



Chinese Indonesians Stand-Up Comedians on YouTube: Laughing with or Laughing at

Shuri Mariasih Gietty Tambunan¹(✉), Wina Aprilia Tirtapradja², and Alvin Steviro³

¹ Literature Department, Faculty of Humanities, Universitas Indonesia, Depok, Indonesia
shuri.mariasih@ui.aci.id

² English Studies Program, Faculty of Humanities, Universitas Indonesia, Depok, Indonesia

³ Depok, Indonesia

Abstract. Humour is a powerful tool to convey social critique. This research aims to investigate how four young Chinese Indonesians stand-up comedians strategically use comedy to contest the hegemonic discourses of Chinese Indonesians identity. By conducting a textual analysis on recorded television performances that could also now be viewed in YouTube, research findings show how as stand-up comedians, they use humour in articulating their minority positioning. By doing self-deprecation especially in relation to issues such as Chinese Indonesian parenting, their (in)visibility, and being a double or even triple minority, they are inviting the audience to laugh with them in challenging mainstream stereotypes of Chinese Indonesians through their comical narratives and punch lines.

Keywords: Chinese Indonesians · Ethnic Identity · Stand -Up Comedy · Stereotype · YouTube

1 Introduction

Digital media has opened a space for young people to be active producers of their culture and participate in constructing alternative or contesting narratives. This emancipatory potential of digital media and youth with their critical agency challenges the hegemonic power structure of society. Digital media has enhanced dialogical learning for society thus elevating the potentialities for democratization. “YouTube is a social space. This virtual community reflects the cultural politics of the present times and thus is rife with both cooperation and conflict.” [1] (p.4). YouTube has become a platform for individuals or even communities to speak up or reflect on the social and political stance in this contemporary time. Stand-up comedy in Indonesia has also been augmented by utilizing this user-generated medium. In the past, stand-up shows are done off-air or on-air to be broadcast on television. Nowadays, many new or even old stand-up comedy materials have been posted on YouTube attracting new participatory experiences in consuming these materials.

Previous research [2] [3] has argued that comedy is a potential medium to challenge racism, sexism, and other hegemonic discourses and norms discriminating against

A. Steviro - Independent Scholar

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minority groups. Comedy has been said to be able to contest the status quo by providing perspectives from marginal groups. However, to contest dominant power through humor, there is a need for interactional context. Humour is delivered while articulating the precise action being performed to reduce audiences' failure in understanding the purpose of the joke [4]. In a stand-up comedy performance, the *komika* (this is the terminology in Indonesia referring to stand-up comedians) will use him/herself or the audience as the main material for the humor. This is in reference to the case study in which 4 *komika*'s materials are being analyzed about their ethnic identities as Chinese Indonesians. In their performances, they often use themselves or the Chinese Indonesian community in general as the main character in their punch line. Even though making fun of the audience is riskier than making fun of the *komika*, sometimes, in the punch lines, these two options are often alternated.

The four Chinese Indonesian *komika* are chosen as case studies because they are representing Chinese Indonesian youth that utilizes humor to challenge hegemonic discourses. In Indonesia, YouTube is used for "citizen participation" with the potential to make socio-political change [5] by building awareness, for example, to gain support from society, confront hegemonic control by the authorities, or igniting action or reaction from the viewers that will eventually lead to change and transformation. As individuals or collectively, young people in Indonesia recognize the imbalanced power relation in their everyday lives [6] and through creativity, they try to transform these officious conditions dialectically in many forms of digital media, such as YouTube, and through many forms of creative content, such as stand-up comedy.

This research focuses on how young Chinese Indonesian *Komika* uses humor to make meaning out of their minority positioning and whether they are perpetuating or challenging stereotypes. In their performances, they invite the audience to laugh at their jokes and comical narratives. Data analysis aims to see whether audiences are laughing at or laughing with the *komika*. The main method is through textual analysis of stand-up comedy materials from Liongky Nugraha, Barry Williemi, Yullianto Lin (or Liant Lin), and Ben Dhanio, which are posted on the *Stand-Up Kompas TV* YouTube Channel. The types of materials being analyzed are the ones using "Chinese" or "*Cina*" as a keyword in the content.

2 Analysis: Laughing with and Laughing At

In finding the data for this research, the researcher found that *Stand Up Kompas TV* YouTube Channel uses the *komika*'s punch lines that are related to the issue of Chinese Indonesian identity as the title of the videos posted on their YouTube account. For example, the title of Liongky Nugraha's performance video in SUCI 3 (a stand-up comedy competition from which all of the *komika* gain popularities as stand-up comedians in Indonesia) is "*Pasangan Idaman Orang Cina Itu Yang Penting Sesuai Sama Calon Mertua*" or "The Most Important Feature of an Ideal Romantic Partner for Chinese Indonesians is They Have to Fit the Future In-Laws' Expectations." Another example is "*Gua Suka Gak Mau Ngaku Kalo Cina Karena ...*" or "I Don't Like to Admit that I am Chinese Indonesians Because ..." which is the title of Barry Williemi's performance video. I argue that by doing so, the *Stand-Up Kompas TV* YouTube Channel is already highlighting the *komika*'s comic material that is related to the Chinese

Indonesian issues. The issue becomes their main identifier even though upon watching the videos, they make use of other topics or issues in other parts of their performance.

Data collected from the videos show that most of the discussions concerning their minority identities mostly focus on stereotypical identity constructions of Chinese Indonesian, which revolves around the issue of (1) Chinese Indonesian parenting; (2) their (in)visibility; and (3) being a double or even triple minority. The first commonality of the videos being analyzed is how the comic narratives are highlighting the stereotypical Chinese Indonesian parenting styles. In the same video that has been mentioned earlier, Liongky Nugraha, who started his performance by addressing the audience with the Mandarin Phrase “Ni Hao” signifying from the very beginning his Identity as a Chinese Indonesian, he said:

“Lo cukup harus jadi ganteng menurut standar dari calon mertua, yaitu sama-sama Cina, mapan dan seagama. Lo pasti ganteng banget. Kenapa sih kita itu mesti nikah sama orang yang se-suku? Apa karena kita rasis? Nggak. Tapi karena kita kaya. Kita bakal mulai beda-beda orang saat kita punya duit. Identitas jadi penting kalau lo kaya. Kalau lo tanya sama gue, kaya lo Cina apa bukan? Tergantung, punya duit apa nggak. Kalau gue lagi banyak duit, gue China banget. Kalau gue bokek, gue lupa gue China.”

“You have to handsome enough according to the standards of your future in-laws, which means you have to Chinese Indonesians, rich and have the same religion. You will be considered really handsome if you have these features. Why do we have to marry someone from the same ethnicity? Is it because we are racists? No. It is because we are rich. We will start see people according to whether or not they have money. Identity is important if you are rich. If you asked me whether some is Chinese or not. I will say it depends whether that person has a lot of money or not. If I do not have money, I will forget that I am Chinese.”

Source: Video “*Pasangan Idaman Orang Cina Itu Yang Penting Sesuai Sama Calon Mertua*”

From this quotation, the main narrative is actually on “future in-laws” representing Chinese Indonesian parents. By stating that wealth and money are important features of being a favorable romantic partner as the main joke, the goal is to invite the audience to think that this is comical or funny.

How do we make sense of jokes concerning stereotypes? DeCamp (2017) argues that we have to consider how is the audience perceptions’ being shaped by looking into the presentation of stereotypes as either “... negative reinforcement, cultural celebration, and expanding understanding” [7] (p.327). DeCamp interrogates on why we have to question the use of stereotypes in stand-up comedy. What is important is “When racial stereotypes are interrogated by comics of the targeted group, there arises the potential for audience members to question prior assumptions” (p. 339). To see whether the stereotypical portrayals of Chinese Indonesians by these *komika* are actually challenging stereotypes we will look at another example.

In a video by Yullianto Lin entitled “*Mami Gua Cina, Iritnya Dobel,*” or “My Mom is Chinese, Her Frugality is Doubled,” his punch line is “*Dan mami gua itu Cina terus ibu ibu. Iritnya double. Irit Kuadrat. Tapi tetap mau gaya. Solusinya adalah beli barang*

KW.” The literal translation is “My mom is Chinese and a mother. So, her frugality is doubled. But she still wants to be stylish. The solution is to buy fake things.” With the previous discussion on comedy and stereotypes, the *komika*... is sharing personal experiences without hostility” (p. 339); hence, he is inviting the audience to think that this is a funny bit emphasizing that being frugal or being materialistic is something we are allowed to laugh at. The question is then whether the audience is invited to think of it as a mere social construction and challenge it.

Another theme from the videos analyzed is how the *komika* is making jokes about their (in)visibility. In his audition for SUCI 3, Liongky Nugraha made a joke on:

“Disini pasti belum ada juga yang lihat gue di TV kan. Ngga ada. Ya kenapa? Karena gue memang jarang banget nongol di TV. Saking jarangnya, gua yakin. Suatu gua bakal terkenal jadi komik Alena. Tau Alena? Iya itu penyanyi yang nongol di TV sama setahun sekali. Di TV sebelah, setiap imlek. Nyanyi lagu mandarin 2-3 lagu, habis itu ‘Sampai jumpa dengan saya tahun depan.’”

“Nobody here ever see me on TV right? Nobody. Why? Because I never show up on TV. I am sure someday I will be as famous as Alena. You know who Alena is? She is a singer who is only on TV once a year. In another television studies, she performs during Chinese New Year. She will sing 2-3 Mandarin songs, afterward she says “I will see you next year.”

Source: Video “SUCI 3: Audisi Stand Up Liongky: Yang Ngomong, Rambutnya Kuning”

From this part of the video, it could be concluded that the *komika* is making fun of his invisibility by setting the context about the singer, Alena.

Using the strategy of “self-deprecation,” or belittling and undervaluing himself, it could be argued that the *komika* is critiquing existing conditions in which Chinese Indonesians are made to be invisible. “Chinese Indonesians are expected to be absent in the public sphere, they must be invisible and refrain from speaking” [8] (p. 6). The long history of discrimination against Chinese Indonesians in Indonesia renders “... Chinese Indonesians seeing themselves as a community of victims who are made invisible and who are voicelessly trapped at the margins of the Indonesian nation with a little avenue to make their presence known or heard. It emphasizes the history of discrimination and persecution from which the community has suffered” [9] (p. 12–13).

“Gue ini keturunan Cina. Marga gw Lim. Klaim itu biasanya bersanding dengan orang-orang berprestasi kayak gini Lim Swie King atlet badminton legendaris. Ada Lim Soo Young orang terkaya di Indonesia pernah. Ada Lim Ce Hok, itu bokap gw. Prestasinya nguliahin gw di BSI.”

“I am a Chinese descendant. My surname is Lim. This claim is usually associated with people with high achievements such as Lim Swie King, who is a badminton athlete. Or there is also Lim Soo Young, who is one of the richest person in Indonesia. And then we have Lim Ce Hok, my father. His achievement is to put me in college in BSI.”

Source: Video “Gua Suka Gak Mau Ngaku Kalo Cina Karena...”

To understand this joke, we must first contextualize that BSI is not considered a renowned or overtly sought-after choice in terms of higher education. However, if we investigate the punch line (the last part of the joke) as the climactic conclusion, the *komika* is undervaluing himself in a similar strategy as seen in the previous data. By making the audience laugh at the notion that his father does not fall into the categories of the renowned group of Chinese Indonesians with “Lim” as their surname, it could be argued that he is challenging stereotypes through jokes. It is an attempt to acknowledge that stereotypes or putting people in boxes because of what is commonly known in society is being rendered as a “joke.” It is something constructed, not real and we should brush it away as a mere joke. Laughing at it could make it meaningless, which will be further elaborated on in the next part of the article.

The phrases laughing at and laughing with suggest a long-recognized distinction between the power of laughter to promote distancing, disparagement, and feelings of superiority. The materials from the *komika* in which they are making fun of Chinese Indonesians stereotypes could be further analyzed by seeing whether they are inviting the audience to “laugh at” him or “laugh with” him. We should look into the comic narratives on whether or not they are “... risky laughables, possibly leading to hurt feelings or offense.” [10] (p. 131). Glenn (2003) argues that sociolinguistically, there are four keys to differentiate “laughing at” and “laughing with,” namely “laughable,” “first laugh,” “(possible) second laugh,” and “subsequent activities.” The first key “laughable” refers to how the person who produces the joke/comical narrative appoints someone present during the telling of the joke as a “butt.” In this case, we should take into account whether the *komika* is ridiculing or making fun of the audience as the “butt.” I would argue that this is not the case in the examples that have been analyzed earlier. Most of the *komika* are laughing at themselves since they are mostly making fun of their Chinese Indonesian stereotypical identities. Furthermore, they invite the audience to laugh at what they are conveying as stereotypical and laughable features of Chinese Indonesians.

As an example, the third issue often portrayed is how they depict themselves as a double or even triple minority. In the video “*Gua Jomblo dan Cina, Sedih Selalu Dihina!*” or “I am Single and Chinese. I am Sad to be Often Insulted,” Liant Lin said:

“Lo tau gak sih kenapa jomblo selalu dihina? Karena jomblo itu minoritas. Ras gw Cina, minoritas. Agama gw Budha. Minoritas. Gua adalah seorang minoritas dalam minoritas di dalam minoritas. Gw rasa ya kalau gw ketemu sama Ini, badak bercula satu, dia yang prihatin sama gw. Bro kasihan banget lo bro sendirian aja bro.”

“Do you know why single people are always insulted? Because being single is a part of the minority. I am Chinese, also a minority. My religion is Buddhism. Another minority. I am a minority within a minority group within another minority group. I think if I ever met a one horned rhinoceros, he will be concern. He will say “Bro, I feel sorry for you for being alone.”

Source: Video “*Gua Jomblo dan Cina, Sedih Selalu Dihina!*”

According to the first key to differentiating “laughing at” and “laughing with,” the *komika* is not ridiculing or making fun of the audience as the “butt.” He is making himself the laughing target. The question is whether or not we are laughing at him or we are laughing with him.

The second key is “first laugh” and the third key is “(possible) the second laugh.” Glen argues that if the first laugh comes from someone other than the “butt” this indicates laughing. In this case, the “butt” or the “audience” is the one laughing. Furthermore, since the interaction is mainly between the *komika* and the audience and it is not a multi-party interaction, there is no (Possible) second laugh. It is argued that if a (possible) second laugh is done by someone other than butt, this reinforces “laughing at”. However, concerning the last key, “subsequent activities,” it is difficult to look at what happens after the audience has been “laughing with” the *komika*. To see whether there is a subsequent talk on the topic that ignites laughter, an audience reception study should be done. The goal should look at whether, in stand-up comedy, particularly in the context of Chinese Indonesian identity, there is (or has been) an attempt to continue discussing the topic while giving more chances to resolve the ambiguity.

In a stand-up comedy performance, the power relation between the stand-up comedian and the audience reflects a dynamic of authority. “Because a stand-up comedian performs before an audience holding on to the (only) microphone (at the venue) and taking center stage with the light directly focused on him/her, he/she assumes inherent authority and power, and by implication conversational superiority, at least for the duration of his/her performance, with the audience” [11] (p. 14). In other words, the comical narratives performed by stand-up comedians are inherently more powerful because he or she has the power to construct meanings for the audience.

By conveying the issues of Chinese Indonesian parenting; their (in)visibility; and being a double or even triple minority, they are not only inviting the audience to laugh with them, but they also invite the audience to engage in a social critique. In the video “*Orang Cina Salah Ngomong, Dipenjara 2 Tahun*” or “Chinese People who Says the Wrong Thing will be Imprisoned for Two Years,” Ben Dhanio says:

“Bebas adalah yang sangat dirindukan orang Cina. Karena orang Cina gak bebas-bebas banget. Salah ngomong dipenjara 2 tahun. Imlek gak ujan.”

“Being free is what Chinese people really miss. Chinese people are not really free. If they say something wrong, they will be imprisoned for 2 years. And then, during Chinese New Year, it will not rain.”

Source: Video “*Orang Cina Salah Ngomong, Dipenjara 2 Tahun*”

Highlighting the constraints faced by Chinese Indonesians while making a joke is one way to make comedy a part of the social critique.

In the Indonesian context, humor as a social critique has been a part of the comedy trajectory which paved the way for stand-up comedy in becoming an alternative entertainment for the Indonesian audience [12]. As an autobiographical performance with strong self-expression, stand-up comedy can construct the *komika*’s personal, social, cultural, and even political identity while also conveying criticism of the hegemonic discourses.

As humor and comedy provide the platform to discuss issues of racism, sexism, and other discriminatory acts that would elsewhere be frowned upon or even banned, this research argues that what these four Chinese Indonesian *komika* or stand-up comedians are conveying in their performances are raising the bar in discussing about Chinese Indonesians discrimination in the public sphere. As argued by Pérez [3] stand-up comedians often rely on brazen racial and ethnic stereotypes and intentionally construct the binary of self and other as a way to point out that "... the role of comedy is to confront touchy subjects, breach norms of etiquette, name taboos, etc." (p. 479). They emphasize that what they are saying is for comedic intent and the jokes are not literal claims of the issue. Through strategies uncovered in the data analysis such as the self-deprecation technique or how the stand-up comedians are inviting the audience to laugh instead laugh at the issues of Chinese Indonesian discrimination, they are upholding the "liberating element of humor" [3] to shatter the constraints caused by the hegemonic discourse.

3 Conclusion

Research findings have shown how humour and comedy have the potential of critiquing and resisting Chinese Indonesians discrimination and oppression through the stand-up comedy performances. Jokes and laughter are used as resistance humour and by utilizing strategies such as self-deprecation, these *komika* are practicing the art of convincing while showing that their performances are paradoxically "serious" in addressing the issues of discrimination and oppression. However, one should also take into account that not all resistance humour is automatically successful. There are layers of complexity in the practice of "laughing with and laughing at." Jokes and comical narratives in stand-up comedy performances are relying mostly on the audience's maturity and openness in reflecting the ethnic infused jokes.

However, there is still a possibility that they impact public perceptions of ethnic minorities, such as Chinese Indonesians, particularly after the videos that were once distributed on television are now broadcast widely on YouTube with a bigger number of audience. The understanding of ethnic stereotyping is not merely an individual prejudice. It is a structural reinforcement with powerful actors legitimizing hierarchies and power structures. As millions of viewers are consuming these recorded performances, further research should be done to see whether they perceive these performances as "just a joke" or as a critical evaluation of dominant ideology.

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