Humour in Exile: The Articulation of Diasporic Identities through Standup Comedy

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Master Thesis: International Relations – Culture and Politics

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Word Count: 14, 936

S2779048

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Name: **Mingyu Shan**

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CONTENTS

Introduction

It is Friday night, and Norah Yang is riding a wave of laughs at Shanghai's Kong Fu Komedy Club: a venue that offers regular shows in both English and Mandarin (Oconnell, 2018). Yet two decades ago, there was hardly a standup scene in Shanghai or most of Asia (ibid.). Standup gigs can be found in some Asian countries such as Singapore, Thailand and Malaysia, but they are usually dominated by expats or visiting Western comedians. Mirroring the empirical realities, scholarship concerning humour in world politics mainly focuses on English-speaking white male comedians (Brassett, 2009, 2016; Dodds & Kirby, 2013; Sutton, 2021). With the blooming standup comedy shows in the Sinophone Pacific, it calls for a more contextualized investigation.

Comedy has been widely researched in various fields such as anthropology, sociology, psychology, and cultural studies (Bergson, 1911; Freud, 1960; Apte, 1983; Berger, 1997; Billig, 2005). Conventional International Relations (IR) has in many ways defined the 'international' as opposed to the 'local', and the 'political' opposite to the 'cultural', therefore divorcing itself from the sociological and anthropological realms (Jahn, 2000; Lawson, 2006). In doing so, it claims a territory of its own at the cost of plural perspectives of understanding political articulations in various sites. As feminist IR scholar Cynthia Enloe (2004) has argued, the local and global domains are not independent but are mutually constitutive. Seemingly mundane cultural practices like laughter and humour play an active role in maintaining and reproducing the international relations of domination and marginalization. Recent years have seen a shift in IR from 'hard power' to 'soft culture', from states to individual experiences, and from the 'serious' to the 'silly' (Bleiker, 2000). However, the relationships between humour and world politics are yet to be explored (Dodds & Kirby, 2013; Wedderburn, 2021; Brassett, Browning & Wedderburn, 2021). This thesis seeks to deepen our understanding of comedy as a site where identity is articulated.

While a rich tradition of IR enquiry focuses on how politicians and diplomats harness humor to build a national identity, only a few have looked at the subalterns. Especially with growing concerns about modern migration and transmigration, the diaspora experiences constantly challenge the traditional notions of nation-space,

territory, and sense of belonging (Gilroy, 2000; Hall, 1993). Comedy exists within, between, and beyond multiple spatialities. On the one hand, it is highly linguistic, creative, and contextual. On the other hand, humor and laughter are recognized as fundamental human experiences that both exist and travel across borders (Bergson, 1911; Apte, 1983; Berger, 1997; Billig, 2005). According to Hall (1982), 'articulation' is the process of expression and connection in the sense that the text relies on the context. Comedy, as a kind of 'articulation', becomes a site of negotiation and struggle. Among other, standup comedy in Asia is widely seen as a form of entertainment imported from the West (Chen & Gao, 2021). The rapid development and hybridization of standup comedy in the Sinophone world trace the movement of the Sinophone diaspora across the globe. Therefore, in this thesis, I pose the following question: *How are the diasporic identities in the Sinophone Pacific articulated through standup comedy?*

Methods

This thesis investigates the articulation of identification and belonging through standup comedy. It draws on the social functions of humor (Bergson, 1911; Berger, 1997), the notion of hybridity in linguistics (Bakhtin, 1984) and identities (Gilroy, 1993; Bhabha, 1994) as a theoretical framework, which will be elaborated in Chapter Three.

Subsequently, this study provides a comparative case study to better understand the empirical phenomenon of humor as everyday articulation. It chooses two comedians – Ang Seng[1] and Norah Yang[2]– and conducts a discourse analysis. AG claims to be the first and only Malaysian comedian who performs in Mandarin in Taipei, Taiwan. Norah is a multilingual comedian widely known in the circle of standup comedy in Shanghai. Having lived and started her career in the US, Norah returned to China and since then has performed in multiple languages including English, Mandarin, and the Shanghainese dialect[3]. Both comedians share transboundary and transcultural

[1] The stage name of Ang Seng is 'AG 喜剧外来种' (AG xiju wailai Zhong). This thesis will address him as AG for convenience.
[2] Norah is her stage name, and this thesis will refer to her as such.
[3] Norah also claims to do standup comedy in Japanese. As there is no available source, and it exceeds the research scope and the author's linguistic ability, this thesis will not cover her works in Japanese.

experiences. Significantly, while AG fits into the traditional category of 'diaspora' as physically away from the 'homeland', Norah is those who return 'home' but experience a 'metaphorical exile' (Said, 1994: 38). By evaluating and comparing these cases, this study attempts to show how traditional diaspora discourses of identity decided by fixed nation-space and territory fail to address their experiences.

In addition, by choosing these two cases, this thesis argues for a more nuanced approach to analysing the flows of cultural expression within Asia, rather than between the West and the East. Norah and AG are not commercially successful comedians who have established fame and fortune, reaching the international audience through streaming media such as Netflix. However, they are representative cases precisely because they are not in the 'center'. Their voices contribute to de-centering both the West and China.

The data set for this thesis mainly includes video clips of AG and Norah's shows. Media reports, existing interviews, and critics will also be used to understand both comedians' personal experiences and highlight the broader context of their works. By taking a two-step approach, this study identifies the mechanism (language) and themes that speak to their transnational cultural identity. First, it investigates their use of (hybrid) languages. Rather than the simple divide between Mandarin and English, it explores how different accents, dialects, or mixtures are deployed to voice the diverse. Second, this thesis categories content that addresses how the comedians position themselves in the local society or the 'homeland', and how they express and joke about their experiences as an 'outsider'. Attention is also paid to the broader context, namely, the socio-political background of the metropolitan cities of Shanghai and Taipei, as well as the dynamic relations between China, Taiwan, and Southeast Asia. By doing so, this study investigates how the context informs the text of standup comedy and how the text attributes to the narration of the diaspora in a 'home' or 'foreign' land.

A limitation of this comparative case study is that it looks into two cases, and the findings, therefore, may lack generalisability. However, the absence of any scholarship on this phenomenon makes an in-depth comparative case study as this research project ever more necessary. Second, both AG and Norah are part-time comedians and have

not produced standup specials that can be accessed online[4]. Due to copyright issues, access to their shows is rather limited. To compensate for this shortcoming, I conducted an interview with AG. Unfortunately, Norah has not yet responded to my interview request up to the writing date.

Diaspora and the Sinophone: Minor Articulation

To answer the research question, the terms 'diaspora' and 'the Sinophone' need to be critically examined. While the word 'diaspora' was originally used to describe a population forced to leave their hometown, especially the Jewish population, it has now been expanded to describe the dispersion of a group of people who identify with the same geographic location (Shih, 2007). The Chinese diaspora is often understood as the community of 'ethnic Chinese' across the globe, who identify with the territory of China as a space of belonging. However, as highlighted in Shih's notion of 'against diaspora' (2007), to anchor identities through nationalities and ethnicities is highly problematic. When the Chinese diaspora refers to the *Han* Chinese who speak Mandarin (*Hanyu*), it is minoritizing, if not entirely excluding, other ethnicities, languages, and cultures.

Throughout the history of globalization, the heterogenization and hybridization of ethnicities and cultures are becoming increasingly common (see, for instance, Wallerstein, 2011). Therefore, either Chinese nationalist rhetoric of the 'overseas Chinese' or Western racialized conception of Chineseness remains insufficient to account for the complexity of those who 'dwell on the borders' (Mignolo, 2013). The study, thus, proposes the term 'Sinophone' developed by Shih Shu-mei (2007). The Sinophone community refers to the dispersion of people who speak or write different Sinitic languages worldwide. Rather than conceptualizing the community of the Chinese diaspora in terms of body (ethnicity) and birthplace (nationality), a community sharing Sinitic-linguistic cultures provides a more inclusive way of examining the hybridized subjectivities in the process of colonization and globalization.

The notion of Sinophone remains complicated relations with its center, China.

[4] It again speaks to the dominance of Anglophone comedians in the comic industry which will be elaborated later.

Similar to the Francophone and Anglophone worlds, the Sinophone comes with a history of cultural colonization. To criticize Western centrism is not to replace it with an alternative that holds a dangerous universalistic worldview of itself as the center of 'all under heaven' (*tianxia*) (Zhao, 2006). As China was and still is a cultural empire, its literary and classic *Han* script has a vast sphere of influence in the Pacific (Wong, 2011). In much of the existing literature, the conceptualization of the Sinophone may reinforce China-centrism if it stresses nothing but a nostalgia feeling and nativist fantasy (Wang, 2003).

Therefore, the Sinophone as a category to study should not attempt to create yet another universalized term to replace the 'Chinese'. Instead, it is the site of the subaltern voicing their significance to the powerful or the center (Shih, 2013). It looks into the dynamic relationship between languages, narratives, and diaspora identities. Meanwhile, it problematizes how the power struggle is practiced in everyday life at local, regional, and transnational levels. The study echoes with Shih (2007, 2013) that the linguistic community is a community of change and remains an open community. It proposes a disenchantment of terms such as 'diaspora' for a more inclusive understanding of belonging and identification.

While standard *Hanyu* as a major language is promoted by agents from home and abroad, various forms of de-standardization can be detected in oral communications, especially in comedy. The practice of de-standardization echoes what Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari call 'minor literature' or 'minor articulation' (1983). In other words, the process of the major language used by a minor group, or the hybridization of the major language and other fragments, plays both constructive and deconstructive roles. As will be shown in case studies, *Hanyu* is standard only to an extent as a written language. Speaking usually mixes different accents, grammar, semantics, and syntax from multiple languages and intermingles with personal experiences. In this way, the standup comedy in hybrid Sinitic languages can function as a site to diminish the influence of the major and voice the minor. Further, it rejects the hegemonic call of the Chineseness, questions monolingualism and ethnocentrism and invites us to reflect on existing diaspora conceptualization critically.

Outline

Chapter Two of this study presents a review of existing literature on humor and laughter within the academic discipline of IR. Chapter Three establishes a theoretical framework that draws from insights across disciplines, considering the lack of methodological and theoretical consensus to address humor in IR. Chapter Four then examines and compares two cases, Ang Seng and Norah Yang, respectively. Finally, Chapter Five provides a conclusion and discusses the implications of the findings for further research.

Literature Review

Recent years have witnessed a cultural or aesthetic turn in International Relations (Bleiker, 2001, 2009; Shapiro, 2013; Moore & Shepherd, 2010; Hozić, 2017). Culture, cultural artefacts and their association with subjectivities are prominent parts of everyday life. More than reflecting, they shape and are shaped by world politics. Critical IR scholars are drawing on interdisciplinary theories, methodologies, and evidence to challenge the boundaries of IR (Caso and Caitlin, 2015; Bleiker, 2001). Rather than a traditional top-down approach that investigates states and statesmen, critical approaches to IR focussing on the dimension of culture shed light on the complexities of power relations in the 'margins, silences, and bottom rungs' (Enloe, 1996: 186).

Among many sites and subjects that challenge the realm of IR, Brassett et al. (2021) flag the increasing importance of humor and laughter in global politics. The growing presence and practice of the comic in world politics demands a better understanding of how it functions. Yet, IR's approaches to humor and laughter appear disjointed and fragmented (ibid.). This chapter examines the scholarly attempts to address the complex intersection between humor and global politics. It asserts that humor and laughter matter as sites of transnational political discourse and everyday practice, yet the literature remains scattered and insufficient to understand their political functions.

First, scholarly attention has been drawn to investigating how politicians deploy humour in international diplomacy (Shilikhina, 2021). With the 'digitalization of public diplomacy', diplomats' use of humor on social media warrants scholars' attention (Manor, 2021). Chernobrov (2021), for example, formulates the term 'strategic humor', through which states can deliver a serious message in an entertaining way that catches the media and public attention. Manor (2021) further suggests that diplomats can establish a unique 'iBrand' by adopting a humorous tone. The case of the Russian Embassy's amusing tweets reveals the intention to craft the image of Russia as an authentic, confident, and accessible world leader (ibid.). The use of humor is associated with the attempt to navigate the diplomatic agenda in an increasingly mediatized global political sphere. Humor suggests a liberal openness and tolerance that appeal to

international audiences, therefore contributing to cultivating a desired national identity and brand (Browning and de Oliveira, 2017).

Aside from focusing on politicians and diplomats, other studies address humor and comedy as practices of the 'common' people following an 'everyday turn' in IR (Hobson and Seabrooke 2007; Solomon and Steele 2017). A few authors draw insights from the discipline of Psychology to explore the function of humor in politics. Building on the Freudian school, humor is a pleasant escape from reality (Freud, 1960). It can relieve pain, pressure and existential anxiety that come from one's engagement with the real world. The comic gives us the courage to face serious issues such as disease, war, and death with less pessimism, if not slight optimism. Wedderburn (2019), for example, investigates the 'aesthetic mode of expression' in a comic book drawn by a German-Jewish detainee in a concentration camp. In this way, comics do not only offer a way to transcend violence, but also manifest the possibility of politics even in a painful and inhuman space. Similarly, Douglas (2002) has referred to humor as 'the affirmation of life' and an 'antidote' to the continuous spirit of war and militaries (264). Humor and laughter do not have to be employed to challenge the status quo or negate the state's negligence, but function as a coping mechanism to ease anxiety and let off anger.

A more prevailing school of thought considers humor and comedy in terms of power relations implied in everyday articulation (Bleiker, 2000; Mbembe, 2001). As feminists, among others, have long asserted, social relations *are* international relations (Tickner, 1992). The seemingly banal and mundane practices do not only reflect but also produce and reproduce the power hierarchies (Enloe, 2004). This approach highlights the agency of political subjects, building on a rich tradition of critical scholarship concerning popular culture and its potential to maintain, produce, and disturb global politics (Grayson, Davies, and Philpott 2009). In this way, humor and comedy are viewed as the reactive site of response to or resistance against power and oppression (Brassett, 2021).

Among this strand of thought, scholars have debated the function of humor, as either the discursive weapon of the powerless or the tool of the powerful. A body of existing IR scholarship has testified to the former, that is, the potential of humor and

comedy to disagree and resist. Seirlis (2011), for example, explores the role of standup comedy in the context of post-Apartheid South Africa. Seirlis (2011) highlights that, instead of throwing rocks at police to demonstrate anger and resistance, "young men […] are now throwing wit from stage" (518). Odysseos (2001) builds on Foucault's notion of *parrhesia* – free speech or free-spokenness, and foregrounds that humor is able to 'ridicule and criticize dominant institutions and their abuse by leaders and citizens alike in a pre-agreed forum' (727). Odysseos considers comedy as a discourse of the truthful. It highlights the wrongdoings or inaccuracies of dominating narratives promoted by existing power (ibid.). Muslia (2014) finds that, in South Africa, standup comedy helps break the silence of 'taboo' questions of race and gender. Similarly, by analyzing the work of standup comedians such as Russel Brand and Stewart Lee, Brassett (2016) argues that humor, although not naturally radical, projects a 'subversive understanding' that encourages both the comedians and the audience to critically reflect on the dominating capitalist discourse and its limits (170).

In addition to the content of comedy, laughter as social conduct alone can also function as a form of resistance. Laughing at or about serious issues such as racial discrimination or death is not 'normal' nor reasonably expected. It undermines the authority by making others *feel* awkward and uncomfortable, in addition to making these ideas communicated and heard (Death, 2016). Obadare (2016), for example, brings up a new way of understanding civic engagement by considering laughter as an informal format of resistance in Nigeria. Salter (2011) notices the sign of 'no laughing' in airports. He argues that joking implies ambiguity and therefore undermines the sincerity and certainty that the security mechanisms rely on (ibid.: 39).

Those who are not so optimistic about the effects of humor argue that rigid power hierarchy can be maintained, if not reified, through everyday laughter. Crucially, Mbembe (2001) suggests that laughter does not only challenge power but simultaneously repeats and reproduces it. For example, think about common racist and sexist jokes. Similarly, Bakhtin (1984) warns that satire can be used to challenge the strong and to mock the weak, for 'it is gay, triumphant, and at the same time mocking, deriding. It asserts and denies, it buries and revives' (1984: 12). Daniel Hammett agrees

with such observation, suggesting a way of engaging with humor as ‘a dynamic, continual and shifting negotiation of ideas of power, resistance and dissent’ (Hammett, 2010: 5). The dialectics of the function of humor has influenced scholars like Källstig (2021). She employs empirical cases from Zimbabwe to explore how stand-up comedy acts as a platform for expression within the silencing political environment, arguing that it both disrupts and reinforces the gender bias and patriotism in Zimbabwean (ibid.).

As demonstrated, a growing number of authors have paid attention to the role of humor within problematic social structures and verified how it could be harnessed by the powerful or the powerless (Brassett, Browning & Wedderburn, 2021). Yet, humor and laughter as methodological and analytical sources remain largely overlooked in studies about diaspora or migrants (Franck, 2022). The topic has been overwhelmingly centered on the discourse of loss, suffering and violence (Coutin & Vogel, 2016). Very few scholars address the process of migration in terms of humor, irony and laughter (de León, 2015; Franck, 2022). Van Ramshorts (2017), for example, conducts ethnographic fieldwork on migration between the border of the US and Mexico. He argues that the everyday experience of migrants cannot be adequately depicted through tragedy only but should be punctuated by play and laughter. Humor is deployed by those in transit as a shared mechanism to deal with vulnerability. Likewise, Hernann (2016) looks at the internally displaced persons (IDP) and refugees from Timbuktu, Mali, and how they cope with displacement through humour and jokes. Joking functions as a way of producing counternarratives and alleviating anxieties. It also contributes to closer interpersonal relationships, forming a sense of community. In diaspora studies, Gruen (2004) innovatively analyses humor in historical and literary records to exhibit the Jewish minority who experience both a respect for the Holy Home and a commitment to the local community. The ambiguity of humor makes it impossible to decide arbitrary boundaries. Humor can serve to undermine serious issues and fear by ridiculing the ‘Other’ (137). Most recently, Franck (2022) proposes to recognize migrants as humorous human beings. Through a case study of migrants on a Greek island, he illustrates how jokes are deployed to refuse subjugation. With the ever-changing vortex of population mobility in current world politics, more narratives, vocabularies, and

methodologies are needed to capture the complexities of diasporic experiences and circumstances.

This thesis intends to contribute to the current debate about humour in two ways. First, there is little research concerning humor and comedy in non-Western contexts. It echoes the fact that the industry of standup comedy is still largely dominated by white, male, English-speaking, Western-countries-based comedians (Brassett, 2009, 2016; Dodds & Kirby, 2013; Sutton, 2021). This thesis shifts the focus away from the centre by including Asian comedians who speak Sinitic languages. Second, this thesis intends to enrich our understanding of diaspora and their experiences. It highlights the methodological and analytical value of comedy and endeavours to account for the struggles of the 'in-between' in a decentralized and relational way.

As demonstrated, the vocabularies regarding humor are varied and vague. In IR, existing studies do not only address 'humor', but also 'laughter', 'joking', 'comedy' or 'satire' (Brassett, Browning, & O'Dwyer, 2021; Hartnett & O'Driscoll, 2021; Saunders & Bruun, 2021; Salter, 2011). Although comedy is often entangled with laughter, those terms are not always mutually constitutive. This thesis does not attempt to classify the concepts. Instead, it approaches humor as an inclusive term that denotes the complex practices of inciting, provoking, or expressing amusement (Eco, 1984:1). Specifically, by focusing on standup comedy, this thesis is interested in the comic expression in performances and the laughter that follows.

Theoretical Framework

Approaching Humour and Laughter

Humour is widely conceptualised as a fundamental aspect of human experience (Bergson, 1911; Apte, 1983; Berger, 1997; Freud, 1960) and a 'vital human quality' (Billig, 2005: 11). As noted, the study of the comic is scarce in IR, and the scope of research is relatively limited to Anglophone comedians. Therefore, a greater awareness of philosophical and theoretical literature on humor may compensate for the insufficiency of IR theory in addressing some issues, such as why some jokes are funny and what can laughter do (Hartnett & O'Driscoll, 2021).

Although humor can be universally found in almost every society (Apte, 1983; Berger, 1997), there are disagreements concerning what makes it funny. At the risk of over-simplification, the main theories of humour can be roughly categorized into three strands: relief theory, superiority theory, and incongruity theory (Billig, 2005). Relief theory, inspired by the Freudian school of psychology, sees humor as an escape from rigid rules and heavy burdens imposed by the social order. Jokes provide immense pleasure by allowing us to express many of our deepest sexual, aggressive, and cynical feelings that would otherwise remain repressed (Freud, 1960). While superiority theory associates humor with an individual sense of victory or superiority vis-à-vis individuals and social groups (Purcell, 2010: 375), incongruity theory suggests that laughter is the product of contradictions. It arises from the inconsistency between what we know in reality and what we see in comedy (Bergson, 1911). It is amusing because it does not agree with what we would expect or perceive in our empirical world. Incongruity theory highlights how humor bears the potential to disrupt human interactions.

However, scholars have pointed out that these three theories are not necessarily exclusive (Raskin, 1985). There are elements from all three theories, among others, worth considering when we uncover the complexities of laughter and humor. For example, incongruity can refer to the incongruity between the mechanical and the human (as Bergson suggests), or between the strict demands of morality and the pursuit of the fulfilment of our natural desire (as Freud would propose). Crucially, for the incongruity to exist, there must be some consensus or agreement between the performer

and the audience. That is, a guaranteed harmony is needed to constitute a context.

Another problem that frequently occurs in Political Sciences and IR's consideration of humor, is to interrogate what functions humor and laughter bear. Optimistically argued by Berger (1997), the comic can not only take care of the invisible in our world, but also create a counterworld, however temporarily (207). Humor transcends the assumptions or rules of ordinary everyday life. Berger quotes what Eugene Ionesco called *dépaysement,* that is, the feeling of not being at home in a foreign or different place, to describe the counterworld in the comic in which the empirical world is no longer the ultimate reality (ibid.: 208). Any negative feelings such as fear, anxiety, depression, and disappointment toward reality are useless, senseless and unimportant. Making fun of the empirical world eventually emancipates us from the maintenance of ordinary reality or, to quote Berger, 'the business of living' (ibid.: 207).

Unlike Berger, Bergson (1911) questions the social functions of humor. According to Bergson, laughter brings with it 'an absence of feeling' (1911: 4) and indicates a 'momentary anaesthesia of the heart' (ibid.: 5). Following Adam Smith's notion of 'empathy' (Smith, 1822; similarly argued by Mead, 1962), social life demands us to constantly take the position of others, imagining how we are perceived by other members and utilizing such imagination to guide our behavior. While laughter lifts the rules and customs imposed on us, the respect and compassion disappear accordingly. To Bergson, humans naturally tend to avoid the humiliation of being mocked. Agreeing with Bergson, Adorno and Horkheimer (1944: 113) stress that to laugh is always to 'laugh *at* something'. Whoever is being laughed at turns into an object instead of fellow human beings as audiences are not expected to show sympathy for the character's pain and suffering.

Furthermore, Bergson proposes that 'laughter is always in need of an echo' and is socially shared (Bergson, 1911: 5). It implies that the focus is turned from the individual to the group, and, most importantly, from personal experience to public effects. The power of laughter to break through the rigidity of reality comes from the idea that the person laughing is carefree, liberated, and supported by the collective of those who laugh together. Consequently, laughter serves a social function to discipline and impose

the customs and routines of society, therefore achieving conformity rather than elasticity.

Humour is both universal and particular. Laughter travels beyond borders of culture and national territory. Yet, it does not mean that the way individuals react to joking is alike. As the brief overview in the section has shown, there is no universal explanation of what makes a joke funny and what humour can do. Humour relates to the social as much as the personal. Social codes entangled with personal experiences contribute to the laughable. The study of humour is not committed to deciding an 'objective nature', but to closely investigating what is articulated by individuals under the disguise of such an ambivalent gesture as joking and laughing, which this thesis aims to do.

Hybrid Languages

Post-structuralist IR scholars have proposed that linguistic, communicative and aesthetic practices are crucial to the formation of subjective identities (see Der Derian and Shapiro, 1989; Campbell, 1992; Hansen, 2006). Standup comedy is the art of creative language. Effectively analysing standup comedy in a language-based community requires us first to interrogate the role of languages.

This thesis proposes the concept of hybridity in understanding standup comedy and its articulation. Hybridity is a term of the nineteenth century (Young, 1995: 6) but in recent years has reappeared in various fields, including cultural studies, linguistics, and postcolonial theories (Mitchell, 2005). While the concept is applied slightly differently across disciplines, its shared certain characteristics will be useful in this study. Hybrid subjects originate from heterogeneous sources and are made up of incongruous components. It follows the post-structuralist celebration of pluralism, ambivalence, and non-fixity (ibid.). Furthermore, it rejects binarism and essentialism, and posits a fluid process of becoming instead of being[5].

[5] According to Heraclitus, *being* is an empty fiction. The state of becoming does not produce fixed entities, such as *being, subject, object, substance, thing*. Becoming is the process or state of change and coming about in time and space (Savitt, n.d.).

The theory of linguistic hybridity, undertaken by Mikhail Bakhtin (1981), posits that language is internally controversial and capable of mixing two speech systems within one single utterance. For Bakhtin, it is clear that all contemporary languages evolve from mixtures of various historical forms of languages. Yet Bakhtin separates this kind of unconscious hybridity from the 'intentional' one. Intentional hybridity, in Bakhtin's sense, is a highly political act that has the potential for subversive resistance. It does not simply mix two opposite views, but 'sets against each other dialogically' (360). The doubleness of dialogue implies that speaking is not always enunciating one single voice, but capable of an ambivalent and undetermined articulation. Moreover, the double-voiced nature of languages problematizes the 'Otherness' in the speech act (Mitchell, 2005: 189), for it refuses the legitimacy of the single dominating voice. According to Young (1995: 20), understanding the speech act as internally contested and conflicted allows us to investigate the moments when one voice can unmask the other and therefore overthrow the 'authoritative discourse'.

Following linguistic hybridity, Bakhtin develops the notion of 'heteroglossia', referring to the simultaneous use of contradictory languages while bearing the speaker's historical, social, and ideological relationships. For Bakhtin, language is never a neutral instrument that is given and fixed. It is an ongoing process that happens in dialogues and interactions within a social context. It is chronotopic (Bakhtin, 1981: 251), denoting the configurations of time and space in languages, discourses and genres. Hence, analysing chronotopic narratives requires our sensitivity toward changing time, space, and their realization in speeches. It inscribes the speaker's agency to both contextualize and decontextualize discourses with the change of settings, audiences, or their experiences.

Heteroglossia bears the discursive potential to the unifying and centralizing forces of verbal-ideological worlds (ibid.: 270). It evolves to become a subaltern practice. Bakhtin draws on the medieval folk humour in revolt against the serious culture of the feudal lords (358). By taking comic and ironic stances, it challenges the officially recognized voices that dominate and suppress the marginalized. The concept of heteroglossia conceives language as an ideologically saturated worldview, instead of an

abstract, firm, and stable system of grammars. The latter is presented in the form of a unified national literary language that dismisses other varieties. The authority of a unitary language, however, can be questioned if language is seen as socio-political and historical, and is inherently connected to the context. In this way, heteroglossia ensures 'the plurality of independent and emerged voices and consciousnesses, a genuine polyphony of fully valid voices' (Bakhtin, 1984: 6).

As will be elaborated on in the case studies, the use of languages does not only imply the comedians' historical and social connections with the chronotope, but it also speaks to the issues of identity and power relations. Here, standup comedy here is a communicative framework harnessed by comedians. For instance, the mixed languages of English, Mandarin and the Shanghainese dialect in Norah's performance deconstruct the discourse of a unified person-language-nationality ideology. AG's commitment to Mandarin but with a Malaysian accent also challenges the myth of 'standard language' and reverses the gaze from the 'native'. As discursive devices, heteroglossia, or hybrid languages, contribute to the articulation of their complex experiences. By using and creating their own linguistic resources, standup comedians can claim and construct a novel social position and identity that transcend the conventional and insufficient categories of race, ethnicity or nationality in grand narratives.

Hybrid Identities

Humour and language are the mechanisms through which diasporic standup negotiate and articulate their identities. Building on Bakhtin's theory of linguistic hybridity, cultural and postcolonial theorists have further explored the potential of speeches or performances in diminishing the single voice of authority. For example, the notions of cultural hybridity and 'third space' (Bhabha, 1994) can be of use in our understanding of diasporic identities. Theoretical investigation of diaspora has been prominent in postcolonial studies (see, for instance, Gilroy, 1993, 2000). Although the cases in this thesis are not necessarily former colonies, they are situated in the context of dispersal and transnational networks that are deeply influenced by postcolonial orders. This thesis borrows insights from postcolonial studies to rethink borders, space,

temporalities, and identifications, but does not necessarily conceive the cases as 'colonised'.

Bhabha (1994) points out that a crucial feature of colonial discourse is its reliance on the notion of 'fixity'. Fixity implies rigidity and an unchanging order, but also disorder, degradation, and repetition. The colonial discourse strives to create a social reality in which the colonized are depicted as the 'Other' and are fully cognizable and knowable by labels. Laclau (1996), following Lacan and Derrida, has proposed that all identities are 'dislocated'. Identities are always experienced as partially incomplete because they rely on the differentiation from a recognizable 'Other'. The identity negotiation is ongoing; integration can only be achieved at a certain period and get lost somewhere again.

Having demonstrated the problems of homogeneity, Bhabha (1994) suggests the ambivalence of culture. The colonial and colonised cultures in the hybrid enclaves will form a 'third space' of resistance where colonial discourse is rewritten, and a new postcolonial culture will emerge. Bhabha argues that cultural identities emerge from a zone of contradiction and ambiguity, where hybridity not only removes the enunciative boundaries – women, ethnic minorities, the colonized, etc. – but also in a middle ground creates a 'third space' with multiple imaginaries. In hybridity, heterogeneous cultures are in-between and crosscutting, and therefore negotiate new meanings. The boundaries are no longer where things end but the starting point of the existence of things in a movement (Bhabha, 1994: 5).

The movement, or as Bhabha refers to it, 'the poetics of exile' (1994: 12), is concerned with those who dwell on the borders. Although there have been critiques of Bhabha's hybridity in the sense that it appears to be overly elite-intellectualized and removed from the everyday realities (Friedman, 2000), many scholars borrow the concept to explore the hybrid identities of diasporic subjects through the lens of popular culture. For Bhabha, transnational diasporic communities, with their continuity of language, religion and traditions, construct a new landscape of cultural interaction and mobility. Many theorists have focused on the question of identity in the exilic situation. Said, for example, sees a 'double perspective' (Said, 1994: 60) of intellectuals in exile

because their experiences are always counterposed with another, thus taking a position that is always novel and unpredictable. They do not see things as naturally given but tend to ponder how they come into being, and necessarily keep sceptical or even playful of what was seen as unchangeable and irreversible. Above all, being in exile is moving from the center to the periphery, from the conventional to the unfamiliar and uncomfortable, and from the habitual to the innovation and experiment (Said, 1994: 64). Likewise, through investigating black diasporic subjects in the movement across the Atlantic, Gilroy (1993) coined the term 'double consciousness'. The concept refers to the duality of the identities and the internal struggle to reconcile between blackness and Europeanness. Cultural voices and practices originating from these two dialectical subjectivities can therefore challenge the hegemonic discourse of modernity. After all, as Stuart Hall (2002) suggests, the value of 'postcolonialism' lies in the rejection of the dichotomy between 'here' and 'there', 'past' and 'present', 'home' and 'abroad', embracing the position of 'non-one' and in-betweenness.

What Bhabha proposes as 'a more transnational and translational sense of the hybridity of imagined communities' facilitates our understanding of the cultures – and in this study, the comic – situated in the history of human movement. The conventional concepts of cultural comparison or cultural diversity based on the presumption of sequential time, spatial distance and homogenous national culture are problematic. We live in 'a generalized condition of homelessness' (Said, 1994: 18) where cultures and identities are deterritorialized. The borders are blurring; and eventually, the personal is the political, the private intersects with the public, and the world and home become each other. Hybridity encourages us to revisit the theories on humour. Although we have established that the comic relies on some harmony to constitute conflicts, and Bergson (1991) even asserts that the same joke cannot make sense if told in a different language, this study sees hybridity inside such harmony. It redirects the focus to accommodating those who linger beyond the borders of cultures and languages. Their jokes and laughter do not totalize experience in the process of displacement and disjunction.

Case Study: Ang Seng (AG)

Ang Seng is a Malaysian comedian based in Taipei, Taiwan. In 2018, AG moved to Taiwan to study Chinese Literature at Yuan Ze University. AG now works in the gaming industry while doing standup comedy part-time. In 2021, he won the second prize in a competition organized by Live Comedy Club Taipei, one of the most influential clubs in Taiwan (Du & Wu, 2022). Unlike Norah, who seems to be pursuing an international appearance, AG focuses on Taiwan's domestic market, as evidenced in his commitment to the Mandarin language and the themes in his work.

Ang Seng has a stage name called 'AG 喜剧外来种' (AG xiju wailaizhong, literally 'AG the introduced species in comedy[6]'). 'The introduced species' in biology refers to a species living outside but brought to the native land by human activities and influencing the local eco-system. AG explained that the metaphor emphasised his identity as a foreigner in Taiwan and a newcomer in Taiwan's comedy circle (Du & Wu, 2022). It is also a personal branding strategy to distinguish himself from other comedians in Taiwan, like how Norah promotes her multilingual abilities and transcultural background. The stage name is not just celebrating the difference from the mainstream, but also contesting and disturbing differences.

Language: 'unauthentic' Mandarin

Although AG admits that it is merely a joke to claim to be the first and only Mandarin-speaking Malaysian comedian in Taiwan, it is indeed hard to find many Malaysian comedians committed to using Mandarin as their stage language. Malaysia is a nation consisting of people of various ethnic, linguistic, and religious backgrounds. Although the main languages spoken in Malaysia are Bahasa Malaysia, Mandarin, and Tamil (Kärchner-Ober, 2011: 298), English remains a more prevalent language in Malaysian standup comedy considering its pragmatic role in the postcolonial neo-liberalist global market. Standup comedians who perform in English can easily access the Thai and Singaporean markets, with more venues, resources, and clientele to

[6] All translations in this thesis are the author's own. The original texts are in Mandarin. Due to the word limit, the original texts are not included alongside the translation.

support their careers (Du & Wu, 2022). On the other hand, English as an international language connects Malaysian standup comedy to larger audiences in the Euro-American countries through international video streaming platforms. English seems to be the entry ticket for a comedian to compete in the global market.

Ang Seng, however, is committed to performing in Mandarin. His being ethnical Chinese and studying Chinese literature motivated him to perform in Mandarin at first.[7] Like Malaysia, Taiwan maintains a diverse linguistic environment where the indigenous Austronesian language and Chinese dialects such as Hokkien and Hakka have endured the imposition of Japanese since Japan's colonization in 1895 and Mandarin since Kuomintang's retreating in 1945 (Lai, 2018). Yet, most Taiwanese are fluent in the language of *guoyu* – literally 'the national language', also known as Taiwanese Mandarin – the official language. It closely resembles and is mutually intelligible with Standard Mandarin spoken in mainland China, with some divergences in pronunciation, vocabulary, and grammar. Meanwhile, the written form of *guoyu* uses traditional characters alongside other Sinophone areas such as Hong Kong, Macau, and many overseas Chinese communities. To AG, Mandarin is the language that bridges his home and his adopting country.

As mentioned before, the linguistic community is not a naturally given and pleasantly fixed unity. On the contrary, it is fluid, flexible, and chronotopic (Bakhtin, 1981: 251). Time and space construct the language that connects people and things. Although AG speaks Mandarin like the local Taiwanese, AG feels 'othered' in a different context of speaking. His foreign accent, for example, is a disruption of nativist and essentialist structures. The transnational chronotopic languages struggle to claim the legitimacy of belonging. In AG's comedy work *Taiwan Greenbook*, he shares stories of how his accent excludes him from the local community.

> *"My accent has been troubling me.*
> *When I first started to do comedy, I approached the senior comedians for advice. They told me, 'AG, first you have to work on correct pronunciation so the audience can understand what you are saying.'*

[7] Ang Seng, interview by author, June 3, 2022.

> *I was shocked, 'Man, Mandarin is my native language.'*
> *The thing that you are most familiar with… [Laughter][8]" (Ang 2021, 7:47)*

The sentence was not finished but interrupted by the burst of laughter from the audience because the word 'familiar' in Mandarin was pronounced as 'shuxi" by AG.

> *"Don't you laugh at me. I know you guys say 'shouxi'. It's not how it should be pronounced in standard Mandarin. It is just an accent of yours![9]" (ibid, 8:10)*

As the quote shows, the notions of standard language, accents and dialects are brought to light and interrogated by AG. The official Standard Mandarin refers to the language used in formal writings and television broadcasts in mainland China (Her, 2009: 377). In this light, neither Taiwanese Mandarin nor AG's can truly be the 'standard'. Yet, in the local context of Taiwan, a new norm of the 'standard', or the nativist expectation of a 'choronotope', has been established. Although *guoyu* (the national language of Taiwan) has largely prescribed to standard Mandarin, it incorporates influences from various languages and dialects spoken in Taiwan—primarily Taiwanese Hokkien. It is not common to say 'shuxi', even if that is how it is taught in standard Mandarin classes.

Interestingly, in the interview by the author, AG suggests that his accents have changed dramatically since moving to Taiwan. He has to put effort into 'performing' a Malaysian accent on stage. According to AG, since most of his works are based on an outsider's perspective, the jokes can only make sense if told by a foreigner from Southeast Asia.[10] Accents become a crucial tool to convince the audience of the stage persona AG creates. In this way, the accents of a diasporic individual are not always nostalgic sentiments. They are harnessed to contest the linguistic order and hierarchy.

AG's joke consists of two layers: first, AG harnesses the accents that live up to the stereotypes of Southeast Asians to consolidate the imagined identity; second, AG mimics the same discourse of linguistic authenticity that is used to 'other' the migrant

[8] Translated by author.
[9] Translated by author.
[10] Ang Seng, interview by author, June 3, 2022.

workers. He mocks that Taiwan, too, is positioned as the provincial and the periphery in the discourse of Sinocentrism. No language can claim to be the 'authentic'. Languages exist and evolve in the intercommunication of individuals and groups, and they are verified by communities (cf. Bakhtin, 1981).

Identities, as much as languages, are constituted, contested, and negotiated in multiple chronotopic spaces. The diaspora agents creatively mobilize a range of identity strategies and personas with the use of languages. The Sinophone community is open and living, and not constrained by 'standards'. There is no race/class/gender-determined essence to how the Sinophone people speak, but it is a linguistic process that never ends. Likewise, the identification is not easy as a simplistic 'either-or' choice between Malaysian and Taiwanese for AG. Binarism fails to accurately describe the experience of diasporic situations. AG neither speaks Taiwanese Mandarin, nor does his accent perfectly fit in the category of Malaysian. His identity, just like his language, is a process of 'becoming' that travels and challenges across various contradictory social sites (Bhabha,1990: 220).

Theme: the annoying outsider

Aside from the mechanism of language, the content of AG's comedy expressions matters as well. Recurring topics in his work include the issue of migrant labor and Taiwan's sovereignty. In various interviews, AG underscores that he is telling stories from the perspective of a diasporic 'Southeast Asian' (Du & Wu, 2022; Ang, 2021; Ang, 2022). The category, however, is strategically broad – AG does not even try to narrow it down to, for example, Malaysian. His content reveals a much more ambivalent and complex persona: a Mandarin-speaking Chinese male born in Malaysia with elite education and relatively high social status, who covers progressive topics such as race and migration, but also holds dubious grounds on jokes related to women and the elderly (Ang, 2021). AG's sets which contain seemingly contradictory themes and styles, articulate the exact hybridity of identification.

The unequal treatment of migrant workers in Taiwan is a consistent theme in AG's comedy shows. In his standup comedy show *Taiwan Greenbook*, he suggests that he

"feels compelled to teach Southeast Asian workers how to live safely in Taiwan[11]" (ibid.: 3'30''). *Green Book* refers to a guide for Africa-American travellers to survive laws that enforce racial segregation in America in the 1960s. The term became known to many audiences after the movie *Green Book*, directed by Peter Farrelly, won the Academy Awards (Pulver, 2019). By using the analogy, AG satirizes the policy and legislation regarding migrant workers' rights in Taiwan. Since the 1980s, Taiwan has experienced rapid economic growth and industrialisation. The economic gap between the sending and receiving countries, the high unemployment rates in many southeast Asian countries, and the ageing population of Taiwan, among other factors, contribute to the continuous transnational labour flow of low-skilled workers from Southeast Asian countries to Taiwan (Deng, Wahyuni & Yulianto, 2021). Those migrant workers are usually positioned in a lower social class and tend to be blamed for social instabilities.

AG goes on by listing three 'suggestions' to Southeast Asian workers, the first of which is "never sit on the floor in Taipei main station[12]" (Ang, 2021: 3'42''). It refers to a recently proposed permanent ban on gathering in the Taipei Main Station. The terminal's hall has been serving as a community space for Southeast Asian migrant workers in the city. A second 'tip' follows, "never leave your job. In fact, always bring along an elderly with yourself[13]" (ibid.: 4'13''). AG explains later that the joke is based on a piece of news about a Vietnamese caretaker being handcuffed and taken by the police when she was taking out the trash because, according to the police, "she looks suspiciously like runaway migrants[14]" (Xie, 2021). Unskilled labor, such as welfare workers, are not wanted to possess national citizenship (Tseng, 2004). Governmental documents used to refer to workers who illegally stay in Taiwan as 'runaway migrants'. The term was replaced with 'unaccounted for' due to accusations of discrimination (Deng, Wahyuni & Yulianto, 2020). AG's tip mocks the work situation of domestic care workers experiencing 'physical and emotional exhaustion at work' (Liu, 2015: 83) due to a blurry boundary between work and personal life and their unequal treatment

[11] Translated by author.
[12] Translated by author.
[13] Translated by author.
[14] Translated by author.

regarding citizenship.

> *"The third one is the most important. I have been in Taiwan for many years, and it feels like a safe place for me.*
>
> *Why? [Pause] Because I don't look like Southeast Asian [Laughter][15]" (Ang 2021, 5:21).*

If the first two suggestions, however sarcastically put, are nevertheless feasible, the last one destroys the entire discourse. By advising on doing or not doing something, it implies that the responsibility to change the status of migrant workers lies on migrants themselves – behave well, and you will be welcomed into the society. Yet AG articulates that the violence and inequalities against migrant workers are simply because of their nationalities rather than behaviours. As a Mandarin-speaking Chinese with a Malaysian passport, AG shares linguistic and ancestral connections with local Taiwanese. Although he has multiple subjectivities from various perspectives, none of which can fully describe or encompass himself. He lives in between home and the foreign, both physically and culturally. The ambivalent and hybrid position allows AG to observe what is taken for granted in the everyday discourse on both sides.

Not all jokes are explicitly related to migrant labour, but AG's stage persona as a Southeast Asian makes all stories come from an outsider's tone. For example, when talking about Taiwan's sovereignty, which is a frequent topic in AG's works, he is still articulating his identity.

> *"I also learnt a few Taiwanese languages here.*
>
> *[Lips moving without sound]*
>
> *[Louder] What did I say? I was just mimicking the voice of Taiwan in international politics. [Laughing and booing from the audience][16]" (Ang 2021, 8:44)*

Not surprisingly, the joke brought AG many criticisms. For many people – especially local comedians – the thought of laughing at the sovereignty of Taiwan would be a political disaster. However, AG routinely jokes about it in his shows and even on his social media platform to create and consolidate the image of an 'annoying

[15] Translated by author.
[16] Translated by author.

outsider' who dares to make fun of the sanctity of sovereignty. During the interview by author, AG explains that hardly any comedians, especially English-speaking comedians from Western countries, can make the topic funny because the Taiwanese audiences would think 'those Americans are being condescending[17]'. On the contrary, a migrant from Southeast Asia, compared to visiting comedians from the 'West', is deemed socially 'inferior'. They are expected to tell 'tragic stories' of migrant workers instead of 'patronizing' the Taiwanese[18]. Hence, as the incongruity theory of humour suggests, when AG jokes about the taboo issue, it is unexpected and, meanwhile, not taken seriously by the audience; therefore, it remains a funny joke but not a political disaster.

In the comic expression, the serious and the comic blur their boundaries, creating a 'third space' of enunciation and negotiation. By making jokes on serious political issues such as migrant workers and national sovereignty, AG articulates his experience as an in-betweener and the struggles of reversing the dominating essentialist discourse. Although AG is linguistically and ethnically connected to the 'native' Taiwanese, the 'differentiation' is clearly maintained. The discourse makes him 'almost the same, but not quite' (Bhabha, 1994: 122). The moments of encounter between AG and the audience through standup comedy open up space for interrogation, contestation and negotiation. In this way, AG confirms his language and vocabulary to articulate his hybrid identities.

[17] Ang Seng, interview by author, June 3, 2022. Translated by author.
[18] Ang Seng, interview by author, June 3, 2022.

Case Study: Norah Yang (Norah)

Born and raised in Shanghai, China, Norah Yang is a standup comedian in multiple languages, mainly in English, Mandarin, and the Shanghainese dialect. Norah's first debut was in 2016 when she was studying for a master's degree at Duke University in the United States. Norah has since performed over 700 shows in more than fifteen cities across China, US, Thailand and Japan, and has opened for several international headliners (Norah Yang - Comedian, n.d.). She was the only Chinese to participate in the 43rd Annual San Francisco Comedy Competition (2018 San Francisco Comedy Competition, 2018). After graduation, Norah returned to China and started her career at Kung Fu Club, a venue run by Australian comedian Andy Curtain. In 2019, she was signed by one of the largest comedy clubs in China. By day Norah works as a senior manager in marketing, and at night and weekends, she does regular comedy shows. She is also a main crew member of Mamahuhu, a cross-culture comedy channel on YouTube with over 190 thousand followers (Hopkins, 2019).

Traditional diasporic discourses are often about people far from their native country (like the case of AG), and the concept of dispersion itself implies a return to the homeland (Shih, 2017). As a result, diaspora narratives often suggest a return to the homeland – or even an imaginary return – as a solution to the discomforts in a foreign land. However, the dilemmas that follow a return to one's homeland are lost. The case of Norah is necessary here because it explores how one deals with the diasporic situation and issues of identification even when returning 'home', therefore contributing to a de-mythologization of 'homeland'.

Language: the multilingual space

As mentioned previously, some scholars approach humor – or, more specifically, standup comedy – as a way of challenging the powerful (Seirlis, 2011; Odysseos, 2001). However, in the case of China, domestic politics and politicians are not open to being

joked about in public owing to its strict censorship[19] (Lee, 2016). The idea of the comic explicitly teasing the powerful seems not applicable in this context. Does it, therefore, mean that standup comedy and comedians in China are apolitical? On the contrary, Norah is the case that shows the political possibilities of the seemingly apolitical practices.

According to Norah, she is still 'learning the comfort zone of the Chinese audience' and the boundaries of Chinese standup comedy (Sparks & Kaplan, 2019: 48'55''). She observes that standup comedy in China, even in large cities like Shanghai, is still a 'new thing' (ibid.: 49'34''). Unlike her experience in New York City, the host in Shanghai will open the show by introducing the rules of standup comedy to the audience. It will be explained that standup comedy is supposed to be offensive, and comedians may talk about controversial topics, and may interact with and tease the audience, but 'don't take it personally'. Norah admits she is unfamiliar with such an opening statement (ibid.). Some audiences also express dissatisfaction with her use of English on a 'Chinese stage', 'do you really need to show off so much that you can speak English? Do not forget that you are in China![20]' (Yangmiemie, 2020). The way of multilingual expressions results from her experiences living in different cultures and is a unique feature of Norah's shows. Yet, for these audiences, this appears to be the evidence of forgetting her ancestors and losing her 'Chineseness'.

According to Norah, the Chinese and American audiences do not have the same laughing points – "Standup comedy is all about telling a story, and the premise of storytelling is that there is a context[21]" (Baozaifan, 2018). The context involves cultural differences, a mixture of the familiar and unfamiliar. That is, for the comic incongruity to make sense, Norah has to establish a certain harmony. The norms and rules in different linguistic communities are the basis of such harmony. "If it is an English show, I do it more from the perspective of a Chinese person. If it is in Chinese, stories are told from the perspective of a Shanghainese person, or a woman" (Baozaifan, 2018), Norah

[19] Censorship remains a critical topic when studying the relationship between culture and politics. This thesis, however, is not interested in diving deeper into a discussion on censorship in China but admits its influence on the comic industry (see Chen & Gao, 2021).
[20] Translated by author.
[21] Translated by author.

explained her choice. When doing an English show, she mainly talks about the cultural phenomena in China and the US. In one of the shows she did in the US, she told a story of how she confused the meaning between 'knock off' and 'knock on' in the English language and made a fool of herself (Yang, 2019).

As mentioned before, having launched her career in standup comedy in the United States, Norah is used to the rules based on the socio-political context of the US, i.e., working on controversial topics (sex, politics, race, etc.), and knowing when and how to make fun of the audience without them being irritated. In this sense, Norah follows a discourse that the homeland native is not used to. Meanwhile, the playing rules at home are also unacquainted to her. What can and cannot be mocked poses a delicate yet ambiguous line that only the 'insiders' can be aware of. Here, insiders and outsiders are not easily distinguishable opposites. Although Norah has physically returned 'home', it does not mean that she is identified with the 'native', nor does she fit into the category of the 'foreigner'.

Binarism and essentialism fail to address Norah's transcultural and transnational experiences. She finds her own way of articulating her identity that is excluded from the insider/outsider discourse. The multilingual standup comedy creates such a space where Norah can blend in her past and present and express ambiguous identities. For example, Norah admits that she cannot comfortably talk about sex in China in front of a large crowd as people's first reaction is to be embarrassed and nervous. 'But in the English language, we can talk [about sex][22]', to quote Norah (Baozaifan, 2018).

The choice is not unique to Norah, the 'returnee'. As Said mentions, the diaspora, or 'an intellectual in exile', does not have to be away from the homeland. They can also be a dissent breaking away from the dominant discourse (Said, 1994). Norah observes that many female comedians who cover topics like sex and sexuality only do English shows, even though they are native Chinese. Norah mentions that she once approached one of the comedians and asked, 'you are hilarious. Why don't you try doing it in Mandarin?' They responded, "I feel like if I speak English, it is a stage persona, people

[22] Translated by author.

won't judge it; but I do it in Chinese, they will [judge me]: *Oh, she is like that*[23]" (Davis, 2019). They are in the situation of what Said calls 'metaphorical exile' (Said, 1994: 38). In other words, a diasporic situation beyond physical dislocation and migration, a division of insiders and outsiders owing to a sense of dissent.

Language creates an alien space that allows for the expression of double voices (Bakhtin, 1984). That is, *another* semantic intention can be blended in one single utterance. The comedians draw a line of boundary between the speaker themselves and the stage character who speaks a foreign language. Yet the voice and enunciation of the stage character are in control of the comedians themselves. The comedians control and construct their stage characters to articulate the intentions that are otherwise silenced. Therefore, the use of foreign language is harnessed and invoked for the speakers' purposes.

Themes: the aggressive performer

Unlike AG, who intentionally promotes his identity as the 'foreigner' and maintains consistent themes in his works, Norah seems to be 'pushed' to the stage character as an outsider. Her 'diasporic identity' is not naturally given in the process of moving abroad, but it is socially constructed. In Norah's case, even if she is not actively expressing her 'outsiderness', she is 'othered' through the nationalist discourse. Norah appears to be more ambiguous in voicing her complex positions. On the one hand, she often articulates her transcultural experiences and sharp observations; on the other hand, with more critiques of her style being offensive and condescending, Norah also admits her struggles.

Norah became known to the Chinese audience after appearing on an online reality show, *Rock and Roast Season 3,* in 2020 and got knocked out in the first round. *Rock and Roast* is a standup comedy competition program streamed on TencentVideos (Baidu Encyclopedia, n.d.). In Norah's 7-minutes performance, a few lines became subject to controversy – 'I am a Shanghainese. I might be the only Shanghainese

[23] Translated by author.

comedian here', 'I work as a senior manager at a foreign company', and especially, 'I do standup comedy in three languages, English, Mandarin and Japanese[24]'. This performance was mainly in Chinese but interspersed with some English and Japanese words and the Shanghainese dialect. These lines created the image of a privileged elite and aroused a backlash from the audience. Among the judging panel, Li Dan – a key player in the field of China's standup comedy and the producer of the comedy show – commented that Norah's performance was 'too condescending and aggressive for a female comedian' and therefore 'made the audience uncomfortable' (TencentVideos, 2020: 38'48''). Li added, 'we do not need to know that you live a good life in Shanghai and have excellent education background overseas. Comedians should not make the audience feel inferior[25]' (TencentVideos, 2020: 40'51'').

The show, however, was a huge success, with over 110 million views per episode according to *36Kr*, a business-focused media platform (Wang, 2020). Since then, Norah has been well known to comedy audiences as 'the aggressive female comedian'. Many online critiques have accused her of showing off her social, financial and cultural capital. A thread on *Zhihu* (a Chinese equivalent of Quora) discussing Norah's performance on the show has 815 replies by the time of writing (Yangmiemie, 2020). Many netizens mentioned that Norah's work is not relatable to Chinese natives. For example, one of her jokes was based on the scenario of ordering coffee in Starbucks; according to the commenter, 'most Chinese people do not have a habit of consuming coffee. This is a very westernized behavior and can potentially arise hostile emotions [of the audience][26]' (ibid.).

Norah is further constructed to be the in-betweener of 'Western' and 'Chinese' humour. On the reality show, Norah was labelled as '*haigui*', which means a 'returnee from overseas' (TencentVideos, 2020). Throughout various interviews, Norah has been repeatedly asked questions like 'what is the difference between American/Western standup comedy and Chinese one?' (Sparks & Kaplan, 2019). There is also a moral

[24] Translated by author.
[25] Translated by author.
[26] Translated by author.

judgment behind this kind of 'othering'. Norah mentioned in an interview an incident where she was approached by an audience member backstage after an open-mic show. The audience member was weeping because she felt hurt — 'why do you say such horrible things about your country, your hometown Shanghai, and your parents? They raised you![27]' (ibid.).

Her multilingual abilities, as well as transcultural experiences, make up the selling point of her shows. While quickly distinguishing herself from other comedians, these selling points presuppose her 'position' as a middle-class woman returning from abroad with a legacy of values and behaviour influenced by the 'Western' ideology. She is different from local comedians, and her performance is different from the grassroots comedies that claim to originate from and represent China's native population. As Laclau (1996) noted, the construction of 'identity' relies on the differentiation from the 'Other'. The confirmation of a *Chinese* comedian is inseparable from the construction of a *Western* comedian. While the nationalist discourse draws a clear line between these two, Norah's appearance makes the line vague.

Norah's response to such 'Otherness' also seems ambiguous. Humour and laughter have the function of discipline. In an interview, Norah admits that as a comedian, she will try to avoid topics that are 'not funny but only make people angry and uncomfortable' (Yang, 2022a). Among the clips available on YouTube, Norah tends to cover topics such as family, education, jobs, or, most often, her experience of regional differences as a Shanghainese (Yang, n.d.). As demonstrated before, for jokes to be funny, there need to be certain degrees of harmony or consensus between the comedian and audience. Changing from sharing transcultural experiences to covering more familiar everyday topics is a step towards such consensus. In this way, Norah looks for mutual understanding – or fitting – in the local context. Conforming to norms and expectations of the local society will sometimes reinforce the dominating rules of the hegemonic center (cf. Bergson, 1984).

However, Bergson's idea of humour as a social corrective may be limited. Although

[27] Translated by author.

Norah shows attempts to avoid being criticised, she also starts to joke about her being labelled as aggressive.

> *'I was suggested to buy personal accident insurance because I am very likely to get beaten up [for telling aggressive jokes]. I did. After that, I feel more relieved.*
> *But be careful [pointing to the audience]. Considering my salary, I might offend you even worse for a high insurance redemption.[28]' (Yang, 2022b: 1'44" - 2'02").*

By making fun of the fear and anxiety that result from the critiques, Norah creates a space where she can make those negative feelings unimportant (cf. Berger, 1997). While getting criticized and 'Othered' is a painful reality, Norah's joke shows the absurdity of such reality. It establishes, however temporarily, a counterworld that refuses to comply with the disciplinary powers.

To conclude, Norah's performance has traces of the rules and norms of the West, daring to show aggressiveness on topics of gender and class. For Li Dan and other local comedians who set the rule in the country, Norah is a rule-breaker. By emphasizing how unrelatable Norah's contents are in the context of China, it is reminding her that the authority of 'home' or center should be respected. Norah, being labelled as a returnee from 'outside', is under the shadow of moral condemnation of leaving or even betraying the 'home'. Through multilingual performances, Norah creates a space where she can comfortably articulate her 'double voices' that are otherwise excluded or silenced. To respond to the 'othering', her topic transformation demonstrates the nuanced function of humor – both disciplinary and subversive.

A Comparative Reflection

So far, this thesis has analyzed two cases, Ang Seng (AG) and Norah Yang (Norah). AG is a Mandarin-speaking Malaysian Chinese comedian who lives and performs in Taipei, Taiwan. Norah is a multilingual comedian in English, Mandarin and the Shanghainese dialect, who returns to her homeland Shanghai from abroad.

Both comedians show the creative use of languages. AG is committed to

[28] Translated by author.

performing in Mandarin but with a Malaysian accent. On the one hand, the Malaysian accent confirms and consolidates his identity as a foreigner in Taiwan. On the other hand, AG jokes about how the Taiwanese *guoyu* (national language) should also be treated as an accent in relation to standard Mandarin. By harnessing his accents, AG subverts the discourse of linguistic authenticity, therefore refusing to be integrated into the hegemonic center of the native society. Norah, on the other hand, uses multiple languages in her performances. For Norah, a mixture of Chinese and Mandarin speaks to her transcultural experiences and transboundary identities. It also creates a space that belongs neither to the native nor the foreign. It is the space highly contextualized and personalized to articulate her own voice. She establishes different personas in different languages and articulates the otherwise excluded 'double voice'.

The content of the two comedians addresses their struggle in the exilic situation, although in different ways. AG is explicit and straightforward in demonstrating his 'otherness'. He creates an image of Southeast Asian migrant labour and makes it the starting point of all the comic works. Whether it is about migrant workers or Taiwan's sovereignty, it is observed and joked about from the perspective of a migrant worker. Especially on the taboo topics (such as sovereignty) that would have been a disaster if told by other comedians, AG enunciates the absurdity and problematizes the power hierarchy. Comparatively, Norah is more implicit about politics. Yet it does not mean that Norah's content is apolitical. The focus of studying Norah lies in the process of 'transformation' as a response to the condemnation and 'otherness' imposed by the native community. Norah does not share the consistency on topics like AG. Her topics gradually transform from overseas experiences to those more relatable in the local context. The topic transformation between Mandarin shows and English shows is also noteworthy. Rather than unity, Norah's changing topics articulate more about her struggles of belonging in the 'homeland'.

To sum up, the case studies reveal that one can be in a diasporic situation, whether or not they are physically situated away from the birthplace. The transcultural and transnational experiences have given them a 'double consciousness' and a hybrid identity. There exists no simple solution to diasporic struggles such as integrating into

the local or returning home. By harnessing the languages and themes of their standup comedy performances, diaspora comedians AG and Norah find or create their own vocabularies to address their ambivalent identities that are excluded in the conventional discourse of diasporas.

Conclusion

This thesis searches for and reflects on a new expression of diasporic identity, of local affiliation and nostalgia. The conceptual framework of diaspora, whether in international relations, sociology, or immigration laws, is an accessory to the dominating discourse of liberal/welfarist or ani-/pro-immigration in Euro-American contexts (Barron et al., 2014: 79). This thesis proposes a bottom-up approach that recognizes the methodological and analytical value of humor and laughter. It examines the diaspora identities and their articulations through standup comedy. It questions both nationalist monoculturalism and Western-centric multiculturalism, therefore contributing to a 'worlding beyond the West' and abolishing hegemonic centers (Bilgin, 2008).

As argued, current literature concerning humour in IR has insufficiently addressed non-English-speaking and non-white male comedians (Brassett, 2009, 2016). This thesis fills in the gap by introducing the Sinophone (Shih, 2007) into the scope of enquiry. The concept of linguistic community problematizes the conceptualization of diaspora in terms of nationality and ethnicity and interrogates the (de)constructive role of languages and narratives. It situates the comparative study in the nuanced relations of Sinitic-language-speaking individuals, groups, and communities. By investigating the 'minor articulation', the notion of the Sinophone asserts an open and fluid community that voices the 'margin' and rejects the hegemonic calls from the cultural center of China.

This thesis engages with critical theorizing about humor and its social functions (Bergson, 1911), hybridity in languages and identities (Bakhtin, 1981, 1984; Bhabha, 1994; Gilroy, 1993). It offers a framework to understand the comic expression of the inbetweener in the Sinophone Pacific. It has been demonstrated that no methodological or theoretical consensus is reached on humor. Humor functions to discipline as well as to subvert. Studying the comic is not to decide an 'objective nature' or testify to a universal principle. It should be sensitive about the co-constitutive relationships between context and text.

Moreover, this thesis has argued for a more nuanced investigation of the language(s)

harnessed by comedians. Borrowing from the notions of heteroglossia and chronotope proposed by Bakhtin, this thesis has argued that languages imply the power relations, and the diaspora's historical and social connections with time and space. Both the mixed languages and the comic expressions are important sites to explore the diaspora's identification with communities and themselves.

This thesis has analysed and compared two cases, Ang Seng and Norah Yang. As AG's native language, Mandarin connects to the home and the foreign. AG harnesses his accents to interrogate and problematize the notion of authenticity and fixity of languages. While the topic of Southeast Asian migrant labour explicitly addresses his self-identification, joking about Taiwan's sovereignty, for example, also embeds AG's enunciation of his position in the 'foreign' land. The case of Norah Yang challenges and demythologizes the traditional dispersion narratives that fantasize the 'home'. The hybridity of multiple languages, including Mandarin, English and the Shanghainese dialect, articulates her transcultural identities and temporalities. A creative combination of languages, alongside changing themes, is an endeavour to express herself in discourses that exclude or deny her voices. The struggle of diasporic identities cannot be solved by simply choosing between integrating into the local or returning home. The languages and vocabularies they use to articulate experiences should be taken seriously. A comparison of the two cases contributes to an enriched description of those of displacement in a mobile and interconnected world.

This thesis, however, acknowledges its limitations. Mainly due to the author's knowledge and the length of this study, the scope of research in this paper is narrowed to the standup comedy performed in Mandarin and/or English based in two metropolitan cities – Shanghai and Taipei. This study is an attempt to understand the Sinophone in its various interconnecting moments of articulation situated within the transnational political and cultural relationships. However, the two cases are hardly the only comic articulation of the Sinophone across the globe, nor are they able to represent the rest. Much as the paper attempts to build a bridge between International Relations, humour studies and linguistics, it remains a considerable gap. More work needs to be done to include more languages spoken in the Sinophone Pacific and resonate with

current studies of the Francophone, Lusophone, Hispaniphone, and Anglophone worlds. Not all places and people are identical. Yet relational and comparative studies among those language-based diaspora communities are valuable towards our conception of the world(s).

Furthermore, the author's positionality may influence the research. Born and raised in mainland China and educated in Australia and Europe, the author, like AG and Norah, experiences the in-betweenness situated beyond the binarism of Self/Other, Home/Abroad, East/West, Center/Periphery, Subject/Object (Haraway, 1991). Studying the articulations of the transnational diasporic identities is deep down a project to articulate, position, and de-center the author herself. It makes the study inevitably partial. Much as this thesis attempts to look beyond a 'Western lens' to attend to those living on the margins, it will inevitably exclude some groups and their perspectives.

Lastly, this thesis would like to emphasise the interdisciplinary nature of studying humor in IR. Serious reasoning is not enough; nor does the comic attempt to redefine what is IR. Throughout the process of writing this thesis, the question of whether it counts as a proper IR investigation recurred. As Bleiker (2017) asserts, the cultural turn in IR should be about 'opening up thinking space' (260). The author has come to realize that there is no one correct, overarching way of explaining and solving problems. IR investigation is a never-ending process and should always be self-reflective and modest in looking for new languages and vocabularies to articulate our relations with the world.

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