

TV comedy like Chinese Burn doesn't smash stereotypes. It reinforces them

Yuan Ren

A BBC pilot about Chinese women in London may tick diversity boxes, but offers no real breakthrough in how east Asian people are represented on screen



There's been a recent boost in east Asian presence on British TV. The arrival of US sitcom [Fresh Off the Boat](#) on 5Star; the Australia-made [Ronny Chieng: International Student](#) on BBC Three; and at the end of last month, [Chinese Burn](#), a show about three women's lives in London, has seemingly given Chinese people greater onscreen prominence.

While *Fresh Off the Boat*, set in 1980s America and launched on ABC in 2015, has faced criticism over its stereotypes, the show has also been acclaimed as a breakthrough for Asian-American identity. A Chinese friend who grew up in Britain says she even feels nostalgic watching it.

Chinese Burn could have offered something similar for UK audiences - the mere fact that the [BBC](#) was commissioning a pilot with all-Chinese leads - and female ones at that - was promising. But as I found out, there's little more to Chinese Burn than this novelty factor. The show starts with the line "Everyone knows what Chinese girls are like, right ... screw that!" and is packed with stereotypes and clichés featuring what it calls "three Chinese girls who kick that shit in the ballbag".

According to its writers, who were interviewed on Radio 4's [Front Row](#), "in order to smash stereotypes you have to offer [them] up first". The problem is that the show not only fails to ridicule the stereotypes it depicts, it also offers no appealing alternatives.

A Chinese friend working in the British film industry says British scripts about east Asians, even those claiming to "challenge Chinese stereotypes", have become clichéd. "They always feature the exact same scene where a Chinese actor is asked to put on a Chinese accent."

Lo and behold, there it is in Chinese Burn. Jackie, one of the three leads in the show, finds herself in the same situation, responding in a scream with the line, "We don't all talk like Bruce Lee" - before doing a karate kick that knocks over the stage lights.

The fact that Jackie is a stereotype who hasn't outgrown her black leather catsuit and her half-shaven head - all acted out without apparent irony - raises the question of whether the writers are dispelling stereotypes or merely reinforcing them.



 'I'd love to see something like *The Mindy Project* with a strong Chinese lead.' Photograph: Brian To/Rex/Shutterstock



A couple of the sketches are just offensive, notably the depiction of Chinese men as sexually impaired. In one scene, filled with clichéd gaffes and references to penis size, the insecure Elizabeth causes her slimy Chinese boss to climax with minimal physical contact. Coupled with Jackie's feeling of repugnance towards Chinese men (she only dates white guys), you wonder if there's an undertone of self-loathing.

Many of the stereotypes also seem outdated, more fitting for an age when pulling squinty eyes (yes, it's in there) really did symbolise the widespread ridiculing of the east Asian face. Today, supermodels such as [Liu Wen](#) and actresses such as [Lucy Liu](#) have dramatically changed that outlook, and there's a widespread appreciation of Chinese beauty.

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It's unclear whether BBC Three will commission a full series following the pilot, but any future programme planning should be sensitive to the changing profile of Britain's east Asian population. China's breakneck pace of development has hugely impacted on perceptions of its global diaspora. An influx of mainland Chinese intellectuals since the late 1990s means that the image of east Asians today has diversified beyond restaurant owners or [Fu Manchu](#).

Shows such as Chinese Burn are being made because of an anxiety about diversity, says my film friend, who wishes to remain anonymous. “Diversity is a real buzzword, and commissioning a show like Chinese Burn ticks all the boxes.” She refers to new BBC rules that could see producers face consequences for [failing to reflect diversity](#) on screen.

If programme planners want more full-frontal attacks on east Asian stereotypes, YouTube has plenty, and many are genuinely funny. Personally, I'd love to see something like [The Mindy Project](#) with a strong Chinese lead who smashes stereotypes with her own brand of authenticity. The BBC would also do well to commission more content on Chinese culture, such as documentaries, to showcase different sides of east Asia's people and history - both at home and abroad. Otherwise, all we end up with is superficial advancement but with little or no improvement for genuine representation on TV.

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