



**UNIVERSITI PUTRA MALAYSIA**

***REPRESENTATION OF „ASIAN“ STUDENTS IN FRENCH TV  
PROGRAMMES***

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**REPRESENTATION OF 'ASIAN' STUDENTS IN FRENCH TV  
PROGRAMMES**

**By**

**YEOW E-LYNN**

**Thesis Submitted to the School of Graduate Studies, Universiti Putra Malaysia, in  
Fulfilment of the Requirements for the Degree of  
Master of Arts**

**January 2016**

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Abstract of thesis presented to the Senate of Universiti Putra Malaysia in fulfilment of the requirement for the Degree of Master of Arts

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**YEOW E-LYNN**

**January 2016**

**Chair: Regis Machart. PhD**  
**Faculty: Modern Languages and Communication**

Over the years, East-Asian populations, especially the Chinese, have become the focus of an exotic, imagined representation of the East, and the Asian student has become a sort of euphemism for Asian communities, at least in the French-speaking context if not elsewhere. This essentialising, reductionist approach contrasts with the concept of “fluid” culture (Bauman, 2004) which insists on the process of identification of individuals who are not mere cultural products as cultures and identities donot exist *per se* (Lavanchy,Gajardo&Dervin, 2011). After addressing the concepts of culture, identity and representations in the media, I analysed in this research how Asian students are portrayed in French TV programmes: are they (still) the archetype of an imagined East or are the media moving away from a stereotyped categorisation of the East for this diasporic population? Using Fairclough’s (1995) model for critical discourse analysis (CDA), Kerbrat-Orecchioni’s (1999) Theory of Enunciation and Dervin’s (2013) Mixed Intersubjectivity, eight videos on Asian students in the French media are analysed. The results show that the discourses on Asian students are edited to only stage cases of academically successful individuals excelling in all fields they participate in. Reportages overwhelmingly portray Asian families as academic elites who become the ‘Asian norm’. The reportages create an imaginary Asian identity where Confucianism often plays a central role in the characters’ identifications, even though most of the characters presented no longer live or have never even lived in a so-called Confucian environment. This *Othering* contributes to representing a community which is out of reach for non-Asian French students, who in contrast to Asian students are less successful and subsequently disempowered because they are not affiliated to the absolutely successful Asian community.

Abstrak tesis yang dikemukakan kepada Senat Universiti Putra Malaysia  
sebagai memenuhi keperluan untuk Ijazah Master Sastera

## REPRESENTASI PELAJAR 'ASIA' DALAM PROGRAM TV PERANCIS

Oleh

YEOW E-LYNN

Januari 2016

**Pengerusi:** Regis Machart, PhD  
**Fakulti:** Bahasa Moden dan Komunikasi

Beberapa tahun kebelakangan ini, penduduk Asia Timur, terutamanya masyarakat Cina telah menjadi tumpuan representasi eksotik dan bayangan bagi dunia Timur, dan pelajar Asia telah menjadi satu bentuk keufemisme bagi masyarakat Asia, sekurang-kurangnya dalam konteks masyarakat yang berbahasa Perancis jika bukan dalam konteks lain. 'Essentialising' dan pendekatan reduksionis ini bertentangan dengan konsep budaya "cair" (Bauman, 2004). Konsep ini menekankan proses pengenalan individu yang bukan semata-mata produk budaya, kerana budaya dan identiti tidak wujud perseparuh (Lavanchy, Gajardo & Dervin, 2011). Selepas menanganikan konsep budaya, identiti dan representasi dalam media, dalam penyelidikan ini, saya telah menganalisis bagaimana pelajar Asia digambarkan dalam program TV Perancis: adakah mereka (masih) menjadi bayangan tipikal masyarakat Timur, atau adakah media sedang beralih dari pengkategorian stereotaip bagi masyarakat diaspora dari Timur ini? Berdasarkan model analisis wacana kritikal (CDA) Fairclough (1995), Teori lafaz Kerbrat-Orecchioni (1999) dan Teori 'Mixed-Intersubjectivity' Dervin (2013), laporan video tentang pelajar Asia dalam media Perancis dianalisis. Hasil kajian menunjukkan bahawa wacana tentang pelajar Asia telah disunting untuk hanya memaparkan kes-kes individu yang berjaya dalam bidang akademik dan cemerlang dalam semua bidang yang diceburi. Laporan-laporan tersebut secara berlebihan menggambarkan keluarga Asia sebagai elit akademik yang menjadi 'norma Asia'. Laporan-laporan tersebut mewujudkan identiti Asia yang direka-reka, dengan Konfusianisme sering memainkan peranan penting dalam pengenalan individu, walaupun kebanyakan mereka yang diperkenalkan tidak lagi menetap atau tidak pernah menetap dalam persekitaran yang dikatakan persekitaran Confucian. Sikap 'Othering' pula ialah penyebab kepada representasi komuniti pelajar yang berada di luar capaian pelajar Perancis bukan berketurunan Asia. Kelompok ini dianggap kurang berjaya berbanding dengan pelajar Asia dan seterusnya tidak mempunyai pengaruh kerana tiada yang mempunyai hubungan dengan komuniti Asia yang berjaya.

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## LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

MIN	Mixed Intersubjectivity
CDA	Critical Discourse Analysis
AFP	Agence France-Presse



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## CHAPTER ONE

### INTRODUCTION

In August 2012, an article entitled *L'intrigante réussite des Chinois en France*<sup>1</sup> was published by the famous French weekly *Le Point*. One year and a half later (i.e. in January 2014), Franz-Olivier Giesbert, the publication director of the magazine, was sentenced by a court in Paris (France) for defamation of the Chinese immigrants living in France because of the article. Its publication had hit the community and caused a big controversy which grew even bigger after Mr. Giesbert declared that the content had been taken at face value when it was only meant to be humorous (*Le Figaro*, 2014). This article traced the path of a 'typical Chinese immigrant' in France and the 'secrets' to his/her success; it concluded with the "five commandments of the Chinese entrepreneur," three of which were found defamatory towards people of Chinese origin or nationality by the court: (i) "*Tu ne rémunèreras pas tes employés car ce sont des membres de ta famille*", (ii) "*Tu ne cotiseras pas et donc tu ne toucheras pas d'aides*" and (iii) "*Tu ne paieras pas d'impôts*"<sup>2</sup>. For the first time, SOS Racisme, a French anti-racist NGO founded in 1984 to fight racial discrimination, supported an Asian association in a legal action, in this case the *Association des jeunes Chinois de France*<sup>3</sup> (AJCF).

Members of the Chinese community living in France were affected by this article because "*L'article est insultant et dégradant et nuit à la réputation de tout un groupe ethnique*"<sup>4</sup> (*Le Monde*, 2012). WangRui, the spokesman of AJCF also lamented over the "*généralisations sur les femmes chinoises dépeintes comme des prostituées*"<sup>5</sup> (*Le Monde*, 2012) and SOS Racismecomplained that 'under the guise of humour,' the article represents in an absolutely racist way the Chinese community. This article was followed by another writing about the activities of the "Asian mafia" in France: *Comment la mafia asiatique prospère en France*<sup>6</sup> (*Le Parisien*, 2012). This news story stated that the Asian mafia is a flawless organisation, which is formidable, well established, and very discreet although unnoticed and unknown by the majority of the French population. This organisation was also alleged to be running business upfront and to lead several activities from prostitution to drug trafficking, forgery of false papers and, "of course", the routing of illegal immigrants. Asians, or more precisely the Chinese are also associated with money laundering, which includes sending huge amounts of currency back to China, and French investigators estimated that the turnover of this mafia was several hundred million euros per year.

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<sup>1</sup> The intriguing success of Chinese in France

<sup>2</sup> (i) You do not pay your employees because they are your family members, (ii) You do not make social contributions and as a result, you do not receive any aid [from the Government] and (iii) You do not pay any income tax.

<sup>3</sup> Chinese Youth Association of France

<sup>4</sup> The article is insulting, degrading and harms the reputation of a whole ethnic group

<sup>5</sup> generalisations of Chinese women portrayed as prostitutes

<sup>6</sup> How the Asian mafia in France prosper.

On the other end of the spectrum, a large number of articles portray the Asian community in France the exact opposite, in a highly positive light. *Le Figaro* (2010), one of France's two major daily newspapers, published *La formidable réussite scolaire des enfants d'Asiatiques*<sup>7</sup> which reported that children of Asian descent living in France show brilliant academic achievements based on statistics that show for example that half of Asian women aged 18 to 50 years old graduated from a higher institution, against an average of 37% for French females (Gabizon, 2010). The same newspaper published two years later an article which stated that Asian students are deemed to be the best students in the world: *Les élèves asiatiques meilleurs en maths?*<sup>8</sup> (*Le Figaro*, 2012). Although the title of the article is in the interrogative, the article clearly states that Asian students excel in math and sciences especially those living in Singapore, South Korea, and Hong Kong, Taiwan or in Japan, as revealed by American studies. The article also mentions that East Asian countries are well ahead of the rest of the world with a considerable advance in the field of education and that France does not appear in the top 45 successful countries. Although it is not stated in the writings which American studies the observation is based on, it seems to correspond with the results of the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA), a worldwide study led by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) in member and non-member nations on 15-year-old school pupils' scholastic performance in mathematics, science, and reading. First performed in 2000, it is then repeated every three years and as of 2012, the results show that students in Shanghai, Singapore, Hong Kong, and South Korea are among the top achievers (OECD, n.d.).

As can be noticed in these articles, Asians are being portrayed and generalised in terms of contrast: they are either placed at one end of the spectrum for being absolutely dreadful or at the other end for being perfectly brilliant. 'They' are 'not normal' and never appear in the middle of the spectrum. They are often being represented by the media as a group outside the 'mainstream society', and generate a love-hate relationship with the 'local' population: Although Asian businessmen are represented as successful and wealthy, they are associated with illegal activities, putting a touch of discredit on their achievement and condemning what is presented as 'Asian' behaviours. On the other hand, Asian students are being placed at the top of the spectrum by the media as academic achievers, but journalists regularly insist on the deficiencies of the 'Asian' education. The way French media portray Asians is thus ambiguous: they appear as successful and generate some form of envy *but* they are also reproached for their flaws which are condemnable and unacceptable to 'French standards'.

Defining who is an Asian varies from country to country. In France, the term refers most of the time to people of East Asian or/and Southeast Asian origin, regardless of their nationality or nationalities. Thus, it represents individuals who are perceived as individuals originally from a territory stretching from Mongolia and China in the North to Singapore in the South, from Myanmar in the West to Japan in the East. However, because the presence of respective origins in the media differs with the significance of the community in France. For example, people from Myanmar are relatively few in France, and TV programmes do not focus on this community. Moreover, some of the 'Asian' students staged has a double nationality or they are French nationality of Asian

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<sup>7</sup>The incredible academic success of Asian children

<sup>8</sup>Are Asian students the best in math?

origin, but at many times, their nationality is not taken into consideration, the media only focus on what they perceive as an 'Asian'.

In this study, I will analyse the discourse on the success of Asian students in the French media, more precisely in several reportages in French which are available on the social media YouTube. Asian students represent a population which has recently become the focus of scientific articles (Henze & Zhu, 2012, p. 91; Machart, Lim, Yeow, & Chin, 2014) or reportages. By analysing the media discourse, I will be able to understand how these representations are generated, what kind of stereotyping of Asians circulate in France, and what cultural biases Asian students may face on a regular basis when living in this country.

### 1.1 Background of the Study

In recent years, the Asian community in France has become more and more visible. The number of newspaper articles, video podcasts or news reports on Asians living in France is on the rise and in 2012, the new socialist government led by Jean-Marc Ayrault appointed the first minister of Asian descent (Fleur Pellerin). At the same time, the Korean-born French Member of Parliament (Jean-Vincent Placé) regularly appeared in the news to voice the Ecologists' point of view on societal topics. SOS Racisme for example, although founded in 1984 to fight discrimination against minorities and famous for its "Black-Blanc-Beur"<sup>9</sup> campaign, supported an Asian association for the first time only in 2012.

Concomitant with the number of reportages, documentaries and newspaper articles, the number of international Asians studying in France is also drastically rising, and Chinese students contributed to 10.3% of the foreign enrolment in French universities in 2011/12<sup>10</sup> (Machart et al., 2014). Besides this rising number, a great number of news reports focused particularly on the academic success of the Asian students such as *Les raisons du succès scolaire des jeunes d'origine asiatique*<sup>11</sup> (*Le Figaro*, 2013), and articles dealing with Asian communities outside France; *Performances scolaires: la Finlande c'est fini, l'Asie arrive!*<sup>12</sup> (*Le Monde*, 2012), *Les universités européennes se disputent les étudiants d'Asie*<sup>13</sup> (*Le Figaro*, 2013) or *Trop bons, les Asiatiques sont les pestiférés de l'université américaine*<sup>14</sup> (*Rue89*, 2013) are deemed to help French readers to better 'understand' Asian students in France.

In these articles, journalists often indiscriminately use the term Asian to group students of foreign origin together with French nationals as long as their appearance falls within the stereotyped representation of the 'Asian' phenotype. This includes French nationals of Asian origin, second and third generation French citizens whose parents were born

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<sup>9</sup> Black-White-Arab, with reference to the French Blue-White-Red flag.

<sup>10</sup> <http://www.iie.org/Services/Project-Atlas/France>

<sup>11</sup> Why Asian teenagers succeed academically

<sup>12</sup> School performance: It's the end for Finland, Asia is coming!

<sup>13</sup> European universities compete for students from Asia

<sup>14</sup> Being too good, Asians are the plague of the American University

in Asia, and students who are foreign Asian nationals. Journalists often place these individuals who have diverse backgrounds under one single category, contrasting them to the 'mainstream' individuals, i.e. Caucasian French residents.

In this study, I have chosen to analyse the discourse on the academic success of 'Asian' students circulating in France as an example of the discourse generated by journalists on Asian populations which is similar to the one on Asian businessmen: the representations of both populations combine an acknowledgement of their academic/social achievement followed by a harsh critic of their practices.

### **1.2 Problem Statement**

Over the years, many people (writers, journalists, researchers, etc.) have represented the East as a more traditional and mostly collectivist society whereas the West is depicted as one which is more modern and mostly individualistic (Veenhoven, 1999; Holliday, 2010, p.42). When referring to the East or the Asians, China often comes to mind and it could be said that the country has become a sort of euphemism for Asia (and the East), just like America (the United States) is the euphemism for the West.

In representing the Asian community or explaining the behaviours of Asian individuals, 'culture', especially what certain people label as 'Confucianism' (Shi, 2006), is often called upon and plays an important role. Based on a certain 'known' (in fact stereotyped) representation of Asians, non-Asians (similarly stereotyped) are expected to negotiate some form of 'intercultural' interactions.

Though this approach may sound essentialist, there is a need to find out how Asian students are being portrayed in the French media to have a better understanding of potential conflicts and/or discrimination occurring during 'intercultural' (in fact here interracial) interactions in order to deconstruct them. The emergence of these social representations of Asian students will be analysed using a critical discourse analysis approach.

### **1.3 Aims of the Study**

The aim of this study is to investigate and analyse how Asian students are being discursively represented in French video podcasts, to determine if they are (still) being portrayed as the archetype of an imagined East or if and how journalists move away from cultural essentialism. Furthermore, I also intend to identify cultural bias that appear in the representation of Asian students in the French media and understand their role in the perpetuation of discriminations.

The selected documents are video podcasts relating academic achievements of Asians that are available on YouTube. I will analyse the discourses of the different narrators, the interviewers and interviewees using the theory of Mixed Intersubjectivity (Dervin, 2013) which will enable to make "different voices emerge" (p. 6). I will focus on how

these media portray the Asian communities to the viewers and what representation of the non-Asians appear in contrast to understand the journalists' or producers' motivations.

#### **1.4 Research Questions**

The representations of Asian students in the French video podcasts and the construction of the 'imagined Asians' will be examined. The research questions are as follows:

- 1) How are Asian students portrayed in the French Tv programmes: are they (still) the archetype of an imagined East?
- 2) How is the concept of 'culture' used to explain these representations of the Asian students or to mitigate their scope?
- 3) Can the intentions of the journalists/producers be interpreted from the critical analysis of the discourses on Asian students?

#### **1.5 Significance of the Study**

With this study, we will have a better idea of how Asians are emerging as a community in French society, how they are being represented in the media, if they are depicted as mere representatives of their community of origin or if they are granted some individuality. We will also have a better understanding about the representation of Asians, the essentialising and stereotyping process of a minority group and the differentiation of 'us' vs 'them' that appear in the discourses in the French media.

#### **1.6 Limitation of this Study**

In order to successfully answer the research questions and keep the length of study within reasonable limits, some limitations of this thesis are identified as found below:

1) The data collected cover a relatively short period of time i.e. 3 years, which is from 2010 to 2012, and corresponds to the period when there was a rise in articles and reportages on the academic success of Asian students in France. The results of these findings only apply to the selected period and I do not intend to extrapolate them to the periods before 2010 or after 2012.

2) This study, which is anchored in the field of discourse studies, has to be seen as exploratory from the point of view of social impact: I have not evaluated the impact of these discourses on the French population or viewers as this would require a bigger scale study and more time. Becker (2009) claims that society impacts media productions which in turn impact society. At this stage, I can only assume that the selected data reflect a part of social representations on Asian population circulating in France.

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