang has made hybridity a key part of many of his performances and began his 2021 Netflix Special *Philly Philly Wang Wang* by saying that being “white and Chinese” makes him part of “the most powerful races on earth”. He further explores hybridity in his 2021 book *Sidesplitter: How to be from two worlds at once*. However, what

French comedians of Asian descent share with Asian diaspora comedians in the US and UK is a desire to play with the image of Asians – and especially the Chinese – as threatening others due to the international status of China. Ronny Chieng’s 2019 Netflix special *Asian Comedian Destroys America* makes this a key premise in a similar way to Bun Hay Mean’s 2019 stand-up show that is discussed above.

Sony Chan provides a further example of a France-based comedian of East Asian descent who work traverses a variety of fields and explores a range of questions of identity. Chan – who was born in Hong Kong but moved to Alsace aged 11 – is a non-binary comedian and also a model, singer, actor, and presenter on both French radio and television. Chan’s stand-up shows have focused on interactions between different identities – East and West, female and male – and she has performed in both French and Cantonese. In interviews, Chan has sought to reject becoming the symbol of a specific identity based on gender or sexuality.<sup>40</sup> Chan has talked of refusing to ‘play the gender identity card’ and argued that ‘for a minority to get accepted, I believe it’s best to highlight what it has in common with the majority rather than the differences.’<sup>41</sup> Furthermore, titles of Sony Chan’s stand-up shows have sought to normalise difference. These have included *Différent comme tout le monde*, *Différente comme vous et moi*, *Princesse sans royaume*, and *Sans étiquette*.

## **Conclusions**

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<sup>40</sup> Adrien Gombeaud. "Le rire libre de Sony Chan", *Les Echos*, 29 April 2016. <https://www.lesechos.fr/2016/04/le-rire-libre-de-sony-chan-1230866>. Accessed 25 March 2022.

<sup>41</sup> Shirley Lau. 'Trans comedian Sony Chan: 'I don't play the gender identity card'', *Post Magazine*, 22 November 2018. <https://www.scmp.com/magazines/post-magazine/arts-music/article/2174460/trans-comedian-sony-chan-i-dont-play-gender>. Accessed 25 March 2018.

The way in which comedians of East Asian descent are using humour in France is similar to the approach that has been adopted by other minority groups that have greater cultural visibility and a longer history of collective political activism. Furthermore, this has parallels with the way that Chinese communities in France are increasingly adopting strategies previously employed by groups such as Maghrebis in response to racism and violence.<sup>42</sup> Given the evolution in the social status, political activism and visibility of Chinese groups in French society that is discussed by sociologists such as Ya-Han Chuang and Simeng Wang, the coming years may well also bring an evolution in their humour. Performances by East Asian comedians in France that have been discussed here suggest that this humour is indeed already evolving. To return to the means of situating ethnic humour discussed at the start of this article, much of Chau's stand-up material can be situated at the second level of Mintz's scale which involves minority groups performing jokes that see them using existing stereotypes. However, a greater proportion of Bun Hay Mean, Luigi Lil, and Sony Chan's humour can be located at the fourth level associated with greater integration and confidence that involves groups "directly confront[ing] and ridicul[ing] those who formerly ridiculed them".<sup>43</sup> In the years ahead, it will be intriguing to see to what extent more comedians of East Asian descent emerge in France and if their humour reflects the power dynamics implicit in Bun Hay Mean's brand of comedy. If we see a continued emergence of East Asian comedians in France, it may well be that being *un Chinois marrant* - the stage name often used by Bun Hay Mean - becomes less of a unique selling point and that further forms of identity negotiation within stand-up comedy will emerge. The shows of Sony Chan –

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<sup>42</sup> Chuang, pp. 227, 231

<sup>43</sup> Rappoport, p. 100.



whilst in some way paradoxical in their simultaneous referencing and downplaying of difference  
– also point towards a banalisation of difference and a normalisation of multiple hybrid  
identities.