Live From New York! An Analysis of Chinese Hosts on Saturday Night Live

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Abstract

Saturday Night Live has long served as a societal mirror that captures and creates popular culture. In recent years, the show has been criticized for its lack of diverse hosts, cast and staff. Out of 930 episodes, only seven have been hosted by an Asian host, four of whom identify as Chinese. This research examined those four episodes through quantitative analysis, finding that the qualities of each of the hosts' characters range from just below neutral to moderately positive. The use of stereotypes and satirical racial humor varied. Jackie Chan and Lucy Liu's episodes had the highest concentration of both overt and covert stereotypes, while Awkwafina had a similar number with a lower concentration. The infrequency of Chinese representation on the show is both a social issue and a barrier to research, and a small sample size does not allow for definitive conclusions to be drawn. Rather, this research paints a picture of how the four Chinese hosts are portrayed on SNL as influenced by their own unique identities and the year of their appearance.

I. Introduction

In the fall of 2019, Bowen Yang joined the Saturday Night Live (SNL) cast and became the first Asian cast member, 44 years after the show's inception (Griffith, 2019). The addition of Yang illuminated a greater issue – SNL's clear lack of diversity among cast members and hosts. By creating dozens of characters viewed by mainstream audiences every week, SNL plays a role in strengthening and weakening stereotypes depending on what actors play which characters. This role, along with its consistent format and leadership, makes the late-night comedy a prime archive to analyze.

Two years after Yang's historic addition, Marvel's first Asian superhero Simu Liu addressed the lively Studio 8H crowd. After telling the crowd how he landed the role in the first place, he paused to acknowledge his role in SNL's history. "I'm also the first Chinese host on SNL …" Simu Liu said, taking a breath as the crowd erupted in cheers, "To be the fourth Chinese host on the show."

The moment revealed both the lack of representation and time that had elapsed since the other three Chinese hosts took the stage. The first Chinese host graced the stage 21 years earlier, actor Jackie Chan.

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He addressed the rowdy crowd as the first martial artist to host the show with no mention of his ethnicity. Seven months later, actress Lucy Liu stepped onto the same stage and delivered a monologue that sharply contrasted Chan's (Wang, 2018). It featured a satirical video montage of her time as the first Asian woman to host the show. Dressed in traditional Chinese clothing, Lucy Liu ironed cast member's clothes, served a dog for dinner, and painted producer Lorne Michaels's nails.

Almost two decades would pass before another Chinese host appeared on the show. Awkwafina's 2018 episode opened with her recounting waiting outside 30 Rock during Lucy Liu's episode. "So thank you Lucy for opening the door," she said. "I wasn't able to make it into the building back then, but 18 years later I am hosting the show."

The four Chinese hosts of Saturday Night Live represent a research sample that crosses decades and genders. Chan's appearance in 2000 as a middle-aged Chinese martial artist whose first language is not English contrasts with Simu Liu's appearance as a young Chinese actor in 2021. Comparatively, the episodes starring Lucy Liu and Awkwafina use their Chinese ethnicities in very different connotations. By analyzing the characters portrayed and the societal stereotypes that exist in American media, these four episodes give insight into how Chinese people are represented in popular American television.

II. Literature Review

The absence of Chinese hosts on SNL is a symptom of a larger problem. Kim (2004) analyzed Asian American representation on TV in the decades since the 1960s. Before that decade, housekeeper and "help" roles were typically filled by Black Americans. The Civil Rights Movement and the NAACP changed that narrative. The movement opened a void for these domestic roles, and throughout the 60s and 70s, Asian Americans were primarily featured as servants in white households. Most notably, *The Courtship of Eddie's Father* starred Oscar Award-winning actress Miyoshi Umeki as the motherly figure in a bachelor father-son household.

With the backdrop of the Vietnam War, the following decades lacked Asian representation on the silver screen. Taking place in Korea, the wildly popular anti-war comedy M*A*S*H* was one of the only shows that featured Asian characters on a regular basis. Despite its location, the show centered on the American and white soldiers, and included usually nameless Korean characters. One credited actress was Rosalind Chao, who played Soon-Lee Klinger in the last two episodes of the show. She appeared as an incarcerated Korean refugee who is put under the watch of Sgt. Maxwell Klinger, who ends the show by staying in Korea to find Soon-Lee's parents. Chao found later success in various television shows, including Star Trek: Next Generation.

Moving into the 90's, Margaret Cho's *All-American Girl* (1994) was the first American sitcom to feature an Asian American family. Despite the show's poor reviews, it paved the way for creating complex Asian characters. It was a far jump from the previous decades where the assigned tropes were often as "foreigner," or "domestic servant."

Kwak (2004) notes that Asian Americans have not had the same reckoning with humor that Latino and Black Americans have. She points to the "model minority" myth, a stereotype which is often attributed to Asian Americans in contexts of academic and economic success, in contrast to other minority groups. Kwak wrote that this myth may explain why the public often does not acknowledge the existence of anti-Asian discrimination. This complacency allows tired stereotypes to continue to exist, almost under the radar.

Wu (1997) also examined the personifications of Asian characters in American media. Through content analysis, he used a five-point scale to measure positive and negative traits. He measured this against European American characters and found a gap in the perceptions. Asian American characters skewed slightly towards negative traits such as "stupid," "poor," or "weak." European characters, on the other hand, skewed towards positive traits such as "smart," "rich," or "strong." The only negative traits attributed to European Americans were aggression and unhappiness, while Asian Americans were attributed entirely negative traits.

In a journalistic context, Jenn Fang's 2018 article for Teen Vogue looked at the enduring practice of "yellowface" in American media. Yellowface is the practice of non-Asian, primarily white people, dressing and acting as Asian characters. It can be traced back to the mid-18th century, where white actors performed *The Orphan of China* in yellowface and popularized its use in American theater. The negative implications of yellowface are coupled with the underrepresentation of Asian Americans in American television and cinema. University of Southern California researchers found that only 4.4% of speaking characters are Asian, even though they are the fastest growing population in the U.S. (Fang, 2018) The practice of "yellowface" is still used in film, as seen in 2017 when Scarlett Johansson played *Ghost in the Shell*'s Japanese protagonist, and in Matt Damon's portrayal of a Chinese warrior in *Great Wall* (2016).

Stereotypes and Archetypes in Comedy

According to Rohrbacher (2015), ten archetypes can be found in comedy. They range from The Anchor, a character who is rooted as a means for the audience to relate with, to The Buffoon, a character who exists to be laughed at. The archetypes provide a framework to understand different characters' purposes, rather than define the character. Many characters fall under multiple archetypes, while others fall under none.

The Anchor	The Dreamer	The Neurotic	The Rebel	The Innocent
The anchor is intelligent and grounded. This character is often the pillar of their group and uses sarcasm as a comedic weapon.	The dreamer is an eternal optimist with a healthy dose of self-deprecating humor. While all characters have desires, this character is defined by desire.	The neurotic is defined by insecurity, filtered through intelligence. This character has a big brain that can process all possible outcomes at once, which can be quite overwhelming!	The rebel has a God complex. Their disdain for life's rules drives them to danger and deceit. They think they can do anything they want and get away with it.	Sweet and lovable, the innocent is made of love. Pure as the driven snow, they have no inherent negative qualities. They can be naive, but you can trust them with your life.
The Eccentric	**The Buffoon**	**The Cynic**	**The Narcissist**	**The Player**
The eccentric is unique, which by definition means rare. Far from spacey, this character is hyper-connected to the world, invested, and curious.	Dimwitted is my favorite word to summarize this character. They're not dumb—no character is. To call any character that is judgmental and generally inaccurate. Buffoons are socially inept with often iffy intentions.	The Cynic is a world-weary defeatist. While often negative, they are simultaneously wonderful friends, strong allies, and invested in life. The mistake actors make with this character is playing like they don't care about anything. Untrue.	They love themselves and things in exactly that order. Entitled is a very particular quality, which this character exhibits to an inordinate degree.	This character lives in pursuit of just one thing: sex with no strings attached. They're fun, bold, and sexually charged, but generally lack substance, even more so than the narcissist.

Figure 1. (Rohrbacher 2015)

Media Action for Asian Americans (MANAA) put out a memo in 2017 describing common stereotypes of Asian people in American media and how to combat them (NTAC-AAPI 2017). Among them include the foreigner who cannot assimilate into modern society, predatory immigrants who steal jobs, unattractive male leads, and cliched occupations like Korean grocers or laundry workers. MANAA created the list in response to the unbalanced portrayal of Asians in mainstream media. Some stereotypes are more covert than others but have been associated with Asian Americans due to their frequency in television and film.

Saturday Night Live and Representation

Awkwafina was the first Asian American woman to host Saturday Night Live in over 18 years during her 2018 episode, underscoring that Saturday Night Live has long struggled with diversity and inclusion, both within its cast and its selection of hosts. As Kilkenney (2022) noted, 90 percent of the show's hosts between 1975 and May 2016 were white. Although SNL has increased diversity in its regular cast, 63 percent of members were white in 2022.

This exclusion is not new for SNL. Gates (2013) examined Eddie Murphy's tenure on the show in the early 1980s and how African American humor is represented, which offers perspective on how minority cast members can be marginalized as comedians. According to Gates, Murphy was able to navigate around this by toeing the line of white, "mainstream" humor while incorporating black humor and social commentary. Murphy is undeniably talented and exudes star quality, but he also made it clear to the producers that he saw how Garrett Morris – the first African American cast member and Murphy's predecessor – was treated, and that he would not accept the same treatment. He was able to work with writers to put his own voice into sketches, so his characters were not all cookie-cutter stereotypes.

Bowen Yang's addition to the cast was similarly significant. He is the son of Chinese immigrants and the first Asian American to join the cast (Coleman, 2013). The news was unfortunately overshadowed by revelations of past racist jokes made by Shane Gillis, another new cast member. These revelations revealed the dissonance between where SNL is going in terms of diversity and what it still needs to address to get there. In a 2020 interview, Yang said that he had exhausted many of his Asian celebrity impersonations when auditioning. Yang expressed his disdain for the idea that he was the "token" Asian cast member (Framke, 2020).

Yang's inclusion on Saturday Night Live's cast raises the question of how the portrayal of Asian people has shifted on the show since Jackie Chan's appearance back in 2000. This study analyzed the episodes of the only four Chinese people to host the show: Jackie Chan, Lucy Liu, Awkwafina and Simu Liu. These four hosts represent Chinese women, men, immigrants, and American-born entertainers, giving a scope for the intersection of these identities. Though some hosts are given creative liberty, the roles assigned to them are crafted by SNL's writers. This paper will look at how their ethnicity is connected to those roles.

Research Questions

RQ 1: How does Saturday Night Live cast its Chinese hosts and are they portrayed through covert or overt stereotypes?

RQ 2: When a Chinese host's ethnicity is used for comedic purposes, how is it portrayed?

III. Methods

To answer these questions, the researcher examined the SNL episodes of hosts Jackie Chan, Lucy Liu, Awkwafina, and Simu Liu. The sample was narrowed to hosts of Chinese ethnicity, as "Asian American" would exclude Canadian Simu Liu, and expanding the category to hosts of all Asian countries would potentially introduce a multitude of different stereotypes. The content analysis conducted only focuses on Chinese representation, though nuances from Asian-American culture are included, as Chinese people make up about 24% of Asian Americans (Pew, 2022).

The researcher chose to conduct a content analysis of the episodes. Content analysis was used to understand the presence of certain phrases, costume choices and characteristics. For this content analysis, the researcher began by watching the episode all the way through and taking notes on any themes. Then, each was rewatched, with the researcher noting the occupation, ambition, and characteristics of the roles. The character's role in the skit and any distinctive personality traits were coded. Examples of these are "loud," "silly," "reserved," "studious" or "serious." To determine the comedic role each character played, the researcher used Rohrbacher's ten comedy archetypes (Rohrbacher 2015). The researcher also noted if the character's ethnicity was a central part of the character.

On third watch, the researcher examined the comedic purpose of the character: are jokes made at their expense? If their ethnicity is important to the sketch, is the connotation negative, positive, or neutral?

After watching each episode three times, the researcher identified categories from noted trends in characters. Looking at the personalities of each character, the researcher noted where they fell on Wu's positive–negative 5-point scale for each trait, with 1 being the most negative and 5 being the most positive (Wu, 1997). For example, if the character is depicted as being athletic and strong, they received a 5 on the scale from weak-to-strong. After examining the personality traits, the character's average score revealed how positively or negatively they were portrayed.

The next step the researcher took was examining the occupations and ambitions of the characters and comparing them to historical stereotypes. Examples of these are the passive domestic worker and the foreigner who cannot assimilate or speak English. MANAA defines common stereotypes, and the researcher used the list to identify them within the episodes. The number of explicit stereotypes were totaled between all episodes.

Finally, the researcher looked at the host's role in each sketch. If ethnicity is used for humor in the sketch, the researcher noted whether it was a positive, negative, or neutral. If the host was explicitly the butt of the joke, then the researcher flagged it for emphasis. The number of times hosts appeared with another Asian person was also noted.

In addition, the researcher (Z) trained another researcher to conduct the same study. The second researcher (X) read the same MANAA and Vogue articles on common Asian stereotypes, then conducted coding of the episodes, following the same steps. Throughout the findings, the first table is by Z and the second is by X.

IV. Findings

Upon initial viewing, the progression in representation is clear. Jackie Chan starred in four sketches in his 2000 episode. Lucy Liu was featured in five. Awkwafina and Simu Liu (each appeared in seven. Chan did not play the lead role in any of his sketches. It's important to note that English is not Chan's first language, so perhaps there was a language barrier, leading to a greater use of physical comedy in his sketches.

	repulsive/ attractive	weak/ strong	powerless/ potent	stupid/ smart	unhappy/ happy	poor/ rich	dependent/ independent	disobedient/ obedient	aggressive/ meek	Irrational /rational	Average
Jackie Chan	3	4.5	4	3	3.5	2	3	3.25	3	1.25	3.05
Lucy Liu	3.8	3.2	2.8	1.2	2.8	3.6	3.2	2.8	3.4	2.4	2.92
Awkwafina	4.286	4	3.571	3.429	3	2.857	4.143	2.571	3.285	3.286	3.443
Simu Liu	3.857	3.143	3.143	3.571	3.143	3.714	3.571	3.143	3.571	2.714	3.357
Average	3.736	3.711	3.379	2.8	3.111	3.042	3.479	2.941	3.314	2.413	3.193

Figure 2, by researcher Z

	repulsive/ attractive	weak/ strong	powerless/ potent	stupid/ smart	unhappy/ happy	poor/ rich	dependent/ independent	disobedient/ obedient	aggressive/ meek	Irrational /rational	Average
Jackie Chan	2.25	3	3.5	3	4.25	2.75	3	3.25	3	2.75	3.075
Lucy Liu	3.4	2.4	2.4	1.6	3.4	3	2.6	3.8	3.2	2.8	2.86
Awkwafina	3.429	3.571	3.857	3.143	3.143	3.143	3.571	2.571	2.571	2.714	3.171
Simu Liu	3.857	3.571	3.429	3.571	3.286	3.714	3.286	3	3.286	2.857	3.386
Average	3.234	3.136	3.296	2.829	3.52	3.152	3.114	3.155	3.014	2.78	3.123

Figure 3, by researcher X

Using Wu's method, the researchers measured the traits of each character on a five-point scale to see how positively each was portrayed. Figures 2 and 3 displays these findings. Lucy Liu was the only host to fall below the neutral 3 on both studies, with a 2.92 and 2.86 as her average score. Lucy Liu fell in the stupid/ smart category, with a 1.2 and 1.6 reflecting the other ditzy characters she portrayed.

While researchers differed somewhat on Chan in the irrational/rational category, he often played characters that exploded into aggressive or strange outbursts at times. However, he typically remained mellow, which perhaps explains the researcher's discrepancy. Chan also scored low in the poor/rich category, as most of his characters were in low-paying occupations such as dry cleaning and a worker digging a hole to the center of the Earth. Chan and Lucy Liu's characters can generally be sorted into two categories. They are either quiet and timid, following the shadow of the other characters, or they are aggressive and over the top. Awkwafina and Simu Liu's characters were more complex, making it harder to distinguish clear traits.

Average	**3.193**
Women (LL/A)	3.181
Men (JC/SL)	3.203

Figure 4

Average	**3.123**
Women (LL/A)	3.016
Men (JC/SL)	3.23

Figure 5

The average score (Figures 4 [Z] and 5 [X]) of the characters skewed just above neutral. The men scored a little higher than the women in both studies, by an average of 0.118. The lowest average scores by category in ascending order were "irrational/rational," "stupid/smart," and "disobedient/obedient."

	Innocent	**Buffoon**	**Rebel**	**Anchor**	**Narcissist**
Jackie Chan	1	1	1	0	0
Lucy Liu	0	2	1	0	2
Awkwafina	2	0	2	2	0
Simu Liu	1	0	0	2	0

Figure 6, Z

	Innocent	Dreamer	Rebel	Anchor	Eccentric
Jackie Chan	2	1	1	0	0
Lucy Liu	2	1	0	0	1
Awkwafina	1	0	2	3	1
Simu Liu	1	0	0	3	1

Figure 7, X

Figures 6 and 7 list the top five comedic archetypes the researchers identified in characters. For researcher Z, the buffoon and the narcissist only appeared in the earlier episodes, when Lucy Liu plays a ditzy lumberjack, and Chan plays an equally ditzy yoga instructor. The anchor only appeared in later episodes, such as Simu Liu's role as a frustrated game-show contestant. Both researchers only identified the anchor in Awkwafina's and Simu Liu's episodes. Additionally, Lucy Liu and Awkwafina were the only hosts to impersonate celebrities. They played Catharine Zeta Jones and Sandra Oh, respectively. Lucy Liu impersonated a white woman, while Awkwafina impersonated a Korean woman.

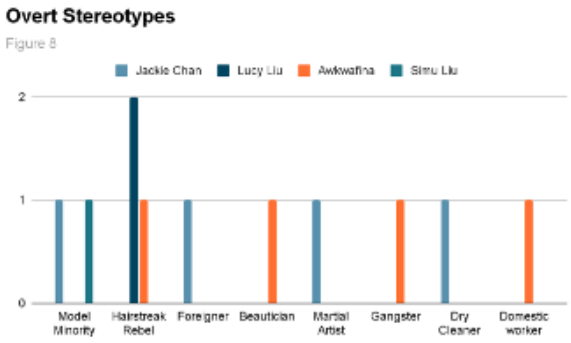

Figure 8

Figure 8 displays the overt stereotypes present in the episodes, using MANAA's list of common tropes. The researchers each identified the same stereotypes All four of Jackie Chan's roles fell into a common stereotype, while only one of Simu Liu's seven characters were identified as stereotypes. Simu Liu played roles that were starkly different from his predecessors. He played a professor, a "finance bro," and a highly decorated army official. Lucy Liu's monologue was excluded from the analysis, as the intention of the skit was for her to impersonate as many Chinese stereotypes as possible, with upwards of eleven identifiable instances.

The researchers then noted how many sketches, including the monologue, referred to the host's ethnicity (Figures 9 and 10). An example of the overt references was when Jackie Chan played a man digging a hole from China and did not speak English. Examples of covert references were the Chinese decorations and gong noise in in Chan's dry-cleaning sketch. Chan was the only host to not mention his ethnicity in his opening monologue. Instead, he talked about his martial arts background and being the first martial artist to host SNL.

	Overt	Covert
Jackie Chan	2	2
Lucy Liu	1	3
Awkwafina	2	1
Simu Liu	2	0

Figure 9, Z

	Overt	Covert
Jackie Chan	3	1
Lucy Liu	1	1
Awkwafina	1	1
Simu Liu	2	0

Figure 10, X

Simu Liu was the only host to appear in a sketch with another person of Asian descent. He and cast member Bowen Yang appeared in three sketches together. Jackie Chan, on the other hand, was the only cast member to appear alongside a non-Asian person playing an Asian person. Horatio Sanz appeared as martial artist Sammo Hung during Chan's monologue.

Appearances also played a role in stereotypes, particularly with the women. In Hollywood there is a common trope of "rebellious Asian women with colorful hair" that stems from the idea that Asian women must Westernize themselves to be seen as independent thinkers (Chen, 2018). Two of Lucy Liu's characters fell under this trope and embodied its rebellious nature. One of Awkwafina's characters fell under the trope, though not as overtly.

V. Discussion/Conclusion

As evident from the data, Saturday Night Live casts their Chinese hosts in moderately positive roles. They aren't vilified or idolized, with many characters falling close to neutral. Roles have become more positive and more frequent over time. Despite the increased positivity, the hosts cannot escape stereotyping. Explicit stereotypes have declined over the years, but they still exist.

This progression could be due to several factors. For one, Bowen Yang was a writer when Awkwafina hosted and a cast member when Simu Liu hosted, meaning there was at least one Chinese person in the room when these sketches were created. Additionally, Asian representation has become a bigger conversation in Hollywood along with the societal reckoning with diversity, equity, and inclusion. It's important to note that these hosts do not represent Chinese people in general. Their individual identities also influence the characters they are written as.

Ethnicities have always been central to Chinese hosts' appearances on SNL, but it's shifted with each host. Chan was the only host to not mention his ethnicity during his monologue. Being Chinese was central to all his characters though, often through covert stereotypes such as "the IT guy" and nicknames such as "my Chinese checker." Even though his martial arts background took center stage, it still holds connotations associated with Chinese people.

Lucy Liu opened the show with an overtly stereotypical skit. She played on all the different tropes associated with Chinese people and announced her historic feat as the first Asian woman to host to thunderous applause. The audience's reaction reflected the excitement. Despite the tongue-in-cheek opening, Lucy Liu was cast in various tropes throughout the episode and boxed into two types of character – one docile and obedient, the other over-the-top with dyed-hair.

Awkwafina's connection to her ethnicity came up during her opening monologue where she praised Lucy Liu for opening the door for her. The roles she played were different and every character she played was not overtly linked to her ethnicity. Some of her roles aligned with common tropes, but for the most part her Chinese ethnicity was not central to the comedy. In MANAA's memo to Hollywood where they addressed Asian stereotypes, they said the way to combat tropes is by casting Asian people in a variety of roles. Awkwafina's episode is an example of that goal. It must be acknowledged that outside of SNL Awkwafina has come under fire for using a "blaccent" and appropriating black culture. This external publicity may have

influenced which roles were written for her.

There was a high level of polarity in Simu Liu's episode. For the most part, his ethnicity was not used as a defining feature in his characters. There were no covert references and the only times it was mentioned was when it was central to the sketch. His monologue highlighted his historic role as the first Asian Marvel superhero. Later in the show, he and Bowen Yang starred in a sketch where they celebrated the first time an Asian host and Asian cast member appeared in a sketch together. It devolved into a competition over who had more "First Asian" awards, poking fun at the vast number of "firsts" each actor had.

The use of ethnicity as a comedic device for Chinese hosts on SNL was different in each episode. When Jackie Chan graced that stage 22 years ago, his ethnicity was central to most characters he played. He relied on physical comedy and appearances, which could be due to the language barrier. Lucy Liu relied on stereotypes for her monologue, but scrapped them for the most part in the sketches she starred in. Covert instances of stereotypes were present, but the declining instances of them could mark a shift in their use. Every host aside from Jackie Chan acknowledged and celebrated ethnicity in the opening monologue.

Future research could extend the category to all people of Asian descent, which would include hosts Sandra Oh, Aziz Ansari, and Kumail Nanjiani. Researchers could also study impersonations of Asian people on Saturday Night Live, particularly before Jackie Chan's 2000 appearance. Finally, future studies would benefit with a larger, more diverse set of researchers, particularly Chinese researchers who understand the nuances of their ethnicity more than anyone.

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