

Article

Ted Chiang's Asian American Amusement at Alien Arrival

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Abstract: In the 2016 movie *Arrival*, aliens with advanced technology appear on Earth in spaceships reminiscent of the black obelisk in *2001: A Space Odyssey*. The film presents this arrival as a serious problem to be solved, with the future of human life and interplanetary relationships in the balance. The short story, “Story of Your Life” by Ted Chiang, on which the film was based, takes a different, amusing route that essentially depicts an ideal vision of the era of colonialism. To articulate this reading, this article will compare Chiang’s science fiction (SF) to the genre in general and will take Isiah Lavender III’s positionality of otherhood to reveal how Chiang’s work expresses a Chinese American secular faith in a moral universe. It will analyze the narrative form in Chiang’s collection, *Stories of Your Life and Others*, and will use it to compare the prose and film versions of “Story of Your Life.” It will also explain how Chiang may be using a nonlinear orthography and variational principles of physics to frame multileveled humor. It utilizes theories of humor by John Morreall and analyses of Chinese American secularity by Russell Jeung and concludes that Chiang’s work reflects concerns and trends of Asian Americans’ secularized religions.

Keywords: Ted Chiang; Asian American; secularities; otherhood; colonialism; humor

1. Introduction

In the popular and beautiful 2016 movie *Arrival* (Villeneuve 2016), aliens with advanced technology appear on Earth in spaceships reminiscent of the black obelisk in *2001: A Space Odyssey* (Kubrick and Clarke 1968). Just the presence of these spaceships causes worldwide panic, illustrated with pandemonium in a college campus (a nearly empty lecture hall!) and with uprisings on television news. The film’s narrative speeds the viewer through several overlapping crises that resolve in human world peace, aliens gracefully vanishing from the planet, and a vision of loving human–human and human–alien relationships. The film thus presents the arrival of aliens as a serious problem to be solved with the future of human life and interplanetary relationships held in the balance. In my reading of the short story on which it was based, “Story of Your Life” by Ted Chiang, the story takes a substantially different, amusing route. Instead of presenting danger, the aliens and humans tell jokes.

The pattern of presenting technology that has the potential to destroy humanity’s moral fabric and then resolving conflicts with comedy is found throughout Chiang’s short story compilation, *Stories of Your Life and Others* (Chiang 2002).¹ To be more precise, the book is not a compilation of Chiang’s science fiction (SF) humor, but his SF plots consistently have comedic turns at the end. These turns also result in the reification of a moral universe. Taking African American literary scholar Isiah Lavender III’s positionality of otherhood, I argue that “Story of Your Life” can be read to depict an

¹ Note that Chiang continues many of the same themes in his latest compilation, *Exhalation* (Chiang 2019), though it is more serene and ambiguous.

ideal image of the era of colonialism, with the free exchange of knowledge and humorous intercultural experiences. To make sense of Chiang's science fiction, which contains comedy and a secular faith in a moral universe, this article utilizes theories of humor by religious studies scholar John Morreall (Morreall 2009) and analyses of Chinese American secularity by religious studies scholar Russell Jeung. I will conclude that Chiang's work reflects central concerns of secular Chinese Americans and trends in Asian Americans' secularized religions.

2. Otherhood, Narrative Form, and Theories of Humor

Before analyzing Chiang's narrative form, it is important to note that the comedy is not apparent to many readers. In fact, the reader's investment in Chiang's SF work may often be the action, violence, and exploration of alternate worlds. For these readers, the short stories' narrative turns can function as a resolution of tension or as a revelation about the SF setting. My articulation of the short stories' comedic form does not diminish these readings, but adds to the complexity and richness of Chiang's work. In order to see the comedy, one has to engage a lens of otherhood, informed by Asian American culture and religion.

I am borrowing the term otherhood from African American literary scholar Isiah Lavender III, who argues that American SF has been "characterized by an investment in the proliferation of racial difference, that racial alterity is a fundamental part of sf's narrative and social strategies" (Lavender 2011, p. 20). SF codes race in characters, species, plots, and more, and sometimes adopts conceptions of racial difference. Otherhood, or the critical stance informed by an identity and environment ("neighborhood") of otherness, reads SF for these ideas of difference and investments in difference. While Lavender invents the term so that African American writers and critics can uncover race in the "blackground" of SF, it may also apply to other social locations, including that of Asian Americans. Asian American literature scholar Betsy Huang argues that Asian American SF writers are frequently informed by their social location, especially by Asian American concerns of immigration, assimilation, otherness, gender, body, and labor as well as the presence of Orientalism and techno-Orientalism in SF (Huang 2015, pp. 148–49). With an otherhood lens, it can be seen that Chiang codes the issues to inspire the reader to reenvision the world. As he points out to Huang, Chiang wants to illustrate characters discovering "something about the nature of the universe which radically expands their understanding of the world" (p. 152).

A frequent theme—and as I will later argue, a central theme—of his SF work is characters radically expanding their conception of religion and morality. In order to address this theme, he plays with boundaries of the genre, especially with the boundary of the possible and impossible. In Darko Suvin's typology and definition of the genre of science fiction, he places science fiction as the literature of cognitive estrangement and separates it from "metaphysical" literature (myth, folktale, and fantasy) which he defines as noncognitive estrangement (Suvin 1979, p. 20). In particular, SF new worlds (nova) should be "perceived as *not impossible* within the cognitive . . . norms of the author's epoch" (viii, emphasis in original). Chiang, by contrast, often creates nova with characteristics outside of our epoch's cognitive norms, and these are quite often religious powers and magical effects. Suvin called these world characteristics "supernaturally determined," "manifestly impossible," and "anti-cognitive laws" (pp. 7–8). Accordingly, one might eliminate Chiang from SF, but we can also see Chiang's work as responding to the early development of the genre.

Mark Rose, in *Alien Encounters* (1981), argues that science fiction began with a nineteenth-century crisis of religious faith and the development of powerful technology (p. 7), and as a result the genre often acts as mediator between the spiritual and material (p. 47). Likewise, Chiang's works take seriously material reality, even within spiritually dramatic plots like the coming of angels. Humans make rational decisions with respect to their realities of body and matter, so characters are making cognitive choices according to our current epoch's sense of agency, but do so under noncognitive conditions. By making these choices and radically expanding their understanding of their world,

Chiang makes the reader consider the intersections of the spiritual and material, and hence he is operating as in the early genre, except that the crises of faith and technologies are different in our epoch.

As will be detailed later, Chiang addresses crises of faith in terms of the foundations of morality, like the eminence of God, especially how technology has the potential to remove or replace these foundations (e.g., overpower God). Without the supernaturally determined and manifestly impossible in the stories, the reader cannot cognitively evaluate foundations of morality. From a lens of otherhood, we can see a concern about the religious changes among Asian Americans as they assimilate into forms of secularism in the United States, encounter others with radically different worldviews and the power to enforce them, and learn powerful science and technology. I will later argue that he is asking particular questions of a Chinese American secular faith.

Interestingly, his stories conclude with the persistence of the moral foundation at question. In order to see how Chiang places the moral foundation into question, we must explicate the narrative form, which matches the structure of comedy. Note that this comedic structure does not mean that all of his stories are funny, just like all stories with the structure of tragedy do not have sad endings. Rather, the comedic structure puts particular questions into focus and affects qualities of the ending. After explicating the form, from a lens of otherhood, one can see how this narrative form puts a focus on Others. With slight variation in specific stories the overall structure is:

- A. a universe governed by moral structures (e.g., God is benevolent)
- B. humans unable or unwilling (e.g., stubborn or hubristic) to see the permanence of those structures
- C. a technology that seemingly has the potential to disrupt the persistence or eternity of the structures
- D. the failure of B+C to break A

This narrative form closely matches tragedy in its classical Aristotelian sense, where humans lose by contesting the universe's structures. It also matches Promethean tragedy, where the rebels end in eternal punishment. In contrast to these tragic structures, Chiang does not necessarily have humans suffer in the end, and in a move towards comedy, the endings often have tentative levity. Another parallel to this narrative form underlies stories of religious humility, where one ponders theodicy or another divinely mysterious phenomena and ends with knowledge of human limits. In such humility narratives, humanity gains knowledge of the universe and humanity's place within it.

There are elements of the tragic and piously humble in Chiang's fiction, and individual stories foreground these. The key distinction from these forms lies in the degree of power of the technology (C) and its ramifications for humans. With great power comes great possibility—for disaster. As is common in science fiction, readers can cognitively evaluate the technology and its risk of apocalyptic results, because the technology is akin to technology of their epoch. In contrast, Chiang typically does not, as tragedy would, dwell on possibilities of punishment for flawed humanity (B). In this way, he does not use technology as a story device to engage the question of human frailty in comparison to the universe's morality (the conflicts of A and B and the conflicts' tragic ramifications). Chiang's stories provide elements to construct such stories, but he deftly avoids tragic narratives that one might expect from their combination.

Instead, the flawed humans often survive or even emerge uplifted or enlightened by the experience. One might view this pattern and argue that Chiang lacks the authorial conviction to complete the tragic narrative structure when he does not punish characters enough for their transgressions. This view would be a stylistic complaint that Chiang flirts with tragedy and ends up incomplete or too close to the desires of a popular audience. Or, perhaps one might view that Chiang is writing according to a SF pattern of focusing the reader on the joys of experiencing new worlds, much like the fictions of exploration and discovery that are foundations of the genre (Reider 2008, p. 124) and like the "ludic pleasure of estrangement" acts as "an opium for the people" (Suvin 1979, p. ix). However, from an otherhood lens, the latter does not seem accurate because Asian Americans have deep psychic wounds from colonialism. An occasional story on exploration seems possible, especially if it is putting this impulse into question, but it does not seem correct from an otherhood perspective that Chiang would

use exploration as a consistent form that ends relatively positively for the main characters. I am proposing that one possible reading that concurs with an otherhood lens is that Chiang is utilizing a comedic narrative structure, which ends with the messiness and contradictions of life, and focuses not on flawed humans (B) with potentially disruptive technology (C) but on the astounding durability of a pillar of the moral universe (A).

Namely, from an otherhood lens, Chiang's stories focus on challenges to the goodness of the universe posed by technology (A versus C). That is, the central conflict is between nonhuman phenomena (the universe and technology), or Others. Others are in nearly every story of Chiang's, such as a mythical tower, golems, angels, aliens, and so on. By locating the central conflict between Others, Chiang shifts the reader's concern away from flawed humanity (B), even though there are many shortcomings of character in his stories. This shift in gaze can be important for those who have been othered, and Asian Americans who have been victim to multiple colonial projects may not want to affirm colonial perspectives. The colonial gaze—as John Reider has argued—undergirds much of science fiction, scrutinizes others “to maintain and reproduce the political and economic arrangements that establish the subjects' respective positions” (Reider 2008, p. 7). Centering on the effects of humans on technology and on the universe thus may focus the reader on humanity's relationship to Others, and, by extension, the respective position of colonist to discovered and undiscovered (sub)humans. Centering on the effects of Others on Others thereby subverts the colonial gaze, and shifts the central questions of the reader.

Another reason to associate Others with technology is that SF frequently reduces Asians and Asian Americans by associating them with technology. Even if Asians are not present in body, there are common plots that mirror the Yellow Peril, with hordes of subhuman aliens or robots threatening humanity. In body, Asians have come to represent a dangerous future, or what is called high-tech Orientalism or techno-Orientalism (Morely and Robins 1995; Chun 2006). As historian Kenneth Hough has demonstrated, an early form of techno-Orientalism emerged during the Russo-Japanese War of 1904–1905, where Japanese people were illustrated as “technologically adept, modern, chivalrous, and civilized, yet savage and ultimately an existential threat to the West” (Roh et al. 2015, pp. 31–33). In this depiction, the Japanese had superhuman control of pain and no morality; as Jack London wrote in a 1904 *The San Francisco Examiner* essay, “Yellow Peril”: “From the West he has borrowed all of material achievement and passed our ethical achievement by . . . A marvelous imitator truly, but imitating us only in things material. Things spiritual cannot be imitated . . . and here the Japanese fails” (p. 38). This image continued and was eventually applied to China in the 1990s as it emerged in the high-tech global economy (p. 4). In this sense, science fiction plots that focus on human relationships to Others may reiterate techno-Orientalism, especially the moral vacuity of Asians and Asian Americans.

In addition, such narratives may exert a discursive control over Asians and Asian Americans, where Asian American readers can either identify with the reduced Other or the subjectivity and culture of the colonist. As Wendy Hui Kyong Chun has argued for high-tech Orientalism, this leaves Asian Americans with two oppressive options. For one, they can see themselves as absent or subhuman. Alternatively, they can choose “to be an individual—to exceed one's culture in order to become incorporated into a global market”; that is, Asian Americans can be an individual yet one without culture and chained to a capitalist system. In other words, the otherness of techno-Orientalism erases subjectivity along with the richness of culture and religion.

By shifting the lens from human–Others to Others–Others, Chiang provides a form wherein Asians and Asian Americans might maintain their subjectivity and religion. Additionally, as I will articulate later, modernized religious traditions and the history of being othered influenced secular Asian Americans to develop wells of empathy for Others; in this respect, Chiang provides a form particularly suited for exploring the moral foundations—such as empathy for Others—of an Asian American secular faith. Moreover, the form is comedic, which can provide further benefits for Asian Americans as they radically expand their understanding of the world. In order to comprehend the

effects of Chiang's plot structure, it is helpful to have a theory of humor, and for that we turn to religious studies scholar and humorist John Morreall.

In *Comedy, Tragedy, and Religion* (Morreall 1999), John Morreall contrasts the tragic vision and the comic vision, and this distinction can help articulate the purpose of using comedic forms. In Morreall's schema, the tragic vision hopes for order, divides the world into absolutes, and is inflexible to life's complexity and nuance. Tragedy comes from the inability of the universe to live up to such neat ideals, leaving humans to suffer. The comic vision is much more flexible, enjoys incongruity and disorder, and does not look for closure or "happy endings" (pp. 21–23). Comedy does not resolve the universe's internal contradictions, or in other words is not necessarily happy, clear, or settled. Following the comic vision, Chiang's short stories end with the disorder caused by flawed humans using disruptive technology, including suffering and death. Further, the universe remains unchanged and humans must come to grips with the assertion of this reality. On the other hand, the universe itself does not appear messy or full of contradictions; rather, its structures remain intact and good. The assertion of the universe's dominance is common to tragedy, where humanity suffers from divine punishment or from the discovery of the truth. Hence, the failure of humans and technology to disrupt the moral universe (D) might not be comedic.

Thankfully for our present purposes, John Morreall helps to explain the humor of a persistent moral universe with his understanding of amusement and the cognitive shift. In *Comic Relief* (2009), he advances a theory of amusement that puts humor outside of the realm of emotions and into the auspice of play. In his schema, emotions are separated from amusement. Emotions engage beliefs, desires, and adaptive actions and accordingly indicate investments in people and situations (pp. 28–31). This seriousness of engagement means that people are too close to the situation to laugh at it. By contrast, amusement requires a certain distance, lack of tension, and lack of personal investment; that is, one has the ability to play with people and situations. In jokes and the arts, the illustrated people and situations can be real, hypothetical, or even absurd.

Relating this to Chiang's work, the reader with an otherhood lens may focus on the imperviousness of structures of a moral universe—such as benevolence, love, and faith—and this positions the reader away from the potential threats of flawed humans and powerful technology. In this way, the otherhood reader will not "emotionally" invest in the stories' problems of humans and technology, but will move towards amusement. Moreover, the universe and technology, which are in conflict (A versus C), are described in painstaking scientific detail. In Suvin's terms, the reader is concentrated on the nova or invented worlds, but Chiang's nova can fall outside of Suvin's schema since they can be supernaturally determined and manifestly impossible, or hypothetical and absurd. In this way, the comedic form transposes the SF mechanism of analyzing the not-impossible to the impossible. For the reader with an otherhood lens, the scientific details can satisfy the enjoyment of analyzing an alternate world, while knowing the nova are impossible provides some distance. Thus, Chiang utilizes conventions of scientific detail and a moral universe to create distance and thereby to inspire amusement.

Humor also comes from a cognitive shift. The "cognitive" in this usage is not the analytic possibilities of Suvin's cognitive estrangement, but the mental structures that inform worldviews. Morreall is interested in this form of cognition because it is common for theorizing why people find certain things humorous. In *Comic Relief*, Morreall follows the incongruity theory of humor which posits that humor arises from the presence of something that violates our normal mental patterns and expectations, or cognitive structures (p. 11). A weakness of incongruity theory is that such violations can easily arouse emotions like disgust. To correct this issue, Morreall argues that comedy utilizes laughter or another social signal to indicate the start of play (p. 37), and play allows people to disengage from any information that follows (e.g., potentially disgusting details). In a play mode, one is free to make a cognitive shift to combine things that are not normally together in our thought patterns and expectations (i.e., they are incongruous), and this unconventional combination makes us laugh. Specifically, humor sets up normal thought patterns and expectations, and then suddenly shifts us out of it; this is commonly known as delivering a "punch line".

In Chiang's stories, the normal thought patterns and expectations are for us to be concerned about the dangers of flawed humans (B) utilizing advanced technology (C), like the coming of Skynet. That is because we are human and we are concerned with scenarios that are calamitous for us. Furthermore, in the science fiction genre, readers enjoy considering the possibilities of scientific development, including terrific possibilities of new technology. In particular, Chiang's stories direct the reader to consider the potential loss of a moral foundation (A)—goodwill, love, faith, and so on. Thus, part of the humor of Chiang's stories is our expectation of this loss (A) that would result from the combination of imperfect humans (B) and world-disrupting technology (C), and then we experience a cognitive shift when the structures of a moral universe prevail over a seemingly amoral technology (D).

An additional layer to the humor, in Morreall's formulation, is Chiang's use of estrangement, in Suvin's terms, to signal play. As we will see in the examples below, the settings can be as familiar as a college campus in an alternate present to as fantastic as a tower that gets hit by flying stars. Especially when the novum draws from mythological physics and supernatural power, the reader can more easily disengage from the contents of the story. As I argued earlier, these elements are part of metaphysical literature, hence these stories may fall outside of the SF genre, but it also foregrounds some of our epoch's crises of faith, placing it in SF. For the reader with an otherhood lens, these moves outside of Suvin's cognitive analysis and into Morreall's cognitive shift effectively disengage from a colonial gaze and engage an otherhood lens, where the reader can reflect on their own experiences of being an Other. In this way, Chiang skillfully balances elements of humorous amusement for Asians and Asian Americans to explore their subjectivity and religious concerns. He allows the reader to ponder the underlying serious issues and questions (e.g., concerns over transhumanism, colonialism, and the loss of biodiversity), come away with the lightness of wit, and feel a faithful confidence in a permanent, moral universe. The next section features examples from *Stories of Your Life* read with an otherhood lens, and it will illustrate how Chiang's humor enables the reader to imagine how the morality of the universe can withstand colonialism's most powerful technologies.

3. The Buddha, a Tower, the Gates of Hell, and a College Campus

This section will briefly flesh out Chiang's narrative form with examples from other short stories in the collection (Chiang 2002), which will inform readings of "Story of Your Life" and its film adaptation, *Arrival*.

The religious references in many of the stories are fairly explicit, making the persistent moral structure of the universe (A) decipherable. For example, in "Hell is the Absence of God," angels intermittently appear and perform miracles and Hell occasionally manifests. Consequently, the concept that faith continues without earthly reward (A) could become obsolete with visible examples of heavenly gifts, but faith ends up deepening in the story's conclusion. "Seventy-Two Letters" is about the animation of material with divine letters, just like the process of making Jewish golems. The story's central scientific problem is whether this technology can save humanity from its infertility, and the resulting moral question is whether they can honor God (A) in their use of the divine technology of writing. Ultimately, the fertility technology honors the divine lineage of the animating letters. Like the above format states, the two stories' moral foundations of faith and adoration (A) persist to the extent that human frailty and hubris (B) are nearly nonfactors. It is also important to note that in both stories, there is considerable suffering and death from humans wanting to utilize the new technology (miracles and divine writing), which can lead some readers to focus on the resulting losses. However, the stories conclude with a deepened view of the moral principle after characters learn to honor the divine foundation of the technology; so, with an otherhood lens the focus is on the relationship of Others (moral principles of the universe) to Others (technology).

For some stories, the moral principles (A) are not as transparent. "Liking What You See" discusses a medical technology, called calliagnosia, that makes one unable to perceive physical beauty. The story consists of perspectives in a college campus debate, which ensues because the college administration considers making this technology mandatory so that students view only peers' skills and view themselves without the shame or pride that physical appearance might bring. Students and others

do not come to a definite conclusion and otherwise no moralism is declared absolute, so the moral principles of this story are not spelled out. Based on this, a reader might concentrate on the debate around the power of beauty (B) and the neutralizing power of technology (C), in which case there is no end to the debate because they came to no consensus about the precise power of beauty. In this reading, the debate rightly continues so there is no right place to end the story, or Chiang should have written a conclusive end to the debate that would have clarified his views on the power of beauty (B).

On the other hand, if we look for comedy, then perhaps the story was not deprived of Chiang's views but ended in an appropriate level of contradiction. We can derive these aspects from Chiang's story notes, where he writes, "I expect physical beauty will be around for as long as we have bodies and eyes. But if calliagnosia ever becomes available, I for one will give it a try" (p. 281). Chiang's statement about beauty and observation indicates that the primary concern is the ability to value others irrespective of external beauty. That is, the story's question is whether humanity will still have the underlying goodness to see beyond beauty (A), and this might be tested with a technology that eliminates the need to use the capacity (C). The fact that he is willing to try the technology means that he does not think he would lose his goodness, and likely he feels the same about it for other humans. In fact, the technology might enable him to see how truly biased he might be, and this experience would be enlightening to help him to correct his bias. Turning to the story, the stated positions on the debate outline ways to see the good in others (A), and through articulating these positions, people's good intentions to act accordingly (A) become apparent. Thus, from an otherhood lens, the short story covers the amount of the debate that was needed to establish the relationship of human goodness (A) to calliagnosia (C), and the amount needed to demonstrate how human goodness can be enacted and reaffirmed through this encounter. Chiang is not worried about characters continuing their disagreements, so the comedy of contradiction carries on while goodness is secure, and othered readers can come to feel the same confidence amongst contradictions.

"Understand" is another story that is not explicitly religious and with a context close to our reality, and it takes a little more analysis to find the persistent moral principle. The story begins with a medical breakthrough in neural repair that heals a teacher, named Leon Greco, who had brain damage, and that further accelerates his mind's development (C). The contents of the story are his diary of thoughts as he learns of his rapidly expanding mental power. With it, he treats the world as "incidental to my aims" (p. 62), which is to manifest his own sense of beauty and thereby experience euphoria through manipulating the world and the "normals" (humans); basically, Greco becomes a sociopathic narcissist. In this way, the narrative follows the confluence of human frailty (B) and advanced technology (C), making it seem as if the main character is headed towards either amoral domination or a tragic end.

The subtle turn to comedy comes from the Greco's eventual encounter with another "enhanced mind," named Reynolds. Reynolds uses his power to "save the world, to protect it from itself" (p. 62) and this puts him at odds with Greco. In one sense, the reader roots for the narrator, who works tirelessly to outdo his opponent, but also against the narrator who antagonizes a world "savior" (A). Even with the drama of technological, neurological, and biological minutiae that is the content of the battle, in the end it is the moral figure who wins, with Greco conceding, "Pragmatism avails a savior far more than aestheticism" (p. 70). To add to the language of the opponent's greatness, in victory Reynolds points upward "in a histrionic gesture" and says "understand" to mimic Plato, the Buddha, or a Zen *koan* (p. 69). Greco's final statement is: "I comprehend the Word, and the means by which it operates, and so I dissolve." The religious language indicates that the victory is not only technical but also moral, leaving the narcissistic and disconnected in awe of the glory of goodness (A). In the story, the term "Word" refers to a "sentence that, when uttered, would destroy the mind of the listener" (p. 67), but it is also a clear reference to Christian *logos* since it is capitalized and is a near-divine understanding of a particular mind's (de)construction.

A reader may dwell on the loss of the narrator's life and the manipulation of societies around the world by Greco, so one can read his hubris and eventual death as tragic for the individual and society. From an otherhood reading, the religious language in the death scene informs the reader that

the story's real battle was between the technology (C) and the moral stability of the universe (A), and C never offered any serious threat to A. Instead of a tragedy, the comic turn renders Greco—who could be a colonial general disrupting the world's societies—into an egotistical artist playing with technology. Moreover, the otherhood reader can reflect on the moral foundations and pragmatic effectiveness of Plato, the Buddha, and Jesus—which might be a hybrid Asian American religious culture—that appears more powerful than technology.

One may consider the unflinching stability of the universe to be indifference or coldness. This can certainly be a reading of the permanent morality of Chiang's universe. However, I would turn to Morreall's explanation that amusement requires playful distance, and the permanence of the moral universe may be Chiang's way of playing with readers' expectations. Additionally, humor can make light of very serious issues, like death, disability, and humiliation, but only by providing play and emotional distance (in Morreall's formulation). One perpetual problem with humor is that no matter how much distance is provided, an audience may still take offense, and the offended audience may feel the teller of humor to be insensitive and cold. Likewise, I leave open the reading that the permanent universe may seem aloof, uncaring, and perhaps offensive to people who hold the ideal of moral permanence to be ethically repugnant.

Chiang also presents playful distance through context. Some of the above stories take place in a world similar to our own, with only a handful of advanced pieces of technology, but Chiang also illustrates vastly different worlds; these fantastic, noncognitive, or supernatural contexts enhance the amusement. For example, "Tower of Babylon" takes place in a physical universe far outside of our own. It is based roughly on the material description of the Tower of Babel articulated in Midrash (*Genesis Rabba*) and the Book of Jubilees. As he details in his notes, Chiang was excited about these stories' descriptions of the brick-and-mortar aspects of the Tower, and so wrote a story that tracks the progress of craftsmen who are so prolific in their work that they are about to crack the vault of heaven (p. 275). Chiang describes various levels of the Tower, and the craftsmen travel up beyond the stars (C). Its architecture is so strong that it holds the nearly infinite height of the Tower (C), and when the Tower reaches the celestial realm small stars literally collide with it. The story is, simply put, breathtaking; it is full of embodiment that engages feelings of acrophobia, anticipation, and faithless confidence in God's existence. Simultaneously, the story conveys a mixture of hubris and fear (B) that surrounds the fate of the biblical Tower of Babel. In this way, the narrative sets up a conflict of the confluence of B and C, yet the context is so distant from our own physical universe that there is little concern by the reader—and perhaps, a little mischievous joy—that God's unquestioned, distant dominance (A) might fall.

The confidence of the human workers and the mythological context lead the reader to believe that this story might illustrate humans outsmarting God's creation and forcing an encounter with God. Workers cut into the vault of heaven and mine a path further upward. Inside the vault, there is no light and no possibility for communication, yet water rushes downward. Eventually, the main character finds his way upward through layers of the vault, and it seems that he will be encountering God face-to-face soon. However, to the reader's and his own surprise, he emerges back on the ground level in a river. Instead of breaking the preeminence of God (A), the narrative reveals that the fantasy universe is a cylindrical-dimensional space, where the top is the bottom (D). In this way, the alternate physics of the universe sets us into a play mode, and the revelation of God's infinite power and wisdom (A) to build a cylindrical universe inspires a cognitive shift, hence amusement. I suppose that a reader might feel that this is a tragedy of human hubris, perhaps with the Flood destined to be sent as punishment soon, or a humility narrative where the main character was literally brought low. However, from an otherhood perspective, religious principles and divine reverence survive the best technology of a colonial regime, so one can still respect one's religion and culture despite the hubristic people who assail it.

In "Story of Your Life," Chiang utilizes the same narrative form as the above stories, along with the universe's moral stability in the face of advanced technology. From an otherhood lens, this form makes alien invasion amusing.

4. "Story of Your Life" in Text and Screen

Before comparing the short story and film, it is important to note that the comparison is not to demonstrate the superiority of one over the other, but to elucidate each's underlying message. In my reading, the film makes great effort to retain the short story's complicated plot and mixture of emotions, and the drama of the film effectively communicates the sensitivity and subjectivity of the universe's life forms. If the film were to illustrate the short story's longform and complicated humor that I laid out and will analyze in more detail below, the film likely would have muddled the story's underlying messages for the theater audience. Perhaps a filmic analysis could argue why the film genre of drama is more appropriate for this goal (A) than another, but that is not the present purpose. Instead, this article brings to light, as seen through an otherhood lens, that the film replaces Chiang's humor with the scopic pleasures of advanced technology (C). To do so, the film's final cognitive shift takes the concern away from the dangers of technology to the realization that technology, when peacefully shared, can found world peace. The short story's cognitive shift moves the concern away from understanding a strange and powerful Other to the realization that expanding another's consciousness, when peacefully taught, can make them appreciate the gift of life. For readers with an otherhood lens, the latter realization serves as an ideal vision of how the encounter of peoples during the colonial era could have occurred, and the ideal image reflects the racial positionality and religious traditions of Asian Americans.

Arrival's power comes from the finale in which the main character suddenly learns the alien consciousness which saves humans from a worldwide apocalyptic war and which provides a vision of her daughter's entire life. The movie revolves around successfully asking the aliens (called heptapods), "What is your purpose on Earth?", which is literally written on a whiteboard. Given the imposing black spaceships, humanity is clearly lower in civilization, and this fact dominates the interaction, leading the viewer to consider whether these invaders will deliver superhuman grace or the all-too-human Christian colonial paternalism or self-justified genocide. The otherworldly, advanced technology is even more evident when humans enter the spaceships where gravity and other physical properties are easily manipulated by the heptapods. Thus, the universal goodness of all intelligent life is not so much in humans' hands as it is in the heptapods' appendages. The central point of contention among humans is the hope for intergalactic peace led by a few human scholars of language and physics across the world, set against humanity's militaries preparing for intergalactic war.

While building up these tensions, the movie successfully details some of the complicated linguistic concepts and physical principles that Chiang carefully articulates in the short story. The film also uses the size of the theater's screen to amplify the perceived power of the heptapods' advanced technology, and thus the potential threat that they pose. The film adds scenes to demonstrate the humanity of the main characters and the subjectivity and sensitivity of the aliens. However, these successful adaptations of the short story do not make up for a pivotal addition: humanity's grace three-thousand years in the future provides the future heptapods a "weapon" or "tool," which is their written language and time consciousness, that helps the heptapods when they will need it, and the present heptapods have come to reciprocate our future grace by presenting us with this weapon (which humans will give to them later). At the end of the movie, this technology of language and consciousness will save humans from world war, and thus technology saves all. This critical addition makes the film anthropocentric and somewhat self-congratulatory because humans will be intergalactic saviors in the future. The narrative also becomes about a technology that can be considered a weapon, which heightens the fears of alien colonialism and human world war, although the peaceful exchange of technology that concludes the film speaks to the benefits of international exchange, cooperation, and philanthropy.

Taking the narrative form outlined earlier, the film successfully communicates A, though a slightly different universal moral principle, heightens B and C and thereby the potential problems of this confluence, and does not address D. The latter is the case because the moral good of the peaceful exchange of technology (A) is not potentially disrupted by people who would wage war with alien technology because humans do not possess it; the film demonstrates that peaceful exchange is life and waging war is death. This demonstrates that the cognitive shift at the end of the film does not lead to

comedy, in Morreall's formulation.² The film, as noted earlier, is dramatic with a grand battle of life and death, love and war, and good and evil. The potential threat of the heptapods is the subjugation or annihilation of humans, and the potential threat of humans to each other is world war. The film's solution to these threats are love and cooperation through the peaceful exchange of technology, and the reward is an embrace of life and love. Comedy would grant the audience an emotional distance from the resolution, whereas the film's drama provides a cathartic relief that world war has been avoided, including saving the lives of the main character's future husband and daughter.

In comparison, the short story spends more time elucidating curiosities of the alien consciousness and facilitates humor by reducing anxieties surrounding the alien arrival. For example, the movie has 12 imposing alien spacecraft, whereas the short story has 112 communication points set up by the aliens, which each feature a curious room-sized looking glass that enables a flawless Skype-style video-chat. The film's immense, gravity-altering spaceships are replaced by these whimsical exchange points, and likewise the heptapods largely share information with humans freely and humans openly work with each other across communication points. The short story does not focus on the question of why the heptapods arrived, though when asked several times they respond with "to see" or "to observe," which does not satisfactorily answer the question for humans (p. 114). The idea of the alien consciousness and system of writing being a weapon does not appear, and learning it does not solve world war. Additionally, as noted earlier, the idea that the consciousness was a weapon provided by humans at a future date does not appear, except to the extent that the narrator explicitly eliminates the option that the aliens learned the consciousness from someone else. In these ways, the short story has whimsy, lessens the feeling of being threatened, and challenges our anthropocentrism.

However, it would be a mistake to assert that the short story does not have drama. As Chiang writes in his notes, he was inspired by watching a one-man play about a wife's battle with breast cancer (p. 277). Accordingly, the short story illustrates a mother's vision of her daughter's entire life, from the night of her conception to identifying her corpse after a climbing accident. It accomplishes this by combining the physical concept of variational principles and the linguistic concept of a non-linear orthography into an alien consciousness, which perceives time as a whole. As you might presume, this is complicated and explaining the story form will take some effort.

Before detailing the specific form and its fit into Chiang's comedic form noted above, it is important to note that my reading is specific to an otherhood lens. Other readings are perfectly valid, and those that focus on the drama and loss of the daughter have a strong argument for the story being a tragedy or an exploration plot. Those who view it as tragedy would read the frequent references to the future death of the daughter like a prophet in a tragedy who foretells the dreadful future, should the main character choose to embark on the journey. In the second to final paragraph, Dr. Louise Banks states, "From the beginning I knew my destination, and I chose my route accordingly. But am I working toward an extreme of joy, or pain?" (p. 145). That is, her choice of extremes (human frailty) led her to the tragic events of the story.

Those reading the story as an exploration plot would note the detail of the aliens and their consciousness. As literary and Jungian scholar Patricia Monk argues in *Alien Theory* (2006), these details of aliens enable the reader to discover disparate aspects of the Self in the unconscious and organize them: "Just as the archetypes of the personal unconscious—the strangers within—are required to order the individual's experience of internal energies, events, and processes which make up the complete Self, so an equal energy is required to order what is experienced by the ego as not part of the Self. Like other archetypes, the Alien as the archetype of OtherSelfness (alterity) has a specific function of ordering human experience" (p. 286). Applying this to the story, the details of the heptapods' consciousness enables the reader to find aspects of this perspective in their unconscious, and discovering these

² The film tries to compensate for this lack of comedy by naming the two main character heptapods, "Abbott and Costello," which will make sense in my analysis below.

“strangers within” and organizing them provides psychic energy. In this way, Banks (and vicariously the reader) discovers foundations of the alien consciousness throughout the story and learns to organize them, and the resulting whole provides the complete love of her daughter. In the end, the travel story explores the frontiers of consciousness and returns home ever more powerful, enlightened, and cosmopolitan.

By contrast, an otherhood lens provides an alternate, insurgent reading from those above. The second reading, exploration, mirrors the colonial gaze of delightful foreign travel; careful, scientific observation of the Other provides one’s own voyeuristic, tourist joy or captures foreign religious ideas to empower the empire. Asian Americans, while inheriting many colonial treasures in American culture and society, have also historical memory and trauma of colonial exploitation and pillage. My otherhood lens makes me wary of this reading, though I can certainly see it.

The first, tragic, reading focuses on the extreme of pain, with the loss in reference to the heights of joy. A comedic reading, by contrast, would maintain both the pain and the joy simultaneously, and that would explain the question mark at the end of Banks’s statement about joy and pain. Suspending both also corresponds to the alien simultaneous consciousness. Moreover, entering a space, meeting strange others, and raising a child with the foreknowledge that this will be painful *and* joyful sounds like immigration, assimilation, and raising multiple generations in the United States. Tragedy alone would imply that Asian immigrants committed a sin of hubris, one that would devalue ancestors and curse their descendants, much like Oedipus’s ambitions cursed his two sons and two daughters. I am not stating that the tragic reading is incorrect, but my otherhood lens suggests comedy, where life is messy and one continues to enjoy it.

With this lens, I will introduce key narrative points that connect to the comedic narrative form, outlined in previous sections. To match the short story’s method, I will present the whole and then walk through linearly.

Each heptapod’s mind knows the whole of its time, and this makes free will an alien concept. Instead, they know what will occur in their lifetimes and savor each moment as a part of the whole. Chiang writes the story in as close to the language of this consciousness as he can, with nonsequential moments of the daughter’s life interspersed in the sequential narrative of the alien encounter. In one particularly illuminating sentence, Chiang describes the appearance of the written language: “If I wasn’t trying to decipher it, the writing looked like fanciful praying mantids drawn in a cursive style, all clinging to each other to form an Escheresque lattice, each slightly different in its stance” (p. 112). This is a colorful description of nonlinear orthography, which is writing that does not move in a sequential order (e.g., left to right), but rather has all of the words equally present. Correspondingly, as the narrator will later explain, each of the mantids are words, and the lattices consist of lines that traverse the words of the entire thought; thus, the whole is woven together and no part can exist separately. Likewise, Chiang wove the story of the daughter’s life inextricably into the experience of the alien encounter, and vice versa. This is drama, but not a question of alien invasion; rather, it is a grand statement of the value of life as it is interconnected. Additionally, this moral structure can withstand even the loss of free will.

Here we can discern the conflict of A and C: all life is interconnected and love (A) and free will seems necessary to make moral decisions to maintain life’s interconnections and love, so a technology that eliminates free will (C) would threaten the moral universe. The cognitive shift reveals that the technology founds a new appreciation of interconnected life, where the preciousness of finite life and the love that develops during lifetimes are always present. In this way, fallible humans (B) armed with alien technology (C) do not disrupt life’s interconnectedness (A). The new perspective is a comedic vision, in John Morreall’s formulation, because it is not a perfect life but one that is messy; in this case, the lives of mother and daughter are mixed with laughter, disease, romance, and divorce. Additionally, the alternative consciousness does not utilize free will, so the cognitive shift provides an alternative to free will as a foundation to life’s interconnectedness and love (A). Thus, there may be two layers to the cognitive shift: the preservation of a moral universe and a realization that this can be preserved

without free will. But Chiang does not stop there and adds the explanatory concept of variational principles of physics, which in my reading ingeniously instills humor into alien subjectivity.

Variational principles, as rendered by Chiang, essentially change the idea of teleology (which is directly stated in the story's text). Outside of variational principles in human consciousness, our physical explanations generally match our sequential sense of time, where our minds like to track paths of objects as they negotiate their environments. Analogously, when our minds track the paths of our lives, we evaluate the impact of our decisions as we negotiate our environments. Chiang utilizes the idea of variational principles to step outside of human sequential consciousness, since variational principles do not operate according to a sequential process. Taking the example of a traveling object, in several cases, physicists can *calculate* the *whole* paths of objects with variational principles, instead of *tracking the movement* of objects. Variational principles are interesting because the calculations factor out variables, leaving the objects to follow the minimum or maximum of one variable and not others. Essentially, where variational principles apply, it seems like the universe does not care about lots of details in-between, but only that the results are the minimum or maximum.

In the story and movie, the example of a variational principle was Pierre de Fermat's principle of least time. First proposed in 1662 and later confirmed within optics, Fermat's principle describes how as light crosses from one medium to another, like air and water, it will take the fastest route of all possibilities. This means that if we could experience travel as a beam of light, *from the moment we began*, we would somehow know the place we will end and we will take the fastest route. In other words, we would know the future and always act with maximum efficiency. In analogous religious terms, this is knowing our *telos*, or our moral status at death. Chiang explores the benefits of knowing our *telos*, such as recognizing the value of love in a limited lifetime. He does not, however, explore the possibility of foreseeing an immoral life where the viewer knows that they are destined to reap a divine penalty, like damnation in Hell.

The religiousness is also indicated by other terms, like when the narrator describes first learning the alien consciousness.

"The semagrams seemed to be something more than language; they were almost like mandalas. I found myself in a meditative state, contemplating the way in which premises and conclusions were interchangeable. There was no direction inherent in the way propositions were connected, no "train of thought" moving along a particular route; all the components in an act of reasoning were equally powerful, all having identical precedence" (p. 127).

With the religious language of teleology, mandalas, meditation, and more, Chiang presents an alternative morality. In this sense, the heptapods' technology of consciousness (C) poses a serious threat to human morality (A), because when life is predestined then it might seem that human choices have no impact on the future. This latter point about predestination and fate is a common theme in science fiction and prophetic literature, where humans reject their foreseen futures in favor of the possibility of a better outcome, only tragically to end up with the same fate. Instead, Chiang chooses the SF solution to the "time loop" paradox that free will and determinism exist simultaneously (Rose 1981, p. 109), and uses the idea of variational principles to explain the coexistence of multiple ways to view time and motion (Chiang 2002, p. 137). In this way, Chiang avoids tragedy and embraces the comedic vision of messy contradiction.

Additionally, Chiang enforces foundations of human morality (A) by demonstrating that an alternative, simultaneous consciousness would both preserve free will and an important benefit of free will: the choice to form interpersonal bonds. As noted earlier, the short story as a whole is a vision of the life of a daughter, from the night of conception through death, except not in that order because all of the events are felt simultaneously. Throughout this vision, the love for her daughter, even during mother–daughter fights, is evident. One way this love is illustrated is that poignant experiences with her daughter are woven into the alien encounter and vice versa; that is, the emotional life of mother and daughter are interconnected with each other and with the aliens. In fact, love completes the nonlinear orthographic sentence that is the short story. It begins with "the question" "Do you want to

make a baby?" (p. 91) and ends with the "answer" "Yes" and the phrase "to make love, to make you" (p. 145). The intent and choice that are hallmarks of free will are present, along with the benefit of committing to love and life, and they come at ends of the story indicating that they are part of the same simultaneous vision of the daughter's life. In these ways, Chiang asserts that the interconnectedness of life (A) is not harmed by the alien technology (C), but rather each reinforces the other. Moreover, the very final cognitive shift assures the reader that human frailty (B) with this technology (C) could not disrupt the foundations and benefits of human morality (A).

Confident with these readings from an otherhood lens that the story follows a comedic form, one can also read—with a simultaneous consciousness and otherhood lens—certain events in the story as jokes. For interspecies jokes, one generally has to separate Banks's experiences before she learns the alien consciousness and after; before, one must read into some encounters, and, after, one must find subtle terms and phrases from other points in the story. Before learning the consciousness, there are moments when the heptapods might be playing with the humans. To see these encounters from their perspective, I take seriously the alien response of "to observe" to the question "why are you here?". In one meeting, the heptapods delivered the same information as the time before. One could interpret this without humor and assert that the heptapods assumed humans did not understand it or that, based on their mutual alterity, there was some other miscommunication. Perhaps heptapods were acting as tourists or scientists and were experimenting on humans. While these readings might be true, it could equally be true that the heptapods were playing a practical joke on humans in order to observe (and to enjoy) humans squirm and be confused. Recall that they have already seen these encounters from their simultaneous consciousness, so they may have been excited for their whole lives to have these interspecies encounters.

Another ambiguous encounter that can be read as a joke is the final exchange, when humans were generally unaware that this was the final exchange. In this meeting, the heptapods requested that the main character come to the glass and they suddenly said that all were leaving, and then left. A non-humorous reading of this is that both heptapod and humans with heptapod consciousness have seen all of these exchanges before and will remember them later, so the idea of "goodbye" does not seem to make sense or hold much value, hence the abrupt departure. However, according to this same argument, heptapods would not need to announce their departure at all. In my otherhood reading, this is just an opportunity for one more funny intercultural exchange. "I just can't wait to see those humans' look of shock, with their funny sequential time consciousness!" Or perhaps they are lovingly mimicking human behavior to the humans who developed heptapod consciousness, basically asserting that "You know that I know that you have learned our atemporal consciousness, so you know that my saying goodbye is lovingly pointing out our differences." From an otherhood lens, these jokes can be seen as moments of cultural distance and as opportunities for nondestructive interpersonal interaction. After all, ought not powerful beings who are moral treat less-powerful others as beings, as ends and not means, and befriend and not exploit them? I think that humor would be one aspect of the peaceful meeting of beings with vastly different technology and consciousness, though to be sure the other side might not be in on all of the jokes.

I also read these moments as humor because as the humans learn the alien consciousness, they learn to play practical jokes on other humans. For example, at one point, the heptapods agree to exchange things, where humans and heptapods bring something without informing the other about what they will bring (pp. 139–40). The colonel who oversaw the main characters' looking-glass sessions then asked about the exchanges, wondering if the offering mattered or what humans might give to encourage a greater gift in return. To this, the main characters explain that intention and requests make no sense to heptapods, so the idea of "gift" makes no sense. The colonel could not understand this and became frustrated, yet, as the text highlights, the main characters did not "improvise" or react to his frustration but responded as if in a "performance" of a "play." In other words, they foresaw the future of the colonel's ignorance and frustration, and carry on their roles accordingly like comedians in a

“Who’s on First” script. Thus, Chiang illustrates how atemporal humor has an analogy of performing a script; it is no less enjoyable for actors and audience, and may even be funnier in some cases.

To support the reading that this is an atemporal joke, Banks ends this memory with “It was an ambiguity invisible to most. A private joke; don’t ask me to explain it” (p. 140). She says “joke” and it is a direct quotation of herself. However, it is not a simple restated phrase; it came thirty-seven pages earlier in a memory of her daughter, a moment which is far in the future after her divorce from the daughter’s father (p. 103). Both quotations come at the end of memories, and are therefore like the threads that weave together the “mantids” of heptapod writing (and a simultaneous consciousness).

Such nonlinear details are found across the short story; in my otherhood reading, these linking points make the humor hard to discern, but they ultimately demonstrate the “humanity” of aliens. As Mark Rose articulates, science fiction sometimes illustrates human–alien jokes to depict aliens as “neither ‘good’ nor ‘bad’ but conspicuously like ourselves,” and such SF is a “reaction against the primitive science-fiction monsters” found in other SF (Rose 1981, p. 80). In short, humor makes aliens less primitive. Humor provides a breadth of subjectivity to aliens and counteracts the colonial gaze to primitivize those whom they encounter; alien humor is therefore attractive for those who have been treated as Others, and Asian Americans in particular who have been considered “aliens ineligible for citizenship” and “illegal aliens.” In these ways, the maintenance of the universe’s morality in the presence of a simultaneous consciousness as well as the comedic form and humor that illuminate the subjectivity of aliens provide an ideal for how Asian cultures and Asians could have been received by colonial empires.

5. A—The Universe is Moral

The above sections detailed what might be read through an otherhood lens and some of the historical and cultural contexts that might inform that lens, but they have been traced to a generic Asian American perspective. I suggest refining it to the perspective of a Chinese American male secular faith, informed by Asian Americans’ penchant for identifying and identifying with alternative intelligences. To detail this perspective, I will turn to Russell Jeung’s research on Chinese American “religious nones.”

As Russell Jeung has argued in a few publications, working with myself and scholars Seanan S. Fong, Helen J. Kim, and Alice Liu, Chinese American secular religiosity is based in two Chinese religious concepts, *liyi* and familism (Jeung 2012; Jeung et al. 2015, 2019). Chinese Americans are the American ethnic group with the highest rate of “religious nones,” or those not identifying with a religion (51.8%, (PEW 2012)). However, this identification does not mean that they do not practice religions and cultural traditions rooted in religious worldviews.

Across religious affiliations and in their secularity, Chinese Americans practice *liyi* and have traditions of familism (Jeung et al. 2019, pp. 5–23). As Jeung details, *liyi* is a set of discourses, based in Confucianism, that were utilized to understand and to critique other people’s religions. *Liyi* discourse eventually extended to a practice of analyzing how one’s “relationships reflect ethical concern and moral responsibilities rather than to how one might belong to one faith tradition” (p. 22). Familism is “a lived tradition that prioritizes family interdependence and right relationships, through the meaningful rituals of being family” which provides values, ethics, and core identities of self and belonging (pp. 5–6). In these ways, secular Chinese Americans utilize multiple religious frameworks to analyze and to maintain relationships, yet do not associate these practices with particular religions and may do so while identifying as nonreligious. Chinese Americans inherit these non-Euro-American traditions of religious critique and secular morality that have themselves been altered and hybridized over centuries of encounters with Europeans and Americans. In the otherhood readings above, Chiang’s work accordingly illustrates a moral universe that overarches religious and secular worldviews (*liyi*) and treats interdependence and interpersonal relationships as foundations of the moral universe (familism).

Additionally, Chiang’s maleness is a significant factor to consider. Jeung argues that practices among unaffiliated Chinese Americans differ along lines of gender (2012). Namely, the gender disparity includes tasking women with maintaining Chinese cultural and religious traditions, and that carries to the religious nones. Unaffiliated Chinese American women learn Chinese holiday traditions and are

responsible for making the family take part in Chinese festivals. Unaffiliated Chinese American men, with their male privilege, are freer to avoid learning Chinese cultural traditions, to call themselves atheist, and to take a more rationalist position on issues of religion and science. That is, men have the privilege of not actively maintaining and promoting Chinese cultural identity and have the privilege of adopting Western terms of secularity for their Chinese traditions of secularized religions. Like these aspects of Chinese American male secularity, Chiang does not overtly preference Chinese religions, culture, or language and often writes about secular contexts and questions phrased in terms of Abrahamic religions.

Chiang also rarely has Asian American characters. As Jeung points out, racial identity and location are less important for Chinese American religious nones. Accordingly, and to the chagrin of Asian American Studies literary scholars, Chiang consistently does not mark the racial identities of his characters (see, for example, (Chun 2007; Foster 2009; Shiu 2014)). Additionally, his stories do not contain coded social relationships that mimic racial disparity, like other science fiction and fantasy encode into otherworldly societies. The racially unmarked characters and non-Chinese contexts thus may be related to the privilege of Chinese American men.

Despite the lack of explicit references to Chinese American people and culture, I argue that Chinese American secularity and Chinese Americans' historical experience of marginalization and oppression may undergird choices of comedy and a moral universe. For example, a few differences between the film and prose versions of "Story of Your Life" can be partly explained by this positionality. The film is explicitly concerned about alien colonialism, and the fear is heightened by the imposing image of the spaceships and the anti-gravity space within them. Apprehensive humans, represented by the actions of Chinese General Shang, resurge their fears when the heptapods reveal that they have a "weapon." This fear goes away when humans realize that it is a gift from future humans and after Shang softens upon hearing his deceased wife's last words divined atemporally by Dr. Banks, "In war there are no winners, only widows."³ For those generously learning and sharing with the aliens, the aliens act as tutors in their written language and corresponding consciousness, which is called the "amical-hierarchical" relationship by Monk (2006, p. 299).

My reading from an otherhood lens provides contrasts to these moments in the film. The short story illustrates the power of the alien technology to engender laughter and love, whether it be the alien consciousness that provides a vision of a daughter's life or the looking-glasses that whimsically inspire curiosity. The aliens seem open to answering human questions and enjoy watching the effects of their practical jokes. In this way, they are hierarchically above humans by way of their technology, but they do not necessarily hurt or heal humans; this relationship falls outside of Patricia Monk's schema and likely outside of her theory that aliens reveal and organize the strangers within. Additionally, there is no mention of a weapon and little space discussing the possibility of worldwide human war. Accordingly, there is no focus on any threatening Chinese general. In other words, alien colonialism and world war due to human frailty are not central concerns, though they remain background possibilities. Instead, the central images are of relationships, between mother and daughter, a woman and her male partners, and human and heptapod.

The concern with moral interpersonal relationships is at the heart of Chinese American secularity, hence the primary focus on relationships matches. Additionally, the process of rationally evaluating the alien consciousness and its relationship to morality is akin to the Chinese American tradition of religious critique. The persistence of this moral universe corresponds to a faith that could undergird a form of Chinese American secularity. Last, but certainly not least, the seeming absence of fear of alien colonialism and the comedic interplay with aliens reflects a subversion of Chinese Americans' history with colonialism; namely, the process of learning from an advanced civilization without domination, exploitation, and paternalism is an ideal image of how the era of colonialism could have occurred. Instead of traveling the world to exploit others and to prove dominance, European aliens could have

³ The quotation was revealed by the screenwriter Eric Heisserer (Patches 2016).

come to Asia to exchange life-affirming technologies and culture at the rate of Asians' speed of learning and adaptation. Sure, there would be cultural difference and moments when Asians did not understand European consciousness and science, but that could have founded new, hybrid forms of humor which also could have been beneficially incorporated by Asians into their lives. This is essentially what occurs in "Story of Your Life": the motives of the heptapods are not wholly evident, but the result of the exchange of consciousness is the affirmation of life and, in my reading, humor that are at once emotionally human and atemporally heptapod.

In addition, the notion that the gift of weaponry would found world peace, as illustrated in the film, is largely foreign to the experience of Asians and Asian Americans. Nuclear weapons, for example, have not only killed Asians and Pacific Islanders, but the existence of nuclear weapons in Asia is repeatedly used by Europeans and Americans as a rationale to fear and to invade Asia. Even if the Europeans and Americans had originally acted amicably, the gift of technology has frequently led to the rationale for later acts of control and suppression. This racist cycle is one origin of techno-Orientalism: Japan (and later China, India, Korea, and more) learned Western technology, advanced toward self-determination, and then were perceived as threats to American dominance. As a result, techno-Orientalism fixes the perceived threat in a stereotypical image where "its reiterations sustain the myth of the racial other as a fragmented nonhuman object that can be quantified and categorized and that needs to be dominated and controlled" (Park 2010, p. 16). The gift of technology, let alone a weapon, ends up turning Asians into machines that need to be shut down. By presenting the heptapods as humorous, Chiang avoids reiterating the colonial dominance of Asia and Asia's subsequent reduction by techno-Orientalism, and it provides aliens a range of subjectivity. Needless to say, the film's representation of Chinese General Shang, a military and technological threat to the peaceful (Western) world, does not match an Asian American otherhood lens.

With this Asian and Asian American perspective in mind, one can see a sort of erasure of Chiang's whimsical (non)colonial encounter in the film's depiction of the role of technology in war and peace. Buddhism scholar Sharon Suh argues that the erasure of historical trauma is common in films with Buddhist themes. For example, in her critical reading, *The Big Lebowski* (Coen and Coen 2005) presents a vision of a Zen Buddhist identity in a way that "obscures the fraught history of racialization of Asian and Asian American Buddhists as perpetual foreigners and embodiments of the Yellow Peril" (Suh 2015, p. 64). Likewise, by placing the film's central potential conflict on technology and war, with colonialism a chief concern therein, the film's creators express their lack of concern for possibly triggering the historical traumas of Asian Americans, Ted Chiang included.

Another way to see the contrast is to note how closely the film's narratives of alien colonialism and of military technology founding world peace match the vision of imperial Christianity, as articulated by Vine Deloria, Jr. In *God is Red*, Deloria argues that the imperial impulse of Western Christianity derives from its vision of Christian history. According to this vision, history is a straight line of progress, from the ancient world, to the ancient Israelites, to Jesus, and to the eventual establishment of the Kingdom of God (Deloria 2003, pp. 97–112). Technology must likewise follow this path, and the assumption is that European (and later American) technology is universally better than what came before.

This linear vision of history legitimated the domination and exploitation of other peoples, and it has led to remarkable willful ignorance of the science of others. For example, Deloria points to the work project of the Egyptian pyramids, which according to the vision of imperial Christianity must have been completed using slavery and with technology as described in the Hebrew Bible's story of the Exodus. Scholarship would be tortured by this presumption, leading to one scholarly determination that it took Egyptian slaves 342 years to complete the Great Pyramid of Cheops (pp. 108–10). Instead of this skewed train of thought, it should have been acknowledged that the ancient Egyptians probably had a form of technology in this regard more superior to the modern West. Note that techno-Orientalism also works for this purpose: it limits Asia's technology to imitations of the West and advancements of the technology to Asians' slavish industrialism and amoral applications of technology. Similarly, *Arrival* asserts that future humans develop the heptapods' weapon and technology, making it so that

the imperial arch of Western history remains intact instead of threatened by alien technology. The short story, by contrast, illustrates how a nonlinear view of history was brought by an Other who developed their technologies before humans. The historical arch of imperial Christianity is thus severed in its sense of linear time and its progressive march of Euro-American technology. Moreover, Chiang's severing of the historical arch destabilizes techno-Orientalism's depiction of Asian technology.

In this respect, an otherhood lens reveals how Chiang's Chinese American male secularity utilizes a *liyi* vision and familism to critique imperial Christianity's view of world history and its corollary reductions of Asia. It contests the basic presumption of linear time along with its presumption of scientific positivism. Moreover, the humor within the prose may heal some of the historical trauma of colonialism. During the colonial era for peoples worldwide, the consequence of having—by historical accident—a combination of less advanced military technology and less resistance to diseases was massive death and exploitation. Colonialism tore families apart, invalidated systems of morality and ethics, and instilled patterns of dehumanization within the psyche of the colonized. As John Reider notes, science fiction often depicts “environmental devastation, species extinction, enslavement, plague, and genocide following in the wake of invasion by an alien civilization with vastly superior technology—all of these are not merely nightmares morbidly fixed upon by science fiction writers and readers, but are rather the bare historical record of what happened to non-European people and lands after being ‘discovered’ by Europeans” (Reider 2008, p. 124). Thus, through humor and a vision of life's interconnectedness—what the heptapods provide humans—Chiang may be intervening in both colonial trauma and science fiction's colonial gaze and historical amnesia. Moreover, the simultaneous consciousness—related to a nonlinear orthography—may be directly countering imperial Christians' linear view of world history.

Opposition to the imperial worldviews and practices of Christians is not unique to Ted Chiang but is common among American racial minorities and secular Europeans and Americans. It is near-impossible to parse where Chiang's influences of Chinese American secularities end and Euro-American secularities begin, but that also may be beside the point. As philosophy scholar David H. Kim argues, modern Asian and Asian American philosophies are assemblages of philosophies of particular Asian nations, Orientalist constructions of Asian cultures, and reflections on struggles under Orientalist modernity (Kim 2007, p. 236). Kim argues that, as a consequence of this construction, studies of Asian American philosophy should be grounded in the historical experiences of Asian Americans and “many kinds of philosophically relevant reflection upon them” (p. 249). Beginning with experience counters Western philosophy's focus on structures of thought, and it reveals Asian philosophies phrased in the terminology of the dominator because they were created under Orientalist modernity. In like manner, my otherhood reading focuses on the experiences implicit in Chiang's narratives—oppression under colonialism and precious familial love—and how they might serve as foundations to view Chiang's oft-humorous perspective. Additionally, as Kim posits for Asian American philosophy as a whole, Chiang's dedication to morality outside of any particular religious framework and in contexts of sophisticated technology closely aligns with Chinese American male secularity, but I am not arguing that it is limited to Chinese tradition.

Kim further posits that Asian Americans' active reflection and hybridity works together with an expanded ethic of concern. Kim points to Asian Americans' associations of wars in Afghanistan and Iraq to the Vietnam War, the 9–11 attacks to the attack on Pearl Harbor, and “the suppression of and backlash against Arabs, South Asians, and Muslims in the United States have been likened to the internment of Japanese Americans after Pearl Harbor” (p. 251). He concludes: “In such a time as this, Asian American philosophy (and modern Asian philosophy) may have not simply an interest in but an ethical mandate to stand with threatened humanity” (p. 252). In such ways, Asian Americans drew from their own experiences and reflections on these experiences and developed an expansive ethic to stand with those analogously alienated. It is a slight jump from alienation to feeling alien, and from being othered to identifying as Others, in reality and in fiction. I suggest that one possible, insurgent reading of Chiang's science fiction is that it focuses on Others as an expression of Asian Americans' ethic of concern.

Chiang's stories shift the central concern from humans and their frailty to the conflicts of the universe and technology. The Others often seem alien, whether it be a cylindrical universe or seven-legged creature with a non-linear consciousness, yet also seem complex and vulnerable and thus worthy of concern.

In addition to developing an expansive ethic of care in response to a history of colonial marginalization, Asian Americans develop a deep and broad sense of empathy based on their social alienation in the United States. Their racial position has been theorized as translocal, where their identity is multiple yet they are not fully accepted as Asian in Asia, as American in the United States, and are often not embraced by Asian Americans of different ethnicities and citizenship status. In this way, the translocality of their racial position provides complex experiences of provisional belonging. As theologian Fumitaka Matsuoka exposit, Asian Americans' experience of provisional citizenship, or permanent "sojourner" status, brings them to an "amphibolous" faith that includes religious hybridity and a sensitivity to pathos (Matsuoka 2011). Thus, social experiences of oppression and alienation have brought Asian Americans to a deep empathy towards others who have likewise suffered and are considered alien. Chiang's detailed illustrations of heptapod consciousness and the main character's neuroplasticity to learn this culture embody the process of hybridity in an amphibolous faith and its sensitivity to the experiences of others. Moreover, the way heptapods treat humans with more humanity than human colonizers and the way humans develop empathy by engaging the aliens' way of life, depicts the ideals of Asian Americans who hope to become better through cultural hybridity, sensitivity to others' alienation, and the moral deployment of power.

There is also a religious dimension to Asian Americans' penchant for identifying with alternative intelligences, which is reflected in Chiang's work. Chiang's focus on moral and interpersonal relationships and the lack of explicit reference to race may emanate from his Chinese American male secularity. Similar secular religiosities are found in other Asian American ethnicities as a result of the modernization, hybridization, and secretive preservation of religions in Asia and the United States. For example, I have argued elsewhere that Japanese religions have been encoded into Japanese American silences and their ethic of cultivating harmony (Esaki 2016, 2019; Jeung et al. 2015). The focus on upright relationships in the Chinese American example and the importance of communal empathy and warmth in the Japanese American example, make the consideration of others' well-being a pillar of Asian American secularity. It is a modest extension to see this religious dimension affecting the attention to or attunement with the well-being of alternative intelligences. Chiang's science fiction that centers on the trials of Others reflects this Asian American religious ethic of secularity (with the caveat from Kim that Asian American philosophies are always hybrid, and that may be best represented by Chiang's SF work that engages religious questions in supernatural contexts).

Put together from an otherhood lens, Ted Chiang's empathic treatment of Others and Others' empathic treatment of humans embody the worldviews of Asian American secularity. Moreover, the persistence of a moral universe in the face of flawed humans, advanced technology, nonhuman Others, and supernatural physics embodies an Asian American secular faith. This faith is a deep calm in today's era of rapidly increasing technology, when Asian Americans are increasingly stretched between global presence and global erasure. The universe is dangerous, but it is filled with a comedic mess of amusement, fear, interconnectedness, narcissism, birth, and death, and will end up morally right in the end.

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