



15 MINUTES WITH JOHN LUC AKA YOUTUBE COMEDIAN MYCHONNY

■ Cindy He

25 Year old Vietnamese-Chinese Australian John Luc, aka YouTube star MyChonny, has finally graduated from our laptops to the big screen. Not only has he scored a role in a mainstream Australian film, he is the lead actor. Yes, a young Asian male as the central protagonist.

In the film *Sucker*, John Luc plays a young Lawrence Leung (the film's real life screenwriter) who is sent to live with his uncle after screwing up his year 12 exams and destroying his parents' dream of him becoming a doctor. During his stay, he winds up getting close to a shady con-artist played by *Harry Potter* actor Timothy Spall, and his beautiful but equally sly daughter, played by Australian actress Lily Sullivan.

For hundreds of thousands of loyal MyChonny fans who have watched John's online comedy sketches for years, this is huge news. This is not just a slapstick five minute spoof of his family's "Asianess", his white friends' lax parenting methods, or the melodramatic hosting of *Iron Chef* – this is a full-length feature film to be screened in cinemas. Things are getting serious.

As 2015 was coming to an end, I sat down with John to ask him about *Sucker*, YouTube, his parents' initial reaction to his dream of being a YouTube comedian, and how he felt about being one of only a few Asian faces in Australian cinema.

Q: As a huge fan of your YouTube videos, I went to see the Melbourne screening of *SUCKER* just a few days ago. It was really exciting getting to finally see your face on a big cinema screen, instead of a tiny 480p display on my phone. But more importantly, it's great seeing an Asian lead in a western-made film! In fact, I bumped into a friend at the screening, who later told me that a big reason why he came was precisely because he wanted to support this rare occurrence of an Asian lead character. How do you feel about this particular form of support, and is this something you get a lot of during your work?

A: Actually, the issue of diversity in film, especially Asians in film, is a lot more developed in America. When it comes to Wong Fu Productions and Asian American YouTubers, everyone's so close and they have this tight-knit YouTube community going on. Over there, they're always holding festivals and events such as "Asians in Media" and "Asians on Screen", but you don't really see this same passion or support in Melbourne or even Australia as a whole. People who came to watch my films were simply fans of me on YouTube. The audience wasn't really motivated by the whole "oh wow an Asian on screen" thing, but I know that's partly why you went to see the movie, which is awesome.

I just don't feel like you get as much of this support down here. Especially with the older crowd, who don't get YouTube and how you have to support the community to make us "rise" and get our names out there. It's a tad bit disappointing and can be frustrating because I want to be able to show other Asian Australians that you can pursue something non-traditional, something your parents never envisioned, and succeed in mainstream society.

Q: Well, as this is your first feature film, it's only natural that the majority of the audience who went to the screenings were your devout YouTube fans. How do you plan to expand your audience in the future?

A: Do you mean bringing an audience that aren't my fans?

Q: Yep.

A: I guess I've got to just work harder, which is why I keep posting up YouTube videos. Honestly, the fan-base is what gets you the audience and the views. That's why we sold out all the screenings, mainly because my fan-base and Lawrence's fan-base came out in full force. Our film didn't get a big marketing campaign at all – you wouldn't have seen an ad for *SUCKER* before a Hollywood film at the cinema, or any big posters anywhere. It was really dependent on word of mouth and the fans promoting it on the internet. Yeah, I'm not really sure. I guess to get a bigger, more mainstream audience for film... it just boils down to me getting more roles and doing more work.

Q: But even the issue of getting roles, especially for someone who's not white – whether you're Asian, Indian or Black – it's much more difficult and still really hard to break into the industry. And just as an example, the 2010 live action adaptation of *Avatar: The Last Airbender* cast all white-actors for Asian protagonists. So knowing how tough it is to come by an opportunity, are you going to keep moving forward with YouTube first to build up your profile, or focus on film auditions?

A: I actually feel like that's what I've already done. Doing YouTube videos got me scouted for *SUCKER*, which I ultimately got chosen to star in thanks to my producer, who's worked on *Kath and Kim* and *Looking for Alibrandi*, and is really passionate about reflecting the multiculturalism of Australia in film. Yeah, I guess it's hard. You watch TV shows like *Home and Away* and it's this cast of all-white Aussie surfers, but what can you do? That's why, in a way, I think I can inspire people... It's been years since I've seen any lead Asian character in an Australian film. So maybe that gives some hope to kids out there.

Q: It's certainly great seeing you in the role of the protagonist for *SUCKER*! Also because... I've been a long-time fan of your YouTube videos.

A: [Laughs] Thanks. That's awesome.

Q: Could you tell us the story of how you were approached for the film?

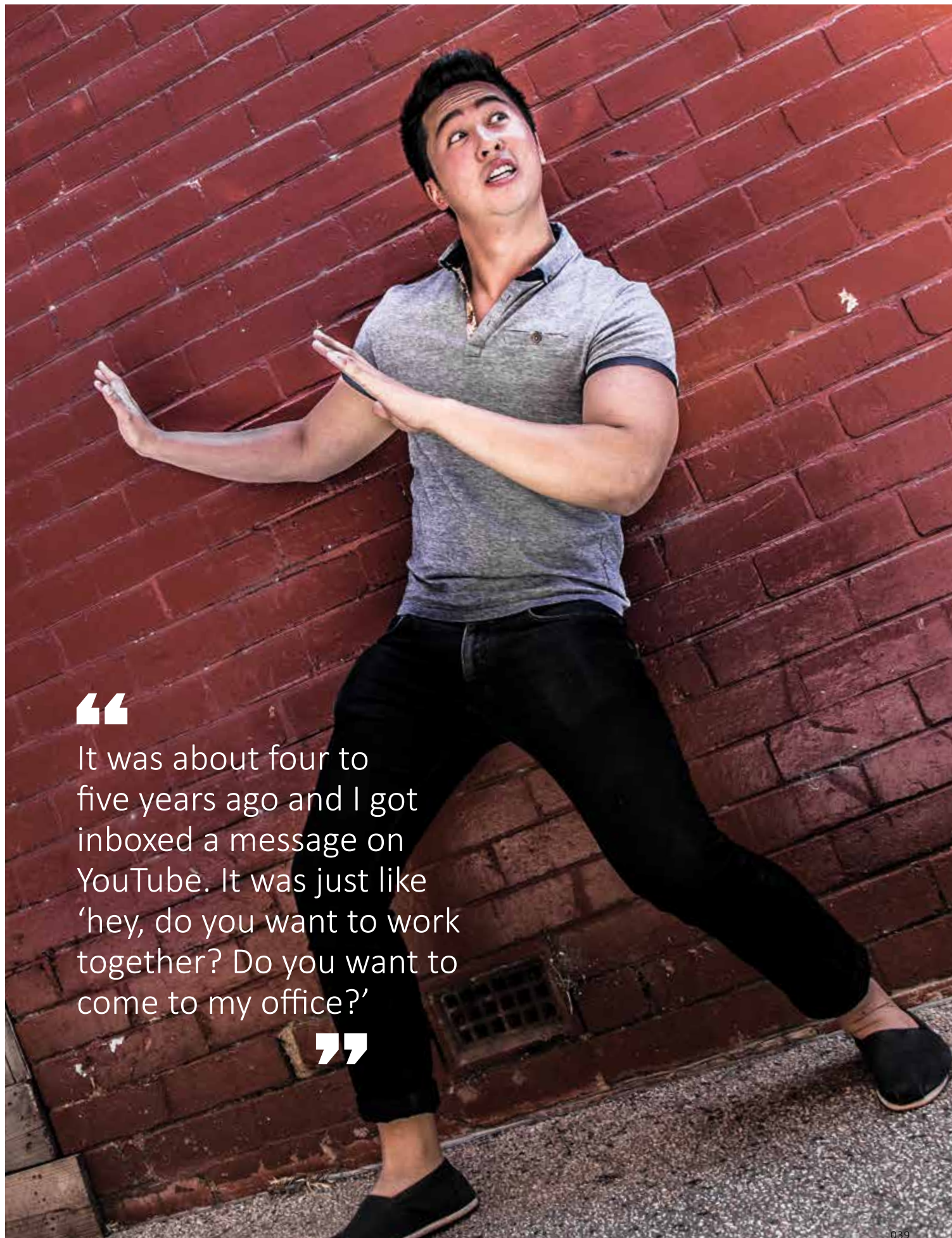
A: Yeah, it was about four to five years ago and I got inboxed a message on YouTube. It was just like 'hey, do you want to work together? Do you want to come to my office?'

Q: And who was this?

A: This was my producer – she was the one who wrote it and I was a bit sceptical at first because you get a lot of random emails on the internet. But then I was like, you know what, what can I lose? So I went down to their office and they told me that they wanted to work together on comedy stuff. I think I waited another year and that's when I got the script and a chance to audition in front of the director. I tried out for it and they were like "awesome", loved it, and told me I got the role. I was so excited that I was going to be in a movie! I told my parents, my family, and then for three years nothing happened [laughs]. But that was all because of financial issues. It's really hard to get Aussie films going because nobody really supports them. But anyway, we started shooting around March last year (2014), and I got to look through a few drafts... and yeah – that was it!

Q: Wow. So what sort of preparations did you make for the film? Did you take any formal acting training, for example?

A: Um, I did ask them. I was like "hey do I need to take acting classes? I have no experience in acting". But the producer and director believed in me after watching my audition and said I was capable of doing different moods – like, I don't even know what the terms are for them [laughs]. Yeah, they just said to do what you do and play a character I was comfortable with. At the end of the day, I played a character that reflected a bit of me and Lawrence's personality – basically us two just mushed together. It was a bit hard at the start because if you've never acted before, you don't know what you're doing so it was a bit stressful, but Timothy Spall, my co-star, gave me a lot of pointers. It was like a super-star acting class for free, which really helped. Once you get really comfortable and you're in the zone, you just fly through it and next thing you know, it's already over.



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Q: Hmm, so would you say it was a relatively smooth process? I mean, you do act in your YouTube videos, but obviously the humorous slapstick style is very different to what is required on film. Were there any challenges with this transition?

A: My facial expressions had to be toned down a lot and I was apparently opening my mouth too much. I had to work on not giving too much of a reaction to something because in my videos, you know, that's what I do – I over-exaggerate everything because it's funnier. But on set, everything was toned down. Oh yeah, and memorising lines. I didn't go to uni and jumped straight to YouTube after high school. I haven't had to memorise things for a long time.

Q: Speaking of high school, I remember you once saying that you actually started making and posting YouTube videos during year 12, basically the most important year of schooling. So I'm curious as to how your parents viewed your YouTube pursuits then compared to now, where you have clearly found a certain measure of success, and have even starred in a film.

A: Back then, I was making about \$150 a month from YouTube. I remember really clearly, telling my dad that I wanted to pursue a comedy career through YouTube. Straightaway, he said no.

Q: Wait, so this was in year 12?

A: Yeah, right after I got my ENTER score which didn't work out at all because I hadn't been studying and had just spent all my time making YouTube videos. My dad's reaction to this was "no, it's not happening, you have to go to uni" and "you can't live off \$150 a month – that's not an income." So I gave in a little bit. I went to uni and tried out some courses but... I just couldn't do it. I was wagging. I would find myself not doing anything. And when I told my parents about the movie, their reaction was just "so where is it then?" because nothing happened for a long time. But now, with it actually coming out, and with YouTube doing well, I've been able to buy my own place and move out. They know now that this is a "job" – back then, they didn't know about YouTube and the technology, and didn't understand a lot of things. Now they get it and they're happy.

Except for moving out. My mum hated that –

Q: Oh yeah, Asian parents.

A: She wanted me to stay until I was thirty or something [laughs].

Q: Hey, I actually just realised that the VCE scores for this year's year 12 students came out this morning. I just wanted to know, were you really disillusioned with studying and academia in general? Was there something more that pushed you towards YouTube?

A: I just stopped studying during VCE because I was so focused on being a comedian. My score ended up being so terrible that it didn't really give me a choice. It was either to go to uni and do a really terrible course OR pursue comedy, which I loved.

Q: That's good! You followed your dreams, which I think more Asian kids with unique or, well, non-traditional ambitions should be encouraged to do. Anyway, I know you do a lot of slapstick, parodic humour in your YouTube videos. An interesting contrast to you is Natalie Tran, who is another Asian Australian YouTube comedian.

A: Yep, I know her.

Q: She once gave a talk at Brown University where she said, and I quote, "I don't contribute to making fun of Asianess because I find there's enough of that in Western media, which I find comes from a lot of different places and I just don't want to contribute to

that." She also gave the specific example of mocking Asian accents, because she didn't want to make fun of how her mother sounded. This is exactly your style of humour though. So would say that there is any social or cultural harm in the way you make fun of Asian stereotypes and accents?

A: Ummm, I don't know. I just do accents because that is actually how my parents sound, and young Asians can relate to it. I guess Natalie and some other people see it in a different light, that there's a harmful undercurrent in this sort of humour. I mean, every now and then, I do get comments from people who tell me off for giving China a bad name or something. But the rest of the people, 99% of them, just absolutely love it! And I'm a comedian, this is what I do. I'm not saying Chinese people eat dogs, which is an extreme and I wouldn't go there [short thoughtful pause]; well, sometimes I do [laughs] –

Q: Yeah, I know the video you're thinking about [laughs].

A: Hey, it's all fun and games. Everyone takes it pretty well. And Natalie, if she doesn't do that sort of humour, that's fine! I've met her a few times and we've done shows together, and she's told me about how she loves my videos so yeah – it's good.

Q: So wrapping up, are there any new and exciting projects that you're working on? Anything you want to plug?

A: Yeah, I'm working on this new web series called "The China Boy Show".

Q: "The China Boy Show"?

A: Yeah, I know, it's as stereotypical as you can get [laughs]. But that's only because we didn't know what to call it. It was a temporary thing and now it's stayed and become the actual name of the show. The show's a mixture of sketch comedy, stand-up, and a few variety games we're bringing in from Korea and Japan – you know those funny variety shows they always do?

Q: I know the ones.

A: Yeah, I felt like I could bring it to Australia because no channel really does it here. And the sketches are just about everyday life. There's one about train station ticket inspectors who think they're cops and have all this power. So it's not really about China or Asia. It's just Chinese because I'm in it, I guess. The show's filming in late January (2016) and I'm focusing on the writing process right now, and YouTube. Oh and SUCKER comes out online on 13th January for all the international fans who are waiting for it.

We're really looking forward to the international release because we only had six screenings in Australia. We sold out the screening in Perth, Adelaide, and it was packed in Sydney. But without more screenings it's a bit disappointing. Maybe because it's an Australian film and there's an Asian lead, so it's hard to sell out and to get cinemas to play the film. Even Lawrence said that when he was selling the script, there were buyers from America who were interested, but they wanted the lead to be changed to a white person because it would be more sellable. And Lawrence backed out. The producers were in the same position – they were taking a risk in casting an Asian lead but they recognised the need for more representation.

Q: Wow. I am grateful that your producers had the guts to do so. And I support you all the way! Anyway, time's running short and we better wrap up so you can do your photo shoot.

A: Awesome. ■