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King-fai Tam
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Not Just a Laughing Matter

Interdisciplinary Approaches to Political Humor in China

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Interdisciplinary Approaches to Political Humor in China

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Altogether, fourteen papers were presented at the Conference by scholars in various disciplines from all over the world. Nine of these papers now appear in this book after major revision, with an additional introductory chapter written by the editors. We are grateful to Kristin Stapleton and Christopher Rea for their help in organizing the Conference. We are also thankful to the participants for sharing their thoughts which have in a concrete way helped shape the present book.

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Chapter 1
Introduction

King-fai Tam and Sharon R. Wesoky

Abstract This introduction explores the potential functions that political humor might serve, as a mode of resistance or a "tiny revolution" or way of telling the truth, but also ultimately often reinforcing the position and dominance of those already in power. It then looks at how the subsequent chapters in the book trace an alternative history of twentieth-century China through the "technology" of various forms of political humor.

As 2014 ended and 2015 began, humor was indeed political in the most geopolitical, "high politics," of senses. In November, the release was delayed of the American satirical film *The Interview*, about an assassination attempt on North Korean dictator Kim Jong-un, when its studio, Sony Pictures, was the victim of a hacking attack. The attack led to the release of private emails and other sensitive information about celebrities and was later linked to North Korea, which earlier had called the film an "act of terrorism" and promised "merciless retaliation" for it. Figures in Hollywood subsequently critiqued Sony as "caving" to "cowardice" by initially refusing to release the film; it was later released as well as viewed illegally online millions of times ("The Interview: A Guide to the Cyber Attack on Hollywood" 2016).

Then, on 7 January 2015, the offices of Parisian satirical magazine *Charlie Hebdo* were attacked by gunmen affiliated with the terrorist group Al-Qaeda in Yemen, killing 12 and injuring several others. The radicalized pair of brothers who committed the attack targeted *Charlie Hebdo,* a publication with a long history of irreverent secularism, because it published satirical images of the Prophet Mohammed; Al-Qaeda in Yemen subsequently claimed responsibility for the attack as "vengeance for the messenger of Allah" (*Reuters* 2015). Both *The Interview* and *Charlie Hebdo* were cases of Western cultural outlets using satire to mock monolithic ideological claims, either

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totalitarian or fundamentalist, which are closed to the possibility of discursive diversity or multiplicity. The response to this satire was punishment through transnational, violent terrorism and cyberwarfare.

As the North Korean case was unfolding, within China the Xi Jinping regime, as part of its generally increasing control of public discourse and civil society, was also seeking to exert control over the deployment of humor and satire as political weapons. As various chapters in this book examine, increased personal and social freedom in the reform era, combined with the creativity and range of expression offered by the internet, led to a wide emergence of politically-directed humor that had been suppressed during the earnestness of the Mao period (see Moser 2004; Abrahamsen 2011). This flowering of online satire, rooted in both traditional and longstanding Chinese linguistic idioms as well as novel modes of expression, led to the regime's State Administration for Press, Publication, Radio, Film, and Television, seeking to ban "wordplay," promoting only standard usage and noting that "Idioms are one of the great features of the Chinese language and contain profound cultural heritage and historical resources and great aesthetic, ideological and moral values" (Branigan 2014). While less overtly imbued with geopolitical significance and violence, this case also features efforts to suppress the use of humor in defining the proper and acceptable contours of public discourse, even in the internet era, seeking to contain the emergence of internet satire through hegemonic notions of how language can and should be used.

All of these cases demonstrate the impact humor can have on real-life politics. Those who come under its attack seek to bring it under control, resorting to measures not excluding the legislating process, intimidation and violent retaliation. Those who exploit it to their advantage, on the other hand, often use it as a tool to expose the mendacity and pomposity of the political entities with which they have to contend. These two camps—those who laugh and those who are laughed at—stand in opposition to each other. The history of modern China is filled with episodes representing the pull and push between them, on which the chapters of this volume will hopefully shed light.

We have thus far deliberately refrained from describing the contention between these two forces in a vertically hierarchical way. The examples of the American film *The Interview* and the Paris incident of *Charlie Hebdo* alluded above clearly demonstrate that the joker and the butt of the joke exist in a much more complex power relationship. All too often, however, political humor is taken to be the weapon of the underdog, which they wield when all other channels of political expression are deprived of them. In this vein, Benton (1988) is thus able to assert that "a society with the vote has no urgent need of political jokes, for it has more effective way of easing political tensions". Political jokes, he continues, are the symptom of the strain of life under dictatorship where "people's public faces no longer match their private feelings" and the discrepancies and confrontations between private feelings and the public life provide "the ingredients for an excellent humor." In a similar way, George Orwell (1970) argues that "every joke is a tiny revolution." Even though it may not instigate an actual uprising, it upsets the established order by making those in power look ridiculous.

Yet, it is by no means easy to gauge the effect of political humor, even if it succeeds in eliciting the kind of laughter or ire it intends. Even Benton maintains that political jokes are revolution only metaphorically and their victories are "moral" rather than "material" (1988), while Orwell (1970) concedes that jokes are merely "temporary rebellion." The fact remains that the shrewd authorities that are being laughed at can always ride out the storm by refusing to be baited. By choosing not to take offence at the humor directed at them, they can patiently wait for the joke to die down on its own accord. Time is on the side of the status quo, for ultimately, humor is the best way of dissipating rather than heightening tension. Political humor captures and capitalizes on the dissatisfaction of society, but by articulating feelings of seething hostilities, it end up reducing them. It is with good reason that Link and Zhou (2002) describe humor of this kind as a safety valve.

More importantly, it is questionable that political humor necessarily serves the disenfranchised. Bergson (1911) points out that laughter is indiscriminate in its attack: "It has no time to look where it hits," and like diseases, "strike[s] down some who are innocent and spare[s] some who are guilty," while it can be used to express subversive views, it comes just as likely to rally behind the dominant, the mainstream and the powerful. The ethnic and gender jokes prevalent in all cultures, for example, poke fun at the deviant, the disabled and the disprivileged, and show all too clearly that humor can be conservative in spirit (Wilson 1979). If only in an indirect way, it can be used to reinforce the existing ideology and mores. In this sense, humor is a double-edged sword that cuts both ways. It can be said to have no agenda (Benton 1988) and can be summoned to use by any political stance and persuasion. In fact, as some chapters of this volume shows, it can be initiated from above, albeit, to be sure, with unforeseen results in some cases.

Even when political humor is put to the aid of the downtrodden, frivolity, supposedly its very strength, may well become one of its weakness. As it flits across the surface of political absurdity, catching elements that lend themselves most easily to the making of laughter, it must sacrifice depth of analysis, unless the humor takes the form of sustained satire beyond an isolated work of cartoon or a brief scathing internet joke. As such, humor provides moments of hilarity but rarely offers systematic programs of actions. Worse, it can justifiably be argued that its lack of seriousness might end up trivializing and normalizing the worst kind of political excesses and improprieties, and taking away the very drive and reason for political action.

It would seem, therefore, a thorough understanding of political humor has to begin with the recognition that it can be but is not necessarily a tool of resistance. It can be but is not necessarily aimed at those in power. Each manifestation can be a tiny revolution, but there is no guarantee that the revolution will have any long-lasting effect. It can express but does not necessarily sway political opinions, or at least, not necessarily in the way it intends.

If political humor as described above sounds an ineffectual or unpredictable way of accomplishing concrete political goals, one must bear in the mind the seductiveness of humor. The Chinese saying that was once used to describe the cautionary functions of the folk songs in *Book of Songs*—"The singer will be free from censure, while the listener will have a chance to heed to the wisdom of the words of

the song"—may well apply to political humor. Freud (1985) speaks of the joke's characteristics of "drawing the laughers over to one's side," disarming or bribing the hearer by the pleasure it offers. To be sure, there is aggressiveness in political humor, but the fact that it is delivered under the veil of humor makes it possible for the hearer to temporarily let down his guard. Whether the humorist will escape censure or punishment depends in the end on the reaction of the listener, but it seems incontrovertible that political humor provides a relatively safe avenue for the humorist to get around external restrictions and touch on issues that are considered taboo.

Ultimately, the impact of political humor is cumulative. One does not expect a single political joke to pivot the public opinion, to win or lose an election or to raise or bring down a regime. Rather, humor works in subtle and persistent ways. Many (Link and Zhou 2002; Liu 2012; Luke 1985) have pointed out the corrosive effect of political humor, where by degrees, it exposes the pride and pretensions of its opponent and cuts it down to size. Liu (2012), in particular, alludes to the need to tell truth in addition to make jokes, for jokes on their own can do very little to change reality.

1.1 Political Humor in China's Turbulent Twentieth Century

The chapters in this volume trace the abundant ways that political humor points to limitations in the state's abilities to monopolize discourses regarding China's paths toward modernity in the twentieth and early twentieth-first centuries. During this period, the continually politicized nature of China's road from trauma to triumph, semi-colonialism to major world power status, also meant that even mundane, daily life has often taken on a political significance. These papers demonstrate various ways that humor indicates intersections and interactions of popular sentiments and official positions, charting a sort of alternative history of modern China, from late Qing uncertainties regarding political reform, to the warfare characterizing much of the post-imperial period, into the hopes of the early post-"liberation" 1950s. Then, the post-Cultural Revolution openings created new spaces and topics for humor on the mainland, as did the contradictions of reform and new technologies of communication, while in the same period Hong Kong's political transitions and uncertainties also provided fodder for politicized humor in popular culture as well as the political process itself.

The papers here thus chronicle a wide set of mediums for humor, including the relative freedom of political cartooning, the contextual and cultural adaptations of *xiangsheng* and standup comedy, the existence of subtle critical spaces in film, the milder use of humor in political campaigns, and the often barbed manifestations of satire in the anonymity of the internet. Humor itself is a *technology* of expression, one that can be employed in different settings for differing purposes. China's process of constructing a modern-nation state led to the emergence of new forms of identity and political community, and shared experiences as well as their disjunctures contribute to

hopes and disappointments in popular consciousness—as Richard Rorty writes, "common vocabularies and common hopes" both "bind societies together" and also provide the grounds for irony due to alienation from these hopes (Rorty 1989). In the circumstances of China's twentieth century, political humor often expresses the "incongruity" between expectations and realities; as John Morreall notes, "Schopenhauer explained the incongruity behind laughter as a mismatch between our concepts and the real things that are supposed to be instantiations of these concepts" (1987). The sheer seriousness of China's political challenges themselves have contributed to an earnest and "solemn public atmosphere" (Liu 2012), but also the creation of plentiful opportunities for "mismatches" between solemn claims and their implementation. These factors, combined with China's openings to the outside world and the development of new concepts of mass political participation and even democracy, led at certain moments to the flowering of imaginative truth-telling as well as moments of the state itself seeing to harness that imaginative potential for its own purposes. Thus, political humor sometimes becomes *politicized* humor, and its potential to challenge power relations instead becomes a mode of maintaining them.

1.1.1 Humor in China's Transitions Toward Socialism

I-Wei Wu, in "Illustrating Humor: Political Cartoons in Late Qing Constitutionalism," points to the surfacing of political humor in the political ruptures at the beginning of the twentieth century, a moment of political opening that allowed for nods both to the use of political humor in the Chinese tradition as well as its usage in debates regarding China's political future. Wu situates the cartoons he is examining in the long history of humor being used for political purposes in the Chinese tradition, but also in the novel form of newspaper journalism introduced from the West, and examines the ways that they satirized and thus offered commentary on the fervent debates regarding constitutionalism occurring in China in the last years of the dynastic rule. Tracing the genealogies of the emergence of pictorial humor in modern China, Wu offers a lexicographical account of Chinese terminologies for the sorts of images that might be placed generically under the term "political cartoon," and in this genealogy also presents the ways that these pictures offer both "historical record and comical relief through exposing the absurdity at the core of political issues." Analyzing cartoons published in *The National Herald* from 1907 to 1911, Wu then looks at how various pictorial depictions of the constitutionalist debates in this period made fun of officials as well as reform advocates as being ineffectual both due to personal failings and persistent Qing despotism, thus using incongruity to point out the innate contradictions of these reform efforts. It is perhaps not surprising that such humor emerged in discussions about constitutional government and its corresponding expanded concepts of citizenship, for the contemporary philospher and dissident Hu Ping writes that "By making fun of power, people claim their sense of equality" (Hu 2013). Wu also

analyzes the uproar over a 1911 cartoon that satirized the Consultative Council to show the political efficacy that cartoons in this period could have to substantively critique government officials.

Humor emerged more and more as a vehicle of political expression in the Republican era; in the 1930s, Lin Yutang wrote of its potential to check the "excesses of corrupt government and overweening local officials" (Chey 2011). These themes can be found in the cartoons of Zhang Leping, whose pieces on the Second Sino-Japanese War are discussed by Laura Pozzi in "Humor, War, and Politics in *San Mao Joins the Army*: A Comparison Between the Comic Strips (1946) and the Film (1992)." Like Wu, Pozzi situates her discussion of the Zhang Leping comics and the later PRC film adaptation in their respective socio-political contexts, with the 1946 moment of civil war actually offering some space for a mode of a "nuanced and multilayered version of the War of Resistance" for Zhang Leping in his depiction of San Mao. A mere young child, San Mao patriotically signs up to fight the Japanese but in his service exposes the vices not only of the Japanese enemy as had been the target of wartime propaganda cartoons intended to empower Chinese fighters, but also of the selfish laziness of the Chinese soldiers and the abuses of power of the Chinese officers. Ultimately for Zhang, the humorous way that he depicted these situations, as well as the absurdity inherent to the nature of San Mao as a child soldier, provided an entertaining way of depicting the devastation of China's many years of conflict as well as an implicit critique of the ongoing war between the Guomindang and the Chinese Communist Party still ravaging the country in 1946. Following a period of being banned during the Mao era, these comics were reissued in the 1980s and followed by a much-changed film made in 1992, with San Mao in this case an unwilling soldier for the GMD whose officers were wholly blamed for the suffering of the Chinese people. Thus, the politically nuanced satire of the 1946 cartoons was politicized in the 1990s as CCP propaganda, with the critical potentiality and alternative imaginings of satire being replaced by more overt ridicule of the GMD and Japanese enemies of China.

This didactic potential in humor was an important part of its emergence in the early years of the People's Republic of China's film culture, as the country developed its own film industry but in dialogue especially with its state socialist brethren, as discussed by Xiaoning Lu in "Chinese Film Satire and Its Foreign Connections in the People's Republic of China (1950–1957): Laughter Without Borders?" The Maoist dictum that art and literature should serve the workers made culture inherently political, and there remained tension between post-liberation desires for laughter and the Party's fears of the disruptive potentials of comedy, but there remained space for cultural negotiation in both film production and audience reception, especially in the early Mao years. The introduction of Soviet-bloc films into China in the early 1950s included comedies that satirized both the corruption of the old regimes as well as some of the humorous aspects of life under socialism. Lu examines the Soviet film *Did We Meet Somewhere Before*? and the Lü Ban Chinese remake *The Man Who Doesn't Bother About Trifles* to show how they used depictions of daily life to in the former case offer critical observations of Soviet society while in the latter to primarily satirize an intellectual, "the only

uncontroversial object of satire in the early PRC." These two films were thus rooted in transnational socialist "consciousness of shared temporality and unbounded connectedness with absent 'others' propelled by common ideology and culture," but diverged in their political settings, with the Soviet film emerging during the Khrushchev Thaw and the Chinese version constrained to be "edifying" and "de-politicized" by notions of what constituted "appropriate laughter" in the early PRC. The "imagined community" of the nation-state formed through shared consumption of popular culture, including humor (Gong and Yang 2010) can be both expanded beyond and constrained by national borders.

1.1.2 Joking in the PRC

The emergence of the reform era led to a greater potentiality for humor to be used as a form of individual expression and even empowerment (Davis 2013) even as new technology provided the potential for its wider dissemination as discussed by a number of observers of the *e'gao* ("spoofing") internet phenomenon (Gong and Xin 2010; Hu 2013; Liu 2012; Rea 2013). David Moser traces the adaptations of *xiangsheng* through the early twentieth century and especially in the PRC through the present day in "Keeping the *Ci* in *Fengci*: A Brief History of the Chinese Verbal art of *Xiangsheng*". Moser notes that pre-liberation *xiangsheng* had its origins as street theater that had to compete for audiences and often satirized newsworthy topics including "corrupt officials, social elites, country bumpkins, the handicapped, prostitutes, pompous scholars, and even political leaders" in a "subversive puncturing of pretense and hypocrisy". This "anti-authoritarian quality" made it a target for post-1949 Party interventions both due to and despite its character as folk art and potential educational usages. Leading *xiangsheng* stars were co-opted by the Chinese Communist Party to create propaganda satirizing and critiquing America, but such didactic *xiangsheng* lost their satirical bite and thus their humorous appeal. One *xiangsheng* piece of the period, "Buying Monkeys", appealed to audiences but also seemed to critique socialism and was criticized by the CCP, and much *xiangsheng* under Mao was thus politicized and sanitized. The end of the Mao era created an opening for "cathartic" laughter as Jiang Qing and the Gang of Four became potential but also brief-lived targets for *xiangsheng* satirical treatments. The social openings in the 1980s allowed for some *xiangsheng* artists to create works that operated on multiple levels of meaning, and so to embed implicit political critiques of, for instance, the moral emptiness of the era, into their performances. Meanwhile, the internet's emergence allowed for some new *xiangsheng* stars to emerge who were able to joke about corruption and social problems in vulgar ways and were critiqued by the Party more for the latter than the former aspects of their humor.

Before the spread of the internet in China, but after the 1989 Tiananmen Square crackdown, the 1990s combination of rampant commodification of culture combined with continued censorship of any arts featuring social or political content led

to likely *xiangsheng* jokes being co-opted in underground forms of joke-based humor, discussed by Howard Choy in his study, "Laughable Leaders: A Study of Political Jokes in Mainland China". The bawdiness of *xiangsheng* is also an important component of much of the post-Mao humor depicted by Choy, who claims that political joking "demystifies the solemnity of politics as the dominant discourse" and, like *xiangsheng* in its early forms, is ultimately "anti-authoritarian" in its public, opinion-based affect, while also questioning the actual political efficacy of such forms of expression. Like *xiangsheng*, the first post-Mao emergences of political humor were collections of jokes mocking the farcical qualities of the Cultural Revolution, though these only targeted allowable figures and rarely the Chairman himself. Later as reform took hold in China, a culture of private joking as well as occasional public performances by comics such as Zhou Libo emerged that targeted the incompetence and stupidity of certain high leaders, as well as sometimes featured sexual themes. Sometimes these more recent jokes were merely Chinese versions of satiric treatments of other foreign leaders, so Chinese humor continued as part also of the global, cynical imaginary that finds reason to satirize all sorts of utopian claims.

Choy ultimately finds that the laughter provoked by these sorts of jokes "functions as a lubricant, which helps prevent political conflicts and maintain social stability", though they can also "engender critical consciousness". This ambivalence is consistent with wider literatures on cynicism and political humor, with some finding cynicism to be an "a political rejection of politics" (Tao 2007) and others finding it containing the potential to be "probing and illuminating" (Bennett 2007). Le Ping and Sharon Wesoky assert that the former is more the case for gendered internet humor in "The Politics of Cynicism and Neoliberal Hegemony: Representations of Gender in Chinese Internet Humor". Using jokes about gender relations found on the Chinese internet, they examine these as examples of the "depoliticization" of Chinese society even as they also feature commentary on society and politics. Briefly tracing the emergence of humor on the Chinese internet among tensions between freedom and control and thus finding it to be containing "multivalent" potentialities, Wesoky and Le ultimately locate internet humor as part the neoliberal realm of "depoliticized politics" discussed by New Left critic Wang Hui, an expression of cynicism and political passivity. The gendered jokes, about marital relations and the proper role of women, serve an ironically didactic function in a China where moral meaning has become individualized and privatized, and yet they also have political implications in their implicit rejections of Maoist feminism's radical gender equality and their emphasis on women's returning to more traditional roles as well as needing to commodify themselves in a corrupt and market-oriented society. Many of the jokes, thus, are implicitly criticizing post-Mao moral degeneration and revealing socio-political anxieties even as they primarily manifest "privatized despair."

1.1.3 *The "Special Amusing Region": Humor in Hong Kong*

Turning to Hong Kong, the three final chapters examine humor in the "Special Administrative Region" both before and after the transition to Chinese rule in 1997. The case of Hong Kong is one where "historical contingency" has been a "comic muse" (Rea and Volland 2008), perhaps even more so than on the mainland. King-fai Tam, in "Political Jokes, Caricatures, and Satire in Wong Tze-wah's Standup Comedy", in the end agrees with Choy that political humor serves primarily as a "safety valve" rather than as a creator of viable and functioning political opposition. Focusing on Hong Kong prior to the end of British rule, Tam examines the ways that cultural openness combined with "stalled politics" to create a fertile ground for political satire, especially in the Cantonese standup scene. While originating as an import from the West, Cantonese-language standup comedy in Hong Kong emerged as a much more overtly political medium than its English version in the territory. Focusing on star Wong Tze-wah, whose shows are massive productions that create the atmosphere of a "communal event" due to Wong's use of audience participation, Tam looks at how his shows, especially those before 1997, were also "overtly and aggressively political". While the political force of his satire existed partially through his skill at caricatures of public figures that necessitate the existence of a "common vocabulary" to create the grounds for humor, Wong also employs Hong Kong's strong economic identity as well as its historical background to assess its 1990s "political malaise". This approach allows him to combine political, economic, and social satire in his long-form comedic shows, which add up to "fully realized satire".

The evolution of Hong Kong citizens' political consciousness is the subject in a different way of the examination of Foong Ha Yap, Ariel Shuk-ling Chan, and Brian Lap-ming Wai at the direct political deployment of humorous rhetoric in "Constructing Political Identities Through Characterization Metaphor, Humor, and Sarcasm: An Analysis of the 2012 Legislative Council Election Debates in Hong Kong." Using methods from linguistics, Yap, Chan, and Wai scrutinize the quite literal politicization of humor as it is used in electoral strategies by politicians seeking to gain the favor of voters. In the case of the increasing aggressiveness of Hong Kong's political discourse as some in the territory seek a more democratic political identity even as it is increasingly tied to Beijing, politicians especially employ metaphors, often humorous ones, as verbal indirectness strategies to create diverging political identities for themselves and their opponents. In their analysis of the 2012 Legco debates, the authors find that these metaphors featured references to opponent politicians' cushy relations with Beijing as well as the financial burdens faced by Hong Kong residents as ways of reaching the public and making one's own political party seem more appealing to voters.

Finally, Karen Fang provides a look at the sensibilities of a prominent creator of (sometimes) politically-oriented humor, in "'Absurdity of Life': An Interview with Michael Hui." Hui, a star of Hong Kong film especially in the 1970s and 1980s,

was also a screenwriter and director as well as a partial owner of his studio, Golden Harvest. His characterizations in his films were often humorous depictions of the "relentless capitalism" characterizing Hong Kong, though, as Tam discusses the import of standup comedy into Hong Kong from the West, Michael Hui's films were an important Hong Kong cultural *export*, thus showing the "universal quality of his humor and social satire". He notes in the interview that he seeks to depict the "absurdity of life" and that all the inspirations for his stories come from life. He was partially interested in owning his production studio, starting in the 1970s, to give him more creative freedom, but both this freedom and the prosperity of the Hong Kong film industry declined after the territory returned to Chinese control in 1997, an indication of the resolutely political contexts of filmic humor, with films needing to "not offend the Chinese government". Hui notes that this change means that "Things are not as funny anymore…There are things you can't say anymore". From the perspective of a prominent creator of political humor, we can see the ways that even in the more open environment of Hong Kong, humor exists primarily, in the terms of De Certeau, as a "tactic…using existing shortcuts within the system" rather than as any sort of strategy to overthrow the system itself (Tan 2011).

1.2 Conclusion

This "tactical" quality of political humor could lead to a certain amount of cynicism regarding humor itself in terms of its transformative potential, as we have already discussed. And yet we hope readers can also learn from the studies presented here that political humor reveals a great deal about the political sensibilities of what Liu Xiaobo terms the "silent majority" (2012, 186), and how these sensibilities have both changed over time but also maintain certain core commonalities. For instance, it is evident that the prevalence of political cynicism in contemporary China and elsewhere is not a new phenomenon but has long existed in various forms, with citizens using humor to expose gaps between political ideals and practical realities since even before the 1911 Revolution. Indeed, the chapters here show the various ways that Chinese authorities have sought to channel political expression, the creative ways that citizens subsequently generate new means of communicating their views, and how humor is an undeniably vital part of this creativity.

Such constant inventiveness shows the persistent interest in exposing the failings of one's political opponents as well as their political stance and agenda, and so political humor offers a valuable window onto political sentiments. The fact that many people find a particular cartoon or joke or performance funny is evidence of shared experiences and attitudes. What appears to be highly fragmented and individualized out of context, therefore, might hide a commonality when viewed in context. The openings that creators of political humor find in multiple levels of meaning or globalized modes of expression demonstrate the adaptability of humor to repressive circumstances, as well as its durability over time as a form of truth-telling. Even when one seek new ways to control political humor, whether

through violent repression or moralistic warnings regarding proper uses of speech, this durability means that political humor will remain an essential way of understanding political sensibilities in a China that continues to be contradictory and ever-changing.

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Part I
Humor in China's Transitions Toward Socialism

Chapter 2
Illustrating Humor: Political Cartoons on Late Qing Constitutionalism

I-Wei Wu

Abstract This chapter analyzes political cartoons relating to late Qing constitutionalism, a pivotal political campaign during the last decade of the empire. Through the reform movement, the Qing court, along with the populace, was attempting to strengthen the nation and "catch up" with foreign powers. The chapter will first look at how late Qing newspapers related political cartoons to the Chinese tradition of political humor and how Chinese cartoonists displayed their wit and humor in their satiric depiction of the constitutional movement, including the constitutional mission and the parliamentary petition campaign. Finally, the government's reaction toward the cartoons will be examined through the analysis of newspaper reports of the day. This chapter argues that late-Qing political cartoons functioned as a crucial medium for representing Chinese political humor in visual form. These images, by drawing on the absurdity inherent in certain political issues, wield satire as a weapon against the government.

2.1 Introduction

China has a long tradition of political humor. Humor has been used as a rhetorical device to comment on political affairs since as early as the Western Zhou Period 西周 (1046–771 B.C.). The *Classics of Poetry* (Shijing 詩經) collects humorous examples of folklore and ballads which point to the tyranny of the government and the suffering of the people. *The Records of the Grand Historian* (Shiji 史記) also describes many court jesters who used witty language and comic performance as an oblique way to admonish the emperor.[1] Chinese literature has inherited this

[1]Besides *The Records of the Grand Historian,* a number of history books and pre-Qing scholars' monographs, too, contain comical and satirical writings with political themes. This shows that Chinese political humor was not limited to certain fields and books but was a common practice in the early time.

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tradition insomuch as comic elements can often be found in texts with political themes (Tang 1992; Qi and Chen 1995).

Despite the abundance of written examples, pictorial representations are relatively rare. It has been argued that it was not until the late Qing that comical scenarios were largely rendered in a pictorial form in China. The turn of the twentieth century was an era of intense political activities in China which coincided with the introduction of Western-style newspapers that enjoyed instant and widespread popularity. The political turbulence provided cartoonists with abundant source materials and newspapers offered them a platform. They published a great number of cartoons reflecting and commenting upon contemporary social and political affairs.

This rapid boom in cartoons at the turn of the century has drawn the attention of many scholars. This period is defined in most studies as the embryonic phase of Chinese cartoons and most scholarship focuses on the association between cartoons and images of funny figures in real life in pre-modern and ancient China, explores the mechanisms by which cartoons were published and examines how cartoons lampooned the political events and social problems of the era (Bi and Huang 1986; Gan 2008; Li 1978; Liu 2004; Han 2012; Chen 2015). Previous research outlines the development of cartoons, emphasizing their political significance in a general sense. Missing from this is a detailed investigation into the cartoons produced in response to a specific political issue. These images, published more or less on a daily basis, not only have value as a source of information on current affairs, but, more importantly, they serve as potential political weapons against the government. A thorough analysis is thus required, in order to grasp the nuances of how humor is deployed in images to make political points.

Accordingly, this chapter probes the fad of political cartoons by exploring images that comment on late Qing's constitutionalism, a crucial political issue in the last decade of the Qing dynasty. By means of the reform movement, the Qing court along with the populace was at the time attempting to strengthen the nation and "catch up" with foreign powers. Instead of cursorily applying the current definition of either comics or caricatures, my analysis will, first, try to define the cartoons within the context in which they were produced by scrutinizing the diverse range of names by which they were referred to. It will then look into how constitutionalism is depicted in different incarnations, including the constitutional mission and the parliamentary petition campaign, amongst others. Finally, it will assess the government's reaction toward the cartoons by analyzing newspaper reports in the wake of the publication of "Picture of Dogs' Gathering" in *Public Opinion Daily* in Beijing.

I mainly examine *The National Herald* (Shenzhou ribao 神州日報, Shanghai, 1907–1927) and its supplementary illustrated newspapers. *The National Herald* was a crucial Chinese newspaper at the time and, most importantly, carried a number of political cartoons created by famous cartoonists such as Ma Xingchi 馬星馳 (1873–1934) and Shen Bochen 沈泊塵 (1889–1920) that were of good quality (Han 2012; Chen 2015). I also refer to the following visual sources: *Mirror of the People Pictorial* (*Renjing huabao* 人鏡畫報, Tianjin 1907) and cartoons

reprints that appear in two compendia: *Qingmo minchu baokan tuhua jicheng* 清末民初報刊圖畫集成 (Guojiatushuguanfenguan 2003b) and *Qingmo minchu baokan tuhua jicheng xubian* 清末民初報刊圖畫集成續編 (Guojiatushuguanfenguan 2003a). Through scrutinizing these images, I argue that the cartoons produced in the newspapers at the turn of the twentieth century fit into the tradition of Chinese political humor. The images, by drawing the absurdity inherent in certain political issues, levy a satirical power against the government in visual form.

2.2 The Humor Tradition Visualized

Recent research tends to dub Chinese cartoons at the turn of the twentieth century as either "manhua" or "fengcihua".[2] The term "manhua" 漫畫 was originally used to indicate illustrations in the newspapers in the late Qing; *Alarm Bell Daily* (Jingzhong ribao 警鐘日報) published three cartoons with the title "A Candid Depiction of Current Affairs" (shishimanhua 時事漫畫) in 1904. However, the term seldom appeared in newspapers (Gan 2008). It was not until Feng Zikai (豐子愷) published his drawings under the title "manhua" in 1925 that manhua became widely accepted as a genre in China (Gan 2008). Nowadays, "manhua" often denotes Japanese manga and comic strips. The term "fengcihua" 諷刺畫 was originally used to describe satirical illustrations in the late Qing but was later translated into "caricature" in the Republican era (Gan 2008).[3]

It might be anachronistic and misleading, however, to suggest that these were the only two terms for cartoons in the Chinese context. As a matter of fact, cartoons went under various names at the time (Bi and Huang 1986; Han 2012; Liu 2004); "manhua" and "fengcihua" were just two of them. Besides, to date, "manhua" and "fengcihua" have evolved into two different genres of visual art. When looking at cartoons dating from the era in question, scholars inevitably leave out those which do not conform to their genre definitions, or, conversely, seek out images dating back to archaic times without considering the context of the emergence of the cartoons.

For example, the authors of the three volumes of *A History of Cartoon in China* argue that cartoons have long been present in China by presenting various images which correlate with the contemporary definition of "manhua". Yet, as Rea (2013) points out, Bi and Huang (1986) ignore how news illustrations influenced cartoons because the images were not "cartoon-like" enough. In addition, the authors' criteria for selecting cartoons are not clear. Li (1978) discusses a wide range of mediums, including statues, murals and literati paintings in his definition and claims

[2]I would like to thank Christopher Rea for his valuable advice on both the content and language in the section.

[3]In 1935, Lu Xun 魯迅 (1881–1936) translated "manhua" into a German word Karikatur in his essay "On 'manhua' 漫談漫畫", which is caricature in English.

that Chinese cartoons can be traced back to the legendary period of Fuxi 伏羲 (ca. before 2697 B.C.), a claim that Gan (2008) challenges.

In an attempt to place the cartoons of the late Qing in context, this chapter proposes a detailed examination of the names which have been variously used to refer to cartoons.[4] The multiplicity of names points to the range of functions and characteristics of cartoons such as contents and pictorial styles. Firstly, these names identify both the images and the accompanying captions and commentaries as satirical vehicles. "Comical words" (*huajizi* 滑稽字) and "satirical words" (*fengzi* 諷字) take characters as iconography, satirizing the subject of the cartoon by altering and distorting characters. Secondly, names like "contemporary picture" (*shihua* 時畫) and "sentimental picture" (*ganshihua* 感時畫) denote both the subject matter and are intended to provoke an emotional reaction. "Historical pictures" (*lishihua* 歷史畫) and "pictures of history" (*hua shi* 畫史) reveal a conscious attempt to use history to allude to a certain position on current affairs. Thirdly, the names indicate the importance of oblique forms of expression. "Allegorical pictures" (*yuyi hua* 寓意畫), "satirical pictures" (*fengci hua* 諷刺畫 or fenghua 諷畫), and "allegorical and satirical picture" (*fengyuhua* 諷喻畫) were especially popular (Shangwuyinshuguan 1979–1983). "Imaginative pictures" (*xiangxianghua* 想像畫) advertised their fictionality while also preempting criticism, since the target of satire was ostensibly purely imaginary. Fourthly, names like "comical picture" (*huaji hua* 滑稽畫), and "laughable picture" (*xiaohua* 笑畫) indicate that the images are intended to be funny and risible (Shangwuyinshuguan 1979–1983). Fifthly, other names indicate that images were intended as commentary on contemporary events (*shiping* 時評), and that the illustrations—sometimes dubbed "picture criticism" (*huaping* 畫評)—were means to this end. Finally, captions like "cautionary picture" (*jinghua* 警畫) and "world-warning picture" (*jingshihua* 警世畫) indicate an intention to root out injustices and warn of present and coming dangers (Shangwuyinshuguan 1979–1983).

Among these names, "comical picture" (*huaji hua*) is used most commonly, which suggests the cartoons' chief objective. Advertisements and the publication manifestoes that typically appeared in the first issue of a new publication also reinforced the humorous aim of the publication. For instance, in April 1912, *People's Rights Illustrated* (*Minquan huabao* 民權畫報) announced that it would distinguish clearly between news illustrations and "comical pictures" and, therefore, added a pictorial column called "comical" (huaji).[5] Moreover, in the first issue of *Theater Illustrated* (*Tuhua jubao* 圖畫劇報, est. 1912), issued in Shanghai in the same year, the editors employed the term of "the comical picture". They announced that they would distinguish "comical pictures" from new illustrations and

[4]In order to avoid causing confusion by using the term "comic" and "caricature", the term "satirical picture" has been employed to refer to the name given to a work by the illustrators who produced it; whereas the term "cartoon" is used in referring to the genre of drawing.

[5]"Shubao gailiang guangkao 書報改良廣告" (The announcement for changing the page order), *People's Rights Illustrated,* 19 April, 1912.

subdivided "comical pictures" into three categories by subject matter: national affairs (*guoshi* 國事), society (*shuhui* 社會), and the family (*jiating* 家庭).[6]

Theater Illustrated positioned national affairs first, implying that politics is the principal concern of "comical pictures". The association of the comical with the political betrays the tradition of Chinese political humor and is explained more concisely in *The True Record* (Zhenxiang huabao 真相畫報). Its first issue in 1912 introduce seven kinds of images, including "comical pictures" (*huajihua*). The text explains that criticism of imperial policy has long been held in high esteem by Chinese society, citing the "Biographies of Court Jesters" (Guji liezhuan 滑稽列傳) in the *Records of the Grand Historian* (Shiji 史記), which combines humor and moral admonitions of policy. Comical pictures, it argues, are intended to offer the same to readers. The very term "huaji" (archaic: "guji") was drawn from the "Biographies of Court Jesters", suggesting the images are intended to amuse the reader.[7]

In his *The age of irreverence: a new history of laughter in China*, Rea (2015) describes a significant phenomenon where a variety of humorous cultural products, such as funny images, comical essays, comedies, etc., have emerged from the late Qing to the Republican Era because of the rapid boom in newspapers and commercial need. Humor is able to increase a newspaper's reach and this leads to the appearance of cartoons. These "comical pictures" inherit the tradition of Chinese political humor and are, no doubt, immediately deployed for political purposes. In the following sections, I will focus on the cartoons pertaining to late Qing constitutionalism, pointing to the general function of cartoons as both historical record and comical relief through exposing the absurdity at the core of political issues.

2.3 Constitutionalism: A National Farce

There has been considerable scholarship concerning late Qing constitutionalism. Much of it asserts that late Qing introduction of constitutionalism represents a breakthrough in Chinese history in that it is the first time that the government attempted to alter comprehensively the system of the government. The implementation of constitutionalism would go on to shake the foundation of Chinese despotism and reconfigure the power relationship between the populace and the government. However, it has also been argued that late Qing constitutionalism was simply a camouflage which allowed the court to maintain their despotism (Zarrow 2006; Meienberger 1980; Bian 2003; Chang 1971; Hou 2009; Jing 1987; Zhai 2011). These opposing views of the motives behind the introduction of

[6]"Benbao tongbao 1 本報通告1" (Announcement 1 by our periodical), *Theater Illustrated,* 9, November, 1912.

[7]"Benbao tuhua zhi tese 本報圖畫之特色" (distinguishing features of images in this periodical), *The Truth Record*, 1 (1912): n. p.

constitutionalism suggest the complexity of the huge political change on a national scale (Chang 1986; Zarrow 2006; Zhai 2011). Scholarship on the introduction of constitutionalism in the late Qing era has thus far explored a great deal of textual materials but very few pictorial materials, such as cartoons. The rise in the status of cartoons as historical resources suggests that the importance of turn-of-the-century cartoons should not be overlooked (Chen and Xia 2015; Scully and Quartly 2009).[8] The arguments positing that Chinese newspapers plays a crucial role in promoting constitutionalism in the social sphere points to the need for the study of the cartoons appearing in these newspapers (Li 2013).[9] As works of "contemporary picture" (*shihua* 時畫), the images aim to record the current affairs of the day, while the "commentary on contemporary events" (*shiping* 時評) provides a lens through which the reader can view certain political issues and events, with the addition of a humorous twist, highlighting the grotesqueness and the absurdity inherent in them. This chapter will investigate how cartoons delineate constitutionalism by exploring three representative political issues: the constitutional mission, the parliamentary petition campaign and the 9-year program to establish a parliament.

2.3.1 The Constitutional Mission: An Awkward China

After China's "national humiliations" that were the expedition of the Eight Nation Alliance in 1900 and the Boxer Protocol in 1901, the Qing court finally recognized its tenuous status and decided to initiate a series of reforms. The age of the New Policies (新政) seemingly pulled the middle Kingdom back from its disastrous defeat and brought vitality to it once again. Constitutionalism, among all of the new policies, was highly anticipated. Numerous intellectuals and officials in favor of the

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[8]Chinese and Western scholars have noted the significance of images as historical sources. Chinese scholar Chen Pingyuan, in his study on *Dianshizhai huabao*, proposed reading history through images. He points out that reading texts accompanying images is a Chinese academic tradition which has been long ignored. He regards the illustrations in Chinese pictorials as historical sources, as implied in the term "Painting History" (畫史) given to describe the illustrations by Zheng Zhenduo 鄭振鐸, an important scholar of the early twentieth century. Likewise, Scully and Quartly state that the cartoon has played an important role in the representation of history in the West for centuries. After the publication and circulation of broadsheet newspapers, they became more significant and influenced the whole world. Although modern historians are beginning to acknowledge the importance of cartoons, Scully and Quartly have pointed to continuing shortcomings. The cartoon is often treated as "a kind of decoration", to break up the text and give an impression of historicity, rather than to add to the historian's argument". The most "pernicious usage" is to casually deploy a single cartoon as "supporting evidence, without [engaging in a] reading of the artistic and cultural conventions shaping its content". In contrast to written documents, "cartoons and other visual source[s] still escape critical analysis".

[9]In *Baokan chuanmei yu qingmo lixian sichao*, Li thoroughly examines how newspapers helped develop and spread constitutionalist ideas in late Qing China. Although she explores the role of cartoons played in late Qing's constitutionalism, her discussion of cartoons is still very short in length when compared to her discussion of textual sources.

political reform claimed that constitutionalism was a potent political trend in the twentieth century and that the war between nations was namely the war of different polities (Meienberger 1980; Hou 2009; Bian 2003). In 1905, the Russo-Japanese War seemed to confirm such a conviction. The defeat of the great power, Russia, by the small country, Japan, was attributed to the latter's successful launch of constitutionalism (Zhai 2011). The result was also taken as solid evidence that only constitutionalism would enable the East to surpass the West (Hou 2009; Zhai 2011).

The constitutional mission was the first key occurrence in this regard. In 1905, the court consented to send five senior officials overseas to investigate constitutionalism in several countries, including Japan, Germany, the United Kingdom, and America. On the eve of the commission, however, opponents to constitutionalism set off a bomb at the train station, wounding some officials and delaying the mission by a year. After completing the mission, the officials settled on Japan as the best paradigm for China and proclaimed constitutionalism as a fundamental national policy (Meienberger 1980; Zhai 2011).

A political change of such a scale inevitably aroused heated debates among senior officials, undermining the Qing court's resolution and ability to successfully implement the introduction of constitutionalism. In 1907, one year after the mission had been completed, constitutional government still seemed a distant goal. A sense of this frustration was reflected in several cartoons mocking the mission. Figure 2.1 shows a man wearing a Western-style suit showing slides of European scenery to a Qing official: "Look inside, there are so many foreign governmental offices and associations (衙門公所 yamen gongsuo)". The official, totally fixated with the images being presented to him, appears comically as a naif. The caption ridicules the constitutional mission, suggesting that it is no better than a slideshow by stating "Alas, none could enjoy such vivid scenery like this even traveling to Europe with a budget of one hundred and fifty thousand taels of silver (銀子)". Another cartoon in *Illustrated of the Year of Wushe* 戊申全年畫報 (Wushe quannian huabao) lampoons a constitutional commissioner (考察憲政大臣) by depicting him as a fisherman who nets the reflection of the moon, here symbolizing the foreign constitutions.[10] The cartoonist undertakes a depiction of the Chinese idiom: "to catch a moon in the water" (水中撈月), which, by extension, means to make impractical efforts to achieve a goal, to suggest the ineffectual nature of the constitutional mission.

The cartoon also points to the ideological divide between the constitutional commissioners and the constitutionalists. Zhai (2011) states that most of the commissioners devoted themselves to political reform and fought against the conservatives at court. They lobbied the court to reduce the 12 years of constitutional preparation to 9 years based on the German model and later reduced this further still, down to just 5 years. Another cartoon, titled "the effectiveness of the constitutional mission" (考察憲政之效果) (Fig. 2.2), points to the idea that contemporary constitutionalists were indignant at rather than grateful for the launch of

[10]*Shishi Baoguan Wushe Quannian huabao*, 1908. (no exact date given).

Fig. 2.1 'Investigation into constitutionalism.' *The National Herald*, October 7, 1908

this grand venture. After the promulgation of the 9-year program of constitution preparation, the constitutionalists were disappointed because they longed for immediate political change. This disappointment led them to criticize the commissioners for what they saw as procrastination in their mission. The cartoon depicts a parliamentary petitioner shooting an arrow at a target labeled "the aim of constitutionalism" (憲政的目的)[11] "from the bottom to the top", but his attempt is blocked by a constitutional commissioner holding a shield, suggesting that the goal of establishing a constitution would never be reached.

The constitutional mission exhibited China's eagerness to follow international political trends, but, at the same time, exposed the awkwardness of its geopolitical status in the world. In the cartoon titled "The state of constitutionalism around the world" (世界憲政之現況) (Fig. 2.3), the cartoonist draws a humorous analogy between raising silkworms and implementing constitutionalism in order to depict China as lagging far behind other nations.[12] On a heap of dead wood are several

[11]A similar cartoon can be found in *Shenbao* in 1908. A man shoots an arrow at the target inscribed parliament but an officer stops it by clipping the arrow with a pair of pliers.

[12]'The phenomenon of the constitutionalism in the world', *The National Herald*, September 28, 1908.

Fig. 2.2 'The effect of investigating constitutionalism.' *The National Herald*, July 3, 1908

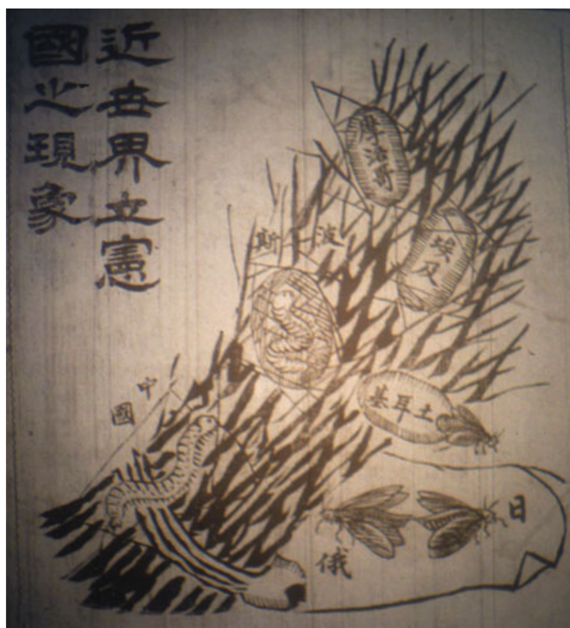

Fig. 2.3 'The state of constitutionalism around the world.' *The National Herald*, September 28, 1908

silkworms, silkworm cocoons and silkworm moths, which represent the status quo of the different nations in terms of their constitutional development. Persia is a silkworm making a cocoon, while Morocco and Egypt have advanced into their cocoon state. Turkey is shown as a silkworm moth wriggling out of its cocoon, while Japan and Russia-two adult silkworm moths-copulate with each other, which suggests the cartoonist is pointing to what he sees as the conspiracy between these two nations to encroach upon the territory in northeast China. Beside all these relatively progressive nations, China is portrayed as still a tiny wiggling silkworm, suggesting the long way still to go in its aim of catching up with the progress made by other nations.

2.3.2 Parliamentary Petition: The Government in Grotesque

The parliamentary petition campaign was also a crucial event in the pursuit of constitutionalism. From 1907 to 1911, constitutionalists urged the court to establish a parliament as soon as possible, which resulted in two petition campaigns. The first started in 1907. Its advocate, Yang Du 楊度 (1875–1931), a pivotal constitutionalist, initiated a parliament petition campaign by publishing essays in *Chinese New Times* (Zhongguo xinbao 中國新報). He was convinced that only a parliament could hasten the progress of constitutionalism, allowing people to participate in politics, to supervise the government, and to expel corrupt officials. The nationwide newspapers and constitutional associations supported his appeal, boosting the number of memorials to the court (Hou 2009).

In 1908, the petition eventually received a response. The court decreed a 9-year program for constitutional preparation mentioned above, which led immediately to considerable disputes (Hou 2009). Most of the constitutionalists deemed the 9 years to be too long, accepting it only reluctantly and turning their energy to establishing provincial consultative assemblies (諮議局). Yet the subsequent arguments with the court disappointed them once again; they realized that the only way to save the nation was to convene parliament. As a consequence of political tumult in 1909, there was a second wave of larger-scale petitions, with four such petitions in 1910 alone. The people from diverse social strata were involved in the campaign and demanded the immediate convocation of parliament (Hou 2009).

An abundance of cartoons appeared from 1907 to 1910 suggests the zealotry of the petitioners.[13] One cartoon renders the Chinese idiom “community of spirit and purpose will accomplish wonders” (眾志成城) visually to represent the popular

[13]‘Parliament,’ *Vernacular Picture Daily* 白話圖畫日報 (Baihua tuhua ribao), February 27, 1910; ‘Representatives of petitions’ *Vernacular Picture Daily*, February 20, 1910. ‘Parliament,’ *the National Herald,* July 1, 1910; ‘Bombastic politicians in power while good men are out.’, *the National Herald*, October 25, 1910; ‘Fruits fall off when ripe,’ *the National Herald* 瓜熟蒂落, October 29, 1910, just to name but a few.

Fig. 2.4 'China's present status.' *The National Herald*, December 28, 1909

effort in 1910.[14] A group of people are pictured presenting the government with petitions, demonstrating their solidarity with constitutionalism. Similarly, the cartoon "China's present status" (中國的現狀) (Fig. 2.4) depicts a Westerner kicking a globe off a cliff. The future of China, the only country marked on the globe, is at stake, the cartoon suggests. To break the country's fall, a group of Chinese intellectuals hold out a huge tray which reads: "Please convene parliament as soon as possible" (請速開國會)!

As early as 1907, when the petition movement was just beginning, cartoons were already hinting at the difficulty of establishing a parliament. The representative institute would make the court redundant. One cartoon depicts the provincial consultative assemblies, part of the preparatory process of establishing a parliament, as a large tumor hanging on the face of the "aged and great Emperor" (老大帝國) (Fig. 2.5) which is often used as a symbol for China. He is trapped within a dark tree hollow signifying the sphere of foreign influence. The compelling peril, nonetheless, does not disturb him at all as suggested by his sound sleep. The provincial consultative assemblies, which were designed to wake up Old Man China, serve only as an ungainly growth on his body.

[14]'Community of spirit and purpose will accomplish wonders,' *The National Herald*, June 18, 1910.

Fig. 2.5 'Hopes of provincial consultative assemblies.' *The National Herald*, November 9, 1907

The cartoons suggest that the petitions were unlikely to succeed. One cartoon, for instance, depicts a man "drawing water with a wicker basket" (竹籃子打水), which is also a Chinese idiom, suggesting wasted effort.[15] The title "Hope for the petition" directly contradicts the image, which points to the huge gap between reality and the people's expectations for parliament.

These cartoonists generally present exaggerated caricatures of officials to emphasize the court's determined ignorance of the popular will. In one cartoon, for example, an official is depicted as a giant statue of Bodhisattva whom the petitioners worship.[16] The statue is made of mud, however, which, according to a Chinese proverb, implies that she is too weak to protect herself, let alone accomplish constitutionalism. In another example, the government is portrayed as the ruthless Yama Raja, the Chinese King of Hell (Fig. 2.6). He sends two little demon servants to meet a petitioner. Their names, "refusal" and "soliciting bribes", are in opposition to the slogan on the king's fan, "striving for reform" (力求改革)

[15]'A hope of the petition.' *The National Herald*, July 4, 1910.

[16]'The muddy Bodhisattva.' *The National Herald*, May 5, 1908.

Fig. 2.6 'Easy to see the master, hard to deal with small demons.' *The National Herald*, June 3, 1908

suggesting the duplicity of officials in shrouding their corrupt dealings with calls for reform.

2.3.3 The Nine-Year Program: A Game of Numbers

The cartoons lampooning the court's 9-year program go the furthest in demonstrating the wit and humor of cartoonists of this era. The images play on the number "*nine*", the stated number of years until parliament would be established, to unmask the absurdity and infeasibility of the court's plan. The cartoon, "A wish for parliament" (國會的希望), depicts a man climbing up to the parliament on top of a mountain.[17] His way is blocked by nine enormous knives which symbolize the various disasters and the internal troubles such as floods, droughts, typhoons, pestilence and so on. The last knife signifies "the ninth year" and is located just beside the houses of parliament. The man, with so many obstacles ahead, hesitates to take the first step. His plight suggests the 9-year program to be more of a calamity than an ideal.

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[17]'A wish for parliament.' *Shenzhou wuri huabao* 神州五日畫報 (Shenzhou Five-Day Pictorial), September 6, 1909.

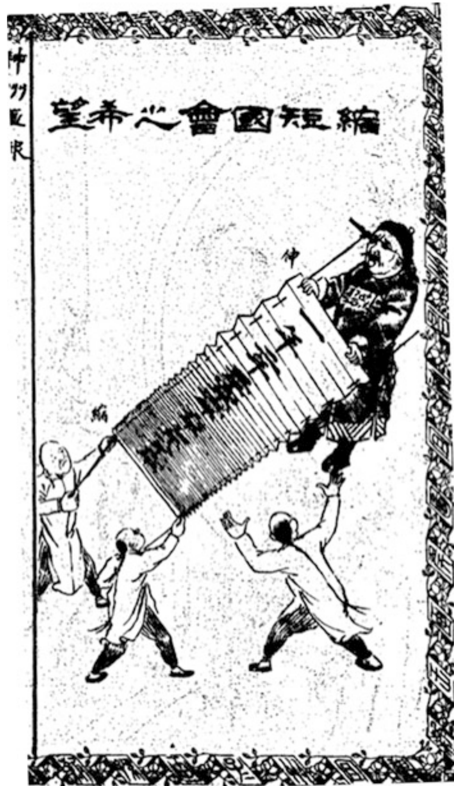

Fig. 2.7 ‘A desire for shortening the reparatory time of parliament.’ *Shenzhou huanbao* 神州畫報 (Shenzhou Pictorial), December 9, 1909

Another cartoon with a similar title, “A desire for shortening the preparatory time for parliament” (縮短國會之希望), derides a terrified official who sticks to the 9-year program and neglects the popular voice (Fig. 2.7). The cartoonist reveals the tension between the people and the government by depicting the official edict folded into an accordion shape. The people and the official grasp opposite ends of the edict and the people endeavor to decrease the number of years by pushing the edict forward, while the officials attempt to increase the number of years by pulling on the edict to stretch it out. The two cartoons, though with the word “hope” in their titles, ironically illustrate that the 9-year program by no means brings any hope to the nation.

Besides domestic suffering, cartoonists also warned that the edict would not prevent a foreign invasion. In one cartoon, “Water afar quenches not fire” (遠水難救近火), a house on fire signifies the exacerbating foreign aggression in China

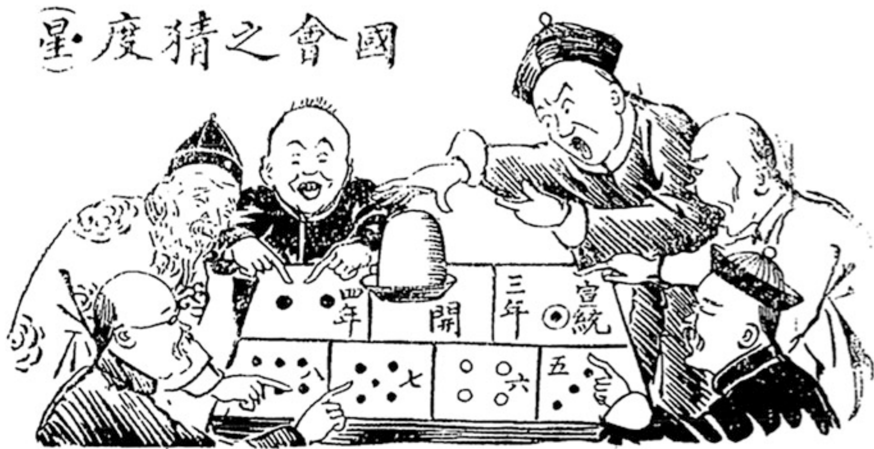

Fig. 2.8 'Surmise of the parliament.' *The National Herald*, November 3, 1910

(外患).[18] The Qing officials, recognized by their official garments and hats, hurry to extinguish the flames. To take water, they have to run towards a remote well that symbolizes the "nine-year parliament" (九年之國會). The distance between the house and the well is so far that only one official comes back to put out the fire. Others are still on their way to the well. The cartoonist, by adapting a Chinese proverb again, pokes fun at the 9-year program.

"Surmise of the parliament (國會的猜度)," published in November 1910, is a brilliant piece of satire on this theme (Fig. 2.8). The cartoonist depicts the court's procrastination over convoking the parliament as a game of dice. On the table are six panels indicating different years from the third year to the eighth year of the Xuantong 宣統 period (1911–1917). The standing official, after shaking the dice cup, demands that the gamblers make wagers on the outcome. The gamblers come from various social strata and point their fingers at different years. None of them has an accurate idea about when the parliament will be established. The cartoon lampoons constitutionalism as an indecent gamble at a national level and the banker is actually the Qing court. This 1910 cartoon could not have predicted that the Xuantong period would end in 2 years. "The surmise of the parliament" did not greet the opening of the parliament but, unexpectedly, welcomed a new republican regime in 1912.

In addition to satirical criticism, these images can also be seen as a form of encouragement. In 1910, the petition campaign finally saw some light at the end of the tunnel, as the Qing court determined to convene the parliament 3 years ahead of the original schedule. The news greatly encouraged both petitioners and cartoonists. On November 8, 1910, one cartoon depicted a house with a plaque inscribed with

[18]'Water afar quenches not fire.' *The National Herald*, December 20, 1909.

the word "parliament" (國會) above the door.[19] A group of people are seen in the cartoon wearing happy smiles and carrying a tree trunk to ram at a door that signifies the "9 years". Behind the door is another black door labeled "5 years". The cartoonist encourages the populace to try harder to break the black door, as implied in the title "One step closer!" (更近一層), suggesting the Qing court could be cajoled into convening parliament much sooner.

Late Qing's constitutionalism, as these cartoons suggest, was something of a national farce: the weak and helpless China on the world stage and the government serving as a laughing stock with the infeasible 9-year program being their slapstick performance. Alongside this, the cartoonists were also eager to reveal the comical workings behind the scenes. The following section examines a specific visual motif of "constitutionalism versus despotism" in order to examine how cartoons unearth the absurd (and irrational) core of late Qing's constitutionalism and how it intertwined with despotism.

2.4 Constitutionalism: A Duplicate of Despotism

The opposition of constitutionalism and despotism provoked heated debate in the late Qing, namely, how despotism and constitutionalism functions in relation to one another. Within the court, senior officials who were of the belief that constitutionalism would destroy the Qing regime and Chinese tradition argued doggedly with the officials supporting constitutionalism in order to maintain the despotic status quo (Zhai 2011). In the newspapers, the public openly challenged the legitimacy of despotism and the feudal regality (Li 2013). Many cartoons of the time pointed out that despotism may have surreptitiously infiltrated the constitutional movement. For example, despotism could be either the fuel or the root of constitutionalism. The cartoon, "The constitutionalist lantern" (立憲燈), satirizes constitutionalism as being fueled by despotism.[20] In the lantern, nationals (國民) run after an official carrying a big round plate symbolizing the constitution. The lantern supposedly illuminates this dark country but this is revealed as an illusion, as it is actually lit by candles of despotism.

The cartoonists illustrate despotism as artfully hidden behind constitutionalism to deceive foreign powers and the domestic populace. Another cartoon compares late Qing politics to child's play: two Chinese children wearing masks confront foreign children. One of them holds a mask with a sad countenance inscribed "constitutionalism", under which is his real face with an odd smile, labeled "despotism". What is hidden in Fig. 2.9 is something a little more deadly, however. It depicts an official who show a man the constitution. On the cover is written "preparation for constitutionalism" and "convene the parliament as soon as

[19]'One step closer.' *The National Herald*, November 8, 1910.

[20]'A constitutionalist lantern.' *The National Herald*, March 2, 1908.

Fig. 2.9 'When the map was unrolled, the dagger was revealed.' The National Herald, July 20, 1908

possible". A huge knife is concealed within it, however, signifying despotism and the intent to cause injury to the people. This creates a visual representation of the Chinese idiom "Tu qiong bi jian (圖窮匕見)" (When the map was unrolled, the dagger was revealed), which describes the real intention mainly to be exposed in the end.

Qing's constitutionalism is suggested to be a duplicate of despotism, meaning that the efforts of constitutionalists had been in vain. One Chinese proverb in particular was often used, "Yi yang hua hulu 依樣畫葫蘆" (Sketch the gourd according to the pattern) which means "acting after the same fashion". As early as 1907, a cartoon in *Mirror of the People Pictorial* depicts a man writing two words "zhuanzhi 專制" (despotism) and "lixian 立憲" (constitutionalism) in the identical form of a gourd.[21] It mocks constitutionalism as just another form of despotism, rather than a political innovation (Huo 2004).[22] In 1909, the theme was expounded further with a humorous four-panel cartoon (Fig. 2.10). An official is depicted as a magician performing his "big magic trick" (Da bianfa 大變法): he puts a rock on

[21]'Sketch the gourd according to the pattern.' *Renjing huabao*, December 15, 1907.

[22]A collection of the Qing' cartoons, *Neizheng chunxiu* 內政春秋 (Annals of Domestic Affairs), contains a very similar cartoon. Though the cartoon's publishing details are not given, but it should have appeared around the turn of the twentieth century according to its artistic style and political theme.

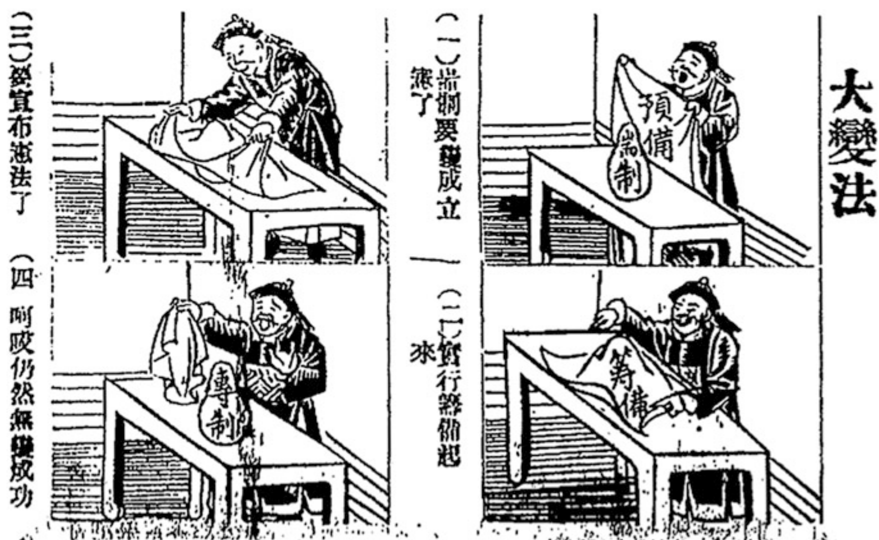

Fig. 2.10 ‘A great magic trick.’ *The National Herald*, March 10, 1911

the table, covers it with a piece of clothing, then makes his big reveal, but the rock still looks the same. The cloth labeled constitutionalism effects no change to the rock labeled despotism. The cartoon plays with an equivoque. “Bianfa 變法” literally means a magic trick, but it is often used, by extension, to refer to political reforms. The failed magic trick, in effect, is a success for the Qing court, whose sincerity in their quest for political reform was always questionable. The smile of the official in the cartoon suggests that he, at least, was satisfied with the result of the magic show.

The previous sections have described how cartoons criticize the government’s venality and hypocrisy. These images serve as a political weapon, but to what extent could they actually *wound* the government? Did the cartoons really influence politics? The cartoon “Picture of fighting dogs” published in the Beijing-based *Public Opinion Daily* (Gonglunshiba 公論實報) sheds some light for us in this regard.

2.5 Exerting Power: Council of Dogs

On January 6, 1911, Beijing’s *Public Opinion Daily* published a political cartoon and a commentary satirizing the Consultative Council (資政院) and its members. The cartoon, “Picture of fighting dogs” (群狗競爭圖), and the commentary, “Dogs’ speech” (狗說), denounce the council as a place where dogs gather and bark at each other for their own self-interest. Such “malicious libel” infuriated the council

members who demanded the local police department reprimand the newspaper; as a result, *Public Opinion Daily* was fined and suspended for 7 days. The writ of penalty resulted in extensive protest led by newspapers in the capital city and the police department reacted defiantly by increasing the penalty. On January 9, *Public Opinion Daily* was compelled to pay an additional fine and to cease publication for good (Fang 2000; Ma 2007; Zhao 2008).

Thus far, attempts to access *Public Opinion Daily* to see the cartoon, the commentary and related essays have been unsuccessful, but, fortunately, related reports and commentaries in other newspapers provide us with valuable clues as to how cartoons were able to wield political power. Although knowing little about the cartoons themselves, we do realize that politicians responded to them. They understood the underlying messages behind the images and were able to issue bans on publication. For that reason, their indignation and retaliation tended to be recorded in newspapers which carried the very commentaries mocking them. This back-and-forth process is a testimony to the efficacy of cartoons in the political sphere.

The ban on *Public Opinion Daily* immediately drew the attention of the newspapers outside Beijing (Zhao 2008).[23] *Shenbao* 申報, for example, an influential Shanghai-based newspaper with a nationwide circulation, published several articles on this issue. On January 14, 1911, a report depicted what was going on within the council. Yi Zongkui 易宗夔 (1874–1925) was the member who proposed penalizing the newspaper. He insisted that the cartoon was an insult to the council and even the nation in that it implied that the council members were dogs and, by extension, that China was a nation of dogs. Although he was opposed by another member, who saw the cartoon as merely attacking the government, Yi's proposal was passed with warm applause.[24]

A Shanghai revolutionary newspaper, *Independent People's Newspaper* (Minlibao 民立報), also aligned itself with the angry press. Its founder, Yu Youren 于右任 (1879–1964), a pivotal literati and press entrepreneur, published a piece of political satire under the pseudonym "Saoxin 騷心". Yu ridiculed the court's publication ban listing the following reasons (Yu 1986).[25] Firstly, it is the council members who put themselves in such an awkward position. The cartoon was alleged to criticize the Qing court but the members insisted that they were the very target (Zhao 2008).[26] This led the editor to mock the members with the jibe that only dogs could recognize the same species, for they identified themselves with

[23]*Shengjing ribao* 盛京日報 in Fengtian 奉天, *Dagongbao* 大公報 in Tianjin 天津, and *Shenbao* 申報 and *Minlibao* 民立報 in Shanghai published reports or commentaries on the press ban on *Public Opinion Daily*.

[24]*Shenbao*, Janunary 14, 1911.

[25]Saoxin 騷心, Wuhu yiyuan san 嗚呼議員(三) (Alas, council members 3), *Minlibao*, January 11, 1911.

[26]According to the report in *Shengjing ribao* on January 12, 1911, *Gonglunshibao* defended itself against the accusation of the cartoon and the commentary as malicious libels by noting that it had often been seen in history books that dogs are used as a figure of speech; the police department,

dogs in the cartoon. Secondly, the members only seemed to care about which newspapers disrespected them rather than devoting themselves to urgent national affairs. The editor deemed it as a national catastrophe. Thirdly, banning newspapers was illegal. By way of a series of witticisms, the editor laid out a case for the cartoon as having nothing to do with the council or the nation. He interrogated the council members as on which legal provisions the order to the Ministry of Civil Affairs (民政局) to ban the newspaper was based. There were no such provisions. The council members' ignorance of the law, he emphasized, is the national shame.

On January 22, *Shenbao* carried a statement made by Yi Zongkui, in which he defended himself against the newspapers' accusation. The government announced that *Public Opinion Daily* was banned for detrimental moral influence and provoking social disorder which, as Yi explained, was far from his original intention. He, therefore, implored the council chair to lift the ban and investigate who drafted the governmental injunction. Yi's statement appears a sincere clarification, but the *Shenbao* editor gave it an ironic title "Is Yi Zongkui afraid to be satirized and chastised?" The title hints at a surge in criticism against the council; Yi, under such pressure of public opinion, shifted all of the blame on to others. His attempts to clarify did not have the desired effect, but rather turned him into a laughing stock, and his cowardice in the public arena was shown to contradict with his arrogance on the council.[27]

The commentary "How did council members become dogs?" published in *Shenbao* on February 6, 1911 derides the council members by sharing with readers tips on how to manipulate members. The author, at the beginning, expressed his anxiety about the future of *Public Opinion Daily*, for it criticized the government more fiercely than ever after resuming publication. According to one of his superiors' words, the author then inferred that the council members were like dogs, in that they did not attack those who fed them with meat and bones. Hence, he drew the conclusion that anyone who paid the members money monthly could make them obedient and silent, suggesting that the members had degraded into pets of the Qing court from which they received their allowance. The author, in the end, asked himself whether the members could bear his acrid mockery as if he were, or should be, worrying about his future as well from that moment on.[28]

The council members' irritation recalls the well-known words made in 1870s New York in reference to a political cartoon: "I don't care so much what the papers write about me. Most of my constituents can't read. But, damn it, they can see pictures" (Schneider 2007). It was allegedly made by William Tweed, the Tammany Hall politician, on seeing a cartoon depicting him as "a vulture picking over the bones of the New York City Treasury" (Duus 2001). The cartoon, created

(Footnote 26 continued)

therefore, should not punish the newspaper for this. However, the explanation was not accepted but rather enraged the department.

[27] *Shenbao*, January 22, 1911.

[28] *Shenbao*, February 6, 1911.

by Thomas Nast, aimed at exposing Tweed's greed and corruption, which may have successfully put Tweed into jail in the end (Duus 2001). Back to 1911 China, the cartoon of "Picture of Fighting Dogs", while failing to send all council members to prison, underlined their ineptitude. The American culture scholar, Stefanie Schneider's analysis (2007) of Tweed's reaction to the cartoon, is analogous to the situation in the Far East: "a well-drawn, witty and fitting cartoon" can make the attack target emotional and fear its influence on the beholders.

2.6 Conclusion

This chapter examines the political humor of Chinese cartoons at the turn of the twentieth century. As the chapter argues, humor is the chief objective, reflected in the name "Huaji hua" (comical pictures). The cartoons on late Qing's constitutionalism demonstrate that cartoonists distill the crucial significance of political events and turn them into a wide array of visual metaphors, which are, to borrow a term from the art historian Gombrich, one of the weapons in "the cartoonists' armory." (1963). These images take on a simple and straight pictorial style, adapt Chinese idioms into the varied political contexts, and achieve a level of wit and humor. Mocking Qing officials and court constitutionalism, the cartoons expose the incongruity between the government's ostensive objective and practical actions, warning readers that late Qing's constitutionalism was essentially despotism in a new guise. The cartoons also wield substantial power, as suggested by the reaction against them, including the publication ban imposed on *Public Opinion Daily* in 1911. Be it indignation or fear, the council members' reaction to the image that compare them to dogs suggests the cartoon's political influence. In summation, the cartoons at the time inherit the tradition of Chinese political humor and highlight absurdities inherent in political issues, paving the way for the exuberance of political cartoons in the Republican Era.

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Chapter 3
Humor, War and Politics in *San Mao Joins the Army*: A Comparison Between the Comic Strips (1946) and the Film (1992)

Laura Pozzi

Abstract This chapter analyses the humoristic features of Zhang Leping's comic strip serial *San Mao Joins the Army* (*SJTA*) published in 1945 and of its film adaptation released in 1992. *SJTA* follows the adventures of the little child San Mao as a soldier during the Sino-Japanese War. The aim of this chapter is to analyse how Zhang Leping employed humor and satire in the original strips of *SJTA* in order to propose a nuanced and multi-layered version of the War of Resistance free from the pompous tones of wartime propaganda, while the more recent cinematographic version of the story supported the Chinese Communist Party's artistic principle to communicate a clear and straightforward political message to the public.

War is rarely a laughing matter, and the Second Sino-Japanese War (1937–1945) was not an exception. Also known as the War of Resistance Against Japan, this conflict is rarely described humorously in Chinese popular culture. Propagandists active during the conflict privileged tragic or heroic depictions of wartime experiences, while in the postwar years it was, and still is, commemorated as one of the most dramatic and traumatizing events in modern Chinese history. One of the exceptions to this rule was the comic strip serial *San Mao Joins the Army* (三毛從軍記, *San Mao congjun ji*, henceforth *SJTA*), created by popular cartoonist Zhang Leping (張樂平, 1910–1992) and published in the influential newspaper *Shen bao* (申報) between 12 May 1946 and 4 November 1946 on the eve of the civil conflict between the Nationalists (GMD) and the Communists (CCP). In this serial, Zhang Leping narrated in farcical tones the adventures of his cartoon hero, little boy San Mao, as a soldier during the troubled years of the Second Sino-Japanese War. *SJTA* has often been overlooked by scholars in favor of Zhang Leping's *The Wandering Life of San Mao* (*San Mao liulang ji*, 三毛流浪記) (1947–1949), which is still considered one of the most popular comic serials of twentieth-century China (Farquhar 1999; Hung 1994a, b; Bi and Huang 2006). Although scholars tend to

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dismiss *SJTA* as little more than an entertaining comic with no great artistic or political value, these comic strips are still very prominent in contemporary Chinese popular culture. One of the most well-known versions of the story produced after 1989 is the homonymous film directed by filmmaker Zhang Jianya (張建亞, 1951–) in 1992 (Tsu 2014).[1] Nevertheless, the amusing and somewhat controversial content of the original comic serial was partially changed in this film adaptation, prompting us to ask some questions about how and why the story of the little soldier San Mao was changed in the 1990s. Why did Zhang Leping decide to draw a comedic story about the War of Resistance in 1946? How was the content of the original series refashioned for the contemporary public in the 1990s? Did the different versions of San Mao's war story have the same artistic and political aims? The aim of this chapter is to analyze how humor and satire were employed in the original *SJTA* strips in order to propose a nuanced and multilayered version of the War of Resistance free from the pompous tones of wartime propaganda, while the more recent cinematographic version of the story supported the CCP's artistic principle of communicating a clear and straightforward political message to the public. By comparing these two versions of *SJTA* it is possible to understand how a different use of humor and satire changed the meaning and aims of the original story.

3.1 Zhang Leping's Wartime Propaganda Cartoons

During the War of Resistance, Zhang Leping was one of the leading artists of the Chinese Cartoon Propaganda Corps (*Jiuwang Manhua Xuanchuan Dui*, 救亡漫畫宣傳隊), a group of cartoonists who employed their art to rally the Chinese population against the Japanese invaders (Hung 1994a, b; Qiu and Zhang 2007). During the 1920s and 1930s, humorous cartoons and comic strips had become popular forms of urban entertainment (Bi and Huang 2006; Shen 2005). While in peace time cartoons were used to highlight the incongruities of modern life and politics, during the war cartoonists' major concern was to propagate anti-Japanese slogans, educate the population about the realities of war, boost civilians' patriotic feeling and encourage them to participate in the war effort. To disseminate their message among the rural as well as the urban population in the quickest and clearest way possible, cartoonists employed visual symbols and rhetorical tools bearing high emotional value that were easily accessible to their heterogeneous public (Hung 1994a, b).

Most of the wartime propaganda cartoons portrayed fierce Chinese fighters, brutal Japanese soldiers and suffering civilians, especially women and children

[1] *San Mao Joins the Army*, produced by *Zhongguo Shanghai dianying zhipianchang* (中國上海電影製片廠), dir. Zhang Jianya, 1992. In 2010 the story of the little soldier San Mao became also a TV cartoon serial, broadcast on CCTV.

(Edwards 2013; Pozzi 2014). The emotions of the viewers were stimulated by crude and tragic images. However, despite the popularity of dramatic and patriotic tones, humor did not completely disappear. In some cases, cartoonists portrayed Japanese soldiers as dull and somewhat ridiculous characters, comparing them to animals or showing how their weak intellectual abilities were a major cause of their impending defeat. As pointed out by Barak Kushner, during the War of Resistance the image of a militant yet incompetent Japanese soldier was quite widespread in Chinese popular culture. While the Japanese were often portrayed with bestial features and considered akin to devils, cartoonists sometimes caricatured them to make them look ridiculous (Kushner 2013). By portraying the enemy as laughable creatures or as inept soldiers, cartoonists invited the Chinese population and armed forces to see Japan as beatable despite its military superiority.[2]

Japanese soldiers were not the only characters to be the object of cartoonists' satire; for instance, on the pages of *Resistance Cartoons* (*Kangzhan Manhua*, 抗戰漫畫), a fortnightly magazine considered to be the political and artistic manifesto of the Cartoon Propaganda Corps, the cartoonists tended to ridicule not only those Chinese who dared to collaborate with the Japanese invaders (*hanjian* 漢奸), but also war profiteers and deserters (Shen 2005).

Zhang Leping was one of those cartoonists who often managed to create propaganda images capable of amusing his readers. The protagonists of his wartime satirical cartoons and short comic serials were often despicable individuals, generally Japanese soldiers or Chinese defectors. For instance, in his short serial *Biography of a Bastard* (*Wangba biezhuan*, 王八別傳) he describes the misadventures of a Chinese traitor whose attempts to please his Japanese master always come to some unfortunate, yet hilarious, conclusion. The aim of the story was to show how Chinese collaborators were mistreated by the Japanese, who looked down on them.[3] Chinese citizens who failed to perform their duties during the conflict were also at the center of a number of San Mao strips published during the war. For instance, in a strip entitled "San Mao's Father" (*San Mao de Baba*, 三毛的爸爸), the little hero discovers that his father disguised himself as a woman in order to avoid obligatory conscription. Appalled by his dad's cowardice, San Mao unmasks him in front of the authorities.[4] Despite the fact that the content of this strip was very serious—conscription was mandatory and those who tried to escape should be denounced to the authorities—the father's cowardly behavior and his amusing ploy could get a smile out of readers. To make people laugh certainly was not the main aim of wartime propaganda; however, humor was sometimes used in order to ridicule enemies and traitors. Similar themes appeared in the post-war years

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[2]For some examples of wartime propaganda cartoons representing Japanese soldiers, see San Mao's official website: http://www.sanmao.com.cn/father/antiwar/manhua.html. Last accessed 5 December 2015.

[3]First published in the monthly magazine *Knife and Brush* (*Dao yu bi*, 刀與筆) in 1939 and in the pictorial of *Frontline Daily* (*Qianxian Ribao*, 前線日報) between 1939 and 1940.

[4]This strip appeared for the first time in *Resistance Cartoons*, in 1938.

in *SJTA*, where Zhang Leping not only laughed at the enemy, but also at the Chinese military forces.

3.2 War and Humor in *SJTA*

At the end of the War of Resistance, Zhang Leping came back to Shanghai, the city where he started his career more than 15 years beforehand (Yang 2010). The artist's arrival in the metropolis in November 1945 did not pass unnoticed. An article published in the magazine *Sea Breeze* (*Haifeng*, 海風) dedicated several lines to the artist's wartime deeds, but it also asked about his future work: "We are wondering, will his comic masterpiece *San Mao*—which attracted in the past a vast audience—be able to meet again the expectation of his readers".[5] The question posed by the article highlights one of the problems that cartoonists like Zhang Leping encountered once they returned to their civilian lives. After years in service and after witnessing warfare's catastrophic consequences on the population, could cartoonists create comical entertainment for their readers as they had done in the pre-war era? Zhang Leping and his colleagues had to adapt their work to the new social and political conditions of the country; in particular, they had to deal with the outbreak of a new civil conflict between the Nationalists and the Communist Party.

At the end of the Sino-Japanese conflict, some of the cartoonists of the Propaganda Corps, such as Liao Bingxiong (廖冰兄, 1915–2006), Ding Cong (丁聰, 1916–2009) and Zhang Guangyu (張光宇, 1902–1965), utilized their artistic skills to depict the deplorable living conditions of the population, to criticize the corruption and inefficiency of the GMD, and to comment upon the political and military struggle between the Nationalist and the Communist Parties (Hung 1994a, b). Zhang Leping followed this trend, especially in his popular comic serial *The Wandering Life of San Mao*, where he described the difficult life of his orphan cartoon hero in a war-ravaged and socially volatile Shanghai.[6] However, his first post-war comic serial, *SJTA*, focused on the recently-ended Sino-Japanese conflict and not on contemporary events.

Single-panel cartoons and comic strips published in China shared several features; however, while cartoons often offered piercing satirical comments about contemporary politics and society, comic strips were generally considered more entertaining and less politically engaged. For instance, when Zhang Leping started publishing San Mao's stories in the 1930s, his strips were more humorous than satirical, and they employed softer tones than his political cartoons. Successful Chinese comic strip authors, such as Ye Qianyu (葉淺予, 1907–1995), Huang Yao (黃堯, 1917–1987) and Zhang Leping, to name just three, employed similar

[5]Reprinted in Yang Guo's *Baishi Leping*, 46.

[6]*The Wandering Life of San Mao* appeared in the influential newspaper *Dagong bao* 大公報 between 1947 and 1949.

technical features in order to obtain the most effective comical results: firstly, the main protagonists of the strips were generally funny tricksters who amused the public with their unfortunate ideas and, secondly, these cartoonists often designed stories which kept the readers' attention until the last moment, when their expectations were turned upside down by the unpredictable actions of the cartoon heroes. These features appear also in Zhang's post-war comics, such as *SJTA*.

To approach the grim subject of war with the humoristic tones typical of the comic strip genre is certainly a challenge for Zhang. As we have seen, during the war cartoonists employed humor and satire in order to laugh at their enemies; however, comical tones were hardly ever used when creating propaganda images of Chinese soldiers or civilians. While cartoonists privileged dramatic or patriotic tones when describing Chinese soldiers' deeds, in *SJTA* Zhang Leping managed to merge humor and drama to create a story about combatants' everyday lives during the conflict. As the author himself explained, the aim of his new comic serial is to merge entertainment with serious thoughts about the recent conflict: "While drawing *San Mao Joins the Army* I tried to create a story that reflected the cruelty of real life; I tried to make people shake with laughter, presenting them a thought-provoking theme."[7]

SJTA is a complete narrative with a well-defined beginning and end. The serial opened with little San Mao arriving at the conscription desk determined to become a soldier, but the official in charge sends him away because of his youth. The child refuses to give up on his plan, and decides to try disguising himself as an adult. He soon returns to the conscription office walking on stilts, which he covers with long pants. A western style jacket and a hat complete his "adult man" costume. Incredibly, the child manages to trick the soldier and he is able to start his life in the army.[8] The story closes with the defeat of the Japanese when at the end of the war, San Mao faces the difficulties of returning to civilian life in cities and fields ravished by conflict.

The serial is composed of several independent shorter stories, developed across a single or multiple strips. As a soldier, San Mao spends his time either working in the barracks or fighting on the battlefield. The longer sequences are those dedicated to military action, normally depicted in at least 10 consecutive strips. By contrast, episodes of San Mao's daily life in the barracks often occupy a single strip divided into four or more panels. Despite their brevity, these episodes outnumber the fighting scenes, and are therefore very relevant to the structure of the story. Readers could either follow the storyline or enjoy individual strips, since each could be read independently without referring to the main narrative of the serial. Zhang chose not to add dialogues to his strips; instead, slapstick humor is the core of the action's comic strength. The expressions of the characters and their body language are as effective as dialogue in the economy of the story, which stages characters like little

[7]Zhang Leping speaking about *SJTA* as reported in Feng (2006, p. 13).

[8]This strip was originally published in *Shen bao* in 15 May 1946. It was censured by the CCP after 1949, and substituted with a different image.

San Mao, the Chinese soldiers with whom he lives and works, Chinese military officials, and the Japanese enemies.

San Mao is the undisputed hero and the main cause of laugher, since most of the humoristic situations of *SJTA* derive from the idea that the child is not meant to be a soldier. The hero's young age adds a farcical tone to the story and is fundamental to its humorous moments. The comic tension between the child's age and his job in the army is realized in three types of recurring situation: laughter is caused, firstly, by San Mao's inability to complete his duties; secondly, by his fortuitous heroic deeds in the battlefield, and finally, by his idiosyncratic understanding of military rules. San Mao's youth and his failure to deal with the most banal military activities are the starting points for several paradoxical situations. On numerous occasions, the child tries to copy his older colleagues, but these attempts often bring disastrous consequences. San Mao regularly finds creative solutions to his problems, mostly with comical results. For instance, in one strip published on 23 June 1946 the little hero takes part in a military drill. The child is running in a column together with other soldiers, but soon he realizes that he is unable to keep pace. Quickly, the naughty hero finds a solution: he borrows a push scooter from a child playing on the street, and thanks to this new vehicle he is finally able to line up with his surprised comrades.[9]

If youth and a frail body are causes for concern in San Mao's regular life, the child realizes that they can be turned to his advantage on the battlefield. In *SJTA*, the little hero faces his enemies on several occasions, always successfully.[10] It turns out that the child is more skillful than other soldiers in surviving combat situations; however, San Mao owes his military achievements to luck more than to courage. As pointed out by the Editor of *Dagong bao* (大公報), Wang Yunsheng (王雲生, 1901–1980), in *SJTA* the child's actions are "sort of heroic" (*chabuduo yingxiongxing* 差不多英雄型), a phrase which underlines how the character's epic deeds are often the result of his good fortune more than his skill.[11] The end of San Mao's experience as a paratrooper is a good example of the child's luck in combat. The hero parachutes from an airplane onto the battlefield, but before he touches the ground his parachute gets caught in the branches of a big tree. San Mao is suspended in the air, unable to move from his uncomfortable position. The situation worsens when a hungry wolf comes to the tree, clearly intending to devour the child. Luckily, the wolf cannot reach San Mao, who is hanging a few meters above the animal's head, but the child suspects that the ropes of his parachute could break, thus transforming him into a juicy meal for the hungry predator. Suddenly, somebody shoots the wolf, giving a moment of relief to San Mao. However, the child's happiness is short-lived, since he soon discovers that his "savior" is a

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[9]*Shen bao*, 23 June 1946.

[10]San Mao fights against the Japanese on five occasions: in strips from 14–15 May, 24–28 June, 28 July, 10–12 August and 21–30 August 1946.

[11]Wang Yunsheng, *Ti* «*Sanmao Liulangji*» 題 «三毛流浪記», ('About *The Wandering Life of Sanmao*'), *Dagong bao*, 23 March 1948.

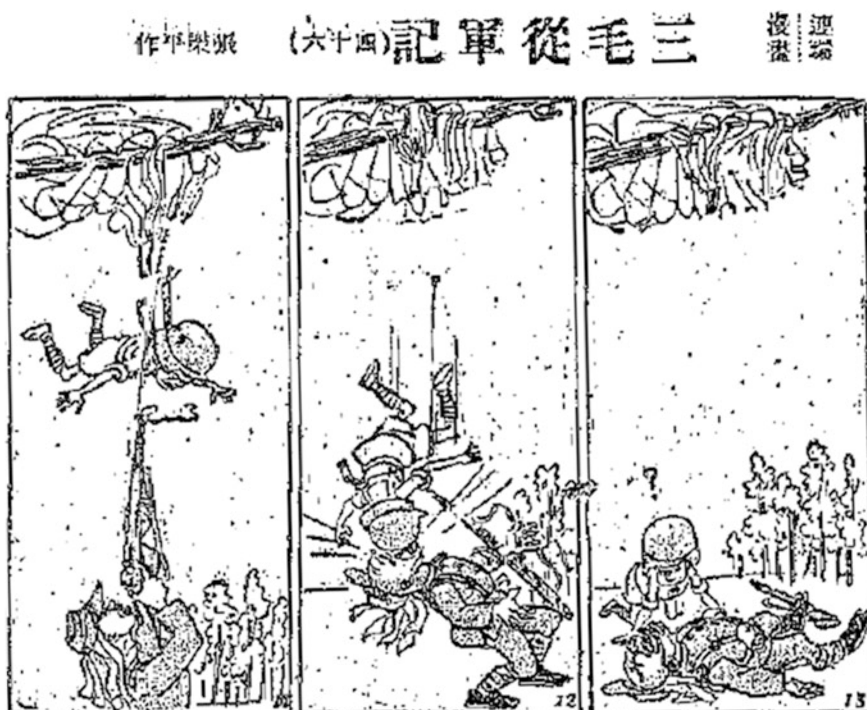

Fig. 3.1 Zhang Leping, *San Mao Joins the Army*, *Shen bao*, 27 June 1947

Japanese soldier who is now ready to gun down the child. The soldier shoots at San Mao, luckily missing him and instead hitting one of the ropes of the parachute. The little hero falls from the tree and accidentally knocks down the Japanese soldier with his metal helmet, in effect killing him. The last panel highlights how the child accidentally survives the attack of the wolf and the Japanese soldier by showing San Mao looking at his victim in disbelief, an emotion which is expressed by a big question mark over the child's head (Fig. 3.1). As in many other episodes, this series of strips presents two main comic elements: San Mao's amazingly fortuitous success and the bumbling behavior of Japanese soldiers.

Besides showing how San Mao's serendipity is far more important than his courage on the battlefield, this strip also introduces Japanese soldiers as relevant elements in the humoristic spectacle of *SJTA*. As we have previously seen, during the War of Resistance Japanese are mostly depicted as ferocious enemies; however, on some occasions, cartoonists produced comical caricatures of their enemies in order to make them look vulnerable. In *SJTA*, Zhang Leping employs the same techniques, proposing an unflattering representation of a Japanese soldier who is as bluntly stupid as he is aggressive. Despite being fierce and demonic, these enemies are often overcome by San Mao and his colleagues because of their mediocre fighting skills and their sloppiness. This type of representation emphasizes the

Fig. 3.2 Zhang Leping, *San Mao Joins the Army*, *Shen bao*, 13 November 1946

farcical tones in *SJTA* that turns brutal struggles into secondary and less than heroic activities.

While the representations of Japanese soldiers in *SJTA* follow wartime examples, Zhang Leping's portrayals of Chinese soldiers and commanders differ greatly from those of propaganda cartoons, where they appear as fearless defenders of their country. In these postwar strips, Chinese soldiers are often lazy, fearful, and far from exemplary. For instance, they spend more time in the barracks quarrelling over irrelevant issues rather than fighting on the battlefield. On several occasions, Chinese soldiers appear less mature than San Mao, whom they often bully and mistreat, stealing his food rations or taking advantage of his physical inferiority. A strip published on 13 November 1946 provides us with an excellent example of such thinly veiled criticism. San Mao attempts to make two of his comrades stop fighting each other, but instead he draws their aggression onto himself and ends up being thrown into a barrel full of water (Fig. 3.2).

The behavior of Chinese soldiers in *SJTA* is antithetical to that described in the propaganda cartoons. In the strips, signs of heroism and friendship between comrades rarely appear, while indifference, competition and selfishness seem rampant in the Chinese army. For instance, when San Mao is selected for a very dangerous solo mission against an approaching Japanese squad, the other soldiers appear relieved

and do not show any signs of sympathy for the unfortunate boy.[12] Although in *SJTA* Chinese soldiers do not embody the model soldiers celebrated by wartime propaganda, Zhang Leping does not fail to point out how their behavior is often connected with their strenuous lives. For instance, on several occasions San Mao and his colleagues are portrayed fighting over food or trembling with cold. These arduous living conditions lead them to commit immoral actions, like in the case of the previous strip.

Soldiers' horrifying living conditions were often compared with the lives of high-ranking officers, who enjoy a far more comfortable lifestyle. However, Zhang Leping does not focus especially on the disparity between different army ranks; rather, he is more concerned with officials' abuse of power. In some strips we see San Mao working as the helper of a general, who on several occasions mistreats the child for menial reasons. Furthermore, Zhang subtly laughs at the tendency of high-ranking officers to receive praise for their military success when soldiers are risking their lives on the battlefield. In one of these strips, an officer shows the little hero his new medal, earned after a successful battle against the Japanese. Ironically, San Mao decides to make a medal for himself out of a piece of paper and then wear it proudly in front of the astonished man (Fig. 3.3). This strip can be interpreted in two ways. On the one hand, San Mao's action indicates that while officials get all the honors, the real heroes are common soldiers like San Mao, who are risking their lives fighting against the Japanese. On the other hand, by creating a fake medal, the child indirectly casts doubts on the real value and honor. Is the medal a prize for the official's real achievement or is it just a symbol devoid of any connection to real life?

Through representations of arrogant officers, cowardly Chinese soldiers, and incompetent enemies, Zhang Leping subverts the vision of war offered by wartime propaganda images, transforming the Second Sino-Japanese conflict in a tragicomic spectacle. *SJTA* proposes a multilayered description of war in which all the characters present some negative traits, and where even the main protagonist San Mao cannot be considered to be a model fighter. By privileging the description of life in the barracks over fighting in the battlefield, the cartoonist proposed to his readers an unusual representation of the conflict, here represented in farcical tones instead of exaggerated dramatic hues. This farcical version of war provides readers with occasions for laugher and made *SJTA* an entertaining story. However, should this comic serial be considered only as a humoristic story without any secondary meaning? In her analysis of *SJTA*, Mary Ann Farquhar, a scholar of Chinese children's literature, describes the humor of these strips as having a "bitter edged" style which allows Zhang Leping to denounce Chinese officers' greed (Farquhar 1999). Yang Guo also claims that *SJTA* "exposes the corruption of the GMD's army" (Yang 2010). While the serial does not praise the Nationalist military elite, their corruption is hardly the center of the story, since it focuses much more on soldiers' lives.

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[12]Strip published on 20 June 1946 in *Shen bao*.

Fig. 3.3 Zhang Leping, *San Mao Joins the Army*, *Shen bao*, 3 September 1946

In order to better understand the content and political message of *SJTA*, it is necessary to analyze it in the specific historical period in which it was created. It was published in 1946 in a country almost fatally wounded by the war against Japanese invaders and on the brink of another period of military struggle, this time between two domestic contenders, GMD and CCP. Despite the victory over Japan, China was again at war; however, in contrast to the previous conflict, this would be a civil war, one which worsened the already appalling living conditions of the population. Zhang Leping's decision to show the less laudable side of war can be interpreted as the cartoonist's warning against the long-lasting effects of another conflict in China. This message appears clearly in the concluding strip of *SJTA*. The war against Japan is finally over, and San Mao and the other soldiers celebrate enthusiastically; however, the joy of victory is soon followed by a bitter resolution. San Mao is dismissed from military service, and he is free to come back to his life as a civilian. However, the last panel shows a gloomy reality. The confused San Mao stands in front of a crossroad surrounded by fields of graves. He can decide between two different directions: one street takes him to a demolished countryside, while the other one leads to a destroyed city. Ironically, the two streets form a 'V', a

letter which at the end of the World War II became a recognized symbol for "victory".[13]

This suggestive epilogue can be considered as the interpretative key to the entire comic. After tens of humoristic or satirical strips, Zhang Leping closed *SJTA* with a dramatic ending. Can the Chinese people really speak of victory? What kind of future can San Mao have in such a dilapidated country? Disillusionment takes the place of patriotism, presenting the war not through a nationalistic prism, but through its destructive effects. San Mao is left alone without guidance in a destroyed land. The last panel of *SJTA* not only brings the public back to contemporary reality, but it also offers a parallel between San Mao and Chinese society, lost in another war despite their victory.

3.3 The 1992 Film of *SJTA*

San Mao remained a very popular visual icon in China after the establishment of the PRC in 1949; however, Zhang Leping was forced to modify the content and style of his new and old strips to be allowed to publish his adventures. New comic serials—such as *San Mao Stands Up* (*Sanmao fanshen ji*, 三毛翻身記)—appeared in major Chinese newspapers and magazines during the 1950s; however, San Mao's new adventures differ greatly from those published before 1949.[14] While drawing his new strips, Zhang had to follow new Party policies, according to which art is not supposed to express personal opinions of the artist, but instead serve the CCP's political purposes. This idea is connected with the growing influence of socialist realism on Chinese literary and artistic production, whose primary aim was "to be the truthful, historically concrete representation of reality in its revolutionary development with the aim of ideologically training people in the spirit of socialism" (King 2014). These new conditions deeply affected Zhang Leping's cartoon hero, who in the new strips is an exemplary child able to inspire his young readers to become dedicated supporters of the CCP. Furthermore, following the rules of socialist realism, in his new serials the cartoonist gives much more space to class struggle, the history of the establishment of the PRC and the bright future of China under the guidance of the CCP. As a result, San Mao's strips lost the humoristic and satirical content which made them popular in the 1940s, fostering instead the CCP's authorized representation of Chinese history.

The new San Mao comic serial followed the new CCP's directives, but what about the older strips, such as *The Wandering Life* and *SJTA*? All artistic and literary works published before 1949 were subjected to the examination of the

[13]Originally published in *Shen bao*, 4 October 1946.

[14]*San Mao Stands Up* was published in *Liberation Daily* (*Jiefang Ribao*, 解放日報) between 5 May and 23 July 1951. Other San Mao strips were also published in Liberation Daily and in children's magazines such as Children's Time (*Ertong Shidai*, 兒童時代).

authorities, which analyzed whether their content was in line with the new policy. In the case of Zhang Leping's strips, while *The Wandering Life* was considered suitable for publication since it could be used to show the decadence of the country before the victory of the CCP, *SJTA* did not pass the authorities' assessment. The adventures of the soldier San Mao were censured since they neither contain any example of class struggle, nor any positive depiction of the lower-class characters and their antagonistic relationship with their exploiters, the upper echelons of the military. Instead, they often focus on rivalry and problems among the lower-ranking soldiers, making their characters morally controversial. Therefore, *SJTA* was banned, and it was not republished until after the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976).

SJTA was republished for the first time in 1983, and in the following years it enjoyed a renewed popularity. In particular, a cinematic version of the story directed by Zhang Jianya was released in Chinese movie theaters in 1992.[15] Despite the fact that the ban on the comic serial had been lifted, the content was altered both in the strips and in the cinematographic version in order to keep it as close as possible to the CCP's political aims. Furthermore, in the case of the film, the humorous sensibility and comic dynamic of the original serial were distorted, transforming *SJTA* from a multilayered story with different potential interpretations into an entertaining film with a single straightforward message.

The process of alteration started in the 1983 with the republishing of *SJTA* by Sichuan Juvenile Publishing House (*Sichuan shao'er chubanshe* 四川少兒出版社). The beginning of the story underwent some drastic changes. The original series opens with San Mao's attempt to join the army despite his young age, an episode which underlines the child's will to become a soldier. In the 1983 version, this episode is substituted by two brand-new strips, which described San Mao's attempt to release a group of civilians imprisoned by two Nationalist soldiers. San Mao tries to free the group when the Nationalists leave their prisoners tied to a tree to take a bath in the nearby stream, but his attempt fails. The soldiers catch him and force him to become a Nationalist soldier.[16] The substitution of the original strip with these new ones solves one of the major ideological problems of the serial: the CCP could not allow San Mao to appear as a supporter of the GMD, not even during the War of Resistance. Besides this evident alteration, the other strips are faithful to the original version.

The 1992 film of *SJTA* drastically changed the content of the comic serial. This was not the first time that Zhang Leping's work had been adapted for the silver screen; the idea to transform cartoon characters into celebrities of the cinema had already occurred in the 1930s, when comic strip characters such as Ye Qianyu's Mr. Wang (*Wang xiansheng* 王先生) and Zhang's San Mao became distinct personalities transferable to different visual media. The canny Mr. Wang is the first comic

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[15]The film can be watched at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iy0-ma-G6ws.

[16]*SJTA* was cleared for publication in Taiwan in 1988. In the Taiwanese version of the story, several strips depicting Nationalist officials mistreating San Mao were censured (Feng 2006, pp. 34–35).

character to achieve popularity outside the comic strip medium. Between 1934 and 1937, at least eight collections of Ye Qianyu's strips appeared on the market; furthermore, the adventures of Mr. Wang inspire a novel and eleven action movies, released by different film companies (Rea 2008). San Mao encountered a similar fate in 1949, when *The Wandering Life* was adapted for the silver screen by the leftist Kunlun Film Studio (Hung 1994a, b; Rosen 1987). This film is different from the original comic strips; in particular, the cinematic version of the story ends with footage of the People's Liberation Army (PLA) entering Shanghai, welcomed by a cheerful crowd. San Mao joins the celebrations, dancing *yang'ge* (a rice planting opera popular in North China and adopted by the CCP for propaganda work) together with the PLA's propaganda group members. The original strips of *The Wandering Life* were not so openly celebratory towards to the new government; indeed, the end of the film was added after the establishment of the PRC in order to follow the new cultural policies introduced by the CCP (Braester 2005).

Similarly, the 1992 film of *SJTA* is not fully faithful to the original comic serial: its content reflects the CCP's vision of society and history. In the strips, war and its contradictions are at the center of the story, which focuses on the wrongdoings of officers as well as simple soldiers. Instead, the film *SJTA* privileges a satirical description of the misconduct of the Nationalist authorities and a comical account of the brotherly feelings which unite Chinese soldiers. The negative characterization of Nationalist authorities is clear from the very first scene of the film. Following the example of the 1983 version of the story, in the film San Mao does not decide to become a soldier of his own free will; instead, he ends up in the Nationalist army after committing a minor criminal offence. In the opening act of the film, San Mao, played by 15-year-old actor Jia Lin (賈林, 1977–), throws stones at a group of Japanese men walking in the streets of Shanghai. One of his stones hits a policeman by mistake, who decides to punish the child by forcing him to join the army in the fight against the Japanese.

The rest of the story follows the content of the original strips; however, some scenes are added in order to make the movie more directly anti-Nationalist and anti-Japanese than the original story. The first brand-new episode added to the movie is a satirical and highly symbolical sketch about Japanese commanders, who are portrayed sitting in an elegant room cutting up and consuming a China-shaped cake named "China" (*Zhongguo*, 中國). This was added to debunk any doubts about their intent to destroy the country. The Japanese landlords and officials look like old degenerates, who seem to experience sensual pleasure when thinking of their intent to conquer the enemy. The representation of Japanese soldiers is more faithful to the original story: they are ferocious but quite dull, easily swindled by San Mao and his colleagues. For instance, in one of the last scenes of the movie, the child and one of the soldiers manage to defeat a group of heavily armed Japanese fighters with a very simple trick: surrounded by enemies, San Mao and his friend start imitating chickens, causing their enemies to burst into uncontrollable laughter, at which point the duo easily defeat all of them.

The officers of the Nationalist army go through a much more evident makeover. Nationalist officials are not represented positively in *SJTA*, but the movie tends to

emphasize all the negative traits shown in the original story. In particular, in the second half of the movie San Mao becomes the helper of the commander, a position which allows him to witness the Nationalist authorities' rampant corruption and the astonishing inequality between the powerful and the average solders. As a helper of a high-ranking officer, San Mao endures his boss's constant harassment; furthermore, he also keeps secrets about the man's unfaithful wife, a detail which never appears in the original strips. The child not only discovers that the commander lacks any military skill, but he also witnesses his family's corrupted lifestyle. The commander's comfortable life is often compared with the miserable conditions endured by common soldiers. For instance, while higher officials enjoy parties and rich dinners, San Mao and his comrades suffer hunger and cold.

One of the key scenes in the movie that never appears in the original story takes place during an extravagant dancing party, where the official and his wife entertain their guests with alcohol and music. Most of the guests wear gas masks, the only element that connects the scene with the ongoing conflict. San Mao is monitoring the room when he receives an important report for his superior, who, however, is too drunk and busy flirting with some ladies to open the envelope, which is soon lost in the crowd. The day after, the man receives another letter from the authorities, who invite him to take his own life for neglecting his duties. The commander kills himself after getting drunk with San Mao. At his funeral, nobody, not even his wife, appears to be sorry about the man's death. The scenes tend to overplay criticism of the Nationalists, who seem to embody all the weaknesses of human nature. Besides being dislikable human beings, the Nationalist authorities are described as useless leaders who do not take their work seriously. For instance, in one of the last scenes of the film we see San Mao listening to the boring discourse of some nationalist politician, who instead of planning the reconstruction of the country still persists with empty words about the national crisis.

While the film pokes fun at and criticizes the Nationalist leaders, San Mao and the other Chinese soldiers are portrayed in much more positive tones than in the original *SJTA*. The plot of the film tends to highlight brotherhood between soldiers and their willingness to sacrifice their lives for their country. As we have seen, in the original story the child is not really a war hero and the soldiers spend most of their time quarrelling or laughing at San Mao; however, in the cinematographic version they appear as genuinely dedicated to the war, and on several occasions they fight heroically against the Japanese. Only in one scene do we see the soldiers wrestling for food and ignoring San Mao's attempt to get some rice; however, the images of the soldiers' poor meals are immediately compared with the wealthy dinner of the military officials in order to drive home the point that soldiers are not to blame for their negative behavior. It is social inequality and the officials' greed that are the causes of the meager lives of the weakest members of Chinese society.

Food issues aside, the soldiers are not only brave fighters, but are also supportive and helpful to each other. An episode describing the selection of groups of soldiers for an almost suicidal mission is one that better represents the striking difference between the comic strip version of *SJTA* and the film. A small number of soldiers are selected for a very dangerous mission, but, despite the dramatic situation, the

men do not try to escape from their mission; indeed, San Mao independently decides to join the squad. It is thanks to his ingenious idea of sending a cow covered in dynamite towards the enemy that they manage to survive and defeat the approaching Japanese. A similar episode is described in a very different tone in the strips. San Mao is sent for the dangerous mission alone, and the other soldiers do not show any sign of compassion or try to help him.[17] The continuous clashes between soldiers and San Mao are one of the main comedic features of *SJTA*, while in the film the results of their collaboration are the real cause of laugher.

Another difference between the film and the comic strips is the participation of civilians in the war effort. During a fight against a troop of Japanese soldiers in a rural village, a well-trained young girl helps San Mao to defeat a very aggressive Japanese soldier who is following the child. The man presents all the traits typical of the satirical representation of wartime Japanese soldiers: his chest is comically hairy to indicate his bestiality, stupidity and violent inclinations. The girl, who has braids and wears pants, pulls San Mao into her house to hide him from his enemy. The Japanese soldier follows the two into the building, which, despite its wretched appearance, soon appears to have been modified with lots of traps. San Mao and his companion fight the man using all the hidden tricks inside the house, such as trampolines, stairs with movable steps and hidden windows. Finally the duo defeats the soldier after a long, well choreographed fight which ends with the Japanese man falling from a high window into a pigsty full of hungry animals. Although it is not declared openly in the film, it is quite clear that the girl is a member of a well-organized partisan group fighting against the Japanese. In particular, the girl's hairstyle and clothes remind one of several heroines in communist propaganda posters, dramas and films, suggesting that she might be a member of the underground CCP. Furthermore, the figure of the resourceful young woman stands in opposition to the only other lady to appear in the film, the officer's unfaithful wife, who is not even able to cry for her husband during his funeral. While the young country girl is a model fighter and patriot, the commander's wife is as corrupted as she is beautiful, and her actions are supposed to cause laugher mixed with disdain among the public.

In conclusion, while the plot of the cinematographic version of *SJTA* is generally in line with the original comic serial, the satirical features are mostly used to criticize Japanese soldiers and Nationalist officials, while softer humorous hues are used to describe the endeavors and personal contacts of San Mao and his fellow soldiers. In this way, the film creates a clear distinction between negative and positive characters, simplifying the nuanced content of the comic strips, where every character, even San Mao, shows some despicable traits. Comparison between positive and negative behaviors, characters with well-defined personalities, the use of satire against enemies and the introduction of model characters such as the young

[17]Originally published in *Shen bao*, 20 August 1946.

female fighter are all classical techniques of CCP propaganda from Yan'an up to the present time. Certainly, the style of the film is far from the monolithic and socialist realist tones of the movies and dramas produced during the 1950s and the Cultural Revolution; furthermore, in contrast with the film *The Wandering Life*, the movie does not make any clear reference to the Communist Party and it refrains from opening with a celebratory scene. However it is clear that the content of the original *SJTA* is changed in order to follow the Party's representation of society and that humor and satire are still employed mostly for educational and propagandistic purposes.

3.4 Conclusion

The Chinese cartoonist Zhang Leping owed his popularity mostly to the success of his comic strip serial *The Wandering Life of San Mao*; however, his war story *SJTA* is still well known in China. Originally, the cartoonist proposes a farcical representation of the War of Resistance, which was generally represented in visual art and literature as a heroic and dramatic fight. Zhang Leping does not refute the necessity of fighting against the Japanese; however, he provides his public with a nuanced description of soldiers' life. By employing humorous and occasionally satirical tones, the cartoonist creates a multifaceted vision of the conflict, which sometimes contradicts the heroic content of wartime propaganda. The strips contain satirical portraits of Nationalist officials; however, none of the main characters in the farcical spectacle created by Zhang has entirely positive traits. The original comic serial was censured by Communist authorities after 1949. However, in 1983 *SJTA* was published again, although in a slightly corrected form. The adventures of the soldier San Mao were then transformed into a film in 1992, but the message of the strips was partially lost, since the cinematographic version of the story propose a black-and-white description of war, where foes and heroes are much better defined than in the original strips. Some of the rhetorical elements often employed in CCP propaganda are present in the movie, such as caricatured portraits of enemies, comparison between the lives of the powerful and the weak, the deliberate introduction of role models and the description of brotherly feeling between the members of the lower classes. The main achievement of the strip was to tell a tragic story in a farcical manner, leaving the readers free to judge the behavior of all the characters; conversely, in the film humor and satire are employed in order to deliver a political message in a direct and unmistakable manner. In conclusion, although the film of *SJTA* contains some genuinely comical moments, by modifying the content and the humorous sensibility of the original strips, it conveys a vision of the War of Resistance that serves the CCP's vision of Chinese history and its role in it.

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Chapter 4
Chinese Film Satire and Its Foreign Connections in the People's Republic of China (1950–1957): Laughter Without Borders?

Xiaoning Lu

Abstract This chapter examines the emerging comedy film culture in the early People's Republic of China (PRC) from 1950 to 1957 by paying specific attention to the importation of film comedies from the Soviet bloc and their dynamic interaction with Chinese cinema. Through a comparative study of the Soviet comedy *Did We Meet Somewhere Before* and the Chinese film satire *The Man Who Doesn't Bother about Trifles*, the chapter reveals paradoxical practices and contested discourses pertaining to the film comedy in the early PRC. On the one hand, importation, exhibition and translation of foreign comedies dismantled national and linguistic borders to welcome laughter as a transnational binding force for socialist communities. On the other hand, the boundary of "appropriate laughter" was reinforced in the process of Chinese filmmakers' comic experimentation and by film reviews and criticisms. Overall, these practical and discursive efforts highlight the complexity involved in the management of laughter for the purpose of constructing hegemony in the early PRC.

Much discussion of the comic phenomenon in Chinese cinema in the early years of the People's Republic of China (PRC) has focused on a sudden surge in film comedy production in the years 1956 and 1957. Film scholars have investigated the negotiation of cultural, social, and political forces within the newly established state to account for the ephemerality of Chinese film comedy in the 1950s. For instance, Rao Shuguang synthesizes various Chinese film scholars' views and suggests that highly centralized film administration, restrictive cultural policies to the effect that "literature and arts should serve the workers, peasants and soldiers," and continuous political campaigns created unfavorable conditions for film comedy production from 1949 to 1955 (2005). Ying Bao investigates the conflicts and negotiations between the Chinese communist party-state and Chinese filmmakers as well as

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anxieties surrounding the Chinese film industry in the 1950s in order to explain Lü Ban's short-lived career as a film comedy auteur (2008).

Considering the fact that socialist ideology conceives the existence of nation-states as a developmental stage in the realization of nationless Communism, this chapter calls into question the use of a national model in examining cultural production in socialist China and highlights the dynamic interaction between Chinese cinema and the cinemas of other socialist states. Specifically, it pays attention to a unique aspect of the then emerging film culture in China, the exhibition and discussion of film comedies produced in the Soviet Bloc, and examines how the consumption, appreciation and discussion of these comedies helped to configure Chinese comic filmmaking practices in the 1950s. In what follows, I first introduce the social and cultural conditions under which film comedies from the Soviet Union and the Eastern Bloc were imported and promoted. I then use a comparative study of the Soviet satirical film *Did We Meet Somewhere Before?* (My s vami gde-to vstrechalis, dirs. Nikolai Dostal & Andrei Tutyshkin, 1954, USSR) and the Chinese film comedy *The Man Who Doesn't Bother About Trifles* (Buju xiaojie de ren, dir. Lü Ban 1956) to illustrate similarities in narrative patterns and comedic styles and, by extension, the generic formula of the socialist comedy. Chinese reception of these two films is also considered in order to investigate why Chinese film comedy, as a local articulation of global socialist comedy, met in China a fate different from that of its Soviet counterpart.

4.1 Laughing Matters

On the eve of the Communist takeover, Chinese film comedy enjoyed such an enormous popularity among audiences that it helped to rejuvenate the film industry, which had been ravaged by the Sino-Japanese War. In 1947 two comedy films, *Long Live the Mistress!* (Taitai wansui, dir. Sang Hu, 1947), which mocks the follies of human behavior, and *Phony Phoenixes* (Jiafeng xuhuang, dir. Huang Zuolin, 1947), which satirizes the corrupted Guomingdang (GMD) government, despite their common focus on domesticity and romance, became strong box office rivals of the Hollywood blockbusters screened in Shanghai.[1] However, this genre production came to a halt in the few years immediately after the founding of the PRC. Some film scholars have suggested that the militant social ambience created by incessant political campaigns and by China's involvement in the Korean War compelled Chinese artists to exclude comedy and laughter from their aesthetic purview and to focus instead on the sublime and solemn subject matter (Meng 2002; Rao 2005).

[1]For instance, while the American film *Gone with the Wind* (dir. Victor Fleming) sold 17,000 tickets at two Shanghai theaters, *Long Live the Mistress* sold 15,000 tickets at the Empress and Jincheng theaters and *Phony Phoenixes* sold 165,000 tickets at the Grand Theater alone. See Zhang Yingjin, *Chinese National Cinema* (London: Routledge, 2004), 96.

The paucity of Chinese film comedy production in the early years of the PRC by no means reflected the general public's attitude toward and its appetite for comedy. Articles in popular film magazines and the recorded comments from film workers reveal the public's passion for comedy and laughter. The 24th issue published in 1949 of *Young Cinema* (Qingqing dianying), an immensely popular Republican film magazine that managed to appear until early 1951, reported the latest news about the famous film comedian Yin Xiuchen and carried on its back cover a colorful *Koudeyi* toothpaste advertisement featuring Yin's long-term comedy partner Han Langeng. Evidently, the public appeal of this established comic duo, who were often called the "Oriental Laurel and Hardy", did not suddenly wane after the regime change.

Famous comedy actors also eagerly awaited opportunities to become involved in film comedy production. Han Fei's experience is a case in point. Having played an important part in *Long Live the Mistress* and starred in post-war Hong Kong film comedies such as *Spoiling the Wedding Day* (Wu jiaqi, dir. Zhu Shilin, 1951) and *Mr. Chen vs Mr. Chen* (*Yi ban zhi ge*, dir. Zhu Shilin, 1952), Han had already established himself as a film comedy actor when he returned from Hong Kong to mainland China in 1952 in the hope of contributing to the development of the new Chinese cinema. But his enthusiasm was soon dampened. During his four-year residence in liberated Shanghai, Han worked mostly as a dubbing actor and appeared on the silver screen only once, as a spy in the film *Cutting the Devil's Talons* (Zhan duan mo zhua, dir. Shen Fu, 1954). Amidst the so-called Hundred Flower Campaign in 1956, the actor frankly voiced his frustration:

> I love acting in comedy. However, it's been impossible to perform in a comedy since the liberation! Some critics, including some party cadres, would not allow peasants, soldiers, and workers to appear in comic roles on either stage or screen. Otherwise, this would misrepresent and insult our laboring masses. So I haven't dared to think about getting any comedic parts. As a matter of fact, there were simply no comedy projects … There is no lack of raw material for comedy in real life. I wish our playwrights were not intimidated by taboos and commandments and would create more comedies. This is because our audiences love comedy and I love acting in comedy! (Han 1956)

As much as Han's emotional outpourings highlight the conflict between the artist's individual aspiration and the new, politically oriented administrative culture, they also betray a pervasive uneasiness about the social and political appropriateness of laughter in the new China premised upon a particular understanding of comedy.

Many Communist Party cadres and cultural administrators may not have been aware of the diverse styles and subgenres of the pre-1949 Chinese comic filmmaking tradition,[2] but they knew all too well, from their study of "revolutionary" texts, that comedy had been related to criticism and disruption. For instance, the renowned modern Chinese writer Lu Xun, whom Mao Zedong praised as a model

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[2]Film historian Li Daoxin points out that Chinese film comedies from 1905 to 1949 can be roughly categorized into farcical comedies, humanistic comedies, and social satirical films. See Li (2004).

for Chinese revolutionaries, valued comedy because of its destructive and truth-revealing power. He once remarked that "comedy shows what is worthless is torn to pieces, and satire is a simplified form of comedy" (1925). In his view, the laughter most befitting his time would be satirical. In practice, Lu Xun wrote numerous satirical essays criticizing the social ills of his day, which have been considered as powerful as "daggers and spears." More importantly, satire, by comparison with other comedic modes such as farce and humor, had by then been invested with much critical attention in the official discourse of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). In 1942 at the Yan'an forum on literature and art, Mao Zedong made specific comments on the use of satire as a direct response to essays written by Ding Ling and other writers who criticized unequal gender relations and an emerging social hierarchy at the CCP's revolutionary base. Although Mao asserted that "Satire is always necessary … We are not opposed to satire in general; what we must abolish is the abuse of satire" (1942), his statement was undermined by the very intention of his talks, which was to curb political criticism by intellectuals and to provide writers and artists with clear guidelines for the creation of literature and art. The important questions that the Yan'an talks open up are these: How can the boundary between the use and abuse of satire be determined? Is it possible for satire to assume a constructive rather than destructive, a cohesive rather than divisive, function when it targets "us" rather than "others"?

4.2 Borrowed Laughter

Despite dire conditions for domestic comedy production, Chinese audiences were able to find laughter in a roundabout way. As early as 1950 the acclaimed Soviet musical comedy *The Kuban Cossacks* (dir. Ivan Pyrev, 1949) was dubbed into Chinese by the Northeast film studio for public screenings (Changchun 1992). From then on a steady stream of film comedies from the Soviet Union and the Eastern Bloc were dubbed and screened in dozens of "film week" events, including "Soviet film week," "Czechslovakian film week," and "Romanian film week" across China, thus providing Chinese audiences with rare opportunities to let out a good laugh. News reports in the CCP press outlets on special "film weeks," and film synopses, production stills, movie reviews and even artistic spin-offs carried in influential Chinese film magazines such as *Masses Cinema* (Dazhong dianying) and *Film Art* (Dianying yishu) supplied further publicity for these films.[3]

It is worth noting that prior to 1954 the introduction of foreign film comedies into China was not driven by conscious genre preference. Rather, it was just a part of a general trend of importation, translation, and exhibition of foreign films in the early PRC, which was integral to the building of a new Chinese cinema for the

[3]For instance, an introduction to the Czechoslovakian comedy *The Path to Happiness* was accompanied by a series of spin-off cartoon strips in the 19th issue of 1952's *Masses Cinema*.

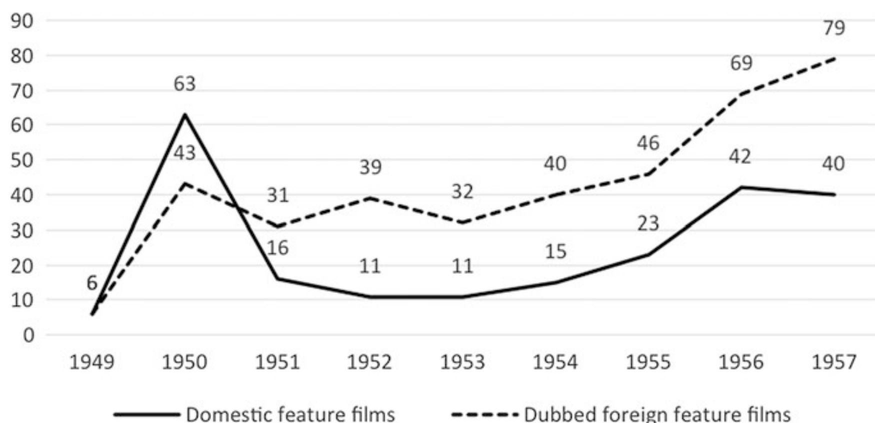

Fig. 4.1 Domestic versus dubbed feature film productions, 1949–1957 (In 1950, the 34 features produced by private film companies accounted for 54% of feature film production. After private companies were completely incorporated into state-run studios in early 1953, the production of feature films decreased drastically) *Source*: Chen Bo, *Zhongguo dianying biannian jishi* (Annals of Chinese Cinema)

masses. In the period from 1949 to 1957, foreign films played a particularly important role in sustaining the Chinese film market and transforming film culture in the new China. Due to the rather low production capacity of Chinese film studios (Fig. 4.1) and the expulsion of Hollywood films from China shortly after the outbreak of the Korean War in late 1950 (Xiao 2004), imported foreign films became an indispensable source of film supply. Among these, Soviet films occupied a prominent position in terms of both quantity and political significance. According to a report published in *Masses Cinema* in 1957, since the founding of the PRC, 206 Soviet feature films—about 54% of feature imports in the period—had been screened, attracting 1.5 billion film attendances in total (Sha 1957).

The rapid ascendance of Soviet films in the PRC film market was a direct result of the CCP's preferential film policy towards the Soviet Union. According to the new film quota policy put into effect in the spring of 1950, movie theaters were required to "reserve 50–55% of screen time for domestic productions, 20–25% for Soviet films, and no more than 20–30% of screen time for U.S. and British films" (Xiao 2004). The promotion of Soviet films was necessitated by the CCP's desire to propagate socialist ideology and to reshape Chinese film culture with the aim of transforming a pleasure-seeking audience into a politically active one.

In fact, the translation and exhibition of Soviet films also served many pragmatic purposes. They helped foster friendly Sino-Soviet relations and gained China reciprocal film promotion abroad (Du 2015). They provided many avenues for showcasing socialist fraternity. For example, Chinese film workers were grateful for their Soviet colleagues' assistance: written translations of film dialogue were

provided for Chinese professionals to help them with dubbing for Chinese audiences (Sha 1957). There was probably a sense of Soviet obligation, as China's "elder brother" (lao dage), to nurture the development of the Chinese film market, especially at a time when China's dubbing production was at its nascent stage. Additionally, these cultural practices manifested Chinese determination to learn from the Soviet Union–the world's first socialist state–in order to quickly modernize itself.

Taking account of this historical and cultural background, it comes as no surprise that films such as *The Kuban Cossacks* and *Tractor Drivers* (dir. Ivan Pyrev, 1939) were imported into China in the early 1950s not because these are famous film comedies but mainly because they depict a prosperous life on Soviet collective farms with idyllic pastoral landscapes, bustling village markets, bumper harvests, and happy singing peasants–a picture of "our tomorrow," as the chief editor of *Masses Cinema*, Mei Duo, aptly cued Chinese audiences to envision (1951).

It was not until 1954 that *Masses Cinema* started to pay serious attention to comedy as a film genre. Phrases such as "comic film," "film comedy," and "satirical film comedy" became more frequently used in the titles of articles featuring newly dubbed foreign film comedies. Compared to earlier imports, film comedies imported in the years between 1954 and 1957 also acquired a stronger satirical flavour. They can generally be grouped into two categories on the basis of their satirical targets: the historical comedy and the socialist comedy.

The first group of films relentlessly mocks the corrupt political system and hypocritical bureaucrats of the old times. A case in point is a Hungarian film comedy *The Magic Chair* (dir. Viktor Gertler, 1954). Introduced by *Masses Cinema* in 1954 as a "satirical comedy," the film offers a farcical presentation of upper-class society under the authoritarian Horthy regime of the old Hungary through its use of a special device, a chair with "truth-revealing" powers. Bureaucrats of all ranks, who take turns to sit on this chair, involuntarily speak from their hearts, thus exposing their own stupidity and corruption (He 1954). The public screening of this highly entertaining film continued well into 1958 (Anon 1958). Another example of the historical comedy is the Romanian film *A Lost Letter* (dirs. Sica Alexandrescu & Victor Iliu, 1954) featured in the 23rd issue of *Masses Cinema* published in 1954. Adapted from a play by the famous 19th century satirist Ion Luca Caragiale, *A Lost Letter* is a comedy set at election time, replete with ludicrous characters such as an adulterous governor, cuckolded statesmen, and drunken voters (Wen 1954). The use of satire in these films is no different from that of modern Chinese satirists Lu Xun's and Zhang Tianyi's, insofar as satire was conceived as a weapon of destruction, directed toward the old political institutions as well as bourgeois and upper-class figures.

The foreign film comedies classified as "socialist comedy" deal with various comical aspects of everyday life under socialism. *The Show Is On* (dir. Oldřich Lipský, 1954) from Czechoslovakia and Soviet productions such as *Loyal Friends* (dir. Mikhail Kalatozov, 1954), *Did We Meet Somewhere Before?* (dirs. Nikolai Dostal & Andrei Tutyshkin, 1954), *The Dragonfly* (dir. Siko Dolidze, 1955), and

Carnival Night (dir. Eldar Ryazanov, 1956) are good examples.[4] These films engage with the reality of contemporary socialist societies and transform mundane everyday life into a cinematic attraction through multifarious comic styles. *The Show Is On* tells the story of a group of suburban peasants and government employees in Prague who must overcome many hurdles to persuade the manager of a famous circus to withdraw the suspension of its performances (Gu 1954). Imbued with a light, mocking tone, the film capitalizes on acrobatic acts and funny circus routines to achieve much of its comic effect. Similarly, a mixture of various comedic modes is brilliantly infused into Soviet comedy films with a critical inspection of contemporary life. For instance, the comedy of errors *Loyal Friends* recounts a trip on a raft made by three middle-aged childhood friends, an academician-architect, a famous surgeon and a livestock expert. Through a series of incidents, the surgeon and the livestock expert help their aloof and arrogant academician-architect friend to shake off his officiousness and their old friendship is revived. In the comedy *Carnival Night*, mild criticism of Soviet bureaucracy is ingeniously embedded within an exuberant spectacle and entertaining narrative twists. The film revolves around how a group of young students successfully put on a joyful New Year's Eve show by defying the orders of Ogurtsov, the director of the Palace of Culture, who insists on mediocre uniformity in all artistic endeavors and censors all humorous entertainment. At the film's climax, Ogurtsov's authority is literally debunked as he becomes a stage buffoon. As a satirical comedy with a number of farcical elements, the film appeared refreshing to Chinese audiences and was well received for its dose of "healthy laughter" (Mei 1957).

The conscious importation of comedy films in the period 1954 to 1957 was a strategic response to Chinese audiences' lukewarm attitudes in the preceding years to foreign films. Despite state-media reports of Chinese audiences loving Soviet films, readers' letters published in film magazines and newspapers around 1950 reveal the initial lack of interest in Soviet films dealing with war, Russian history, and global affairs, such as *Michurin* (dir. Alexander Dovezenko, 1948) or *The Russian Question* (dir. Mikhail Romm, 1948).[5] Paul Clark has attributed the unpopularity of these new types of foreign film to Chinese audiences' unfamiliarity with Soviet history and culture. He has pointed out that "to appreciate, and even understand, the plot of a foreign movie, filmgoers required a degree of familiarity with foreign ways of life, geography, and so on" (1987, p. 40). However, if Chinese viewers had found foreign movies more enjoyable, they would perhaps have been more willing to learn about foreign cultures, ways of life, and so on. Thence the need to introduce more entertaining foreign films.

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[4]Chinese audience' reviews of these films include: Tang 1955. The Soviets' friendship: Afterthoughts on viewing *Loyal Friends*. *Masses Cinema*, 23:34; Li 1956. Different understandings of *Did We Meet Somewhere Before?*, *Masses Cinema*, 11:34; Mei 1957. Let our life filled with healthy laughter: afterthoughts on viewing the Soviet comedy film Carnival Night, *Masses Cinema*, 21:11–12.

[5]For Chinese audience' responses, see Liu 2008. Soviet films in China. *Film Art*, 4: 56.

Indeed, public screenings of foreign film comedies not only showcased the richness of socialist culture and enhanced cultural exchanges among socialist countries, but also presented China's fraternal countries as lands of merriment and happiness, thereby suggesting the desirability of the socialist system. Moreover, since the consumption of foreign comedies was rooted in a specific locale yet connected to a broader socialist network, it signalled the formation of socialist modernity, of a consciousness of shared temporality and unbounded connectedness with "absent" others propelled by common ideology and culture. In this sense, "borrowed" laughter functioned as a transnational binding force among citizens in socialist states.

4.3 Parallel Divergence: *Did We Meet Somewhere Before?* and *The Man Who Doesn't Bother About Trifles*

In addition to satisfying domestic demand, the rapid introduction of foreign film comedies attests to the eagerness of Chinese film professionals to keep abreast of the latest trend within a global socialist network of cultural production. Imported film comedies not only helped to test the boundaries of "appropriate laughter" in socialist China, but also provided sources of inspiration for Chinese filmmakers when the Chinese government started to encourage diversified film development.

In 1955, a report by the Ministry of Culture to the Propaganda Department and the Central Committee of the Chinese Communist Party proposed several strategies for improving feature film production in terms of both quantity and quality. The report specified that, as well as films of high artistic value, it was permissible to make harmless, entertaining, but educational films such as film adaptations of May Fourth literature, Chinese folklore and traditional operas, and popular rural films and satirical films (Chen 2005). Despite being given a green light, Chinese filmmakers still faced the challenging task of making comedies that would both enliven and enlighten the audience and of using laughter to strengthen rather than weaken social cohesion.

In the midst of the Hundred Flowers Campaign, a number of Chinese film directors, including Lü Ban, Wang Yan, and Fang Ying, were ready to embark on artistic experimentation with film comedy. They departed from the well-trodden path of filmmaking by shifting their focus from historical subject matter to mundane everyday life and personal matters. Fellow socialist citizens including sloppy workers, women fickle in love, and incompetent bureaucrats, replaced the corrupted GMD officials and snobbish petty urbanites of pre-1949 social comedies as the main types of comic figure on the silver screen.

The first wave of Chinese film satire production in 1956 and 1957 clearly resonates with the aforementioned Soviet film comedies at the levels of thematic focus and characterization. For instance, Lü Ban's 1956 film *Before the New Director Arrives*, the first satirical film to be made in the PRC, ridicules an

Fig. 4.2 The dubbed version of *Did We Meet Somewhere Before*? Produced by Changchun film studio in 1955 (DVD snapshot)

Fig. 4.3 Marximov at the train station director's office (DVD Snapshot)

irresponsible, unctuous and peremptory bureaucrat who mobilizes all the staff in his section for the "top priority" task of making a big splash to welcome the new bureau director. Lü's later and final comic film *Unfinished Comedy* (1957) displays a mixture of satire and farce. By deploying the narrative structure of a film-within-a film, it not only makes fun of human weakness and criticizes moral decline, but also satirizes a Chinese Ogurtsov, a prudish and officious literary critic who finds all humor unacceptable. A comparative study of the Soviet film comedy *Did We Meet Somewhere Before?* (Fig. 4.2) and Lü Ban's second film satire *The Man Who Doesn't Bother About Trifles* illustrates the communicative mechanism of the socialist comedy, demonstrates the narrative strategies adopted by Chinese film-makers to innovate in the genre, and reveals a heterogeneous discourse of satire present in film reviews and criticism.

Starring the most celebrated Soviet stand-up comedian Akadii Raikin, the film *Did We Meet Somewhere Before?* was developed from comic sketches that Raikin had performed on the Soviet variety stage (Anon. 1956). The film tracks the travel mishaps of the famous Soviet comedian Marximov (played by Raikin). It chronicles Marximov's brief encounters with multiple comic figures including a tale-bearing woman, a toadying train station director, a sloppy and incompetent photographer, and a snobbish theater manager (Fig. 4.3). Using various modalities of comedy

such as the parodic, the ironical, and the satirical, the film sympathetically ridicules the follies of humanity and draws attention to certain problematic bureaucratic practices in Soviet society. The use of satire in this film functions as a magnifying glass: it makes what generally may be passed over markedly visible and enables the audience to easily recognize flawed characters and social vices.

As an aesthetically rich text, the film employs many classical comedic strategies, such as depicting mistaken identities, parodying institution, and deploying humorous dialogue. Its comic style of filming–rhythmic momentum and heightened theatricality—is defined by Raikin's remarkable performance style. The film even incorporates Raikin's signature comedy routines. Its opening sequence depicting the protagonist Marximov's one-man show thoroughly displays Raikin's performance talents as a performer. Using a repertoire of gestures and voice registers, Marximov/Raikin instantaneously transforms himself into such psychologically and physically distinct characters as a haughty but maladroit poet, a timid audience member, and a rigid-minded cultural critic. Such theatrical techniques reappear later as Marximov's everyday tactics: after inadvertently leaving his suitcase behind on a train he assumes fictitious identities in order to obtain the documents and tickets required to continue his trip. It is through Marximov's "performance," or his playful appropriation of the rules of the bureaucratic game, that the film most effectively exposes the political malaise in society.

In addition, the film employs self-reflexivity not only to draw attention to the intertextuality between film and stand-up comedy, but also to cue film audiences to identify with Raikin's character and thereby to critically observe Soviet society. For example, the film's main narrative is prefaced by an iris shot featuring Raikin's direct address to the audience (Fig. 4.4), in which the comedian acknowledges their support and explains his role in the ensuing film. The use of this archaic film technology, the iris, by way of simulating a typical stage lighting effect, not only appropriately introduces the renowned comedian Raikin and sets a comic tone for the film, but also establishes Raikin's Marximov as a character to be identified with. From this clearly grounded viewing position, the audience can laugh along with Marximov and appreciate his mild ridiculing of social vice.

With its use of heterogeneous comedic strategies, this light-hearted humorous film satire delighted ordinary Chinese audiences and prompted creative responses

Fig. 4.4 Akadii Raikin in the opening sequence of *Did We Meet Somewhere Before*? (DVD snapshot)

from Chinese artists. The poet named Gong Mu wrote a long free-verse poem based on a sequence in the film where Marximov meets the sycophantic train station director; the cartoonist Wu Yun used comic strips to illustrate the responses of Chinese viewers who break into a knowing laughter as they recognize various types of figure ridiculed onscreen (Gong 1956; Wu 1956). Moreover, the public screening of this film led to many discussions of the meaning and methods of comedy, as well as of how to appreciate film satire. These discussions helped to shape the dominant discourse of comedy in socialist China—a discourse that emphasizes comedy's pedagogical function and subordinates its comedic means to its political goal.

Essays published in *Masses Cinema*—exemplars of reifying interpretive exercises—interpellate readers to take the same analytical stance in approaching the film. Take, for instance, an essay entitled "Burning Them with Satirical Fire—Thoughts Upon Viewing *Did We Meet Somewhere Before?*" The author of this essay praises the film for its "poignant and incisive ridicule of unreasonable social practices" and believes that the laughter elicited by the film "not only suggests the audience's repudiation of the backward but also shows their support for the nascent and the healthy" (Tang 1956). The author further elaborates on the film's edifying message:

> Marximov, as a new Soviet man, observes and critiques negative things around him. With party spirit he fights back against those backward elements. […] Aren't there backward people like those being ridiculed in the film in our own lives? Of course, there are many. Our responsibility is to put up a tenacious and incessant fight against these backward phenomena. In the meantime, we should also use the backward as a mirror to reflect our own shortcomings and then correct them. Here lies the pedagogical significance of this film: we shall use the spirit of socialism to educate and reform ourselves. (Tang 1956, 15)

At times, the interrelationship of the political and the aesthetic was brought to the fore unexpectedly. Due to their lack of literacy in film satire, some Chinese audiences were quite puzzled by the design of comic scenes in this Soviet film. To address this issue, the 11th issue of *Masses Cinema* in 1956 included an article written by an audience member from Beijing which elucidated the distinction between the form and the purpose of film satire. At the outset of the article, the author mentions that he and his friends held contradictory opinions about *Did We Meet Somewhere Before?* For his friends, the comic depiction of characters in the film was rather problematic. They pondered why Marximov did not confront the station director directly and wondered whether Marximov's inappropriate behaviors, such as assuming a fake identity and plucking flowers in a park for his lover, would invite imitation and fraud. The author, who is apparently versed in the arts, then goes on to justify the use of exaggeration, coincidence, and other seemingly "unrealistic methods of representation" by emphasizing the particularities of the comic art. Moreover, he asserts, the use of these comedic devices serves a pedagogical purpose: "[it] makes us recognize different annoying types of person and the unhealthy phenomena in society. It also prompts us to reflect on ourselves and to bid farewell to similar shortcomings when our laughter winds down" (Li 1956).

What these discussions do not directly address is how the specific historical conditions of Soviet society impacted upon the comic aesthetics of Soviet films.

Produced immediately after Stalin's death in 1953, *Did We Meet Somewhere Before?*, along with *Loyal Friends* and *Carnival Night*, is emblematic of cultural production during Khrushchev's Thaw. Compared to earlier film comedies such as *The Kuban Cossacks*, which embrace the principle of "conflictlessness" and present a varnished Soviet reality, these three film comedies take an interest in human stories and snapshots of daily life. Like film in other genres produced during the Thaw, they discredit Stalin-era orthodoxies and examine the psychological legacy of Stalinism. As film scholar David Gillespie points out, *Loyal Friends* can be seen as an allegory of individual rebirth and social regeneration, "as the trio shake off the superficial officiousness acquired in the course of their adult years—Stalinism—and recapture the innocence and goodness of their younger years" (2002). Through its satire of the rigid-minded bureaucrat, the visually exuberant *Carnival Night* also promises a post-Stalin new order where young people will find romance, enjoy champagne, and throw themselves into dancing, singing and laughter. In the case of *Did We Meet Somewhere Before?*, while exuding optimism, it exhibits a remarkable ease in using various comedic modes. This is most clearly manifested in the film's mild satire of Marximov's flippant courtship. By poking fun at the protagonist, with whom the audience is intended to identify, the film tactfully dissolves the distinction between the subject and the object of satire, thus transmuting separation into connection.

The dissonance between revolutionary stages in the Soviet Union and in China in the mid-1950s heavily impacted upon filmmakers' attitudes toward and strategies of comic filmmaking. This is clearly manifested in Lü Ban's 1956 film *The Man Who Doesn't Bother About Trifles*, which concentrates on the uncivilized behavior and hypocrisy of a rising satirical writer, Li Shaobai, whose name is itself a parody of Li Taibai (also known as Li Bai), the greatest poet of the Tang dynasty.-Framed by Li's attempt to get a first date with his love-interest are fragmented episodes of his day traveling around a new city where his admirer lives: he plucks flowers and draws graffiti on a pavilion column while touring a park (Fig. 4.5); he almost burns a rare book at a local library by flicking his cigarette; he heckles at an opera

Fig. 4.5 Li Shaobai draws graffiti

Fig. 4.6 The satirist delivers a lecture on satire

performance; he delivers a public talk on satire in an officious tone and encourages his audiences to use satire to criticize those lacking in public spiritedness (Fig. 4.6). As Li's love interest inadvertently becomes both a victim of and a witness to his obnoxious conduct, when the two finally meet up the satirist is punished by the woman's look of contempt and a prematurely ended romance.

This film represents a variation on the generic formula of the Soviet socialist comedy, which combines a light-hearted depiction of the simple pleasures of everyday life with mild satire of dreary and undynamic bureaucrats as well as ludicrous social phenomena. Its connection with the Soviet satire *Did We Meet Somewhere Before?* is particularly hard to miss. The title song of *The Man Who Doesn't Bother About Trifles*, sung by a chorus, clearly echoes the Soviet film satire, with lyrics that read: "There's a fair-skinned scholarly man. He is not a bad person really. You have met him and you can recognize him. […] But he has some small shortcomings: he has no sense of public and moral responsibility. […] You have met him and you can recognize him." Resemblances between these two films are also evident in the way they both use a travel narrative to present comic figures and events in everyday life as well as using coincidence and exaggeration to create comic effect.

Despite their similarities, these two films met with different fates in China. Although it is difficult to reconstruct the actual reception of the two comic films because of the lack of reliable statistics on film attendance and of an adequate record of audience responses, selected audience reviews published in *Masses Cinema* reveal what the state media encouraged Chinese audiences to think about them. Whereas the film *Did We Meet Somewhere Before?* was upheld as an exemplary comedy in which "satire becomes synonymous with warm-hearted help" (Hu 1957), due to a rapidly changing political climate in the year 1957 *The Man Who Doesn't Bother About Trifles* first met with mixed reviews but soon incurred vehement attacks.

Between the 12th and 15th issues of 1957, *Masses Cinema* published several letters from audience members with slightly different views on *The Man Who Doesn't Bother About Trifles*. A moviegoer named Li Kefei gave Lü Ban's comedy a thumbs-up and elucidated the merits of a few well thought-out film scenes (Li 1957). Other audience letters mainly addressed the film's artistic defects while acknowledging the director's efforts and experiments. The key weaknesses enumerated included: a repetitive and insubstantial plot, the film's entrapment in its own formalism, and above all its poorly developed central character. One viewer pointed out that the film seemed to pursue laughter for laughter's sake, that it mechanically set up an accumulation of figures as laughing stocks and liberally inserted "meaningless" and almost vulgar gags simply to provoke laughter (He 1957). Another major criticism was of the film's crude construction of its protagonist. Lacking distinct personality traits, Li Shaobai's annoying behavior and inappropriate verbal outbursts often occur for no apparent reason. As viewers pointed out, the construction of this comic figure is unrealistic, failing to embody any typicality (*dianxing xing*) (He 1957; Jin 1957; Zhang 1957). One writer even encapsulated audience' dissatisfaction with the character in a sharp question: "Is Li Shaobai crazy and insane?" (Jin 1957).

The divergent receptions of these two films alert us to the specific aesthetic strategies adopted by Soviet and Chinese directors and the socio-political contexts that conditioned these aesthetic choices. When compared with the fast-paced light-hearted and humorous Soviet film comedy, Lü's film appears monotonous and lacking sufficient narrative momentum. The selection of comic figures in these two films largely accounts for their differing comic effects. When watching *Did We Meet Somewhere Before?*, spectators are invited to travel with the film's protagonist, Marximov, to meet and mock a variety of comic figures from all walks of life. They also laugh at Marximov himself when the film occasionally exposes his own silly and uncultured behavior. Given that the comic effect is largely dependent on the "conspiratorial" relationship with the audience (Horton 1991), the Soviet film's inclusion of multiple comic figures maximizes its comic potential by engaging in conspiracy as many people as possible from all social classes.

In contrast, *The Man Who Doesn't Bother About Trifles* features a single comic figure, the satirist Li Shaobai. This banal aesthetic choice is in fact a deliberate decision made by the filmmaker in order to accommodate popular need and political demand. Given the constraints imposed by the CCP's commandment on the artistic depiction of workers, peasants, and soldiers, Lü was cautious enough to cast a comic light on the only uncontroversial object of satire in the early PRC, the manners and behaviors of an intellectual. The exclusion of all workers, peasants, and soldiers inevitably precluded the filmmaker from developing more sophisticated comic events involving multifaceted interactions across social strata.

In order to both tackle the political constraints on film comedy and entertain mass audiences, Lü not only subtly infused the character of Li Shaobai with the ludicrous traits of both old-fashioned literati and pompous bureaucrats, but also simultaneously incorporated into his film the satirical art form most popular at that

time, cross-talk (*xiangsheng*).[6] In fact, before there was any Chinese film comedy production, cross-talk performers were already using this traditional comic art form to criticize emerging social problems. For instance, an immensely popular cross-talk piece called *Buying Monkeys*, scripted by He Chi and performed in 1954 by cross-talk masters Ma Sanli and Wang Fengshan, ridicules a sloppy, careless, and irresponsible shop clerk who inadvertently shortens the order “buy Monkey brand soap” into “buy monkey.” Although the inter-medial relation between cross-talk and film is not made explicit in the film’s narrative, the cross-talk writer-cum-screenwriter He Chi encoded it in the narrative structure itself. Each episode in the film revolves around a single person’s detestable behavior and is given equal narrative weight. These are loosely linked in the same way as a cross-talk piece is structured. To a certain extent, the innovative integration of two media gave Lü Ban a unique aesthetic strategy for constructing a space for laughter. However, its shortcomings are also obvious. As a moviegoer from Kunming observed, *The Man Who Doesn’t Bother About Trifles* fails to grasp or respect the specificities of film as a medium. The film depicts personal behaviors and acts that are more suitable to be represented by cross-talk or in a cartoon strip. As a result, it falls short of maintaining logical coherence or creating a convincing character, compromising its affective power considerably (Zhang 1957).

The film’s failure to live up to Chinese audiences’ expectations turns our attention back to the boundaries of laughter. While foreign socialist comedies were imported across national borders and laughter was celebrated as a border-crossing force that bound socialist communities together, the comic practices and artistic imagination of Chinese filmmakers were still circumscribed by the elusive boundaries of “appropriate laughter” in the early PRC. It is worth noting here that the comic form is fundamentally derivative, being determined by the very social structure it ridicules and shaped by the national tradition of a comedic culture. That *Did We Meet Somewhere Before?* is able to deploy diverse comedic modes and sophisticated aesthetic strategies is indicative of the confidence of a more established and liberalized socialist state, which was more willing to accommodate its own forms of cultural critique. As for *The Man Who Doesn’t Bother About Trifles*, its artistic limitations, as noted by many viewers, are in fact deeply rooted in the predicament in which the comedy director found himself. Treading a fine line between satisfying the general audience’s yearning for laughter and not overstepping political boundaries, Lü Ban was compelled to adjust his artistic aspirations and turned his film satire into a de-politicized diversion.

Perhaps unexpectedly, Chinese audiences’ well-intentioned criticisms of *The Man Who Doesn’t Bother About Trifles* paved the way for a vehement attack on the filmmaker. In September 1957, when the Anti-Rightist Movement was in full swing in urban China, Lü Ban’s comic experiment was subject to a backlash. The director

[6]Xiangsheng, often translated into English as cross-talk, is a traditional Chinese art, subsumed under the heading of quyi (popular verbal arts). The most common form of xiangsheng involves two comedians performing a comic dialogue in front of an audience. Please see David Moser’s chapter on xiangsheng in Chap. 5.

was labelled as a Rightist and accused of sardonically mocking new persons and new things in a new Chinese society "in the name of comedy" (Xu 1957). The elusive boundaries of film satire were solidified, making it a forbidden zone. A few years later, Chinese film professionals could only resort to an idea of "conflict-lessness" and began to produce light comedies such as *Today's My Day Off* (dir. Lu Ren, 1959) and *Five Golden Flowers* (dir. Wang Jiayi, 1959), or the so-called "eulogizing comedies" (gesong xiju), which used depictions of model socialist citizens and gentle teaching to showcase a harmonious socialist society.

4.4 Conclusion

This chapter has examined the emerging comedy film culture in 1950s China, paying specific attention to the transmission of film comedies from the Soviet Bloc. It shows that public discussion and criticism of foreign film comedies played an important role in shaping the dominant discourse of comedy, which prescribed socialist comedy as an uplifting genre producing "healthy" laughter and having a positive bearing on the formation of rational and reflective socialist beings. By conducting parallel readings of the Soviet comedy film *Did We Meet Somewhere Before?* and the Chinese film satire *The Man Who Doesn't Bother About Trifles*, this chapter suggests that, although the international trend of comedic production under global socialism greatly informed the production of Chinese comedy, the local expressive lexicon of comedy had to be developed through the film artists' reconciliation of political demand, popular need, and individual aspiration. Although the simultaneous erasure and reinforcement of the boundaries of laughter, affecting foreign and domestic comedies respectively, may appear to be paradoxical, such efforts highlight the complexity involved in the management of laughter for the purpose of constructing hegemony in the early PRC.

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Part II
Joking in the PRC

Chapter 5
Keeping the *Ci* in *Fengci*: A Brief History of the Chinese Verbal Art of *Xiangsheng*

David Moser

Abstract The Chinese verbal art of *xiangsheng* 相聲 is one of a number of Chinese oral performance literature forms in the category of *shuochang yishu,* "speaking and singing arts." The most common format is a kind of rapid-fire humorous dialogue between a "straight man" and a jokester, who explore topics as varied as Peking Opera, folk customs, and social issues. When Mao took power in 1949, xiangsheng was cleansed of "unhealthy" or "feudal" content and incorporated into the propaganda agenda of the arts, used as a tool for education and indoctrination. Humor and satire being the core of xiangsheng performance, the art form often fell afoul of the censors as it attempted to balance the Party's requirement to edify with the audience's preference for robust satire. This chapter traces the path of xiangsheng in its quest to retain its relevance and popularity as it negotiated the changing political winds of post-1949 China, the Reform and Opening-up period, and the present age of the Internet.

5.1 Introduction: The Origins of Xiangsheng

One of the most popular humor forms in China throughout the last century is the verbal art of *xiangsheng* 相聲, literally "face and voice", indicating that the art form primarily emphasizes facial expression and vocal skills.[1] Xiangsheng is one of a large number of Chinese folk oral performance literature forms in the category of *quyi* 曲藝 ("vocal arts", sometimes translated as "minor performing arts"), which includes clapper tales (*kuaibanr* 快板兒 and *Shandong kuaishu* 山東快書), drum-accompanied narrative forms (such as *Jingyun dagu* 京韻大鼓) and storytelling forms (*pingshu* 評書). Because these forms usually involve storytelling in

[1]The standard English translation for the term is "crosstalk," a rendering that seems to draw upon the first-tone reading of the character *xiàng* 相 as "mutual", and *sheng* 聲 to mean "voice, speech."

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some combination of singing and speaking, such forms are also referred to as *shuochang yishu* 說唱藝術, "speaking and singing arts." There are more than a hundred regional varieties of these storytelling forms, and most involve minimal staging and small performing forces, usually one or two performers.[2]

Quyi art forms are performed in a wide range of regional dialects, but xiangsheng performance developed and took root primarily in the two cities of Beijing and Tianjin, and thus most typically employs the Beijing dialect. Standard xiangsheng performance consists of two actors standing up on a stage in front of a live audience engaging in rapid-fire humorous repartee, with their interaction following the tried-and-true formula of a "straight-man" (*penggende* 捧哏的, "joke supporter") acting as an exasperated foil to the muddle-headedness of an illogical clowner (the *dougende* 逗哏的, "joke cracker"). Westerners seeing the modern version of the form for the first time are often strongly reminded of classic American comedy duos, the closest parallel being Abbott and Costello's famous "Who's on First?" routine, which is very similar in style and structure to xiangsheng.

The art of xiangsheng had its origins in a kind of street theater that arose in the late Qing Dynasty. Upon the death of the Xianfeng emperor in 1861, the Qing government declared an official mourning period of 100 days, during which time all the theaters and music halls were shut down, and all forms of public entertainment were forbidden. This edict compelled the musicians and performers, always a marginal lot at best, to seek their livelihood in the streets and back alleys of Beijing. Performers quickly developed an ad hoc form of open-air theater, improvising comedic banter or singing songs to attract an audience among the passers-by, and then launching into a rehearsed storyline or humorous tale, the narrative structures of which would later be developed into the classic routines that have become staples of the xiangsheng repertoire.

Xiangsheng had to compete for audiences alongside a ragtag group of acrobats, magicians, and storytellers who performed in Beijing's Tianqiao District, and these lowly beginnings as a form of street performance, as well as the challenge of attracting the attention of distracted pedestrians, would later have an indelible effect on the form and content of the art. The subject matter of traditional xiangsheng was quite varied, and could include anything from Peking Opera plots to folk legends or aspects of local Beijing culture. From the very beginning, xiangsheng had a reputation as being a rather rowdy, irreverent and even bawdy art form.[3] Indeed, it is

[2]Here and elsewhere my basic information on the art of xiangsheng is taken from several Chinese sources, including Xue (1985), Hou et al. (1980), and Hou and Xue (1981). Perry Link provides the most comprehensive and enlightening English sources (Link 1984, 2007). Some of the material in this chapter was also taken from my Master's thesis, (*The Chinese verbal art of Xiangsheng*, 1989, Center for Chinese Studies, University of Michigan) and from a general history of xiangsheng (Moser 2004).

[3]There was a *xiangsheng* genre called *hunkou* 葷口, lit. "meat [as opposed to "vegetarian"] mouth", which involved suggestive themes and sexual humor. A rare surviving example of this form is *Niao bu jiao* 《鳥不叫》, "The Birdie that Doesn't Chirp", transcribed and analyzed in

said that if a woman with a child came within earshot of an outdoor xiangsheng performance, the two actors would bow politely and wait for the woman to leave the scene before resuming the show.

Due to the special relationship with the audience, xiangsheng tended to be quite a self-referential theatrical form; performers often began their act by mentioning aspects of xiangsheng language and performance itself, and this feature of the art form remains common even today.[4] Partly for this reason, xiangsheng was also a very language-conscious form, continually calling attention to its own linguistic skill set, and mining the rich legacy of Chinese dialects and idioms for comedic material. Many traditional pieces were based entirely on aspects of language use, such as Beijing slang, imitation of regional dialects, metaphorical two-part sayings called *xiehouyu* 歇後語 (also referred to as *qiaopihua* 俏皮話), tongue twisters (*raokouling* 繞口令), and peddler's cries (*yaohe* 吆喝). Though most xiangsheng performers were illiterate, they had sharp ears, prodigious memories, and amazing powers of mimicry. As with most artistic trades of the time, the art was passed down via master-apprentice lineages that still exist today, with various stylistic schools associated with the legacy of a famous performer.

In the traditional xiangsheng pieces that have been preserved, one can glimpse the irreverence and subversive humor of the original repertoire. An example is the short traditional piece *Mai guancai* 賣棺材 "Selling Coffins." The plot involves an unscrupulous coffin seller desperate to sell his wares during a period of disappointingly low mortality rates. In a particularly hard-sell attempt, he tries to convince a prospective customer that a coffin can have a multitude of other uses besides the usual one:

A: [*to the customer*]…The smaller coffins also can be put to other uses besides burying people, you know.
B: Like what?
A: Do you have a child in your family?
B: Yes.
A: Great! You can buy one of these small coffins and use it as a baby stroller. It'll be perfect: the handles on all four sides will keep the baby from falling out.
B: No good. A stroller has wheels, a coffin doesn't. Without wheels, how can you rock it back and forth?
A: Just put four wheels on it and there you go! It shouldn't cost much money.
B: But… the baby will be terrified jostling about inside!
A: Oh, don't be such a fuddy-duddy! Stick a little mattress in there and it'll be just fine.
B: Boy, you've got a solution for everything.
A: So you'll buy one, eh?

(Footnote 3 continued)

Link (1992). The piece is performed by a man-woman team, and the "birdie" in question is a thinly-veiled euphemism for the man's penis.

[4]For more on this self-referential characteristic of xiangsheng, see Moser (1990).

B: Well, I… no, it won't work. There's no place to hang mosquito netting in the summer.
A: What do you need mosquito netting for?
B: Without it, the baby will get bitten by mosquitoes!
A: So just shut the lid. The mosquitoes won't be able to get in.
B: But with the lid shut, the baby will suffocate!
A: So much the better.
B: What?!
A: You can just wheel the coffin to the cemetery to bury the kid—no need to hire pallbearers. (Jiang et al. 1996. Translation is my own)

There are virtually no written scripts or records for these early performances, and thus some of the more daring content was discarded or permanently lost when xiangsheng was sanitized by the Party for propaganda purposes in the 1950s. The art form gradually amassed hundreds of set pieces or plot structures (in xiangsheng parlance, *duanzi* 段子, roughly a "bit" or "sketch"), which were passed down from master to disciple, continually modified and honed over the course of thousands of performances. Due to the often chaotic performance environment of the times, a xiangsheng performance would usually begin with a short introductory section called the *dianhua* 墊話, or "cushioning talk", which contained some preliminary jokes or comments to get the attention of the audience, assess their mood, and warm them up for the main subject matter. We have a very good idea of the content of the established routines, since they survived in oral form into the Mao era. We know much less about the more improvisational *dianhua* sections, but accounts from the xiangsheng masters suggest that the content was often topical, related to recent events or scandals, and sometimes contained social humor based on the daily headlines.[5]

Amidst the social changes of the Republican period, xiangsheng moved into the teahouses and theaters, becoming a staple of Beijing and Tianjin nightlife entertainment in the 1920s and 30s. Though the performing space had begun to shift to indoor stages, xiangsheng still retained its satirical street-theater edge, lampooning corrupt officials, social elites, country bumpkins, the handicapped, prostitutes, pompous scholars, and even political leaders. One could say that the art form was an equal-opportunity offender.

Satire needs such targets for the humor to be effective, of course. The Chinese word for "satire" is *fengci* 諷刺, *feng* meaning "to mock" and the second character in the compound, *ci*, meaning "to prick, stab, or sting." As xiangsheng adapted to the changing political realities of the 20th century, it struggled to retain this crucial, cathartic quality of *ci*—the satirical bite, the subversive puncturing of pretense and

[5]The main body of xiangsheng pieces is always a memorized routine, and improvisation was never a significant factor in xiangsheng performance practice. However, we do know that performers did often improvise humor in an ad hoc fashion when the situation called for it, a practice that xiangsheng performers referred to as *xiangua* 現掛.

hypocrisy—that had always been at its core. This goal proved rather problematic at times, as the xiangsheng's role in the arts changed, and as acceptable targets for ridicule shifted with the political winds.

5.2 Xiangsheng After 1949

By the time Mao took power in 1949, xiangsheng had become a well-established form of entertainment, one that maintained a somewhat earthy, anti-authoritarian quality. It was a widely popular, and populist, art form that for ordinary citizens had become almost synonymous with humor itself. As genuine folk art genre, it became an ideal candidate for inclusion in the Party's remolding of the arts into propaganda, as laid out in Mao's "Yan'an Forum on Literature and the Arts." Being easily staged and accessible to the millions of illiterate peasants, xiangsheng had great potential as a tool for education and indoctrination. However, Party officials in charge of the arts for the new China were in agreement that the content of xiangsheng was too irreverent and coarse to be employed in its existing form. Clearly the sexual and scatological humor had to be cleaned up, but now political figures were also off-limits as well, and performers could no longer ridicule the peasantry, who in the new society were the class heroes of the revolution.

A special task force, the "Small Group for the Improvement of Xiangsheng" (*Xiangsheng gaijin xiaozu* 相聲改進小組) was set up to sanitize and reform the xiangsheng repertoire. Among the committee members were Hou Baolin 侯寶林, xiangsheng's star performer, who would go on to become the standard bearer for the art form in the next three decades, and Lao She, the beloved author of *Rickshaw Boy*, who had returned to China to spearhead reform efforts in literature and the arts under the new regime. Lao She had tried his hand writing xiangsheng and other quyi pieces in 1938 as propaganda for the anti-Japanese war, and later on for the Korean War (Link 2007, Moser 1989). Like other intellectuals of the left, Lao She respected the class credentials of xiangsheng as a true "people's art", though he admitted that his own efforts in the genre were not always successful.

The special task force quickly set to work to produce a several anti-American propaganda pieces, among them *Ruci Meiguo* 如此美國 "This is America," which satirized economic inequality in the US:

A: Don't believe the Americans when they say America is a rich country. It's all arranged so that the money ends up in the hands of a small group of capitalists. The vast majority of citizens never get their share. There are a lot of out-of-work and hungry people. Many American workers don't even have a place to live.

B: What? America has a housing shortage?

A: Just look at all the skyscrapers in New York—they're all property of the big bourgeoisie. The average worker has to pay $60 to rent a house, so how much money can they actually take in each month? So you have a place like Harlem

> in New York, where the average building houses 4000 people. At night when everyone's sleeping, if somebody wants to turn over on their side, they have to shout "Right face!" and everyone turns over in unison. (Lao 1982)

Lao She went on to produce a series of such propaganda xiangsheng pieces that were arguably of better quality than this example, but none of his pieces went on to become classic repertoire, precisely because of their didactic nature. *Fangwen Dulesi* 訪問杜勒斯 "Interviewing Dulles" is an imaginary press conference with John Foster Dulles, Secretary of State under Eisenhower, in which the US position on nuclear armament is ridiculed. *Hougu bojin* 厚古薄今 "Valuing the Past, Neglecting the Present" makes a case that the new socialist literature is on a par with Tang poetry and the great literature of the past. These post-1949 pieces survive only as museum fossils of the era, the humor throttled by transparent, obligatory political agendas.

In fact, writers and performers under the new government all faced the same challenge of creating pieces that were both edifying and entertaining. The immediate problem for the reformers was how to take xiangsheng, this unruly folk art form that was satirical in essence, and turn it into a vehicle to laud the Party and the extol the new China. The artistic solution to this conundrum quickly became finding a proper balance between "praise" (*gesong* 歌頌) and "satire" (*fengci* 諷刺). Of course, few dissenting voices dared point out the obvious problem, namely that it's nearly impossible to be funny while praising something.

Nevertheless, writers and performers made valiant attempts to achieve this delicate balance. One "praise" piece that enjoyed a modicum of success was *Zuotian* 昨天 "Yesterday", a communist "Rip Van Winkle" story. The dialogue tells the story of an old man who has a complete nervous breakdown after being cruelly bullied and exploited under the repressive conditions of the "old society." He is put into a hospital, where he remains in a coma for 10 years. When he finally wakes up, he finds himself in post-Liberation China, unaware of the monumental social changes that have taken place. Misunderstandings ensue as the old man, still in a mindset of the old realities of poverty and inequality, is set free to roam the streets in Mao's new socialist utopia:

A: A young pioneer walked by, and my grandpa called him over, "Hey, young master!" (*xiao shaoye* 小少爺, a term used by a servant to address the youngest boy of a rich family)
B: What? "Young master?"

A: "Is this Tiananmen?"
"Yes, sir, it's Tiananmen."
"These flower wreaths and these large buildings, were built by foreigners?"

B: Huh? Built by foreigners?

A: The little kid says "Grandpa, these weren't built by foreigners. We built them ourselves."
"We did?"

"Right. They belong to all of us, all the people, including you."
"How would I have the money to build a building?"

B: Ha!

A: The child replies "Just look! This is the Monument to the People's Heroes. This is the building where the People's Representatives meet…"
"People's Representatives?"
"Right! It's we the Chinese people taking care of the important political affairs of the country…"
[*The old man nervously hushes the boy by putting his hand over the boy's mouth*]
"Don't talk politics!" [*mo tan guo shi*莫談國事] (Chang and Hou 1978).

The work's time-travel plot device was admired for its cleverness, if not for its humor. Indeed, in the only available recorded version, the audience laughter seems rather tepid. Writers soon learned there was a limit to the possibilities of such "praise" pieces.

There were xiangsheng works of the early 1950s that resonated with audiences, but often for that very reason were met with official scrutiny. Audiences were laughing, yes, but were they laughing for the right reasons? *Mai hou* 買猴 "Buying Monkeys" by He Chi was one of the success stories of post-1949 xiangsheng when it first was recorded. The story paints a humorous portrait of a low-level functionary named Ma Daha (馬大哈), who carries out his duties in a perfunctory and careless manner, resulting in mayhem reverberating throughout the bureaucracy of his work unit. Given the task of writing out a purchase order for 50 crates of "Monkey Brand" soap, Ma Daha, his mind on the evening's date with his girlfriend, absent-mindedly writes out "50 monkeys" instead. This clerical slip-up sends a hapless company comrade on a wild goose chase across northern and southern China to somehow procure 50 live monkeys. The absurdist tale was a hit with audiences, who recognized the Ma Daha character as a symbol of the inefficiency and waste of the new socialist bureaucracies that the Party had created. The very name "Ma Daha" even entered into the Chinese lexicon, serving either as a noun or adjective, to denote a careless, irresponsible scatterbrain. Despite the popular acclaim of "Buying Monkeys", by 1955, the piece began to be criticized by the Party censorship apparatus. However well-meaning the intent, or how gentle the satire, the Party began to suspect the humor had come uncomfortably close to criticizing the new socialist society. The author, He Chi, was ultimately branded a rightist in 1957. Link (2007) masterfully analyzes the vagaries of politics and perceptions that led He Chi and other unsuspecting creative artists to be caught in the "crocodile jaws" of the Party's censorship apparatus in the years after 1949.

For the most part, xiangsheng master Hou Baolin was able to remain above the fray during this period, retaining his role as the paramount xiangsheng performer throughout the Mao years and well into the 1980s. Many of the pieces he wrote or adapted have become timeless classics. (Beijing taxi drivers to this day still listen to Hou's recorded performances on the radio). Hou was a self-taught performer with a prodigious memory and an uncanny ear for dialects. With a Buster Keaton deadpan face and a relaxed, understated style, his performances had an urbane sophistication

lacking in many other performers. His enduring popularity was partly due to his sheer mastery of the form, as well as his ability to find rich veins of humor in China's history and traditional culture—aspects safely removed from the highly charged political environment of the time. Hou was a true genius and a master of the art, but he was not a satirist. Thus, for most of the Hou's active career, *fengci* was not part of the program.

Mao Zedong himself was an avid fan of xiangsheng, and would hold performances during the parties in his residences at Zhongnanhai on Wednesday and Saturday nights, at which Hou Baolin featured prominently. Hou Baolin reports that he performed more than 150 xiangsheng pieces for Mao, all of them selections from the traditional repertoire—the Chairman had no use for the new sterile, politically correct pieces. (Wang Jingshou 汪景壽, Peking University professor, Chinese department, personal communication).

In 1989, I interviewed several xiangsheng performers who had performed for Chairman Mao at these weekly events, among them Hao Aimin, who was one of the younger artists to take part in the events. In the relaxed setting of my dorm room at Peking University, Hao related what it was like to perform xiangsheng in front of Chairman Mao:

> We would peek out from behind the curtain backstage while we were waiting to go on, and there would be Chairman Mao, all red-faced, dancing waltzes with the young women. Chairman Mao was a large man, very robust, but actually quite graceful on his feet, and a good dancer. Seeing him in this context – as a human being rather than a world leader – enabled us to relax a bit and not be so terrified when it was time to go on. Still, standing up in front of Chairman Mao telling jokes could be intimidating. You had the feeling the people in the audience were afraid to laugh unless he did. Zhou Enlai was a better audience in this respect. He himself was more easy-going and laughed readily at all the jokes. He also had a tendency to anticipate the punch lines, and would say them along with you. This would spoil the joke somewhat, but it made for a more relaxed atmosphere. (Hao Aimin 郝愛民, personal interview, Peking University, 1989)

During the dark days of the Cultural Revolution, xiangsheng was reduced to a mere humorless vehicle for sloganeering and indoctrination. Public performances of xiangsheng became increasingly rare as performers became understandably cautious about lampooning the wrong target, and the mandate to "praise" completely overshadowed any possibility of satire, or even genuine laughter.

5.3 Xiangsheng in the Reform and Opening up Period

In the late 1970s, following the end of the Cultural Revolution, for a brief period xiangsheng experienced a rebirth as performers were again given more or less free rein to exercise their satirical skills. This time xiangsheng performers had a safe and officially sanctioned target: the Gang of Four and the excessive zealotry of the nightmare decade that had just ended. Performers took gleeful pleasure in getting comedic revenge on Jiang Qing and her cohorts, and dozens of pieces appeared

with titles like *Baigujin xianxing ji* 《白骨精現形記》 "The White-Boned Demon Shows Her True Self". Jokes about the Gang of Four that had been circulating underground for years could now be put to use in these routines, and xiangsheng performers were even free to show off their much-vaunted imitation skills to viciously parody Jiang Qing:

A: [*imitating Jiang Qing*] I've always studied diligently since I was young. I persisted in reading Marxist-Leninist literature five hours every day, and Chairman Mao's works for seven hours every day. Comrades, I read four works from cover to cover: I can recite from memory Lenin's *Das Kapital*, and Marx's *The Collected Works of Lenin*…
B: Come off it! Give us a break!
A: Comrades, the struggles at the top are complex, and there are those in political circles who oppose me.
B: Yeah, they can see you're a schemer and an opportunist!
A: They say that I have openly tried to subvert the Party. These accusations are totally groundless! Sure, I tried to subvert the Party, but it was never openly! (Ma and Jiezhong 1979).

Not exactly side-splitting humor, of course. Most of these pieces don't hold up well, being prime examples of the type of humor for which "you had to be there." But the laughter was truly cathartic, as audiences were now free to laugh at what just a few years earlier had been a deadly-serious aspect of everyday life.

One of the more successful pieces of the post-Mao period was Jiang Kun's *Ruci zhaoxiang* 《如此照相》 "How to Take a Photograph," which skewered the absurd amount of obligatory political sloganeering in daily life during the Cultural Revolution:

A: On the shop wall was a piece of paper, with four words on it: NOTICE TO CUSTOMERS.
B: What did it say?
A: "All revolutionary comrades who walk through the revolutionary front door of this revolutionary photography shop, before stating any revolutionary request, must first recite a revolutionary slogan. If any of the revolutionary masses fail to recite a revolutionary slogan, the revolutionary shopkeeper will resolutely adopt a revolutionary attitude and refuse to give a revolutionary response. Revolutionarily yours, the revolutionary management."
B: That's pretty "revolutionary", all right. That's just how it was in those days. You went into the shop and the dialogue went like this: "Serve the People!" Comrade, I'd like to ask a question.
A: "Struggle Against Selfishness and Criticize Revisionism!" Go ahead.
B: [*to the audience*] Well, at least he didn't ignore me. [*Back in character*] "Destroy Capitalism and Elevate the Proletariat!" I'd like to have a picture taken.
A: "Do Away with the Private and Establish the Public!" What size?

B: "The Revolution is Without Fault!" A three-inch photo.
A: "Rebellion is Justified!" Okay, please give me the money.
B: "Politics First and Foremost!" How much?
A: "Strive for Immediate Results!" One *yuan* three *mao*.
B: "Criticize Reactionary Authorities!" Here's the cash.
A: "Oppose Rule by Money!" Here's the receipt.
B: "Sweep Away Class Enemies of All Kinds!" Thank you. (Jiang and Wenhua 1979).

The piece catapulted the young performer Jiang Kun into instant success, and more pieces followed. For a brief period of time, xiangsheng had an officially sanctioned target and almost total license to attack it.

This period of satiric openness did not last long. Once the brief period of letting off steam had subsided, the excesses of the Cultural Revolution, and political topics in general, were once again off-limits. Those in power did not wish for discontent with the recently toppled regime to begin to spill over into the current one. Xiangsheng performers were still for the most part employed as the song-and-dance troupes adjunct to work units, and xiangsheng pieces often once again became vehicles for education and propaganda, charged with promoting the one-child policy or the spread of Putonghua.

For a very brief time in the late 1980s, however, it seemed as if one performer, Jiang Kun, teamed up with a talented young writer named Liang Zuo, might be able to put some teeth back into xiangsheng by adopting a tactic that creative artists under other repressive regimes have often employed, namely working at two levels simultaneously, incorporating subversive messages into a work that functions at the surface level as innocuous and politically correct.

The team's first successful collaboration was *Hukou xiaxiang* 《虎口遐想》, "Reflections in the Tiger's Mouth," the basic premise of which is as follows: A young man accidentally falls into a tiger pit at the zoo and finds himself face to face with a hungry tiger. Attempts to rescue him fail, and, suddenly forced to confront his own mortality, he frantically searches for some metaphysical consolation in his last remaining moments of life:

A: [*Shouting to spectators looking down into the tiger pit*] Hey, up there! Shouting slogans won't do any good, the tiger doesn't understand them! Hey, up there! If you really want to emulate the spirit of Lei Feng, some of you should come down here and rescue me!
B. Did any of them come down?
A: "Communist Party members follow me!"
B: Are you a Communist Party member?
A: Uh, don't ask. Anyway, it was obviously me who took the lead in coming down here in the first place! …
B: After all this time you haven't thought of a way to escape!
A: Take it easy! Wait till I discuss this with the tiger.

B: Oh, so you're going to discuss it with the tiger?

A: We're going to do a little "ideological work." [*addressing the tiger*] "Tiger! Tiger! Open your eyes and take a good look at me. I'm pretty skinny—no meat!…Tiger, if you have mercy on me today and don't eat me, if you let me get out of this, I… I promise I'll lead a good life. I'll not only work for the Four Modernizations, I'll even work for the Eight Modernizations. I won't show up late for work at my work unit, and in the evening I won't leave early. I'll do everything my superiors tell me. At home I'll be a model of filial piety, I'll cherish my brothers and sisters. On the street I'll obey the traffic rules, and I won't spit on the ground!" (Jiang and Jiezhong 1988)

The protagonist then seeks metaphysical solace in various religions—Christianity, Islam, Buddhism—but realizes to his dismay that he doesn't know enough about any of these belief systems to take advantage of the solace they have to offer. When he is finally pulled to safety, he once again puts these existential questions aside as he directs his attention to wooing the attractive young lady who helped organize his rescue. The underlying message was evident to those who could read between the lines: namely that the Party, in abandoning the legacy of Chinese history and replacing it with merely a bankrupt and empty ideology, had failed to provide ordinary people with any moral grounding for their daily lives. Jiang and Liang had a hit on their hands, a piece that truly resonated with audiences—and made it past the censorship apparatus.

The best Liang-Jiang collaboration using this two-level approach was a piece entitled *Te da xinwen* 《特大新聞》 "Big News", which was premiered as part of the televised Chinese New Year's festival in the spring before the Tiananmen Square crackdown. The piece was an immediate hit. The premise is as follows: The *dougende* tells the straight man that he has heard it through the *xiaodao xiaoxi*, ("back alley information", i.e., "the grapevine") that the government is about to come up with a bold new experiment: Tiananmen Square is going to be converted into an outdoor free market, where hundreds of private enterprises would be allowed to set up stalls and hawk everything from blue jeans to VCRs. The straight man is incredulous that the historic square would be converted into such a crass commercial venue:

B: Tiananmen Square is the window of China. How could it be appropriate to plunk an outdoor market down there?

A: Window of China, right! Foreigners don't know what China is like. They can take one look at the square and say "An open-air market? Hey! China has a commodity-based economy!" Taking another look, they say "Hmm, and everything is pretty cheap, too! Okay, now we know!" And that's the first step.

B: Oh, so now they know.

A: A window, you said. They take one look and get the picture. Foreigners take one look and think "Not bad!"… It'll put their minds at ease. "So much bustling activity, so much prosperity! Surely China will have no trouble repaying its debts!" (Jiang and Jiezhong 1989)

The ostensible premise involved the perils of gullibly swallowing the absurd rumors circulated in the *xiaodao xiaoxi*, but more astute members of the audience were, of course, aware of the delicious irony of the true underlying subtext, which poked fun at the contradiction between China's rapid economic reforms and its continuing repressive political policies. The piece managed to achieve something close true political satire, right under the noses of the television censors.

After the chaos of the Tiananmen Square massacre, a new ice age for the arts set in. "Big News" disappeared from the xiangsheng stage and the public record, and Liang Zuo himself became fed up with the xiangsheng domain, turning to more lucrative TV serials. He died of a heart attack in 2001 at the age of 44.

5.4 The 1990s: Xiangsheng Adrift in the Marketplace

The 1990s was a dark decade for xiangsheng. By the admission of both performers and audiences, the art form fell into a protracted slump. Faced with competition from the increasingly popular *xiaopin* 小品 "comedy skits" and TV and film imports from Hong Kong and the US, xiangsheng found itself increasingly irrelevant and unsatisfying to younger audiences. The entertainment sections of Chinese newspapers and magazines were filled with articles speculating about the reasons for xiangsheng's decline. Was it the collapse of the traditional master-disciple relationship? Was it the competition from other forms of humor? Was it the lack of talented new performers? Or was the form simply a victim of changing tastes and esthetics?

Though the 90s was indeed a decade of enormous changes in mass media,[6] the task of producing popular xiangsheng material was made nearly impossible by the fact that the government was still not allowing any content in the arts that touched on the realities of life in China. The raw material for humor and social satire was certainly not lacking; there was the increasing number of laid-off workers, the influx of foreign goods, the new sexual freedoms, the collapse of the longstanding *danwei* system, the gaudy excesses of China's nouveau riche, or the generation of spoiled-brat "little emperors" resulting from the one-child policy, etc., just to name a few. In principle, the 1990s should have been a heyday for Chinese xiangsheng performers. But all of the compelling topics were still off-limits, effectively preventing xiangsheng humor from even getting off the ground. Even more frustrating was the fact that all these subjects were already being satirized in the rich underground repertoire of jokes, doggerel poems (*shunkouliu* 順口溜), and punning slang terms circulating among the public.[7] Xiangsheng performers lamented that

[6]For example, the sudden tsunami of imported digital material, VCDs, DVDs, in the mid-1990s brought about a revolution in the consumption of media products and unprecedented freedom of access to all varieties of foreign entertainment. See Moser (2006).

[7]Link and Zhou (2002), document examples of such anonymous grassroots humor of the 1990s.

the jokes being told by cab drivers were funnier than those they were allowed to tell on TV. All performers could do was to rehash old material, parody TV ads, sing pop songs, or recite tongue twisters. And the form continued its downward slide, as audiences became bored with the increasingly irrelevant blather performers were forced to offer.

By the late 1990s, xiangsheng seemed to have lost its core audience. Having been transformed by the influence of television into a national humor form, it had lost much of its local charm and traditional fan base. Even in the cities of Beijing and Tianjin, the cradle of the xiangsheng art, there were virtually no theaters or teahouses where one could enjoy xiangsheng on a weekly basis. Once a mainstay of CCTV (China Central Television)'s annual Spring Festival Gala TV show, xiangsheng was now only a perfunctory part of the festivities, having been eclipsed by the more adventuresome *xiaopin* skits. Performers such as Ma Ji had almost ceased to write any new pieces, and in the 2002 CCTV gala, Jiang Kun, once the iconoclastic trailblazer of the art, was reduced to offering audiences translations of foreign jokes that he had downloaded from the Internet.

5.5 The Internet Explosion and the Rise of Guo Degang

The emergence of the Chinese Internet in the late 1990s and early 2000s opened new spaces for humor and satire, and a greater accessibility to outside forms of humor. The Internet fostered a new savvier audience that craved edgier and more relevant satirical fare. The reason for this shift is twofold: First, the Web simply provided access to a much wider range of entertainment media, as netizens could easily enjoy TV and movie media from Hong Kong, the US and other foreign countries. Second, and more importantly, for a time the exponential explosion of internet information effectively overloaded the government's censorship apparatus, as social networking platforms such as Weibo allowed for easy dissemination of viral videos and other alternative media. Suddenly Internet surfers could download anonymous "spoof" videos (called *egao* 惡搞) that parodied movies and advertisements, satirical fake "Lei Feng" blogs, daring social criticism by bloggers such as Han Han, or animated cartoons lampooning events like the 2008 contaminated milk powder scandal. The sheer quantity of such material that simply "fell through the cracks", either unnoticed by the internet censors or considered not threatening enough to expunge, easily transcended anything that was even remotely possible in the public information sphere during the 1990s.

Into this mix appeared Guo Degang 郭德綱, whose meteoric rise has been considered as contributing to a new renaissance of xiangsheng's popularity. Many consider that Guo has single-handedly revived the art of xiangsheng, recapturing the youth audience and making xiangsheng a relevant art form again. A Tianjin native, Guo was somewhat of a child prodigy, studying the storytelling form *pingshu* 評書 at the age of eight, later turning to xiangsheng in his teens. Largely self-taught, he honed his craft outside the usual master-disciple system, working as

a freelance performer in Beijing until becoming a disciple of Hou Yaowen 侯耀文 (son of Hou Baolin) in 2004 (Zhang 2009). An all-around talent, he has been a significant presence on TV, movies, stage, product endorsements, blogging and publishing. Guo has also made great contributions to fostering of new xiangsheng talent, nurturing an entire new school of young disciples such as He Yunwei 何雲偉 and Li Jing 李菁, who were able to master their craft in front of nightly audiences at Guo's own Deyunshe Theater in Beijing.

Guo is gifted with a combination of solid technique and a unique stage presence. He has a thorough mastery of the traditional xiangsheng repertoire, and has also been able to breathe new life into the older pieces, updating the content and adding modern context in the *dianhua* preamble. In contrast with the usual stagey and polite xiangsheng performance style, Guo has cultivated an irreverent "bad boy" image, injecting earthy *double-entendres* and sardonic references into his performances. While steering away from overtly political topics, Guo Degang nevertheless tends to include jokes about the sex scandals, rampant corruption and social dysfunctions that appear in the daily headlines. Guo's avid post-80s generation fans, most of who had come of age in the new era of internet openness, were hooked.

However, the Party censors, and even some fellow performers, were not so enthusiastic. Critics from all circles began to accuse Guo of being too extreme, of taking sexual innuendo and social criticism past the limits of good taste. In July 2010, in response to what Party officials perceived as an escalating trend toward salacious content in broadcast media, Hu Jintao issued a memorandum calling for a crackdown on the so-called "Three Vulgarities" (*sansu* 三俗, namely *yongsu* 庸俗、*disu* 低俗、and *meisu* 媚俗; roughly "low-class", "vulgar" and "pandering"). (Jintao 2010) Guo Degang's performances were singled out as examples of excessive bad taste. The criticisms of Guo Degang in major newspapers and websites only seemed to intensify the loyalty of his fans. Guo himself seemed to revel in the controversy, and began to include his struggles into the scripts, often thumbing his nose at his puritanical critics. *Ni yao gaoya* 《你要高雅》 "One Must be Tasteful" was in part a response to the crusade against him, as it dealt in tongue-and-cheek fashion with the boundaries between erudition and vulgarity, poking fun at the hypocrisy of upper crust elites who dictate morality to the lower classes. In the excerpt below, Guo Degang speaks to the straight man, Yu Qian:

Guo: After much laborious research, I have now fully inspected all the adult videos in the world—even the un-pixillated ones.
Yu: Good grief. Pixillated or not, I'm sure you watched every single one.
Guo: [*stage whisper*] I'll return them to you in the next few days.
Yu: [*indignantly*] Return them to me?? Hey, you didn't borrow those things from me!
Guo: Let me tell you, without vulgarity, high-class things wouldn't exist.
Yu: Yes, they mutually complement each other.
Guo: The two are part and parcel of the same thing.
Yu: Dialectical opposites. The dialectic.

Guo: Only through the vulgar can people approach high art.
Yu: Right.
Guo: Art has no distinction between vulgar and refined.
Yu: Right
Guo: The truth is, both stage plays and X-rated movies exist to bring pleasure to the viewer.
Yu: That's putting it bluntly.
Guo: But it's true.
Yu: Hm.
Guo: Upper class elites never watch X-rated films.
Yu: Good for them.
Guo: They act them out in real life!
Yu: Huh? It'd be better if they just watched them! (Baidu Baike 2009)

In August of the same year, the Propaganda Department launched an "Anti-Three Vulgarities Campaign", targeting, among other things, Guo Degang's xiangsheng pieces. Guo's books and DVDs were removed from bookstores, and a moratorium was declared on his public performances (Martinsen 2010). Faced with increasing pressure from the media and officialdom, Guo made a formal apology to the public via his blog in December (Stack 2010).

The Guo scandal to some extent revived the debate about *fengci* versus *gesong* in xiangsheng, but it did no permanent damage to Guo's reputation and career. He remains one of the most visible media figures in China, appearing in movies, talk shows, and advertisements in addition to his xiangsheng performances. Guo still steers clear of explicitly political messages in his work, and it is important to note that he was not censored for criticisms of the Party, but merely for flaunting the Party's disapproval of his over-the-top vulgarity. Guo's pieces nevertheless serve a cathartic function for his audiences, delving as they do into vitally relevant topics in risky ways. He evokes general truths that resonate with the audience, without mentioning specific incidents or persons that would force the hands of the media censorship apparatus. Whenever the subject comes up in interviews, Guo is usually clear that xiangsheng and politics don't mix, and he has never been one to promote a didactic role for the art form. "Should xiangsheng be used as educational material; should it be used for propaganda?" he asked in a 2005 piece, "This is a huge mistake, one that kills the human spirit." (Wang 2013)

Despite Guo's opinion, under Xi Jinping's China it seems that xiangsheng is again being asked by the Party to perform an overt propaganda function. Case in point: The CCTV Spring Festival Gala of 2015 featured a xiangsheng piece, *Zhe bu shi wode* 這不是我的, "This Isn't Mine", that satirized official corruption as part of Xi Jinping's "tigers and flies" anti-corruption drive. As such, the piece, which was much touted in the advance publicity for the show, was definitely *not* an example of xiangsheng comedians "speaking truth to power." Rather, the script was actually commissioned by the Party propaganda department, and the content dictated and vetted by the producers of the annual TV event. Ironically, Xi Jinping's anti-corruption drive seems to have granted xiangsheng performers an officially

sanctioned target for satire–with the Party censors dictating when, how, and to what extent the satire can be applied. The two performers, Miao Fu 苗阜 and Wang Sheng 王聲, even told reporters that they had received assistance from the Shaanxi provincial discipline inspection commission, which provided examples of typical corruption cases across the country that could be used as raw material for jokes. In the performance, the *dougende* character plays the role of a corrupt official who has accepted bribes of a house, a car, and even a mistress, all the while excusing his actions as essential to the stable functioning of the local government:

A: They're all gossiping about me.
B: Gossiping about you?
A: Right. They're jealous of me, just because I drive a fancy car.
B: Oh, right, they pointed your car out to me when you drove here to the studio. That looks like a pretty expensive vehicle.
A: It was a gift from Lao Zhang.
B: Lao Zhang?
A: One of my colleagues. He felt sorry for me, seeing me always struggling to get a taxi, so he sent a car over for me to use.
B: Oh, you mean he bought you a car!
A: Hey, you can't say it like that. It's too sensitive.
B: Why?
A: I'm a high-ranking official, after all.
B: So why don't you just refuse to accept the bribe?
A: I can't refuse it! I'm afraid I would negatively impact Lao Zhang's job performance assessment.
B: What would the car have to do with his work evaluation?
O. A: If I don't accept the car, he'll think I want to keep my distance from him, and he'll start to have doubts. If he starts to have his doubts, his doubts will become a psychological burden. If he has a psychological burden, he'll become distracted in his work. And if he's distracted, then his work assessment will suffer. Won't I be hindering his prospects for success?
B: You've got quite a complicated rationale there. (Miao and Sheng, 2015)

Those who know something of the history of xiangsheng might experience a sense of *déjà vu*. In reviving the principles of "arts serving politics" laid down by Mao Zedong in his talks at the Yan'an forum, Xi Jinping has called for a expression of "positive energy" (*zheng nengliang* 正能量) in the arts—a mandate not so different from the 1950s *gesong* "praise" requirement. Performers presumably will respond to this dictum in the same way they always have; by complying with the occasional requirements to produce propaganda pablum pieces, by seeking fodder for meaningful humor in "safe" topics, and by continuing to survive in an increasingly restricted artistic space.

5.6 Conclusion

In the 21st century, China finds itself in a very different information environment. As a humor art form it must compete with the wave of internet parody videos, foreign entertainment, TV skits and reality shows. As markets have diversified, xiangsheng has at least been able to maintain its role as a popular media presence, particularly in the mainstream CCTV-produced variety shows and family-centered entertainment fare that is produced for holidays and important occasions.

For audiences seeking edgier forms of satire, the emerging comedy format in China is American-style standup comedy. Much of this humor is performed “off the radar”, with major cities like Beijing and Shanghai opening a host of comedy clubs where both Chinese and Westerners try out routines in an atmosphere relatively free of monitoring and censorship. Media savvy young Chinese have for some time been aware of the influence of stand-up humor in the western media, but the form has never caught on due to the insurmountable barriers of language and culture that stand-up often presents. Now a new generation of western-influenced Chinese comedians has begun to recreate the style and flavor of standup in a Chinese context. One of these is Joe Wong, a Chinese citizen who first made a name on the American comedy circuit in the early 2000s (Moser 2009). Wong performed standup on the Tonight Show and Ellen Degeneres, his early efforts culminating in a performance at the Washington Correspondents’ dinner, where he made good-natured fun of Vice-President Joe Biden seated next to him on the dais. One of the most talented and politically daring xiangsheng performers of the early 2000s, Wang Zijian, went on to became host of his own variety show, *Jinwan 80 hou tuokouxiu* 今晚80後脫口秀, “Tonight’s Post-80’s Talk Show”, in which he performs what is essentially standup monologues “with Chinese characteristics”. Mark Rowswell, better known to Chinese audiences as Da Shan, the first foreign xiangsheng star, has now switched to performing his own brand of standup comedy, in both English and Chinese. All these performers have expanded the possibilities of Chinese comedy, and have blurred the lines between traditional xiangsheng and Western-style standup.[8] This new crop of comedians are having a profound effect on other young performers and audiences alike, setting the tastes and expectations for the next generation of media consumers.

Is social and political satire an essential element of modern humor? Xiangsheng humor has never relied on overtly political or socially subversive material, but the relevance and vitality of any humor form is predicated on the freedom to explore any and all aspects of human society. In an atmosphere as highly politicized as that of China, the restrictions on sensitive or uncomfortable topics have often left xiangsheng performers “dancing in shackles,”[9] struggling to produce jokes that truly resonate with audiences. Nevertheless, xiangsheng has proved a remarkably

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[8]Please see King-fai Tam’s discussion of standup comedy in Chap. 8.

[9]A phrase used by journalist He Qinglian to describe the plight of Chinese news reporters, but it applies to all creative artists in China, as well.

durable art form, in part due to the ingenuity of performers in finding genuine humor that transcends the narrow issues that divide society, and finding laughter in the common concerns that unite people. If xiangsheng can continue to occupy this niche in Chinese society, it will have audiences for many generations to come.

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Chapter 6
Laughable Leaders: A Study of Political Jokes in Mainland China

Howard Y.F. Choy

Abstract While the 1950s–1970s witnessed an idolization of the PRC founders, the turn of the century in China was marked by the proliferation of political jokes about their successors. Myths regarding Chairman Mao's guerrilla warfare and Premier Zhou's diplomatic finesse that once fascinated the whole nation have yielded to a spate of jokes, which unmercifully mock the ineptitude and corruption of Li Peng and Jiang Zemin, top leaders of the postrevolutionary generation. These quips often translate the clownish duo's political incompetence into sexual impotence, playing between their powers and libidos. The distorted images of the highest officials suggest not only the discredit of certain politicians, who failed to establish themselves as the new Fathers of the People's Republic in the shadow of their precursors, but also people's distrust of the Party itself. In light of Freud's and later theorists' thoughts on jokes, this chapter presents some of the Chinese political jokes collected from social gatherings and hearsay, as well as some disseminated on the Internet. What does it mean when the communist dictators become standing jests? Are political jokes an indicator of freedom of speech or merely an alleviator of political pressure? Seemingly subversive and antisocial, political jokes actually function as a lubricant to maintain the state machine. In the economy of trading political anxiety for laughter, these amusing stories serve to postpone the impending bankruptcy of an authoritarian government without authority. Nonetheless, it is interesting to study how political jokes as formulaic and yet ever changing social texts are (re)produced, performed, and circulated in post-Mao China.

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6.1 The Unbearable Lightness of Laughing: The Political Joke, Joker, and Jokology

"Surprisingly," British historian Egon Larsen (1980: 2) writes, "the phenomenon of the political joke has attracted little interest as a subject of serious research." While we should not blame the academia for having not taken jokes seriously enough, "political joke" strangely mingles the gravest business and the funniest matter into an art form of engagé entertainment. In effect, the term per se appears as a paradox of the serious and the ludicrous. It is exactly the playfulness of jokes as mass culture that demystifies the solemnity of politics as the dominant discourse—a grand narrative that has subsequently silenced other voices, including comic voices, in the West and inside China. A study of the political joke can foreground the existence of these neglected features as the undercurrent in mainstream culture.

In his 1900 comic classic *Laughter* (*Le rire*), Jewish French philosopher Henri Bergson (1913: 197) concluded that the meaning of the comic lies in laughter's social signification as "a corrective"—a curative that can restore the health of the society. Five years later, Sigmund Freud (1989: 125) further argued in his *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious* that jokes are anti-authoritarian: "The joke then represents a rebellion against … authority, a liberation from its pressure." Such liberation from pressure produces libidinal pleasure. Freud's statement finds an echo forty years later in George Orwell's (1968: 284) definition of the "funny" as something that momentarily "upsets the established order" and in his dictum: "Every joke is a tiny revolution." In favor of Shakespeare, Swift, Rabelais, and Boccaccio, the British writer also identifies the "vulgar," or "obscenity," as "a kind of subversiveness" (285). During the Cold War period, sociologists John and Mavis Biesanz (1954: 620) believe that humor was "an effective anti-Communist propaganda device" because "Communists take themselves so seriously."

In view of Freud's psychoanalysis, Orwell's criticism, and the Biesanzs' remarks, British anthropologist Gregor Benton defines political jokes as "the citizens' response to the state's efforts to standardize their thinking and to frighten them into withholding criticism and dissent…. The politically powerless use it as a tribunal through which to pass judgments on society where other ways of doing so are closed to them."[1,2] Finally, after the rise of the "iron curtain" in December 1989,

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[1]Various parts of this essay were presented at the 57th and 59th annual meetings of the Association for Asian Studies, April 2005 in Chicago and Mar. 2007 in Boston, respectively; the 59th Rocky Mountain MLA annual convention, Oct. 2005 in Coeur d'Alene; the annual meeting of the American Comparative Literature Association, Mar. 2009 at Harvard University; the 125th Modern Language Association annual convention, Dec. 2009 in Philadelphia; the 8th International Convention of Asia Scholars, June 2013 in Macao, and the international conference of "Political Humor in Modern China: Interdisciplinary Perspectives," Dec. 2013 in Hong Kong. I am grateful for the feedback at the conferences. I would also like to thank my student Joey Yu at the Georgia Institute of Technology for his supply of the Taiwanese version of some political jokes included here.

[2]Benton (1988: 33). This argument is further expounded on the following page of his essay: "The reason is obvious: a society with the vote has no urgent need of political jokes, for it has more

Romanian political joke collectors C. Banc and Alan Dundes (1990: 11) assumed that jokes told under the jackboot are "to serve as a vital communal defense mechanism in a time of severe totalitarian repression." The questions are: Do jokes incite any specific type of revolution? Does their generic nature favor a certain target of subversion, such as a dictatorship or no matter what form of institution? Does the same joke sound more rebellious, subversive, hence more exciting and entertaining in a repressive regime than in a democratic society? And what if the Communists also make use of jokes as a propaganda device? The inquiries require an understanding of the literariness of jokes and the role of jokers in the first place.

Jokologists have treated jokes as a narrative form or popular literary genre. Neal Norrick identifies the three parts of the narrative structure of a typical joke: the build-up, the trigger, and the punchline (Herman et al. 2005: 266–267). In Elliott Oring's (1992: 81–82) differentiation between jokes and tales, the key lies not so much in the former's fictional world that "invokes the abnormal, the bizarre, and nonsensical" as in the presence or absence of an abrupt final line that efficiently evokes laughter: "A joke without a punchline is no joke." The punchline—be it a sentence, a word, an exclamation, or a gesture—is a literary device that "demands a sudden cognitive reorganization". The unexpected reorganization of frames of reference, in my view, is responsible for the rebelliousness of political jokes. It is with the surprise of such restructuring of epistemological order in the climactic line of the joke that a political point is made. The rearrangement of epistemological order or reversal of common sense is a prerequisite to upset the established political order, and such subversion lies in the final humorous twist of the punchline.

Benton regards the political joke as an antidote to official language, contrasting the former's brevity and vividness with the latter's prolixity and triteness. To the political joke's pithiness, let me add the importance of the filthiness of its language. It is precisely in its aesthetics of coarseness that the political joke undermines the grand authoritative discourse, that its playfulness lightens the gravity of politics. It is also exactly in its position of lowliness that the political joke can be perceived as a counterculture to the highbrow culture, that its vulgarity undermines the pretentiousness of officialese in the realm of political culture. Only with this in mind can we fully understand Benton's (1988: 39) comparison: "Jokes are incorruptible, and true even when false; official language lies as a matter of necessity and routine." As the audience responds passively to official speech, it "is not free…, without pleasure and delight; and its applause is measured and contrived." On the contrary, the reader's response to jokes is spontaneous; their active role in "getting" the hints "is indispensable in the creation of the laughter," with which the political joker gains the approval for his performance, hence the release of tension on both parties.

(Footnote 2 continued)

effective ways of easing political tensions. It is only under modern dictatorships that political jokes come truly into their own and are part of the everyday life of all classes…. To be sure, political jokes are not the only vehicle for non-official opinion in societies that forbid opposition, but they are probably the least dangerous."

Political jokers are arguably revolutionaries—or "counterrevolutionaries" as the communist lawmakers would call them. But joke tellers hardly qualify as politicians, for they propose no political program. They are less philosophers than "philogelos"—as in Hierocles' and Philagrius' classical Greek term—laughter lovers. Yet laughter is not their only goal, as Elliott Galligan (1984: 17) asserts in accordance with Arthur Koestler's theory of jokes in the latter's *The Act of Creation* (1964), because jokers as "the best humorists are people with strong opinions," and the strongest opinions, in my opinion, are offered by political jokers. Political jokers are opinionists. Nevertheless, the joker as *the actor of creation* does not need to be an original creator; rather, he may appear as a raconteur of an author-free work that gets handed around without attribution. The joke being a public discourse, instead of a private creation, exchanged directly between user and user at social gatherings, often as table talk, opens itself to unlimited variants, and the joker as a recreational actor may act as a re-creator of new variations on old themes in a different social context.

In his study of contemporary Chinese political discourse, historian Maurizio Marinelli (2003–2004: 149) considers the monopoly of language in preparing public opinion, particularly in propaganda, to be the prerogative of the Party leaders, who "had somehow the duty and the responsibility to use the official language to teach the masses *how* to express their thoughts and emotions in a proper and correct way, so that they could learn *how* to say *what* was expected of them" (italics in the original). However, as Marinelli finds, new cultural forms have emerged in the 1990s to demystify the formalized language that is no longer adequate to interpret sociopolitical reality. One of the "alternative language forms and expressive devices" that "attempt[s] to re-construct and re-appropriate the actuality", as I shall demonstrate here, is the postrevolutionary political joke which, with its unpredictable language creativity, affords us a comic vision of the grim reality, an unbearable lightness of laughing.

The lampooning of named politicians did not appear in China until the Republican period of the early twentieth century. Additionally, after 1949, jocular literature, be it endemic to the Chinese tradition or Western influenced, had been completely under the central control and censorship of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). As political sociologist Ding Xueliang (2013: 235) suggests, "when one lives in the darkest environment, risky political humor is most firmly suppressed by the regime" and "cannot flourish." Ding witnessed in 1970 how a local party leader in his native province was arrested and imprisoned for teasing the way Lin Biao (1907–1971), then Vice-Chairman and Mao's official successor, named his daughter by his favorite food, beans. During the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976), as Ding observes, no political humor was made out of contemporary Chinese politics: "To do so would risk being labeled a counter-revolutionary and being punished accordingly." It was not until the 1980s, when the darkest period was over and, in the words of Ding, "when the majority of the ruled recognize[d] that official propaganda [was] in fact lies," then collections of jokes of the Cultural Revolution first appeared in print.

In addition to the Cultural Revolution jokes published by officially approved publishing houses, this research presents my collection of post-Mao political jokes

from friends' and acquaintances' oral accounts at social gatherings, comic talks, as well as some "written" sources disseminated on the Internet in the past decade. While there is no way of making my oral sources more graspable other than trying my best to document their provenances and acknowledge my informants wherever possible, I hope this work can serve as an initial collection of late political jokes from the People's Republic of China (PRC). Here my scope of political jokes is in the strict sense of the term, as distinguished from similar subgenres such as *shunkouliu* 順口溜, "doggerels" or "slippery jingles," which is included by Canadian Chinese scholar Helen Xiaoyan Wu in her rather broad definition of political jokes as innocuous generalities: "Instead of pulling political leaders' legs, they are subtle [and] impersonal" (Davis 2005: 474).

However, when the post-Mao communist dictators become standing jests, is jocular freedom with political critical humor an indicator of increased freedom of speech or an alleviator of political pressure in mainland China? In the economy of trading political anxiety for popular laughter, do these amusing stories serve to postpone the impending bankruptcy of an authoritarian government without authority? Seemingly subversive and antisocial(ist), do political funnies function as a ludic lubricant to maintain the state machine?

6.2 Propaganda Pranks: Laughing Stocks in the Mythical Age

While the 1950s–1970s witnessed the idolization of the founders of the PRC, the turn of the century in mainland China was marked by the proliferation of political jokes about their unsuccessful successors. Myths eulogizing Chairman Mao's (1893–1976) guerrilla warfare and Premier Zhou Enlai's 周恩來 (1899–1976) diplomatic finesse that once fascinated the whole nation have yielded to a spate of jokes, which unmercifully mock the ineptitude and corruption of the then top state/party leaders, Li Peng 李鵬 (r. 1987–1998) and Jiang Zemin 江澤民 (r. 1989–2003). These quips often translate the clownish duo's political incompetence into sexual impotence, playing between their powers and libidos. The distorted images of the highest officials suggest not only the discredit of certain politicians, who failed to establish themselves as the new Fathers of the People's Republic and remained mere shadows of their precursors, but also people's distrust of the Party itself in the aftermath of the Cultural Revolution and the 1989 Tiananmen Square massacre.

Communist historiography has lionized the first generation of PRC leaders, the founding fathers of communist China, to say nothing of the supremely sacred status of Mao and Zhou in times of political myths. From the 1950s through the 1970s a series of political movements were launched to brainwash the younger generation into worshipping Mao. The Mao mystification reached its zenith during the Cultural Revolution, when the Little Red Book (*Quotations from Chairman Mao Zedong*)

became the Bible, and propaganda posters eulogizing Mao were omnipresent. After the death of Zhou in January 1976, a two-line jingle became widespread: "People's Premier loved by his people; people's Premier loves his people" (*renmin de zongli renmin ai; renmin de zongli ai renmin* 人民的總理人民愛*;* 人民的總理愛人民). The earthshaking demise of Mao on 9th September of the same year marked the end of the heroic age with the conclusion of the Cultural Revolution.

Unlike the East European cases, in which jokes about the Nazi and Soviet despots are abundant, what survive from the days of the Cultural Revolution in the loyalistic mindset of the Chinese are those about deposed leaders, not about the absolute chairman. Whereas jokes and cartoons found in Red Guard tabloids during the turbulent decade all targeted at the revisionists and capitalist roaders, Mao's political foes, not at Mao himself, the tidal wave of cartoon drawing that swept across the entire nation after October 1976 humiliated the fallen Gang of Four instead of the deceased chairman as the CCP decided to maintain the mythic, sacred status of Mao by shirking responsibility onto his wife, Jiang Qing 江青 (1914–1991), and her three henchmen for the political turmoil.

The absence of real jokes during the Mao era seems to be at odds with the very theoretical propositions by Orwell and others. This contradiction can be explained by the fact that these Cultural Revolution jokes and cartoons are no more than propaganda used as a means of power struggle among infra-party rivalries. They are part and parcel of the Mao discourse, serving to continue the mystification of Mao and consolidate the position of the Party. Chairman Mao would certainly be amused, not offended, by these propaganda pranks.

These propaganda pranks are shown in jest-books of the late 1980s, including *Collected Laughing Stocks of the Cultural Revolution* (*Wenge xiaoliao ji*), *Complete Collection of Laughing Stocks of the Cultural Revolution* (*Wenge xiaoliao daquan*), and *Great Jokes of the Cultural Revolution* (*Wenge da xiaohua*).[3] Retrospectively, they form an alternative voice for the mainstream post-revolutionary narrative that stresses the tragic themes of national suffering, blood and tears. They re-present the great revolution as a farce. In the editors' preface of the first title, the jokes, with a handful of which allegedly selected from newspapers and magazines, are seriously treated as "historical facts" (*shishi* 史實) available in neither official nor unofficial history. Likewise, in his introduction to the Taiwan edition, the compiler of the third title also claims that the jokes are considered to be historical records rather than literary artifacts. These books of forgotten laughter evidence the existence of political jokes even during the Cultural Revolution, but these jokes as a means of political discourse in tune with the times were bound to be politically correct; in other words, the laughable leaders in Cultural Revolution jokes were those who had been labeled anti-party, counter-revolutionaries, or class enemies and had been deprived of their powers, if not lives. American journalist Orville Schell (1977: 32–33) has observed the "political

[3]I thank Nicolai Volland for bringing my attention to the first two titles. As expected, there are a few overlaps of the jokes collected in these three books.

nature" in Chinese humor, which "rarely seems to involve cruelty, sarcasm or cynicism at someone else's expense … [with] exceptions for well-defined and *officially approved enemies*" (italics mine); thus, he found the Russian antagonist leader Khrushchev in this black category, not Mao, during the period Schell characterizes as "struggle between those who supported Mao's cult and those who feared it" (Hays 2008).

Composed of 296 and 442 pieces respectively, *Collected Laughing Stocks of the Cultural Revolution* and *Complete Collection of Laughing Stocks of the Cultural Revolution* largely consist of absurd anecdotes about the revolutionary masses and organizations, in particular the Red Guards and rebel factions. Less than one-fourth of the jokes in both collections criticize the ultra-left leadership, of which about half are directed to the Gang of Four and Lin Biao, with the rest mostly about their named and nameless lackeys. Of the 134 political jokes found in *Great Jokes of the Cultural Revolution*, more than one-third loathe the leaders, including over a quarter poking fun at the Gang of Four and Lin.[4] Where nearly all contents in the selections are ridiculous, irrational, or illogical rather than funny, one joke about Jiang Qing provokes standard laughter:

> One day, Jiang Qing suddenly feels chest pain; so she immediately calls her doctor to make a diagnosis to see if it is a symptom of heart disease.
>
> After a careful check, the doctor smiles and says: "Please don't worry, madam, there's absolutely no problem."
>
> Jiang is overjoyed: "Really?"
>
> "Really," the doctor replies with certainty. "Because you're simply heartless!"[5]

On the contrary, veteran cadres occupy only a small percentage of the collections, be they deriding or defending against Lin Biao or the Gang of Four. Portrayed positively, they are elevated to the *xian* 賢, or "worthies," who rebuffed the *ning* 佞, "sycophants," in the first of the eight parts in *Complete Collection of Laughing Stocks of the Cultural Revolution*.[6] Full of wit are the conversations of Chen Yi 陳毅 (1901–1972), Peng Dehuai 彭德懷 (1898–1974), Zhu De 朱德 (1886–1976), Liu Bocheng 劉伯承 (1892–1986), Ye Jianying 葉劍英 (1897–1986), Hu Yaobang 胡耀邦 (1915–1989), and Peng Zhen 彭真 (1902–1997), to speak nothing of Zhou Enlai and Deng Xiaoping 鄧小平 (1904–1997).[7]

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[4]Liu (1990) has composed 107 political pranks partly based on the poet Liu Shahe's (1988) collected essays, plus an appendix of the latter's thirty one jokes, of which twenty seven are political.

[5]Chengshi (1988: 126). Translations of all quoted passages from the three collections are mine.

[6]Ren (1989: 3) puts together jokes and rumors about the top leaders during the Cultural Revolution under the section entitled "Sycophants and Worthies" ("Ning xian pian" 佞賢篇) in the beginning of his collection.

[7]A well-known rumor given in all of the three collections (Chengshi 1988: 118; Ren 1989: 16–17; and Liu 1990: 108–110) is Foreign Minister Chen Yi's effective self-defense against the Red Guards' siege by making (up) a quotation from Chairman Mao unseen in the "little red book": "Chen Yi is a good comrade."

In the dozen of jokes where Deng is the hero, people "cry out against the injustice" done to him and believe that after rehabilitation, as proved later in the 1980s when the jest-books were published, he should be able to "improve livelihood" for the nation (Chengshi 1988: 121, 145). Portraying the veteran cadres as comic heroes in the traumatic history, these jokes are adulatory in nature.

Especially noteworthy are the twenty accounts involving Mao, his image or statue, only four of which, however, dare banter him mildly without the use of injurious language. For instance, the following humorous text makes fun of Mao's figure to criticize the unemployment of middle and high school graduates in the city, who were mobilized and sent to the countryside instead:

> A new 20-to-30-m-high huge statue of the leader is erected, with its gigantic hand stretching forward, sublimely. When people pass by, they always take a look and make a comment.
>
> Soldier: Chairman Mao waving his gigantic hand means our homeland's territory is sacred and inviolable.
>
> Theorist: It means to usher in the great new age of Mao Zedong Thought.
>
> Leading cadre: It means to carry the Cultural Revolution through to the end.
>
> Educated youth A: The five stretched-out fingers mean no recruitment for five years.
>
> Educated youth B: No, ten years! There're five more fingers at the back![8]

While one of the few variations of this bodily story is adopted by Shanghai comic performer Zhou Libo (2009: 1:25–26) later in his talk show, where Mao's five fingers set the maximum wage of fifty RMB a month, the standup comedian reminds today's Chinese audience that during the Cultural Revolution a simple joke about Mao like the one above or below could cost someone years in jail:

> Our great leader Chairman Mao has a good swim in the Yangtze River [on 16th July 1966], you know…. A person plays a joke…. He says, "Chairman Mao swims in the Yangtze at such an advanced age. He has installed a propeller underneath." … Six years in prison! A true story. [1:24]

Deng's reforms ushered in a period of relative political relaxation, allowing a degree of openness in the private sphere. People began to push the limits on free speech in the unpublished, ephemeral form of political jokes against the sitting elite. While we find no joke about the then top leaders in China Central Television (CCTV) or *People's Daily* (*Renmin ribao* 人民日報), a considerable amount of mirth have circulated among the people.

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[8]Chengshi (1988: 5–6). A slightly different version entitled "Wu nian jia san nian" 五年加三年 (Five years plus three years) is found in Liu (1990: 249–250), in which an educated youth thought that Chairman Mao's five stretched-out fingers of his stone statue in Chengdu 成都 indicated that he could return there in five years, but he has been detained in the countryside until eight years later, when he is finally transferred back to Chengdu and discovers three more fingers revealed under Mao's left sleeve at the back. Similar wits also appear in Chengshi (1988: 5, 59, 147–148), where Mao, again in the form of a statue, serves as sentry, traffic police, and kindly approves a five-day leave for a reactionary writer, respectively.

6.3 Global Gags: Political Jokes in the Postrevolutionary Period

Spontaneously and independently created political jokes reemerged in China with such caricatures as Fang Cheng's 方成 1980 drawing of Wu Dalang 武大郎—a midget from the classical novel *The Water Margin* (*Shuihu zhuan* 水滸傳)—and the latter's newly opened restaurant, in which one of the small waiters tells a job interviewee: "Our master is a bit of a dwarf. He refuses to employ anyone who surpasses him in height."[9] A line of the couplet in the background reads: "The important thing for a man is not to be tall; it is to be powerful." Apparently, the cartoonist made an insinuating remark of the mean stature and illiberal statecraft of Deng Xiaoping, who had just resumed his authority then. A popular one-liner of the 1980s complaining about the inflation brought about by Deng's economic reforms also pokes fun at the paramount leader's figure: "Everything in China is going up, except Deng Xiaoping's height." Yet satirical cartoons in today's China seldom have a political barb at the top echelon, whereas *shunkouliu*, such as the above one-liner, are only occasionally directed at high officials.[10]

Chinese critic Liu Zaifu 劉再復 (1994: 18) has pointed out the sociocultural and aesthetic displacement from the heroic kingdom of Wu Song 武松 (Wu Dalang's younger brother, the tiger killer) to the dwarfish kingdom of Wu Dalang in the age of economic reforms. The Deng leadership indeed marked a degradation from giantism to dwarfism, from the laudable to the laughable and, in *short*, from myths to jokes. Of course Deng is always remembered for changing the direction of China as in the following anachronistic story:

> Upon arrival in Xi'an during his first state visit to China in 1998, Clinton is so impressed by the ancient city wall that he proposes a motorcycle race on it with Jiang Zemin. Jiang suggests that Putin should be invited, too, and here comes the Russian President to join the fun.
>
> Clinton first hits a crossroad. Thinking capitalism is right, he makes a right turn immediately.
>
> Putin gets there afterward. Guessing Clinton must have turned right, he follows to catch up with him without hesitation.
>
> Jiang finally stops there. He also believes that Clinton is a rightist, but he himself is a communist and so should turn left.
>
> "What can I do? Make a left turn and drop from the race with America and Russia?" He turns around and consults Deng Xiaoping in the back seat.
>
> "Signal left." Deng blows out a smoke ring. "Turn right."[11]

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[9]Harbsmeier's (1986: 64, 70) translation has an additional line, which does not appear in the cartoon: "After retiring from his career as a peasant revolutionary he opened this teashop…."

[10]For an exemplary *shunkouliu* that satirizes named high-ranking officials, see Link and Zhou 2002: 101. I am grateful to Liu Jianmei 劉劍梅for bringing my attention to this article.

[11]Retired reporter Cheung Kwai Yeung 張圭陽 shared with me this old joke in a teahouse during our trip to Tibet in July 2013.

This joke illustrates the truth that the PRC has actually adopted capitalism while still upholding its communist claim.

So, after the dwarf Deng appeared the fools Jiang Zemin and Li Peng, who failed to establish themselves as either great communist revolutionaries like Mao or successful capitalist reformers like Deng. Taking Mao as his role model, Jiang promoted his own personality cult in the last years of his decade-long presidency. To match Mao Zedong Thought, he strove to invent a Jiang Zemin Ideology (*sixiang tixi* 思想體系) and to constitutionalize his crude doctrine of the so-called "three representations" (*san ge daibiao* 三個代表), the latter of which has become a pun joke in Zhou Libo's (2009: 1:43) very popular Shanghai-style comic talk known as *Haipai qingkou* 海派青口:

> Don't bother me with the three *daibiao*. We ordinary people have no clue about it. It's okay as long as you leading cadres can recite it. The three *daibiao* has nothing to do with us. We ordinary people are only concerned with three bills: water bill, electric bill, and gas bill.

Being a professional performer, Zhou possesses more talent than any other player in adopting the Chinese top leaders' voices and facial expressions to amuse people. His imitations of three generations of the CCP leaders, beginning with Mao's high pitch proclamation of the establishment of the PRC's central government on 1st Oct. 1949, imagine their different responses to the 1999 US bombing of the Chinese embassy in Yugoslavia and to the collapse on stock market. In his remarkably true to life impressions of Mao's Hunan accent, Deng's Sichuan pronunciation, Jiang's Jiangsu intonation, their gestures, habits and hobbies (i.e., smoking cigarettes, playing bridge, and speaking English, respectively), Zhou (2008) delineates a degeneration from Mao's heroic spirit to Jiang's cowardly personality: Mao would shoot all of his 200 missiles to America for retaliation and spend all reserve to save the market, whereas Deng would use a small portion to test the water, and Jiang would be overcautious to do anything for fear of loss. Video record of the episode is banned in mainland China and yet made available by Hong Kong's TVB (Television Broadcasts) and on You Tube.

Despite his painstaking attention to his self-image and appearances, Jiang was seen as a despotic buffoon—especially in 2000, when he showed off his shoddy English by criticizing Hong Kong reporters for being "too young" and their questions "too simple, sometimes naive."[12] The following dialogue joke expresses people's resentment.

> George W. Bush and Jiang Zemin are competing to see whose soldiers are braver. Bush orders a GI to leap from a cliff-top. The private looks down and refuses. "Sorry, Sir," he salutes, "I can't do it. I have a young wife and a small kid, Sir." Bush nods and lets him go.

[12]Jiang continued to yell at the reporters in English: "Naive! Naive! I'm angry!" See Cheng Zheng's cover story in *Apple Daily*, 28 Oct. 2000. A video clip of the news report by Sharon Po Wah Cheung, whose own questions provoked Jiang, is available on You Tube (http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CSeKSqC7Ph4); accessed 19 Dec. 2010.

> Now Jiang commands his soldier to make the same leap. The Chinese soldier closes his eyes, and jumps. Later he is carried back to the two leaders and is still alive. The US President is seriously impressed: "How come you're so brave, man?" "Because I have a young wife and a small kid."

Jiang and Li have become standing jokes mainly because of their perceived incapability and stupidity.

> Three travelers lost their passports and are detained at the Beijing airport. The first person says, "I'm the famous tenor Pavarotti." "But how can I know?" Asks the customs officer. So he proves his identity by singing a high C and shatters all the glasses. "Marvelous!" The officer screams, "Pavarotti, welcome to China!"
>
> The second person claims, "I'm the celebrated soccer player Maradona. Let me show you." So he kicks a soccer ball three stories high and breaks the window. "Super!" The officer smiles to him, "Maradona, you may go now."
>
> And the third person comes forth: "Comrade, I'm your leader Li Peng. Don't you recognize me?" "Sorry, Sir, but you have to prove it." "Well, what can I do? I can do nothing…." "Oh, that's right! You must be Premier Li."[13]

The aim of jokes about Li Peng, to borrow Orwell's (1968: 285–286) words, "is not to degrade [him] but to remind him that he is already degraded." Indeed, indignity is one of the three ingredients of humor in the Koestler/Pinker theory of jokes.[14] In the following jokes, the ineptitude of the Chinese top leaders is rendered into a mental problem.

> Li Peng is invited to be a judge of Miss China pageant and takes a fancy to one of the beauties. Unfortunately, when it comes to the intelligence contest, she gives five as her answer for two plus two. Knowing that the lady is Li's favorite, the MC asks the audience, "She's too nervous—let's give her one more chance, OK?" Li Peng immediately responds by clapping his hands, "One more chance! One more chance!" Then everybody follows Li and pleads for mercy.
>
> So the MC raises the question again: "Two plus two equals …?" "Three," answers the beauty. The whole house breaks into thunderous applause: "One more chance! One more chance!"
>
> And so the MC poses the same question for the third time. "Four," finally says she. At this moment Li Peng rises to his feet, clapping his hands: "One more chance! One more chance!"[15]

As shown above, political jokes are not only tellable, but better performable. Like in the earlier jokes about Mao's statue and Deng's stature, the bodily dimension becomes the focus for fun. Some burlesques require a performance of antics on the part of the teller.

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[13] I thank historian Robert Y. Eng for correcting me the details of this joke from the early 1990s.

[14] The other two elements in the jokology of the writer Arthur Koestler (1964) and the neuropsychologist Steven Pinker (1997: 545–554) are anomaly and resolution.

[15] Chinese opera researcher Yao Shuyi 幺書儀 from Beijing told me this joke during her visit at the University of Colorado at Boulder in 2001.

> Li Peng is inspecting a school for the mentally retarded, accompanied by the schoolmaster. They first visit the beginning level class, in which students are working very hard to match their left and right index fingers. "The common problem of our students here lies in the incoordination between the left side and right side of their brains," the schoolmaster explains, guiding Li to the intermediate level, "but the situation improves after one year of training." Li finds that the second-year students are now able to bring their forefingers together and yet they still cannot put together their palms.
>
> At the end of the visit, in honor of the distinguished guest, a dance is performed by advanced students, who are capable of beating time by clapping their hands. Li Peng is so impressed that he begins to applaud, but his hands are actually waving in the air![16]

Mao is known for his signature applause, which has been blindly imitated by his successors with unintended ludicrous effect.

After decades of Mao's closed-door policy, people like to make issues of the government leaders' official visits abroad. Jiang and Li remain the butts of jokes for their lack of brains.

> While visiting the US, Jiang Zemin is invited to the White House to tea with Clinton. He asks the US president what his leadership philosophy is. Clinton says that it is to surround himself with intelligent people. Jiang asks how he knows if they're intelligent. "I do so by asking them the right questions," says Clinton. "Allow me to demonstrate." He phones Al Gore, "Mr. Vice-president, please answer this question: Your mother has a child, and your father has a child, and this child is not your brother or sister. Who's it?" Gore responds, "It's me, Bill." "Correct. Thank you and good-bye, Al," says Clinton. He hangs up and says, "Did you get that, Mr. Jiang?" "Yes. Thanks a lot. I'll definitely be using that!"
>
> Upon returning to Beijing, the Chinese president decides he'd better put the Premier to the test. He summons Li Peng to his office and says, "Old Li, I wonder if you can answer a question for me." "Why, of course, old Jiang, what's on your mind?" "Uh, your mother has a child, and your father has a child, and this child is neither your brother nor your sister. Who's it?" Li hems and haws and finally asks, "Can I think about it and get back to you?" Jiang agrees, and Li calls his Publicity Minister Ding Guangen, "Ding, answer my question or you'll be fired: Your mom has a child, and your dad has a child, and this child is neither your brother nor your sister. Who's it?" Ding is shaking over the phone: "It's really hard! Give me some time to think about it." Ding calls an emergency party meeting: "Now look here, comrades. Your mom has a child, and your dad has a child, and this child is not your brother, or your sister. Who's it?" They puzzle over the question for several hours, but nobody can come up with an answer. Finally, a minority representative arrives at the meeting room and Ding explains his problem. The representative answers immediately, "It's me, of course."
>
> Much relieved, Ding reports to Li immediately, "I got it—it's me!" Li rushes back to Jiang's office and exclaims, "I've figured out the answer! I know who it is! It's Ding Guangen!" And Jiang replies in disgust, "Wrong, you dumb ass, it's Al Gore!"

With the double punchlines ending the turn-by-turn talk, the autocracy is deftly debunked as a foolocracy.

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[16] This joke was relayed to me by the Chinese writer Mo Yan 莫言 during his visit at Stanford University in 2000.

6.3.1 The Freudian Offense: Sex and the Dirty

To belittle or to cause the authority to seem stupid is indeed a strategy of moral victory or illusional revenge adopted by the people. This psychological compensation, also found in the psychic economy of dreams, has been theorized by Freud (1989: 122): "By making our enemy small, inferior, despicable or comic, we achieve in a roundabout way the enjoyment of overcoming him—to which the third person, who has made no efforts, bears witness by his laughter." In his paper on humor and its language—laughter, Dutch sociologist Zijderveld (1983: 40) points out Freud's mechanism of laughter as a release of repressed aggression: "Like a dream, a joke tricks the censor and transfers aggression from the dark regions of the unconscious to the light of the conscious." Inspired by Bergson's (1913: 186) theorem that "*comic absurdity is of the same nature as that of dreams*" (original italics), Freud (112) describes the common methods shared by joke-work and dream-work in venting aggression through the techniques of "condensation, displacement, indirect representation."

Freud's pansexualism may also explain why the communist leaders' political incompetence is often translated into sexual impotence. People jeer at their depravities in the disguise of dirty jokes, using the scurrilous subculture to undermine the superstructure. As a matter of fact, rumors about the top leaders' extramarital love affairs have turned into laughing stocks. For instance, in Fig. 6.1, Jiang Zemin's favor of the famous folk singer Song Zuying 宋祖英, who is dubbed a "first lady" (*guomu* 國母), has laid the pair so open to ridicule that a faked *Titanic*

Fig. 6.1 Jiang Zemin and Song Zuying on Titanic

still image of them is created and spread far and wide as a graphic joke via the Internet.

Sex is indeed the most common comic component. New Zealand anthropologist Piddington (1963: 142) has observed:

> The scheme of social evaluations connected with sex is a universal source of laughter, though among certain social groups such laughter is partially inhibited by convention. But in almost all societies we find some form of obscene wit which is certain (provided that it does not offend) to provoke laughter, and in view of our analysis of the ludicrous this is readily understood. For the subject of sex is open to an almost infinite range of conflicting social evaluations….

Yet political jokes of a sexual nature are not only funny, but also offensive, hostilely aggressive. Sex jokes are not necessarily pornographic, but they have to be gross, because they mean to blaspheme, to bring down those who are in the exalted positions of power. People use them to express disapproval of and disrespect for their leaders, as in the following joke credited to the fourth premier of the PRC:

> Li Peng and his wife Zhu Lin 朱琳 visit an experimental pig farm. The piggery director shows them the boars in front of them, saying that each of these male pigs can copulate once an hour. Zhu Lin glances sideways at her husband: "See!" Li Peng does not utter a word.
>
> When they arrive at the breeding station, the director introduces to them the new species of stud that can mate several times per hour. Zhu gives Li a sidelong glance again, but Li asks the director, "Does a boar mate with the same sow or different sows?" "Different sows, of course," answers the director. Li looks askance at his wife: "See!"[17]

6.3.2 *The Internet Dissemination: The Global Transferability of Joke*

The above spicy joke actually originates from the so-called "Coolidge Effect," an anecdote attributed to Calvin Coolidge (1872–1933), the thirtieth US President.[18] Similarly, the previous joke about Jiang Zemin's test of Li Peng is recycled into an internet joke-meme titled "George W. Bush's Intelligence Quiz," with a switch of the cast from Jiang, Clinton, Al Gore, Li, and Ding Guangen to Bush, Queen Elizabeth II, Tony Blair, Jesse Helms, and Colin Powell. Thus, for many jokesters, Jiang Zemin and George W. Bush are interchangeable. While one may think that different versions of the same joke would work just as well no matter which politician is being made fun of, the juxtaposition of joking on communist China and a democratic society does not always produce equal effects, because targeting at the

[17]This joke was also privately told by Mo Yan at Stanford University in 2000.

[18]See Friedman 2001: 218. I thank Lam Shan-muk 林山木 (2002: 10) for this older source in his review of Friedman's book.

state leaders requires much more courage in China than in America, where it is not as effective in terms of relieving political pressure points.

X. L. Ding (2013: 251) argues that the Internet has provided a society of censorship with a particularly "convenient and powerful public opinion forum." Even with the government's regulations such as real-name registration, he found that the "internet revolution" has become a breeding ground for political jokes:

> Those jokes are spread instantly as numerous young (and not so young) people stay online day and night, and will not wait a minute to pass on critical and funny pieces when they read them. The initial version of a political joke laden with high-quality "raw materials" undergoes constant refinement and enrichment, thanks to the impromptu contributions of online readers, and pictures and sound can be added to the texts of political jokes to make them even more entertaining and spicy. [248]

Nevertheless, the fact that these jokes are drawn and reinvented from the common stock of earlier humorous texts across distinct sociopolitical systems reveals not only the ubiquity of political anxiety, but also the universality, or at least the cross-cultural quality, of political humor. From the standpoint of world literature, the transferability and terseness of the political joke have developed it into a global genre. Save those script-switch triggers of low-quality humor that make use of untranslatable verbal punning limited by the linguistic ambiguity of a local dialect,[19] jokesmiths need only the simple technique of "switching" to change the "inessential elements" (Benton 1988: 35) such as names and place of a piece from one country or continent to another. On the one hand, the insignificance of the "original" context should help the dissemination of the text; on the other, the irrelevance of the specific setting also makes mockery slippery. For the listener, any joke unheard of is "original." As political gags go global, nothing in them is unalterable or perpetual. Consequently, while political jokes are widely applicable, their political effects can only be accumulating rather than everlasting.

Although anthropologists concede that jokes "contribute to the weakening of the state's authority" and are "always anti-social," they conclude that their subversiveness is only metaphorical, not material, and that laughter's social sanction is never serious, with "its primary function being to prevent any disturbance of the system of social values upon the recognition of which by individuals society depends for its existence" (Benton 1988: 41; Piddington 1963: 128, 148). Accordingly, political jokes are not real threats against the status quo, but rather outlets for the social control system. Moreover, in Cohen's (1999: 41) philosophical reflection on jokes, laughter as "the human response to jokes" is seen as "a human response to absurdity"—an absurdity that reveals our incapacity to make sense of the world in which we live, and yet our ability to "dwell with the incomprehensible without dying from fear or going mad."

[19]Ding (2013: 232–233) points out that while "a critical spirit, sharp observation, subtle sarcasm and a bit of philosophical contemplation [are] all essential ingredients of high-quality political satire," verbal punning makes jokes almost impossible to translate into another language and needs explanation and, as a result, these jokes "lose a large part of their enjoyable flavoring and effectiveness."

Fig. 6.2 *Upper left* Old Mao waves his hand—go down to the countryside! *Upper right* Old Deng waves his hand—go in for business! *Lower left* Old Jiang waves his hand—go on the dole! *Lower right* Old Hu waves his hand—go south! "I'm Hu J. T. T for trick. I won't trick you to death!")

While the last reign of Hu Jintao 胡錦濤 (r. 2003–2013) and Wen Jiabao 溫家寶 (r. 2003–2013) witnessed an ebb tide of political jokes against them, wry jokes like the following in Fig. 6.2 appeared on the Internet when the Chinese stock market turned south after its rapid growth had been brought under President Hu's macroeconomic regulation and control[20]:

[20]A blog forwarded to author by Lü Ting 呂汀 in May 2008.

The global financial crisis spread to China in 2008, a year Shanghai comedian Zhou Libo utilized to publicly parody Wen in a two-and-a-half-minute episode entitled "The Popular Premier" ("Pingmin zongli" 平民總理). Zhou (2010: 2.3:8) burlesqued Wen's warning with his signature mimicry of the leader's worried look and voice: "Premier Wen said, '2008 is probably the most difficult year.' … Before the Premier said so, nothing had happened; as soon as the Premier finished speaking, everything went wrong. New Year snowstorm, returned flight, derailed train, earthquake—all because we didn't listen to the Premier!" Although Zhou is said to be "the first performer who holds an incumbent top leader up to ridicule since the founding of the PRC in 1949" (2.3:9), his criticisms are actually non-essential and mixed with seemingly sincere support of the sitting leaders.

In Chinese political jokes, the ludicrous functions as a lubricant, which helps prevent political conflicts and maintain social stability. As a psychological adjustment, the political joke serves as a catharsis, a form of relief rather than resistance under political pressure. The disdain for or hatred of the authorities is thereby economically consumed away with the pleasantry at the expense of incompetent political leaders. Carnivalesque burlesques leave the political power intact as laughter and its immediate satisfactions disperse in evanescent moments. As Zijderveld (1983: 9) claims, the "mini-reign of chaos" caused by a joke "is but a mirage of true anarchy and usually lasts not much longer than the laughter it elicits…. For the duration of the laughing response, humor may affect our faith in reality, but it can never completely destroy it." Zijderveld imputes the transience of humor's disturbance of routine sociopolitical life to the marginality of the genre: "This reign of anarchy is only temporary because it is *just a joke*" (21; my emphasis). Yet, as he concludes, is not the Marxist utopia "nothing but a joke" (58)? If jokes are unreal and absurd, so are utopias, be they communist, capitalist, or capitalistic communist.

Nevertheless, the jocose prevention of sociopolitical confrontations is also temporary. Unlike democratic countries, where the political joke is merely one of the many channels to dredge away popular discontent, China still allows very little freedom of the press. Lovell (2012: 23–24) points out: "Freedom of expression for Chinese writers has significantly broadened over the past three decades [1990s–2010s], … as long as they steered clear of politics." In fact, as far as I know, none of the people's jokes about their top leaders have been printed in books, magazines, or newspapers in the People's Republic; they are only transmitted orally or electronically. If bureaucratic corruption and social ills persist, while popular indignation intensifies, underground humor, or what the Germans call "whispered jokes" (*Flüsterwitze*), will not be able to fritter away frustrations. At the same time, while a single joke, in Benton's (1988: 54) conclusion, "will change nothing" and "mobilize no one," a lot of them will enhance a general mood of disdain for the authorities and engender critical consciousness among the populace. When actions other than cocking snooks at political leaders are taken by the "silent majority" to express their wrath, tragedy will replace comedy as teases turn into tears, with laughter close to anger.

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Chapter 7
The Politics of Cynicism and Neoliberal Hegemony: Representations of Gender in Chinese Internet Humor

Sharon R. Wesoky and Ping Le

Abstract In this chapter, the authors examine jokes about gender relations from the Chinese Internet to examine how these are examples of contemporary "de-politicization" in Chinese politics. While looking at the emergence more generally of humor on the Internet in China and some views of its critical potential, they note that gendered jokes do feature commentary on society and politics, but ultimately locate them primarily as an expression of cynicism and political passivity. Even as the jokes, about marital relations and the proper role of women, do have political implications in their implicit rejections of Maoist feminism's radical gender equality, they serve an ironically didactic function in a China where moral meaning has become individualized and privatized.

Keywords China · Internet · Humor · Gender · Neoliberalism

> I cannot go on to claim that there could or ought to be a culture whose public rhetoric is *ironist*. I cannot imagine a culture which socialized its youth in such a way as to make them continually dubious about their own process of socialization. Irony seems inherently a private matter…Ironists have to have something to have doubts about, something from which to be alienated. (Rorty 1989, 87–88)*

One of China's biggest internet portals, Sohu.com, featured a special issue for the March 8th Women's Day holiday in 2011. Titled "Women Swallowed by Fear," it described for readers women in a state of anxiety in China:

> Life experiences are telling us: turn on the television, and the most popular programs are about mothers and daughters-in-law; stroll by the newsstand, and women's magazines are the most eye-catching; walk down the street, and the shopping mall's prime location is always selling cosmetics…therefore, one word will do to sum up these descriptions: fear… Professional women have eight major fears: fear of being old, fear of heights, fear of being

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> ugly, fear of getting fat, fear of being poor, fear of being "leftovers," fear of mistresses, fear of being ordinary.[1]

Many people participated in the forum, and they could not help but asking: what do these questions tell us about the predicaments of Chinese women in the 21st century? And what can the instability of gender roles in China today tell us more generally about the Chinese political and social *ethos*?

This chapter will examine a set of recent jokes found on the Chinese Internet and in text-messaging as one means of assessing current perspectives regarding gender and social, political, and economic change. While there has been much analysis and debate regarding the socio-political effects of the explosive growth of the Internet and other forms of electronic communications in China,[2] gender is typically not an important subject for such research, particularly in relation to the *content* of internet discourses and discussions, although there is research on the "gender gap" in internet use in China, which has narrowed considerably in recent years.[3] To this end, this chapter seeks to situate gender questions in the context of wider discussions about the Chinese Internet and the "depoliticization" of Chinese society, and in particular to center gender issues in a study of the "profane politics" and cynicism of contemporary internet discourses. We first look at how didactic jokes about marriage and henpecked husbands reflect the "privatization" of moral and social discourse.[4] Second, we examine how humor regarding the pervasiveness of extramarital activity in contemporary China connects to a socio-political cynicism reflective of the "moral vacuum" characterizing contemporary Chinese society.

7.1 Internet Humor and the Significance of Gender

There is a wide scholarly discussion regarding the implications for state and society of the rapid expansion of internet usage and expression in China. While early debates focused on whether the Chinese Internet would be more of a venue of freedom (e.g., Xiao 2007) or control (e.g., Shie 2004), later treatments adopt a more nuanced approach, labeled as "multi-interactionism" by Yang (2009) and a "recursive" state-society relationship by Zheng (2008). The inherent and mutually constitutive relationship of power and resistance on the Internet is evident in the

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[1] *Bei Kongju Tunshi de Nüren* ("Women Swallowed by Fear"). March 8th Women's Day Special Issue, Sohu Culture, sohu.com, 4 March 2011, <http://cul.sohu.com/s2011/women/> (accessed 21 March 2011).

[2] Important recent books include Zheng (2008), Yang (2009), and Zhang and Zheng.

[3] According to a recent survey by the China Internet Network Information Center, internet users in China are about 54.8% male and 45.2% female (2010, n.p.). Some research does find a "gender gap" in internet usage, with men more likely to use "chat rooms" and having more self-confidence in their computer skills than women (Li and Kirkup 2007).

[4] For arguments regarding China's "privatization," see Zhang and Ong (2008).

wry name popularly given to the group of state-paid internet commentators (*wangluo pinglun yuan*) (e.g., Yang 2009)—it is known as the "fifty-cent party" (*wu mao dang*) for the amount they are supposedly paid per comment. Mechanisms such as the Great Firewall, the "fifty-cent party," and increasing requirements that netizens register using their real names indicate that the Party-state seeks to impose a semblance of "order" onto the "disorderly" Internet (Latham 2007).

Humor is an important component of internet usage in China. While many of these jokes are no doubt utterly unrelated to social or political commentary, there is another important subset of humor that is closely connected to political and social satire and irony. Indeed, observer Eric Abrahamsen (2011) claims the Internet "salvaged Chinese humor" after the deadly earnestness of the Mao era, discussing the revival of political irony in particular with the fall 2010 "My father is Li Gang" sensation mocking local officials' corruption. Earlier examples include the creation of the mythical creatures "grass mud horse" (*cao ni ma*) and "river crabs" (*he xie*), promoted as homonyms for an offensive Chinese curse term in the former and for "harmonious (society)" in the latter, as a way of digging at internet censorship (e.g., Rosen 2010). Referencing the long Chinese tradition of politically-charged humor through spoken word such as "cross-talk" (*xiangsheng*) and *shunkouliu*, translated as "slippery jingles" by Perry Link and Kate Zhou (2002), Guobin Yang also claims that "Parody is as old as human civilization, but has never enjoyed such a renaissance as in Chinese cyberspace today" (2009). As with some analysts of blogging in China (Esarey and Xiao 2008), Link and Zhou regard *shunkouliu* as a "safety valve" that may not change "social reality" but also could have a "corrosive effect on the legitimacy" of the Party and state (2002).

The Internet and other information technologies such as SMS (Short Message Service) have surely provided fertile ground for the even wider dissemination of the sort of satiric humor epitomized by *shunkouliu*, which raises the question of the import of such expression as political activism or resistance. The Internet certainly does provide for space for political expression, even if in the view of some it is mostly in the guise of "identity politics," with the ability "to create social spaces in which marginal groups such as gays and lesbians can claim a voice" (Damm 2007). 2010 Nobel Peace Prize winner Liu Xiaobo characterizes political humor on the Chinese Internet as having both "strong anesthetic effects" as well as having a Bahktian carnival-like effect in granting creativity and "fearlessness" to the "grassroots" (Liu 2006). Similar to Link and Zhou, Liu regards the spread of such political humor as evidence of a loss of legitimacy of the Party-state. Guobin Yang also looks at internet expression in relation to Bakhtin's ideas of "carnival" and cultural "heteroglossia," finding that the Internet grants new space for creative expression among the common people (2009). Along similar lines, Gong and Yang (2010) view internet *e'gao* ("spoofing") as an "alternative space for individual expression," as an "alternative empowerment." More recently, Christopher Rea has somewhat differently asserted that *e'gao* are a "rather oblique form of critique" in relation to other forms of political expression "available to Chinese netizens" (2013).

Thus, many regard internet humor in a multivalent way, as simultaneously containing traditional and (post)modern, repressive and liberatory potentials. In this sense, it is no different from other realms in Chinese society today, with Sheldon Lu's asserting that "Contemporary China consists of the superimposition of multiple temporalities; the premodern, the modern, and the postmodern coexist in the same space and the same moment" (Lu 2000).

Yet, we wish here to stress a more pessimistic view of the overall effects of internet humor. Such a perspective is consonant with the argument of New Left critic Wang Hui that there is a "worldwide dynamic toward depoliticization" underpinned by the hegemony of neoliberal economic perspectives (Wang 2009, 9). In this sense, neoliberal hegemony, the sense that there is no real political or economic alternative to market economics, combined with authoritarian politics in China, means that internet humor is primarily an expression of political cynicism and overall powerlessness, rather than being a realm of "freedom" as asserted by some (e.g., Ding 2013). Expression may indeed be relatively "free" on the Internet, but of what consequence is freedom of expression when the ability to transform such "freedom" into efficacious political action is limited or non-existent? In this sense, political humor may be more a reflection of privatized political passivity under the dominance of neoliberal hegemony (e.g., Wang 2009) than political critique with real-world implications.

The suppression of humor during the Mao years (e.g., Abrahamsen 2011; Moser 2004; Yue 2010; Zhang 2012) is similar to Confucian orthodoxy's suppression of humor in that both sought to achieve some degree of ideological and value uniformity. The more recent emergence and proliferation of humor certainly reflects a greater degree and variety of political expression, but also may reflect the "anomie" that distinguishes the moral landscape in China today (e.g., Kleinman et al. 2011). Greater diversity of views may simply manifest ultimate ideological or idealistic emptiness, an overall meaninglessness in political and/or social systems. Thus, humorous political expression becomes a way of venting cynicism regarding the lack of space for political change, with the contemporary "passé" and seemingly "saturated" quality of political humor in China today (Zhang 2012) reflecting passive and privatized critique rather than political potency.[5] Such a perspective is also reflected in the argument by Tao Dongfeng on "canon-mocking literature" revealing the "profound cultural nihilism and moral cynicism" of Chinese youth, resulting from a perceived "values-vacuum" and destroying "the program of truth-discovery" (2007). Thus, political humor may just promote the further corrosion of a political system already lacking a clear moral or ideological core.

[5]Similar debates exist regarding political humor and internet expression in other contexts, for instance, with some arguing that Jon Stewart's *The Daily Show* in the United States is more individualized critique than search for real "political solutions" (Hart 2013, 338), but others asserting that his viewers are political informed and engaged (Bennett 2007). For an examination of online community and cynicism in a different dissident context, that of Uzbekistan, see Kendzior (2011).

While gender and gendered topics are a common source of humor in information technology, gender per se has not received much attention as a category of analysis in "internet activism."[6] Yet, assessment of gendered discourses on the Internet can contribute to comprehension of the functions of internet humor as well as a perspective on consciousness regarding social and political issues in China today. Gender also provides a clear example of the ways that internet discourse is "prosaic rather than sublime" (Yang 2009). Sex and gender intrinsically lend themselves to the "spirit of profanation" that Yang regards as particularly characterizing "digital contention" (2009); indeed, much of the internet humor in China is described as *huangse* or "pornographic." As will be seen below, topics such as bodies and beauty, sex and adultery, and marriage and family, all connect both to satire regarding gender relations but also often are related to wider socio-political concerns and critiques. In relation to the views of Yang and Liu regarding Internet as an expression of "carnival," Mikhail Bahktin writes, "Carnival brings together, unifies, weds, and combines the sacred with the profane, the lofty with the low, the great with the insignificant, the wise with the stupid" (1998). Here, we will especially focus on internet humor relating to marriage and adultery, alongside other "anxieties" faced by women, to understand how it reflects privatized politics as well as political cynicism.[7]

7.2 Gendered Jokes and Privatized Politics

Jokes about gender and gendered relationships can embody qualities both eternal and specific to a particular temporal circumstance, and should be read as such.[8] Thus, while humor regarding marital relations has a long history in China, contemporary versions must be located in historical-cultural contexts as well as in

[6]Yang does not include it in his list of the seven main issues in his analysis of online activism (popular nationalism, rights defense, corruption and power abuse, environment, cultural contention, muckraking, and online charity), although it is included as part of some of these wider categories (2009, 55). In their analysis of *shunkouliu* from the 1990s, "sex and the social role of women" is one of the themes discussed by Link and Zhou (along with "a society driven by money," corruption, "the disappearance of socialist values," views of the course of the revolution, "political challenges," and regional differences) (2002, 97–103).

[7]Due to space constraints, our analysis here will focus solely on the *content* of the jokes, rather than on their linguistic characteristics. In short, some of them do fall into a category that might be described as versions of "*shunkouliu*" (short, pithy, rhyming), while others are more like anecdotes. The complete set of jokes analyzed are available upon request. Jokes were found through searches on baidu.com as well as renren.com, and were circulated on blogs, internet bulletin boards systems (BBS), as well as through mobile phone text-messages (SMS or 短信), in two major time periods, early 2011 and fall of 2012. A warning to the reader: some of these jokes are funnier than others, at least in the view of the 老外co-author of this paper.

[8]The jokes we are discussing are all fairly heteronormative as well as assuming some basis of sexual bimorphism—homosexuality and transgender questions, while more openly discussed in China today than in the past, are not particularly part of our data set. Also, many jokes seem

contemporary discursive frames. Many thinkers in both traditional (e.g., Feng Menglong, Li Yu; Xu 2011) and Republican-era China emphasized the "didactic" purpose of humor, with the latter era most clearly represented by Lin Yutang who believed it could serve as a "civilizing tool for the modernization of Chinese society" (Chey 2011). In the contemporary moment, such a vision of humor must also be joined to ways that moral meaning today is a largely privatized matter. Some scholars argue that the increased tendency toward "neoliberalism" in "post-socialist" China has led to a corresponding tendency to "privatize" what used to be "public" issues in the Mao era. Thus, Hui Faye Xiao argues that narratives about adultery, divorce, and women's issues tend to be framed as individualist, a "personalized victim narrative" (Xiao 2010).

For instance, a major scenario in many jokes about gendered relationships features marital strife caused by a woman who is too much of a *nüqiangren*, or "strong woman," although this term is itself rarely used. This is a view of women that is connected to the gender sameness and androgyny emphasized during the Mao era, and is often also regarded as a derogatory term, describing women "who are unsympathetic, imperious, overbearing, or who have sacrificed female qualities and do not have happy families" (Hom and Xin 1995). For instance, jokes might imply that men are merely hen-pecked victims, unable to assert their own personhood or their own points of view in the situation of being married to a *nüqiangren*:

Wife: Are you done with your novel?

Husband: Yeah, but I'm going to modify it a little bit.

Wife: Is the hero in your novel afraid of his wife too?

Husband: No, he dares to face his wife's wrong ideas and criticize and fight with her.

Wife: Have you ever had such an experience?

Husband: No. This is only science fiction.

Such jokes regarding henpecked husbands in fact have a long tradition in China. Such jokes appeared as early as in Feng Menglong's late-Ming era *Xiao Fu*. In 1953, C.T. Hsia connected them "to the Confucian principle that each should behave appropriately according to his or her station," regarding this notion as the source of "traditional and current jokes about cuckolds and henpecked husbands" (Chey 2011). For instance, a set of contemporary pieces titled "Eleven jokes reveal husband-wife relations" seeks to impart lessons for happier marriages, with fully eight of the 11 jokes essentially featuring husbands nagged by their assertive wives. For instance, number three:

An old couple was praised because of their good relationship. When a journalist asked what was the secret of having such a happy marriage, the husband explained, "It has something

(Footnote 8 continued)

primarily to be about and to apply to urban, middle-class Chinese, which is consistent with their audience being the larger set of Chinese "netizens" who are in urban areas.

> to do with a story during our honeymoon. We went to a canyon for our honeymoon. We planned to ride a donkey to the bottom of the valley. However, the donkey fell to the ground after a few steps. My wife said calmly, 'the first time.' A few miles later, the donkey fell again. My wife said calmly, 'the second time.' After a half mile, the donkey fell the third time, and my wife took out her gun and killed the donkey. I couldn't agree with her behavior, so I quarreled with her. Then my wife said calmly, 'the first time…'"
>
> Comment: There should be respectful bottom lines in a marriage. We know where the bottom lines are after we test each other. Compromise consciously, and do not let ourselves get out of control.

In an example of the contemporary coexistence of "multiple temporalities," a re-working of the Confucian ethics of the "three obediences and the four virtues" claims wives and husbands observe the "three nevers" and "four patients":

> The new system for husbands in 2011: don't pretend to be cool in front of your wife, don't make your wife jealous, give way first when you quarrel, you have to bear it when your wife beats you.
>
> The wife needs the three-nevers: never do laundry, never cook, never mop the floor.
>
> The husband needs the four-patients: be patient to wait when your wife is putting on make-up, be patient and pay the money [when your wife goes shopping], be patient when your wife gets angry, be patient to please your wife when she is angry.

In this vision, despite much evidence of gender androgyny actually granting women a heavy "double burden" under Maoist socialism that persists to the present day, women refuse to do housework and are moody and unpredictable; their husbands' primary job is to patiently wait out their tempers and provide financial support for them. Such a viewpoint expresses a certain frustration with women's lack of proper dutifulness in the home, and yearns for a more traditional, "obedient and virtuous" wife. This is consistent with a reaction against Maoist feminism, which "is said to have emasculated men, masculinized women, and mistakenly equated the genders" (Rofel 2007).

These moralistic discussions, which seem to be linked to traditionalist views of gender relations in China, should nonetheless not be separated from the contemporary context of public moral void combined with privatized moral improvement. In many of these discussions, the general implication is that women's lack of virtuous obedience is to blame for quarreling and lack of respect in marriages. Thus, the causal linkages of *nüqiangren* leading to hen-pecked husbands leading to marital dissatisfaction, (and in some cases) adultery and divorce, generates the conclusion that a return to women's more traditional roles would be a greater source of marital (and thus social) harmony. This is also reflective of some of the jokes seeming to reflect a sentiment that the plague of extramarital activity in reform-era China could in part be resolved by privatized moral and sometimes even consumerist good behavior.

In fact, there is a deeply contradictory set of imperatives for women reflected in many of these jokes. On the one hand, as seen above, *nüqiangren* receive the blame for marital discontent, but are also often seen as enslaved by consumerist requirements:

What is a modern beauty? Body measurements are demonized; income is white-collar; housework is abandoned; happiness is day-to-day; love is persistent; sentiments are petty; shopping is a madness; lover is standard; husband is enslaved!

On the other hand, consumer behavior is presented as the solution to the problem in particular of men straying into affairs. For instance, a set of jokes titled "33 excellent metaphors of male–female relationships" contains the following:

Every woman has two editions: a deluxe edition, and a paperback edition. The former is shown to others during work and social occasions, wearing make-up and being glamorous in front of people; the latter is shown to her family who she loves the most. Husband can usually see the paperback edition of his wife, and the deluxe edition of other women—this is one of the causes of having an affair.

In this case, women's inadequate consumption of clothing and cosmetics contributes to the husband's "having an affair." Such a perspective is highlighted most clearly in a set of jokes involving regional differences in how wives handle their husbands' "staying out at night,"[9] with "the Shanghai wife" not surprisingly handling it as a beauty-oriented consumer, as well as a shrewd businessperson:

The wife couldn't fall asleep the whole night. The next day, she went to a salon and had her hair done. In the afternoon, she did a face mask, and went to a lingerie store and bought sexy underwear. Later she went back home and prepared a candlelit dinner by herself. She spent 400 yuan for the day. When the husband came back home at night and saw his pretty and sexy wife, he was surprised, with his mouth wide open. He regretted that he ignored her beauty and sexiness, and swore that he would never let her go for the rest of his life.

One week later, the wife published an article on a magazine, titled "How did I get back my play-boy husband?" and she received 500 yuan payment for this article.

One potential implication from this example is that the desirability of the Shanghai middle-class lifestyle serves as a model for all of China as it moves toward urban, consumerist (post) modernity, also reflected in this *shunkouliu*, a mixed assessment of contemporary women:

Women of the current age (are),

Loyal to friends;

Scrambling to pay for meals;

Wearing high-heels to the battlefield;

Skilled at business wars;

Fighting and seizing;

Driving a BMW to capture "bad eggs";

Having higher education;

Having character;

Competing or fighting [with their] IQ in both career and love;

Knowing how to dress up;

[9]Regional stereotyping has long been part of Chinese humor (Chey 2011, 21).

> Knowing how to raise a family;
>
> And the bride dares to rob the groom.

This perspective shows the multifaceted identity of modern, urban Chinese women but also shows their overall consumerist or competitive tendencies.

Such viewpoints of the pervasive quality of market-oriented sentiments are evident in this recent view of male–female attraction:

> A man said, "I'm the best guy. I swear I will make you a happy life. Please be my girlfriend." This is peddling.
>
> A man said, "My father has three apartments. If you be my girlfriend, these apartments later will be yours." This is salesmanship.
>
> A man didn't express his love, but the woman was already enchanted by his temperament and demeanor. This is marketing.
>
> A woman didn't know a man, but all of her friends spoke highly of him. This is branding.

Such a view regards relationships themselves to be "commodified," in the end characterized by the same sorts of behavior through which one would market products. Such a perspective on the individualistic sources of empowerment and victimhood is consistent with what Hui Faye Xiao identifies to be the "sweeping popularity of various 'How-To' marriage guidebooks" that tend to focus more on a "self-development rhetoric" as a way of overcoming the woman's lack of *suzhi* ("quality") and *nengli* ("capacity") that are the causes of her marital failures. Xiao also argues that media "representations of divorce…tend to naturalize the privacy of family life and dismiss its economic and political underpinnings" (Xiao 2010).

Sometimes, the "quality" of a woman is a reflection of her physical self-discipline:

> Never look down upon a woman who keeps a good figure. She must have incomparable determination and endurance to refuse temptations that ordinary people fail to refuse. A woman on a diet has to control what she eats, keep physically active, practice yoga, and refuse any nice food or calories that would make her fat. Such great determination and willpower when used in love affairs and work simply cannot be a disadvantage.

Such a perspective is really ultimately reflective of the sort of "biopower" characteristic of neoliberal "governmentality" (Zhang 2011), where subjectivity and individual agency are devoted primarily to self-governance, for example in the cultivation of *suzhi* (Jacka 2009).

7.3 Gendered Humor and Political Cynicism

It may seem, thus, that arguments about unhappy marriages and troubled male–female relationships in China are largely a matter of privatized moral failings, with responsibility resting with individuals who do not adequately nurture their relationship through either proper Confucian-style behavior or consumerist

self-indulgence. Yet, much of the humor regarding gender relations in China does point to wider issues and in particular to societal moral degeneration. The "decline of social mores" is in fact a common topic of internet discourse (Thornton 2010). Yet, unlike some analyses that seek to find aspects of political hope and opposition in the socio-political critiques embedded in political humor on the contemporary Chinese Internet, we propose that such humor is first and foremost a reflection of political cynicism and even nihilism that is indeed also a product of neoliberal privatization. While much humor does contain embedded critiques of social and political inequalities in "neoliberal" China, absent corresponding social or political activism, such critiques are ultimately and merely cries into the void. As discussed above, the moral vacuum, and, more importantly, the absence of a cohesive and common moral discourse characterizing most of Chinese public life today inevitably have corrosive effects upon individual agency and subjectivity.

Such cynicism is particularly reflected in the pervasiveness of humor about extramarital relationships that also touches upon the economic and political corruption that is an endemic part of many of these situations. Thus, the humor is a lamentation regarding broken familial relationships and at the same time a statement of hopelessness regarding the continued imbrication of the personal and the political, of the intimate and the powerful, in post-Mao China.

> A set of jokes titled "Social Encyclopedia" contains the following:
>
> The difficulty of being a person
>
> If you are rich, people say you will become bad; if you are not rich, people say you are a loser; if you are achieving, people say you make profits through dubious ways; if you are not achieving, people say you are a loser; if you have a lover, people say you are bad; if you don't have a lover, people say you are not normal.

This provides one example of connections drawn between moral concerns about sexual (mis) behavior and socio-political critiques, with the prevalence of "having lovers" in China connected to other moral ambiguities in society. Sexual misconduct is sometimes connected to wider problems in China's socio-political milieu, and especially to corruption and economic inequality, and this begins to shift causal discussions of these phenomena away from the privatized individual and towards the agent situated in socio-political structures. The same "'Social Encyclopedia" discussed above also defines "Poverty and Wealth" in the following way:

> When people are poor, they feed pigs; when they get rich, they feed dogs; when people are poor, they plant grains; when they get rich, they plant grass; when people are poor, they want to find wives; when they get rich, they want to find lovers; when people are poor, their wives have part-time jobs as their secretaries; when they get rich, their secretaries have part-time jobs as their wives.

Thus, this view of "poverty and wealth" also implicitly connects affairs in China to economic inequalities and regards "finding lovers" to be a product of affluence. This perspective is consistent with views beginning in the 1990s that "participation in sexual affairs" was a "gendered exchange" trading sex for money, with women seeking men of high status and men seeking young and beautiful women

(Hershatter 2007). Another view of the financial aspects of having lovers is seen in the view that, "Between families, talking about money will hurt their relationships. Between lovers, talking about the relationship will harm their money."

Other jokes are even more explicit in the connections they draw between political and economic corruption and marital infidelity:

> Some bureaucrat says to his wife: chi fan, shui jiao;
>
> to his sister-in-law: chi ge fan, shui ge jiao;
>
> to a beautiful lady: chi chi fan, shui shui jiao;
>
> to his [cute] secretary: chi fan fan, shui jiao jiao;
>
> to the people: chi shen me fan, shui shen me jiao!

The "bureaucrat" employs increasingly flirtatious means of communicating with various women, but a fairly heartless method of communicating with the *laobaixing*, indicating a distaste for the common people that is some distance from the close relationship that cadres were supposed to cultivate with the "masses" during the Maoist era. Another joke connects various levels of Chinese business and government hierarchies with both infidelity and also various grades of mobile phone service:

> Chief managers are so majestic, bringing their secretaries "GoTone"; department managers are amorous, fostering "concubines" with "EasyTone"; project directors are not stupid either, hooking up lovers as "Rechargeable Card"; normal workers' pockets are empty, taking their wives "LocalTone".

For Guobin Yang, the Internet is a space where netizens can "nurture moral sentiments" in an environment of "utopian realism" (Yang 2009). The views of adultery as evidence of moral degeneration not only in the family but also in the Chinese socio-political system enable these discussions to transcend gender issues and to engage wider critiques of inequality in Chinese society. For Wang Hui, "the critique of corruption is also a critique of much deeper levels of inequality and injustice involved in the asset-transfer process" (Wang 2009). In this sense, regarding extramarital affairs as one product of corruption allows for netizens to take subtle jabs at various social problems simultaneously.[10]

Indeed, these jokes point more at the general belief in the moral degeneration of Chinese society. Internet humor about adultery offers a variety of stated and implied causes for such degeneration. Consistent with the discussion above regarding privatization and hegemonic consumerism, extramarital affairs sometimes seem to be manifestations of just another form of "shopping" for the ideal product, as evidenced in the joke above using marketing as a metaphor for a man finding a female partner. One of the "33 excellent metaphors of male–female relationships" compares women to fashion:

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[10]This is somewhat consistent with a view of some feminists that in the Chinese critical setting, gender is sometimes a stand-in for class, the critiques of which are largely taboo (Wang and Zhang 2010, 66–67).

> Wives are similar to clothes—the new fashions are updated so quickly, and the price increases day by day. No men are good—but they are after all the largest consumer on women's market.

Chinese society, in other words, generally suffers from the loss of moral virtue resulting from forces of the market economy, and this includes women who instead of cultivating traditional virtues are interested only in material possessions and physical beauty. Such a focus on consumption is seen by some critics as a component of state ideological control—following Althusser, Wang Hui refers to "market ideological apparatuses" that include "the media, advertising, the 'world of shopping,' and so forth" that are depoliticizing and yet have "appeal to the 'common-sense,' ordinary needs" of individual consumers (Wang 2009). Lisa Rofel argues that gendered consumerism is a blend of the local and the "cosmopolitan" in the imaginaries of young Chinese women, and that it is also a way of being "free of all constraints" (Rofel 2007). At the same time, consumerism is seen as a central component of ideas of self-improvement and "quality" (*suzhi*) in contemporary Chinese society. Thus, women are pressured to consume and simultaneously mocked for their consumerist desires; but these consumerist desires and the ultimate marketization of all relations becomes a cause of moral depredations in China today. Jokes reflecting the cynicism and implicit critiques of the consumerism that has gripped "middle-class" Chinese society, as well as its effects on Chinese women, reflect literary critic Jing Wang's view that, already in the 1990s, "It has become a national knack to satirize a society gone mad with consumerism while quietly going along with the greed" (quoted in Yang 2009).

Other jokes, however, point more to politics than the market as a central cause of affairs. High officials having mistresses is *de rigeur*, linked to the intersections of money and power. For instance:

> The current situation of Chinese officials: disguising good images, dawdling away their time, keeping their positions, going whoring, having big dinners, filling their bellies, exercising their courage, hugging their mistresses, coaxing their wives, enjoying happiness, possessing houses, holding official seals, staring at money, and doing everything for their children.

Thus, Chinese officials inherently are linked to corruption and "whoring." Cynicism about the behavior of officials cannot but be linked to cynicism about the Communist Party. While the Party during the last decade sought to deal with the self-evident moral and intellectual vacuum in China by promoting, for instance, the notion of a "harmonious society" and thus implicitly reviving certain Confucian moral codes, humor about adultery also reveals anxieties about moral shortcomings in China today that can point right back at the Party itself. For instance,

> A woman had an affair with another man, and she was caught by her husband. Her husband yelled, "If I were not a party member, I would have killed both of you!" The woman yelled back, "If I were not a party member, I would have divorced you!" The man who had an affair with the woman was thrilled, and cried as he was putting his clothes on, "Long live the Communist Party!"

This joke reveals a certain cynicism about not only adultery in China today, but also about the continued relevance of the Communist Party, seeing it as ironically the official guardian of some sort of simplistic sense of morality or stability, even as its members are clearly lacking in such moral sensibilities when it comes their own behavior.

Such issues are reflected also in the following joke indicating some nostalgia for the moral clarity of the Mao era:

> Scientists in China cloned Mao Zedong successfully! All the physical measurements show that his body condition is in his 50s.
>
> After releasing the news in a press conference, the whole world is shocked.
>
> […]
>
> The domestic conditions suddenly changed!
>
> […]
>
> Within 24 h, the officials above the county level turn in total $980 trillion of corrupt lucre.
>
> All the enterprises voluntarily reform themselves into public-owned business.
>
> 1.29 million illegal "concubines" of the officials stand out and accuse those officials for their crimes.
>
> 25 million prostitutes give up their "jobs" overnight and live normal lives.
>
> The stock market soars upwards.
>
> Chinese soccer wins!
>
> Housing prices drop 60%.
>
> 1.3 billion people sing the song again, "The East is Red…"

While clearly more representative of "utopianism" than "realism," this last joke also does reflect a sense of dissatisfaction with "the social polarization that has accompanied China's rapid economic development," which is why Guobin Yang believes that internet contention in China represents, among other things, a "social revolution" (Yang 2009). Link and Zhou also assert that "the widespread sarcasm in *shunkouliu* can actually be read as strong expression in favor of ideals" (2002). One thing that the information technology humor assessed here is doing is struggling to assert the need for some sort of moral or socio-political ideal in the face of degeneration in the same spheres. We assert, however, that in the absence of actual political action, cynicism is the other side of the coin of idealism, when there is an absence of any sort of path to actual realization of such ideals.

7.4 Conclusion: Privatized and Profane Politics

It is because the Party and the market are both apparently to blame for corrupted gender relations that we locate the ultimate effect of these jokes to be more as manifestations of cynicism and less as productive critique. What is there to believe in, to orient one's life purpose around, if neither of the two dominant structures in

Chinese life are worthy of veneration or imitation? What is the use of political action if morality is strictly a privatized matter and politics and the market alike are pervaded by corruption and inequality? Humor certainly reveals the ironies of a system of "market socialism" and reveals a certain "privatized despair," but concrete political and social action are needed to resolve them so that the Chinese system can better promote gender and other forms of justice.

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Part III
The “Special Amusing Region”: Humor in Hong Kong

Chapter 8
Political Jokes, Caricatures and Satire in Wong Tze-wah's Standup Comedy

King-fai Tam

Abstract Cantonese standup comedy became a popular entertainment form in Hong Kong in the last two decades of the twentieth century. It bore rudimentary resemblances to English standup comedy initially, but soon took on an aesthetic of its own due to the cultural and political concerns of the time. Against this background, Wong Tze-wah emerges as one of the handful performers who manages to craft a widely successful career in standup comedy. This chapter focuses on the political satire in his standup comedy in the 1990s. Over a number of full-length performances, Wong develops a sustained satirical vision that goes beyond isolated jokes and caricatures. The chapter concludes by raising questions about the relationship between political humor and political action.

Hong Kong in the 1990s brings to mind Charles Dickens' famous lines with which he begins *A Tale of Two Cities*, "It was the best of times; it was the worst of times." In those hectic days, Hong Kong witnessed an era of political, cultural and social openness unseen in any other periods in its history. Recent political events combined with other social and institutional factors created a sense of urgency among the populace to seek to understand Hong Kong's past and present and imagine and articulate their visions of its future. Meanwhile, the rampant consumerism caused in no small degree by the economic globalization and technological innovations persisted despite all dire economic and political predictions. Such an environment gave rise to the innovative use of established artistic forms such as film and cartoons on the one hand, and the proliferation of new media of public discourse such as blogs, street performances, experimental art and theater, face-to-face debates, and interactive radio TV shows on the other.

Yet, while culture thrived, politics stalled, giving rise to a pervasive sense of doom and futility in society. Two incidents, one in the recent past and the other in the near future, hanged heavily on people's mind. The June 4 Incident of 1989 was still fresh in memory while the prospects of the turnover of Hong Kong's

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sovereignty to China in 1997 was looked upon with ambivalence if not dread. Somewhat belatedly, the Hong Kong British government introduced political reforms, which served to stir rather than calm the anxiety of the people. All these would soon become the staples for political satirists.

It is against this cultural and political backdrop that I propose to examine the political humor in Wong Tze-wah's standup comedy, but to fully understand Wong's innovations in this regard, it is necessary to review the history of standup comedy in Hong Kong.

8.1 Standup Comedy in Hong Kong

That standup comedy is a new performance art form in the 1990s is something that most critics can agree upon, but there is less consensus on its origin. One hears casual assertions, supported by little evidence and even less research, that it is possible to trace its roots to other Chinese genres of verbal comedy: the *xiangsheng*, qingkou, *er'renzhuan* or *xiaopin*. For example, Jin (1990), one of the earliest critics to take note of the merging standup scene, is reminded of the street performers in early Hong Kong, and recalls that one Shenggui Zhuo specialized in telling comic stories in the Yau Ma Tei area in the 1930s. Shenggui Zhuo would start his workday in the late afternoon, long before other artists came to perform in the outdoor fairground, so that he could deliver his jokes undisturbed by their loud music. He would also end his day at around sunset before the darkness obscured his lively facial expressions which added nuance to his jokes.

To the extent that standing up in front of a crowd to tell jokes is such a universal human behavior that no single culture can claim to have a monopoly over it, it is not surprising that one can find similar art forms to standup comedy in China. Yet, to maintain that standup comedy can trace its origin to indigenous Chinese roots is to overlook the fact that the English standup scene in Hong Kong is no different from English standup comedy elsewhere in the world in almost every way. The Takeout Comedy Shop, one of the longest standing standup comedy clubs in Hong Kong, for example, offers regularly an open mic, where amateurs and professionals (mostly overseas comedians passing through Hong Kong) share the stage. It features short courses on the art of standup and hold an annual contest for local talents. Until recently, most artists and customers come from the expatriate community in town. Like their counterparts in the English-speaking world, performers at this Club stand up on the stage to deliver short monologues of 5 to 6 min to a small crowd. They have few props apart from the microphone in their hand. In form and content, they are in keeping with the standup aesthetics established in other places.

In the 1990s, a Cantonese standup scene began to take shape. Like their English counterparts, the Cantonese standup artists perform short skits to small audiences. They also readily acknowledge that they owe their inspirations to the West, which, in the setting of Hong Kong, refers primarily to the Anglophone world made up primarily of the UK, the USA, Canada and Australia. Yet, only a very small number

of artists managed to cross the linguistic line, and the English and Cantonese standup scenes thus exist side by side with each other, with little mingling in between.

It would seem, moreover, that Cantonese standup is informed by a set of motivations and concerns different from English standup. In an interview on March 2009, John Moorhead, the founder of Punchline Comedy in Hong Kong, pointed out that his club allowed people to "[leave] economic worries at the door." Hard times, he explained, had made it all the more necessary for people to look for comic relief, and his club accordingly provides a temporary refuge for people who want to turn away from the harsh reality of Hong Kong (Maloney 2012). For the most part, then, the English shows deal with topics of comedies of manners—the awkward situations that the expatriates encounter in adapting to life in Hong Kong, the exotic (and laughable) practices of Chinese people, the social foibles and follies one sees so often in life and so on. If they talk about politics at all, it is usually not Hong Kong politics but that from their home country, which, from a distance, does not seem as immediate or worrisome. Such an escape theory of comedy, however, does not seem to apply to Cantonese standup, which is more ready to face the political and social reality in Hong Kong head-on. Fab, for example, won the title of the Best Comedian in Cantonese Standup in the Takeout Comedy Shop's annual contest in 2012 with a biting piece of satire on the greed of the business magnate Lee Kar Shing. Intent on expanding his economic empire all the wider, Lee as depicted in the show turns the whole Hong Kong into one big shopping mall. It is fair to say, therefore, that the Cantonese standup is considerably more politically and economically aware than English standup, and that the artists and audience alike prefer to be reminded of the political and economical reality even when they look for a light moment of diversion.

8.2 Wong Tze-wah, the Standup Comedian

Wong pursues a multi-faced career in various entertainment areas such as TV, film, radio and stage performance, but is best beloved as a standup comedian. He has been credited, if inaccurately, for introducing the art of standup comedy to Hong Kong, and his name has been regarded as synonymous to Cantonese standup since it became a definable art form in the 1990s. In October 2010, he celebrated the twentieth anniversary of his standup career by putting the twelfth of his full-length standup routines, with a title—"The World of Entertainment: A Bloody History, Part II"—that echoes that of his very first. Alternately self-congratulatory and self-mocking, Wong explores the ups and downs of his career, even as public consensus affirms his steadfast dedication to the art, the social and political relevance, and the artistic variations with which he invests in it, and the popularity he has gained among the Cantonese-speaking populace in Hong Kong and elsewhere.

It has to be noted that while the Cantonese artists described in the previous paragraphs practice the art of standup as amateurs, Wong is one of the handful

successful performers who engage in it professionally. He puts on shows in large theaters and stadiums that house audiences in the hundreds and thousands. The Coliseum in Hong Hom, where Wong staged his last few shows, has a capacity of 12,500. The average length of his performances is over 2 hours. The DVD record of his “No Charcoal to Use” (Wong 2003) shows Wong riffling a script more than 60 pages long. Rather than the seemingly off-the-cuff remarks delivered with few props but a microphone in hand, Wong’s shows have evolved into an entertainment production of mega-proportion, involving not only the lone artist but a crew of technical and artistic support personnel. The sensibilities have also changed. Wong still engages in conversation with the audience, but with viewers now numbering in the thousands, he has developed new ways to interact with them. In recent years, Wong has taken to coming onto a 360-degree stage in the accompaniment of the beat of heavy music. Like a rock star, he orchestrates the cheering of the fans, sometimes pumping his arms in the air and sometimes cupping his hands behind his ears to elicit ever more raucous applause. From his high point on the stage, he throws mementos to the crowd below. These initial warm-up exercises are followed throughout the rest of the show by other more conventional methods of mixing with the crowd. He would come down from the stage to walk the floor and engage in one-to-one conversations with the viewers, sharing his microphone with them. Conversely, he invites members of the audience to come onto the stage to sing a song or play a game with him. The interaction can take on a mock aggressive tone when he challenges the audience to heckle him, and demonstrates time and again they are no match for his quick wit in repartee. All these gestures and postures combine to make Wong’s standup comedy an experience with orchestrated audience participation, where most viewers leave at the end of the show with a feeling they had taken part in a satisfying communal event.

As Hong Kong evolved in the last twenty years, so did Wong’s standup comedies. The change is evident not only in his methods and tone of delivery, but also in his choice and rendition of the subject matter. Some critics note that his jokes now cater more to the younger (and presumably less reflective) audience, while others bemoan Wong’s gradual shift away from controversial topics in his latest shows. In the past, especially during the years leading to 1997, Wong was overtly and aggressively political. His first six shows all contain in various degrees political satire of one type or another, and “Where to go next?” (1992), “The Latter-Day God of Wealth” (1994) and “Settling Accounts before the Autumn Harvest” (1997) among them are particularly comprehensive and incisive in the analysis of the political situation in Hong Kong. After 1997, however, he began to turns his attention away from politics. Probably, the most notable change in his orientation is found in “Muddling Along” (1999), his first show after the turnover, which he opened by pointing out that Hong Kong did not fare as bad as he had feared. Having thus concluded the first phase of his standup career, Wong now aims his satirical missiles at targets other than politics these days. Although he still indulges in one or two political jabs every now and then, they are mostly caricatures of public figures, and the sustained attention that he has given to politics has become a thing of the past.

8.3 Political Jokes, Caricatures, and Satire

Jokes are supposed to be short and to the point. The joke-teller may outline a situation which gives only whatever is necessary for the delivery of the punch line. All other information is regarded as extraneous. Wickberg (1998) contrasts this quality of jokes with the digressive nature of other narrative forms such as the novel in this way:

> [T]he novel aims to reproduce the detail of everyday life in language as a sign of the value of concrete, empirical, ordinary middle-class existence, whereas the joke aims at ultimate abstraction, condensation of detail, and exclusion of all elements not to the 'point,' so as to make it accessible as a product to an anonymous audience of consumers. Both the novel and the joke, however, are characteristically modern, and one standing for the uniqueness of the individual work of art and the artist behind it, the other representing the interchangeability of parts, the techniques of mass production, the anonymity of modern life.

Political jokes are no different from other jokes in these regards. Yet, while Wickberg rightfully points to the effect of the brevity and abstractness of jokes, he fails to note that these qualities are results of a common vocabulary that exists between the teller of the joke and his listeners. Condensation of details and abstraction are possible only when the two parties do not misread the references of the joke. A toothy grin on the face of a politician on an American newspaper in the late 1970s says Jimmy Carter. Similarly, a woman with a broom-like hairdo in the newspapers of Hong Kong in the early years of the first decade of the 21st century says just as loudly Regina Ip. Reduced to such level of abstractions, political jokes become political caricatures—where laughter is raised not so much to make a political point, but to launch an attack on a political personality.

Standup artists often resort to this kind of political humor. The brevity of a joke makes it possible for the artist either to present it as it is, or embed it in another joke, making it almost incidental to a larger point. In 2003, when a wave of suicides struck Hong Kong, Wong counsels young people against taking their lives in "No Charcoal to Use" (2003) adding facetiously that the working of reincarnation is such that people who kill themselves will be reborn to their worst enemy. He then proceeds to prove his point by detailing the many instances of parent-child hostility, ending his joke in this way, "Do not take your life, then. If you do, you may find that when you open your eyes again, you will see the face of Tung Chee-wah bearing down on you as he reaches over to tickle your chin, saying, 'Oh, what a cute little baby!'"

On one level, the punch-line with its reference to the first Chief Executive of Hong Kong, Tung Chee-wah, is an odd ending to a joke about suicide. The audience is caught off-guard at first, and their laughter, coming a moment later than usual, registers unmistakably a note of surprise. Yet, the joke works because the consensus at the time was that Tung's ineffectual government had made him the public enemy no. 1 in Hong Kong, which constitutes the common vocabulary between Wong Tze-wah and his viewers. As a result, what at first appears to be a *non-sequitur* becomes an oddly appropriate and satisfying punchline. On another

level, one could also argue that the long narrative about suicide and reincarnation is a mere preamble to the political joke that underscores the people's disgruntlement with Tung Chee-wah. In "Where to go next?" (1992), Zhang Junsheng, the vice-director of New China News Agency in Hong Kong, whose frequent obnoxious public announcements during the last phase of the transition is used to conclude a joke about noise pollution. Similarly, Christopher Patten's weight problem becomes the butt of another joke about the excessive consumption of natural resources, as is Tung Chee-wah's signature pauses in public speaking, signifying either an addled mind or a lack of resolve. These jokes reveal nothing about political figures that the audience does not already know or the political figures themselves are not aware. Rather, they merely articulate what is already in everybody's mind, recalling Orwell (1970)'s famous remark that the purpose of jokes is not to degrade a person "but to remind him that he is already degraded."

What is most distinctive about Wong's political humor, however, is his political satire, a term that I use here to refer to a carefully crafted narrative that goes far beyond these personal or personality attacks discussed so far. Wong Tze-wah targets not only the political players, but the political climate of the times. In "Where to go next?" (1992), Hong Kong is likened to a train moving fast forward, but the passengers have no idea where it is heading. Every now and then, they wonder aloud, "What is the next station?" but they are by and large contented to be moving along. Wong develops this metaphor in this show and others as a fitting description of life in Hong Kong, where people move aimlessly from one activity to the next, always wondering, "What's next?" Hong Kong is thus condemned to an eternal transitional state. The 1997 turnover seems in this light a corrective to this lack of direction as it introduces a purpose to history, a destination to this runaway train. Yet, the populace shows no enthusiasm over it. Judging from the scale of emigration in the late 1980s, there is every indication that instead of the jubilation over the end of the colonial era one expected to see, Hong Kong was in fact filled with apprehension at the approach of 1997.

Wong analyzes this political malaise from at least two angles: economical and historical. Now as much as in the past, Hong Kong's *raison d'etre* lies in economic prosperity. The history of Hong Kong as a haven for refugees may in part account for the undue emphasis on the importance of economic survival, but when making a living becomes life's only goal, all other human activities become incidental to our existence and the economy has the power to subsume, or in Wong's lively metaphor, "digest" them. Thus in "Settling Accounts before the Autumn Harvest" (1997), Wong points out matter-of-factly that Hong Kong's way of marking the death of Deng Xiaoping, a potentially momentous political event, is to allow "the economy to digest the news." As long as the stock market shows no wild fluctuations, Hong Kong people are not too concerned over the passing of this important political figure. That the economy can "digest" all is the overarching theme of "The Latter-Day Gods of Wealth" (1994), in which Wong subjects to scathing satire celebrities and social phenomena alike. Most notably, the latter includes the preferences for gourmet food and luxury items such as Mercedes, Rolexes and the Shanghai hairy crabs as well as the daily obsession with stock market and horse

races, all of which reveal the prevalent crass consumerist values in Hong Kong. All these are the latter-day gods of wealth. Speaking like a religious evangelist, Wong punctuates his performance by raising his arms in a gesture of supplication every now and then, as if to ask the power that be to preserve them, for they are the substance and symbols of Hong Kong's continuous prosperity. The dream of making a fortune in horse races is so deeply ingrained in people's mind that it directs their attention from the other portentous events. Facetiously, Wong advises the pro-democracy elements get on the bus with the gamblers at the end of a horse race day to understand the true meaning of "national mourning" (國殤). The forlorn look on the faces of those who have had a rough day at the racecourse says more about the complete loss of hope than any commemoration event of the June 4 Incident.

There is therefore a kind of political wishful thinking on the part of Hong Kong people. Since the economy will "digest" all causes of instability, there is no need to worry our little heads about them. For their part, the people in Hong Kong are only too happy to bury their heads in the sand, as when the issue of the 1997 turnover was brought up in 1984. Wong proposes three theories to explain this ostrich-like behavior in "Settling Accounts before the Autumn Harvest" (1997):

1. "As long as we keep quiet about it, nobody will remember it [the upcoming 1997 deadline] 唔講唔記得論": referring to Margaret Thatcher's ill-conceived trip to Beijing in 1984. The self-delusionary thinking on the street regards as her greatest mistake in bringing to the Chinese attention to the imminent expiration of the lease of Kowloon. Had she kept quiet about it, so goes the theory, China would not have remembered that the lease was to expire soon, and Hong Kong could have stayed in British hand beyond 1997.
2. "The AIDS Theory 愛滋病論": referring to the feeling of helplessness over something that lies beyond Hong Kong's control. Not much is to be gained for an AIDS patient to discuss his conditions, as there is no cure for it. Hong Kong was in a similar situation in the 1980s. As later event bore out, the negotiations over Hong Kong's future was indeed taken out of Hong Kong's people's hand, giving rise to a prevalent sense of futility in the city.
3. "As everything has been fine until now, there is no reason that it should get any worse in the future 好地地論": referring to the faith in the continuation beyond 1997 of the charmed existence that Hong Kong has enjoyed up to the 1980s. Hong Kong had overcome many crises in the past, and so it is only fair to expect that it would survive the 1997 transition as well. Just as the "AIDS syndrome" theory is marked with pessimism, this theory is perhaps informed by unrealistic optimism.

Wong is quick to point out that Hong Kong's previous special position was made possible by the collusion of unique circumstances that were fast disappearing in the 1980s. As one takes a more careful look at history, moreover, such optimism proved to be groundless anyway.

Accordingly, Wong's most extensive examination of the political malaise in Hong Kong is found in his idiosyncratic version of Chinese history, which sometimes takes the audience as far back as the period of the legendary kings and emperors. For the most part, however, he focuses on the recent history of China after the Opium War, an incident that turns Hong Kong into a British colony. In "Settling Accounts before the Autumn Harvest,"(1997) Wong steps into the role of the Qing diplomat Li Hongzhang, making a report to the Empress Dowager of the latest development on the Hong Kong front. The latter is enraged at the news that Kowloon has been leased to the British government for 99 years for only a dollar and stands ready to wage war against the British government. Li counsels patience; that, he says, would only play into the hands of the Westerners, who are waiting for an excuse to drive their forces to Beijing so that they could say to her face one of the most vicious curses in English: "Fuck you!" The bungling Li Hongzhang pronounces this epithet as 福夭, which he glosses as "the untimely termination of one's blessing (福之夭折也)." Then, bowing repeatedly, he withdraws, muttering by way of apology: "Your humble servant deserves to 福夭. Your humble servant deserves to 福夭." (奴才福夭,奴才福夭)

Metaphorically, then, Hong Kong is born from the sexual aggression of the British. In "Where to go next?" (1992), Wong constructs a different family tree for Hong Kong. There are two fathers to Hong Kong: the Nationalist Thief and the Communist Bandit. The mother is China, otherwise known as 'the turf' over which the "Nationalist Thief" and the "Communist Bandit" fight. Fortunately, there as also a stepmother, a foreign devil woman (鬼婆), who takes good care of the stepson, giving him shelter and food (好食好住). As a result, when asked about Hong Kong's identity, Wong shrugs and replies, "Who bloody cares?"

Such, according to Wong, is the reason for the lukewarm response to the conclusion of the colonial era of Hong Kong. Hong Kong is an orphan who has been taken good care of by the stepmother. By contrast, where is the glorious history of China that would make Hong Kong people proud? Wong proceeds to give a highly schematic sketch of the chronology of Chinese history in various shows. In "Where to go next?" (1992) he begins with the Xuanyuan Emperor, moves on to the "Seventh Generation Ancestor" the First Emperor of Qin, then to the "Twenty-seventh Generation Ancestor" Emperor Yang of Sui, and then the "Thirty-seventh Generation Ancestor" the last Emperor Song, Du. All but the first one of these imperial figures constitute in the popular imagination what can be called the rogue gallery of Chinese monarchy. The line of succession becomes difficult to trace when Wong moves into the modern period, but the overall sense is that China does not fare any better after the end of the imperial period than before. With time, the country is torn asunder by the warlords, the CCP-GMD civil war, and the War of Resistance against the Japanese. The establishment of the PRC in 1949 promises the coming of a brighter future but the hope is quickly dashed by a series of political movements: the Great Leap Forward, the Three and Five-Antis Movement, and the Cultural Revolution. In the other accounts found in "Settling Accounts before the Autumn Harvest" (1997) and "Latter-Day Gods of Wealth," (1994) the sacking of Beijing and the burning of the Summer Palace by the Western

powers in 1900, the Great Famine of the early 1950s and the June 4 Incident of 1989 are thrown in the mix. All these are delivered as bullet points, with their interconnections unexplained, re-enacting the way history is generally taught in schools and understood by the general public.

8.4 Other Considerations

The analysis of Wong Tze-wah's standup comedy brings to the foreground a number of points in the discussion of political humor. First, political satire is too often narrowly equated with the castigation of policies and politicians in a humorous manner, and as such, has been understood as the voice of the disenfranchised. Howard Choy notes in his chapter in this volume, however, that the jokes that come out in the wake of the Cultural Revolution are equally divided between those that cast a critical glance at the follies of the politicians on the one hand and the masses that either blindly follow the lead of the authorities or exploit the political situation for their selfish gains on the other. The other chapters of this volume show that those in power can just as easily enlist political humor to their aid. Similarly, Wong Tze-wah is not content with only making fun of the active players in politics, but the silent apolitical majority comes under his attack as well. For economical or historical reasons, these people disavow their political prerogatives and responsibilities at a time when they run the least risk in making their voices heard.

Secondly, there is a need to reconsider what constitutes political humor. Many of Wong's jokes are bifurcated. The one about being reborn to the Tung family and the one about the mournful look of the gamblers on a horse race day, for example, are about politics as much as social mores. Similarly, the skit featuring Li Hongzhang comments on Hong Kong's present as well as China's past, demonstrating thereby a connection between history and politics. In these instances, political jokes and other kinds of jokes interpenetrate each other, making it necessary to take a careful look as to what political humor exactly encompasses.

Thirdly, it is obvious that Wong's political satire gains something from his historical, economic and social analyses. The expanded scale of the Cantonese standup opens up many more possibilities than an isolated jab at the political figures here and there, a characteristic that Wong exploits to the full by his carefully crafted scripts. "The Latter-Day Gods of Wealth," (1994) for instance, is structured in such a way as to allow Wong to give a comprehensive analysis of the money-minded culture of Hong Kong. The litany of the "Gods" serves as a topic sentence to be developed in the rest of the show: the brand name consumer goods, the Mark 6 lottery, the Project Hope, the horse races, the stock market, the run-away real estate price, the old district Shum Shui Po as the depository of the losers in the game of economic survival, the Macau casinos, the market value of the corpse of Mao Zedong, and so on. One recalls in this connection Wickberg (1998)'s discussion of the differences between novel and jokes quoted above, which Wong seems to have

succeeded in transcending. Perhaps it is more accurate to say that Wong's type of humor does not rely on jokes or caricatures, but constitutes fully realized satire, whose structured digressiveness is reminiscent of the novel.

Finally, we are faced with the questionable relationship between laughter and political action. The characterization of humor as society's safety valve comes to mind. Freud (1985) describes the joke as "a liberation from the pressure [from political authorities]" pointing to the function of the joke is to reduce tension, while many after him (e.g., Banc and Dundes 1990) expand on the "defensive mechanism" that humor affords. Likewise, Benton (1988) speculates that the vote would obviate the need for political jokes in a truly democratic society, for it "has more effective ways of easing political tensions. It is only under modern dictatorship that political jokes come truly into their own and are part of the everyday life of all classes." "Political jokes," he continues, "are not the only vehicle for non-official opinion in societies that forbid opposition, but they are probably the least dangerous." Taken together, these views seem to undercut the assertion that political humor can galvanize the masses. Rather than inciting political action, it might actually remove the cause for action by dissipating feelings of dissatisfaction before they reach a boiling point. By making policies and politicians laughable rather than hateful, do political satirists turn disgruntlement to amusement, thereby postponing the bankruptcy of an unpopular political regime? If indeed the vote obviates the need for political jokes, do political jokes conversely obviate the need for the vote or the need for political action at all?

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Chapter 9
Constructing Political Identities Through Characterization Metaphor, Humor and Sarcasm: An Analysis of the 2012 Legislative Council Election Debates in Hong Kong

Foong Ha Yap, Ariel Shuk-ling Chan and Brian Lap-ming Wai

Abstract This chapter examines how politicians use metaphor, humor and sarcasm to construct favorable political identities for themselves and unfavorable ones for their rivals. Data for analysis come from five televised debates during the 2012 Hong Kong Legislative Council Election. The chapter adopts Fauconnier and Turner's (2002) Conceptual Blending framework and analyzes how rival candidates spar with each other using characterization metaphors, and pays special attention to how politicians make use of metaphors as verbal indirectness strategies that mitigate the negative impacts of their face-threatening acts and in this way help them enhance, or at least maintain, their positive image with the general public.

Keywords Political identities · Metaphor · Humor · Sarcasm · Electoral discourse

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9.1 Introduction

Metaphor and humor abound in political discourse. The use of these two rhetorical strategies is particularly evident in electoral discourses where political leaders need to establish common ground with the general public while at the same time aggressively competing against rival political parties for electoral votes. Both rhetorical strategies are valued among politicians not only because they add a touch of novelty and wit (and hence entertainment and attention) to one's speech, but also because they can be used as verbal indirectness strategies to attenuate potential face-threats to either speaker or addressee.

Previous studies have shown, for example, how politicians often use metaphors to ridicule their opponents without damaging their own positive self-image (Kuo 2003; Obeng 1997; Wilson 1990), and how humor is likewise frequently used to criticize rivals without violating politeness maxims (Taskona 2009).

Sarcasm is also fairly common in political discourse (Kiley and Shuttleworth 1971; Inge 1990). However, while sarcasm shares with humor a heavy reliance on counter-expectation to achieve ironic and comic effects, the two rhetorical strategies differ with respect to intended pragmatic outcomes. Crucially, whereas humor elicits laughter and amusement, sarcasm instead triggers embarrassment for the addressee (Lewis 2006).

In this chapter, we will examine how metaphor, humor and sarcasm are used to construct favorable as well as unfavorable political identities for public figures in Hong Kong. More specifically, using Fauconnier and Turner's (2002) Conceptual Blending framework, we will analyze two extended metaphors used in the 2012 Hong Kong Legislative Council Election debates—namely, the cushion metaphor and the ladder metaphor—to elucidate how humor and sarcasm are used in attempts to construct positive political identities for oneself, while at the same time disparaging and undermining the political identities of others.

9.2 Some Background on the Unique Political Situation in Hong Kong

Hong Kong, well known as an international business and financial center and also a popular tourist destination in the Asia-Pacific region, is bequeathed with a unique political arrangement known as "one country, two systems," whereby the former British colony of Hong Kong was returned to the People's Republic of China in 1997 and is given freedom within the framework of a mini-constitutional Basic Law to maintain its capitalist system of governance without interference from the socialist system on the Mainland for at least 50 years leading to 2047, except in matters relating to diplomatic relations and national defense. A similar system has also been implemented for the former Portuguese colony of Macau in 1999.

A variation of this system has been proposed for Taiwan, with recent efforts being placed on first strengthening economic ties and political exchanges.

In the years leading to the British handover in 1997, and since then, the people of Hong Kong have become more involved in the process of democratization, which in recent years was often accompanied by street protests on a wide range of social, economic and political issues. For example, there was widespread public discontent over a long-standing shortage of affordable housing, as well as outrage against cross-border (i.e. mainland) pregnant mothers competing with locals for medical services as they seek to deliver their babies in Hong Kong in an attempt to help their newborns obtain right of abode in the city. There was also public outcry against the government's attempt to introduce a "national education curriculum" which some feared could be a means of brainwashing young minds under the pretext of teaching traditional moral values and filial piety. There was also strong public reaction against political reforms proposed by the government related to the election of the Chief Executive, with the non-ruling pan-democrat parties arguing that the proposed nomination procedure was designed to screen out nominees that are not favored by the central government in Beijing. In this climate of multiple conflicting interests and competing claims, many new political parties as well as independent candidates emerged to vie for seats in the 2012 Legislative Council Election.

The political parties in Hong Kong are generally divided into four major groups: (i) the pro-establishment parties such as the Democratic Alliance for the Betterment of Hong Kong (DAB) and the Hong Kong Federation of Trade Unions (FTU) which tend to align with the local government in Hong Kong, and often with the central government in Beijing as well; (ii) the pro-democracy parties such as the Democratic Party, the League of Social Democrats (LSD), and People Power; (iii) the moderates such as the Liberal Party and the Civil Party, and (iv) independent candidates whose 'independent' status is often unclear since the general public tend to label them as either pro-establishment or pro-democracy despite their claims to the contrary.

9.3 Adversarial Talk and Verbal Indirectness Strategies in Political Discourse

A number of studies have noted an increase in aggressiveness in political discourse in recent years. Clayman and Heritage (2002), for example, noted this trend in their analysis of White House press conferences in the US, while Yip (2003) observed a similar trend in Hong Kong radio talk-shows such as 風波裡的茶杯 *Fung*[1] *Bo*[1] *Leoi*[5] *Dik*[1] *Caa*[4] *Bui*[1] (literally "Teacup (i.e. Chat-time) in a Storm", also sometimes translated into English as "Storm in a Teacup"), a local program known for its discussions of controversial issues, including political ones.[1] In her analysis of

[1]This program was broadcast by Commercial Radio Hong Kong from 1991 to 2004, and has resumed airing from 2012 through the Digital Broadcasting Corporation Hong Kong Limited.

ministerial press conferences in mainland China, Sun (2010) recently observed more direct and more aggressive questioning from foreign journalists compared to local journalists, an asymmetry which points to cultural and socio-political differences in what counts as permissible norms of politeness in public discourse.

Election speeches and debates are also particularly fertile grounds for aggressive and adversarial talk. As noted earlier, however, politicians also need to be sensitive to maxims of politeness and to be mindful of their own positive self-image. For this reason, politicians often deploy verbal indirectness strategies when engaging in aggressive and adversarial talk. These include off-record politeness strategies such as the use of ellipsis, rhetorical questions, and metaphor (Brown and Levinson 1987; Chan and Yap 2015; Wai and Yap 2013; Wong and Yap 2015), which are favored because they can mitigate the negative impact of face-threatening acts. For example, by using these verbal indirectness strategies when denigrating a rival or engaging in self-praising, the politician can protect himself or herself from being held responsible for what was not explicitly said.

The use of metaphors, in particular, has received considerable attention in research on political discourse (Charteris-Black 2005). Because metaphors provide us with a means of expressing abstract ideas in more tangible (and often novel) ways, they are ideal rhetorical devices for "grabbing" the attention of the audience, and they can often also help to shape an idea into an ideal when they include elements of novelty that subtly generate positive emotions such as pleasure, delight and wonder in the mind of the listener (Punter 2007).

Deciding what-and-which metaphor to use to make an abstract idea tangible is far from arbitrary. Often the choice is made from our life or body experiences. As pointed out in Lakoff and Johnson's (1980) seminal work, *Metaphors We Live By*, our cognitive schemas are conceptual structures formed from our experience of growing up and acting in the world (see also Yu 1998 and Gibbs and Wilson 2002). Among the conceptual structures that have been extensively studied are "image schemas" (Johnson 1987) and "mental spaces" (Fauconnier 1994, 1997). Studies on image schemas have identified frequent use of "path schemas" (involving metaphors such as "up is happy", "down is sad" and "the road to victory") and "containment schemas" (involving metaphors such as "out of sight" and "filled with love") in daily life. Research on mental spaces reveals that speakers often set up mental structures to manipulate how a particular referent (e.g. a person, object, location, time or other circumstance) is to be perceived by the addressee. By relying on radial semantic extensions to other referential entities, the speaker can set up "connectors" (e.g. person-person triggers, person-product triggers, etc.) whereby the speaker can manipulate the mental frames of their audience/addressee(s). For example, an author or film director could frame "Harry Potter" so that the reader/audience would conceive of him as an orphan, a wizard, or a legend, while a film reviewer could frame "Harry Potter" as the movie itself or the movie series actor "Daniel Radcliffe". In political discourse, as will be discussed in this chapter, we will see evidence of "path schemas" and "mental images" being used in the

construction of positive political identities for the speaker (self) and negative identities for their rivals (others).

Other than life and bodily experiences, cultural values are also often used as the source domains or mental space inputs for the construction of political metaphors. In their studies on political discourse, Charteris-Black (2005), Kövecses (2005) and Deignan (2005) have found that there is extensive use of "relationship metaphors" in British and American political speeches and news commentaries. For example, in a commentary in *The Economist* (see Howard 2005), we find politicians and voters being described as lovers having an intimate relationship: "Partly it is because *although voters have fallen out of love with Tony Blair*, they are not yet desperate for change" (italics added). Another example is Obama's use of the friendship metaphor when referring to America's diplomatic relations with other nations in his 2008 inaugural address: "know that America is a friend of each nation, and every man, woman and child who seeks a future of peace and dignity."[2]

In their analysis of Chinese political discourse, Liu (2002), Wei (2003) and Cheng (2009) have also identified frequent use of family and marriage metaphors to describe cross-strait issues (e.g. 兄弟關係 *xiongdi guanxi* "brother-to-brother relationship" and骨肉 *gu rou* "bones and flesh") to describe the relationship between the People's Republic of China (PRC) and Taiwan. As noted in Charteris-Black (2005: xi), these metaphors combine "our understanding of familiar experiences in everyday life with cultural values that evoke powerful emotional responses".

Essentially, by exploiting apparent similarities and at the same time taking advantage of the subtle shifts in the conceptual system that form an inherent part of metaphor mapping—in other words, by relying on cognitive shifts from source to target domains (*a la* Lakoff and Johnson's Conceptual Mapping Theory), or by inducing (often unexpected) blends that emerge from multiple mental space inputs (*a la* Fauconnier and Turner's Conceptual Blending Theory)—politicians can enhance their persuasion and appeal to the general public. Politicians often use incongruent mappings for comic effect to great advantage (e.g. characterizing an ineffective ruling party as a lame duck or paper tiger, or an ineffectual rival as a broken pencil; see Charteris-Black 2004). Since incongruent connections such as these are done not just for fun but essentially for political gain, these humorous metaphors can have an element of sarcasm in the way they challenge or disparage rivals in attempts to win the support of the general public (see Kiley and Shuttleworth 1971; Inge 1990; Boler and Turpin 2008). However, while political discourse is often contentious, with rivals frequently engaging in face-threatening acts such as challenging or inducing doubt in others (Cacciari 1998), the negativity generated is often made less offensive through the deployment of metaphors as a figurative and indirect rhetorical strategy.

[2]From President Barack Obama's Inaugural Address delivered on January 21, 2009. Retrieved from https://www.whitehouse.gov/blog/2009/01/21/president-barack-obamas-inaugural-address on August 30, 2015.

In this chapter, we will examine how politicians within the unique “one-country-two-systems” political arrangement in Hong Kong creatively use metaphors to construct negative political identities for their opponents and positive ones for themselves during the 2012 Legislative Council Election. We will also analyze how these politicians additionally deploy humor and/or sarcasm to spar with each other, at times to deflect a negative metaphorical characterization (e.g. challenge, criticism or ridicule) from an opponent, and at other times to frustrate the positive metaphorical characterization of self (i.e. a “self-praising” attempt) by a rival. Through these analyses, we will then see how politicians use metaphors to construct—as well as deconstruct and reconstruct—political identities for themselves and others in an effort to win the support of the general public.

9.4 Data and Analytical Framework

Data for our analysis come from five debates televised by Radio Television Hong Kong (RTHK) during the Hong Kong Legislative Council (LegCo) Election campaign period from August 18 to September 1, 2012. Each debate lasted for about 50–60 minutes, totaling 290 minutes of oral data. Excerpts containing metaphors were culled from the speeches and rebuttals of the contesting candidates for both quantitative and qualitative analysis. Quantitative results reported earlier in Chan and Yap (2015) revealed the use of 48 metaphors, 32 of which involved characterization metaphors. Of these, 6 included the use of humor and 1 included the use of sarcasm.

In this chapter we will focus on the analysis of two of these metaphors—namely, the cushion metaphor and the ladder metaphor—using Conceptual Blending Theory (Turner and Fauconnier 1995; Fauconnier and Turner 2002). We will also analyze the effects of humor and sarcasm based on incongruity and absurdity models (e.g. Attardo 2001; Morreall 1987).

Conceptual Blending Theory posits that metaphorical thought is pervasive and we are constantly mapping ideas between interconnected input spaces. These mappings often go beyond one-to-one correspondences, and many metaphorical mappings inherit partial structures from both input spaces, producing new emergent structures. The novelty of these emergent structures activates imaginative engagement on the part of the hearer(s) and prompts them to search for links between the input spaces. This kind of mental exercise is generally pleasurable and trigger positive emotions, and politicians thus often use metaphors to good effect to establish and maintain common ground with the general public. Figure 9.1 below provides a schema highlighting the conceptual mappings between Input Space$_1$ (I_1) and Input Space$_2$ (I_2), together with the generic space (G) that hold these two domains together within a more comprehensive mental domain where speaker and hearer share common ground, and the novel blended conceptualization product (B) that trigger audience appreciation.

Politicians convey their message through cues from multiple input spaces (e.g. I_1 and I_2), and the audience is then invited to form in their mind a blended metaphorical characterization (B) that is typically positive for the speaker and

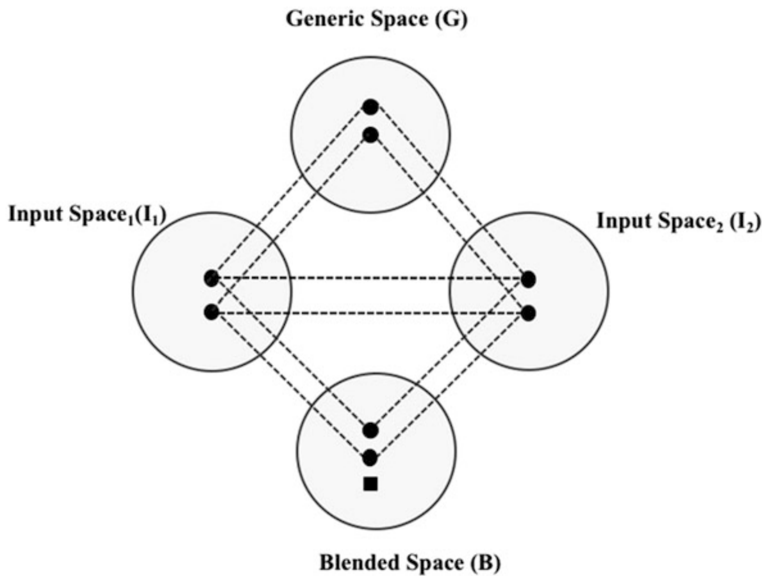

Fig. 9.1 Schema of a conceptual blend

negative for the opponent. In this way, positive and negative political identities are constructed through blended metaphors.

These conceptual blends are often further embellished with humor or sarcasm. These involve elements of incongruity and absurdity (Attardo 2001; Morreall 1987), and we distinguish them in terms of their effects on the face-needs of hearer and speaker. We categorize a metaphorical blend as [+ humor] if it generates merry laughter, and as [+ sarcasm] if it generates awkwardness and embarrassment for a political rival.

In the next two sections, we will analyze the cushion metaphor (§9.5) and the ladder metaphor (§9.6) to elucidate how humor and sarcasm contribute to the formation of positive and negative political identities within the context of an aggressive political campaign in Hong Kong. The context for the use of these blended metaphors is an innovative "Gift-giving Session" (送大禮 *Sung3 Daai6 Lai5*) during the televised debates. The LegCo election candidates were given a few minutes to "offer a gift" to either the audience or themselves or their rival(s), and as we shall see in our analysis below, some of the candidates have come up with highly creative metaphors as they compete to win the hearts and votes of the general public.

9.5 Analysis of the Cushion Metaphor and the Effects of Humor

We will first analyze the use of the cushion metaphor used by Liberal Party candidate Lau Kin-Yee during the gift-giving ceremony for the election debate involving the Hong Kong Island geographical constituency on August 18, 2012. As

seen in lines 1 and 2 of Excerpt 1, Lau chose to present a cushion to one of her opponents, Tsang Yok-Sing, a well-respected veteran candidate for the Democratic Alliance for the Betterment of Hong Kong (DAB), which is known for its pro-establishment and pro-Beijing stance. In lines 4–6, Lau elaborates on the significance of this cushion metaphor as she points out that the cushion will come in handy since the DAB "kneels each time the whistle blows," alluding to the DAB's frequent compliance with the wishes of the central government in Beijing. Lau uses the cushion as a visual metaphor to highlight a master-minion relationship between the DAB and the central government and in this way she creates a negative political identity for her opponent and his political party, but she does so indirectly through the use of metaphor, which allows her to mitigate violations of politeness maxims while engaging in a face-threatening act. Note that she did not explicitly mention the central government, and she also deploys other hedging devices as well, such as the hearsay evidential expression *jan1wai hou2 do1 jan4 waa6* "because many people say" (line 3) to mitigate her own responsibility for her face-threatening act by borrowing the voice of others.

Excerpt 1: The Cushion Metaphor

HKIsland_57:00-57:12_LauKinYee

01 我想將呢個禮物，呢個 cushion 呢，

ngo5soeng2zoeng1lei1go3lai5mat6lei1go3le1

02 就送畀阿曾鈺成嘅。

zau6sung3bei2aa3Zang1Juk6Sing4ge3

'I want to present this gift … this cushion to Tsang Yok Sing.'

03 因為好多人話呢就係

jan1wai6hou2do1jan4waa6ne1zau6hai6

04 民建聯呢就係，

Man4Gin3Lyun4ne1zau6hai6

05 一 聽到吹雞呢就跪低 ，

jat1teng1dou2ceoi1gai1ne1zau6gwai6dai1

06 咁個 cushion 呢就非常係受用嘅 。

gam2go3 cushion ne1zau6fei1soeng4hai6sau6jung6ge3

'Because many people say… That is DAB… that is, they kneel down once they hear (the Chinese central government) blow the whistle (Implication: Whenever the Chinese government requests, they comply with her). So this cushion would be very useful (for them).'

Figure 9.2 below illustrates the conceptual blending network of the master-minion relationship invoked by the cushion metaphor. We see a minion and a master within an input $space_1$ (I_1) projecting respectively onto the DAB party under Tsang Yok-Sing and the central government in Beijing within another input $space_2$ (I_2). Both input spaces are linked to a generic space (G), indicating their shared conceptualization of a scenario in which a subordinate is receiving a request or order from a higher supervisory authority. What emerges is a blended space (B) in which the cushion takes on metaphorical significance, highlighting the compliance of the DAB party to the requests of the central government in Beijing as an act of feudal subservience that is incongruent with the wishes of the general public and the current political situation in Hong Kong. By using the cushion metaphor, Lau sends off a message that casts her opponent and his political party in a negative light, without explicitly uttering the words "master". "minion" or "central government".

Lau then goes a step further to distance her own party from the DAB. From lines 7 to 11 (see Excerpt 2 below), Lau appeals to Tsang and his DAB party to preserve the core values of the Hong Kong people by daring to sometimes say "no" (apparently to the central government, but again without explicitly mentioning any names). In lines 12–13, Lau concludes her "gift-giving" speech with another verbal

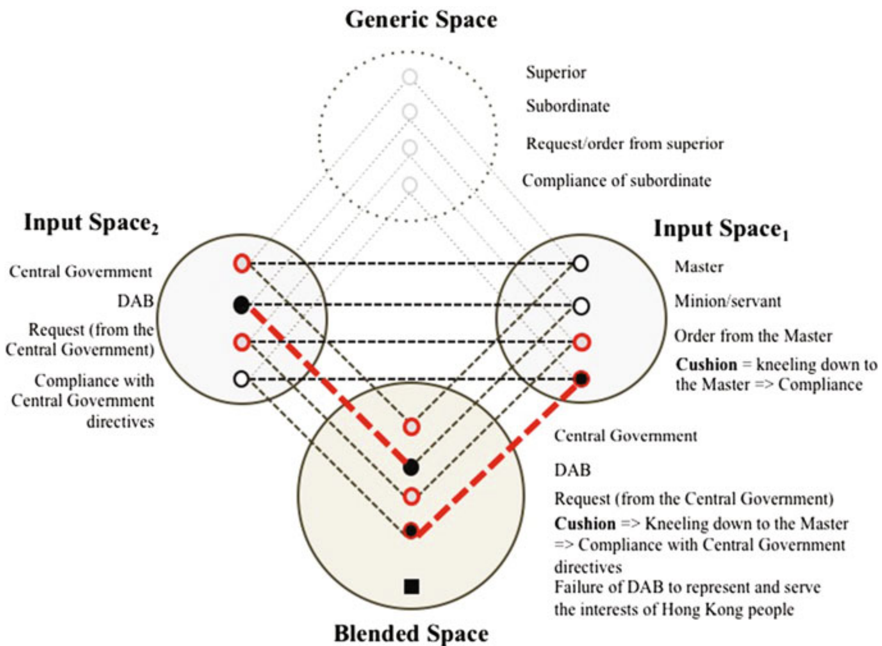

Fig. 9.2 Conceptual blending network for the master-minion relationship triggered by the cushion metaphor

punch to her rival as she quips, “If the DAB acts in such a way [i.e. to dare say no], the cushion will last for a long time.” By reiterating the cushion metaphor, Lau once again invokes in the mind of the audience the negative characterization of the DAB as a subservient and hence undesirable candidate for political leadership, and by implicature then raises her own Liberal Party as the candidate of choice.

Excerpt 2: Reiteration of the Cushion Metaphor

HKIsland_57:12-57:23_LauKinYee

07 咁但係我都呼籲呢 ，

gam2daan6hai6ngo5dou1fu1jyu6le1

08 就係民建聯呢 ，

zau6hai6Man4Gin3Lyun4le1

09 响涉及港人核心價值嘅問題上高呢 ，

hoeng2sit3kap6Gong2jan4hat6sam1gaa3zik6ge3man6tai4soeng6gou1le1

10 係作為建制派呢，

hai6zok3wai4gin3zai3paai3le1

11 仍然係敢於 say no。

jing4jin4hai6gam2jyu1say no

‘But I still appeal to… that is, to DAB, as for the issues involving the (violation of) the core values of Hong Kong people, as a conservative party, you should still dare say no.’

12 如果係咁嘅話呢，

jyu4gwo2hai6gam2ge2waa2le1

13 呢個 cushion 可以用好耐。

lei1go3ku1seon2ho2ji3jung6hou2noi6

‘If (they act) in such a way, this cushion can be used for a long time.’

In this verbal sparring game, however, the opponent is not left without a defense. Built into the rules of this televised “Gift-giving Session” is a rebuttal mechanism, and Tsang is skillful enough to use a crucial piece of information about Lau’s Liberal Party to his advantage during the rebuttal that immediately follows. In good humor, with a broad and good-natured smile, a twinkle in his eye and a chuckle in his voice, and prefacing his counter-attack with *gam1 ci3 hou2 jau5ceoi3 aa3* (今

次好有趣啊 “this time it’s really funny!”) as seen in line 1 in Excerpt 3, Tsang quickly reminds the audience in lines 2–4 that the Liberal Party which in the past has branded themselves as a conservative (and hence pro-establishment) party now is re-branding and advertising themselves as a political party that “dares to say no.” In this way, Tsang succeeds in partially deflecting Lau’s negative characterization of his DAB party, and redirecting her barbed arrows back to her own political base. As he closes his rebuttal in line 5, Tsang also deploys reiteration to emphasize his point of how amusing the situation is, that the pot should be calling the kettle black. Note his careful and prudent choice of words, choosing to use the more conciliatory phrase *jau5ceoi3* (有趣) “funny or amusing,” which resonates better with his use of humor, instead of using more provocative phrases such as *fong1mau6* (荒謬) or *fong1tong4* (荒唐), both of which would have conveyed a combative and provocative stance with a negative reading such as “absurd” or “ludicrous.” Note also that Tsang chooses to engage with the audience directly. This he does by inviting them to draw their own conclusions: *nei5 waa6 hai6 gei2 jau5ceoi3 le1!* (你話係幾有趣呢) “You say how funny it is!” By adding *nei5 waa6 ... le1* (which has the pragmatic import of “Won’t you say/think X too?!”), Tsang expresses confidence in a shared judgment and hence common ground with the audience, and in this way subtly draws them closer to him and his political party.

Excerpt 3: Rebuttal to the Cushion Metaphor

HKIsland_57:24-57:37_Tsang Yok Sing

01 今次好有趣啊，

gam1ci3hou2jau5ceoi3aa3

‘This time, (the situation) is very funny,’

02 反對派呢就標榜理性務實，

faan2deoi3paai1le1zau6biu1bong2lei5sing3mou6sat6

03 然後呢以前話叫建制派嘅呢，

jin4hau6le1ji5cin4waa6giu3gin3zai3paai3ge3le1

04 就標榜 say no。

zau6biu1bong2gam2 say no

‘The opposition parties advertise themselves as rational and pragmatic. Then, the one that is usually called “the conservative party” advertises itself as “the one that dares to say no”.’

05 你話係幾有趣呢！

nei5waa6hai6gei2jau5ceoi3le1

‘You say how funny it is!’

Through the use of humor, and other rhetorical strategies that likewise establish common ground with the audience, Tsang succeeds to some extent in thwarting the attempts of his rival to characterize him and his political party in negative terms. We thus see how politicians use metaphor and humor to score points against each other as they contest for the popular vote. Both sides are aware of the power of metaphorical language to construct positive or negative political identities for themselves and others, and often they also deploy other rhetorical strategies such as humor to further lubricate the effects of their metaphorical wit.

9.6 Analysis of the Ladder Metaphor and the Effects of Sarcasm

We now turn to the ladder metaphor used by Chan Han-Pan, a younger member of the pro-establishment and pro-Beijing DAB party, during the New Territories West Legislative Council Election debate televised on September 1, 2012. As seen in lines 1 and 2 in Excerpt 4, Chan is presenting a ladder to all the citizens of Hong Kong on behalf of his political party, the DAB. He uses this ladder as a metaphor to express his hope that the housing policy advocated by his political party will help solve the housing problems in Hong Kong (lines 3–4), and he specifically identifies potential beneficiaries, mentioning in particular his hopes of seeing tenants in overcrowded sub-divided flats moving “more quickly” into public housing estates (line 5), the latter being much better built and slightly more spacious and hence more desirable. Pan also uses the ladder metaphor to send the message that the housing policy advocated by his political party will help to improve the chances for the next generation to own their own homes (line 6), and will also help to reduce the burden of heavy home mortgage payments for the sandwiched middle-class (line 7). Although the ladder metaphor is an old clichéd metaphor, Pan succeeds in using it effectively to re-frame a complex housing issue into a simpler topic that the audience can easily understand and appreciate.

Excerpt 4: The Ladder Metaphor: The Housing Policy as an Instrument of Home Ownership for Hong Kong People

NTWest_47:53-48:09_ChanHanPan

01 我哋呢今日喺呢一度送張梯畀

ngo5dei6le1gam1jat6hei2lei1jat1dou6sung3zoeng1tai1bei2

02 全港嘅市民。

cyun4gong2ge3si5man4

'We are here today to present a ladder for all Hong Kong citizens,'

03 希望呢我哋房屋政策呢係

hei1mong6le1ngo5dei6fong4uk1zing3caak3le1hai6

04 有房屋嘅階梯，

jau5fong4uk1ge3gaai1tai1

'hoping that our housing policy is the one that provides the solution (lit. ladder) for housing (problems)'

05 令到劏房嘅市民呢

ling6dou3tong1fong2ge3si5 man4le1

06 可以快啲上到公屋，

ho2ji5faai3di1soeng5-dou2gung1uk1

'so that those who live in sub-divided units can move into public housing estates more quickly.'

07 小朋——即係後生嘅朋友呢

siu2pang4zik1hai6hau6saang1ge3pang4jau5le1

08 可以買得起樓，

ho2ji3maai5-dak1hei2lau2

09 中產呢亦都唔需要做房奴。

zung1caan2le1jik6dou1m4seoi1jiu3zou6fong2lou4

'(We also hope that) the next generation can afford to own a house, (while) the middle class do not need to work like slaves to pay off their housing mortages.'

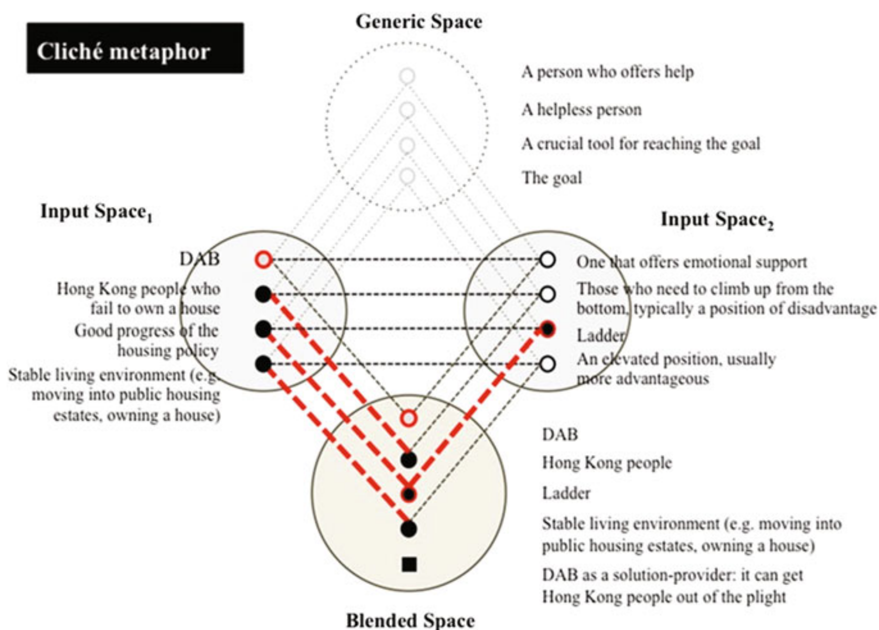

Fig. 9.3 Conceptual blending network for DAB's housing policy triggered by the ladder metaphor

Figure 9.3 below illustrates the conceptual blending network of the housing policy triggered by the ladder metaphor. We see people on the lower rung of the ladder in Input Space$_2$ (I_2) projecting onto the economically disadvantaged in Hong Kong society in Input Space$_1$ (I_1). Both input spaces are linked to a generic space (G), with its prototype scenario of people needing help to be lifted from poverty, misery or distress. What emerges is a blended space (B) in which the ladder takes on metaphorical significance as "the instrument for a rescue," the visual symbol of the housing policy of the DAB party that promises a solution to the housing problems that the Hong Kong people are facing. By using the ladder metaphor, Chan succeeds in conveying the message that he and his political party brings hope to the people, and is thus the right candidate for Legislative Council leadership.

Having successfully set up the ladder metaphor as a vehicle to discuss the complex housing issues in Hong Kong, Chan takes the metaphor further as a vehicle to discuss other complex and pressing issues as well. In Excerpt 5, Chan begins by addressing the young people (line 8), who are becoming increasingly vocal politically. Note that Pan presents these complex issues incrementally, with bisyllabic words ending with the same syllable *jip6* (業), which produces a

cascading rhetorical effect of "a list of things of equal importance": *zi3jip6* (置業) "home ownership," *hok6jip6* (學業) "studies," *zau6jip6* (就業) "career," and *cong3jip6* (創業) "entrepreneurship" (see lines 9 and 10), all of which are represented by the ladder metaphor as the means or instrument to achieve the stable living environment sought by the people of Hong Kong. In this way, Chan consolidates his use of the ladder metaphor to create a positive image for his political party, depicting the DAB as the solution-provider, and one that cares for people from various walks of life: the poor, the middle-class, and the youth.

Excerpt 5: The Ladder Metaphor: Upward Mobility for Young People

NTWest_48:09-48:218_ChanHanPan

10 亦都係要送畀全港嘅青年人，

jik6dou1hai6jiu3sung3bei2cyun4gong2ge3cing1lin4jan4

11 希望呢大家喺置業、學業、

hei1mong6le1daai6gaa1hai2zi3jip6hok6jip6

12 就業同埋創業方面呢 ，

zau6jip6tung4maai4cong3jip6fong1min6le1

13 有一個向上流動嘅階梯。

jau5jat1go3hoeng3soeng6lau4dung6ge3gaai1tai1

'(I would) also give it to all youngsters in Hong Kong, hoping that there will be a way (lit. ladder) for upward mobility in terms of housing ownership, studies, career and entrepreneurship.'

As discussed earlier in Sect. 9.5, metaphors can be used not only to create positive political identities for oneself and one's group; they can also be used to create negative political identities for others. Sometimes, the good or ill intentions are less than clear. This ambiguity emerges in Excerpt 6 below, where Chan offers the ladder to "the third tier" (i.e. the lower-ranking and mostly younger members) of the Democratic Party, a rival party known for its pro-democracy stance, wishing them more success (in the future) in contesting for a Legislative Council seat (lines 12–13). Given that Chan is in no position to offer genuine help to a rival party, his "friendly gesture" is more likely to be interpreted as "fake goodwill." Moreover,

against the backdrop of recent squabbles within the Democratic Party, Chan's offer of the ladder is easily viewed as a "barbed gift" intended to highlight divisions within the Democratic Party and thus embarrass them by characterizing them as being too splintered and hence too weak to lead.

Excerpt 6: The Ladder Metaphor: Upward Mobility for Frustrated Rivals

NTWest_48:18-48:24_ChanHanPan

14 更加要將呢個禮物送畀

gang3gaa1jiu3zoeng1lei1go3lai5mat6sung3bei2

15 民主黨嘅第三梯隊，

Man4Zyu2Dong2ge3dai6saam1tai1deoi2

16 希望你哋有機會(.)可以爬上嚟。

hei1mong6lei5dei6jau5gei1wui6ho2ji5paa4soeng5lai4

'(I) should also present this gift to (members of) the third tier of the Democratic Party, hoping that you will have a chance to climb up (i.e. enter the Legislative Council).'

In trying to create a positive political identity for his own party while at the same time undermining his rival(s) at one stroke with his use of the ladder metaphor, Chan may however have over-extended its effectiveness, turning attention away from its symbolic use as an inspiring instrument of hope and change to a rather mean instrument for sarcasm. This appears to be a bad move, particularly in a debate where there is rebuttal time for the opponent(s). As seen in Excerpt 7 below, Tsang Kin-Shing from another pro-democracy party, namely the League of Social Democrats, lost no time in lashing out at the ladder metaphor, accusing the pro-establishment DAB party of giving the people of Hong Kong a ladder of despair, one that forces some folks to climb higher only to jump to their death (i.e. to commit suicide) (see line 2), largely because of financial burdens which Tsang claims is linked to the failed housing policy of the government led by Chief Executive Leung Chun-Ying (lines 3 and 4).

Excerpt 7: The Ladder Metaphor: The Cause of Despair and Instrument of Death

NTWest_48:24-48:236_Tsang Kin-Shing

01 民建聯送呢張梯呢

man4gin3lyun4sung3lei1zoeng1tai1le1

02 係逼港人呢

hai6bik1gong2jan4le1

03 喺天棚擒高一啲跳樓。

hai2tin1paang2kam4gou1jat1di1tiu3lau2

04 因為梁振英上場之後呢，

jan1wai6Loeng4Zan3Jing1soeng5coeng4zi1hau6le1

05 樓價再升多一成。

lau4gaa3zoi3sing1do1jat1sing4

‘DAB presented this ladder so as to force Hong Kong people to climb up higher and jump to their death from the roof. This is because the housing price has gone up by ten percent since Leung Chun Ying came to power.’

Tsang’s use of sarcasm is highly caustic and is intended to shock the audience and to ridicule the DAB’s attempt at creating a positive political identity that depicts them as the solution-provider and the right candidate for implementing policies that will bring about a better life for the people of Hong Kong. Tsang’s sarcastic tone cleverly rides on the hint of sarcasm in Chan’s previous ‘gift-giving’ speech. Tsang appears to be taking advantage of Chan’s *faux pas* (“false step” or “wrong move”) to legitimize—or at least excuse—his angry outburst and use of caustic sarcasm. At any rate, Tsang does not hesitate to turn to another input space to reframe the meaning of the ladder metaphor to his opponent’s disadvantage.

As seen in Fig. 9.4, Tsang metaphorically exploits the climbing of heights afforded by a ladder and mapping this scenario to the tragedy of depressed people jumping to their death. His is a novel metaphor, in which the actions of those who despair in life and those who bring stress into the lives of others (psychological Input Space$_2$) are projected onto the financially-burdened people of Hong Kong and their allegedly incompetent policy makers (Input Space$_1$). The generic space (G) of this dark metaphor comprises of those who are victims of tragic situations and those who abet in aggravating their despair. The blended space (B) links the

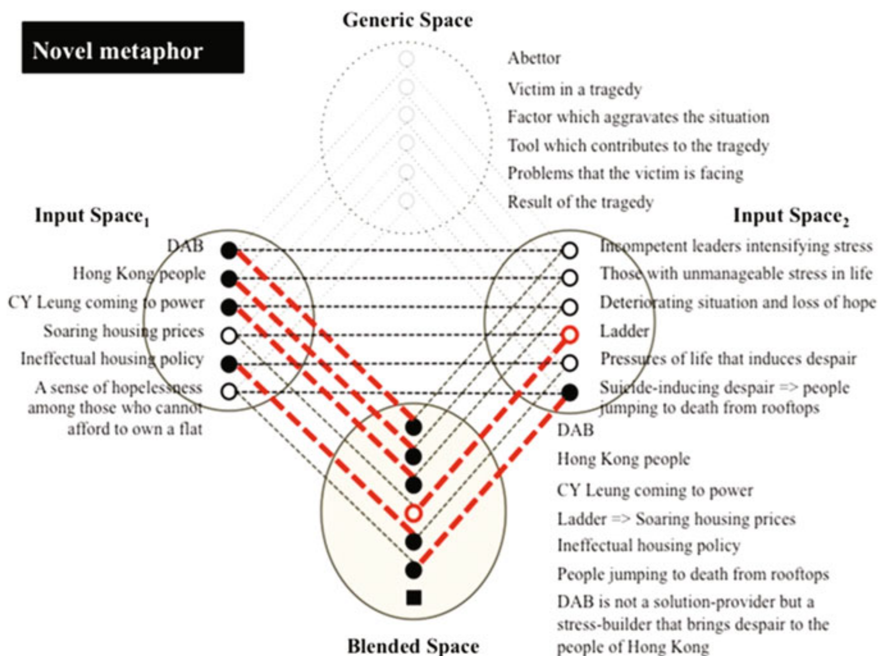

Fig. 9.4 Conceptual blending network for the tragic loss of hope and life triggered by the ladder metaphor

government's allegedly failed housing policy to the stress in people's lives and to the ladder metaphor that invokes tragic scenes of suicidal jumps from high buildings.

By turning to another input space for the ladder metaphor (i.e. away from "solution-provider" to "stress-builder"), Tsang re-frames the political identity of his rival—from a positive image to a negative one. And given that his counter-attack is made during rebuttal time, he is left with the final say, and thus succeeds in undoing some of the positive image-building that Chan has built earlier.

9.7 Conclusion

We have seen in the preceding two analyses, that whereas the cushion metaphor was used by an electoral candidate (Lau Kin-Yee) to denigrate her opponents, which was then gently deflected through humor, the ladder metaphor was used instead by another candidate (Chan Han-Pan) to praise his own political party and induce doubt in the ability of his opponents, only to be counter-attacked with caustic sarcasm by another opponent, whose angry outburst, though lacking in social grace, was nevertheless quite effective because it captured the equally angry

mood of a sizeable segment of the general population during the 2012 election period. What is evident from our analysis of the cushion and ladder metaphors is that politicians often frame and re-frame the same metaphor as they compete for the attention of the general public. That is to say, establishing and re-negotiating political identities is part of the political game of broadcasting one's political stance and agenda, and politicians deploy metaphor and other rhetorical strategies such as humor and sarcasm to compete for public trust. The verbal (and non-verbal) sparring continues, and the points on the scoreboard changes, as each side scores a point here, loses a point there, and re-scores again. What we see happening during the Legislative Council Election debates is a political game, deeply rooted in human history, played out not just in Hong Kong but elsewhere in the world as well, often wittily through the use of metaphor, sometimes humorously articulated, sometimes sarcastically conveyed, but each time expressing the strong desire on the part of the politician to reach the general public.

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Chapter 10
"Absurdity of Life": An Interview with Michael Hui

Karen Fang

Abstract Although beloved comedian Michael Hui is a legend of Hong Kong cinema, his cerebral nature is sometimes obscured by the broad physical comedy and colloquial humor that characterized his chart-topping films of the 1970s and 1980s. In this 2013 interview, Hui was asked about inspirations and influences underlying his early career. After more than four decades in the public eye, Hui's comments illuminate the strong role that sociology and university education play in the star's comedy. His statements provide a unique glimpse into an artist's reflections upon his work and its contribution to the world.

Michael Hui (許冠文 or Hui Koon-Man) is one of Hong Kong's reigning entertainers, well known to local audiences and beyond for his side-splitting skewering of contemporary culture and society. Through a series of chart-topping films during the mid-1970s through the 1980s—an era often recognized as a golden age in Hong Kong cinema—the comedian branched out from his initial celebrity as a television personality contracted to Shaw Brothers and Television Broadcasts Limited (TVB, the local film and television enterprises run by media magnate Run Run Shaw) to acquiring an ownership interest in his own movies at Golden Harvest, a startup film distribution company that enabled Hui to demonstrate his multiple talents as screenwriter and director as well as star. In films such as *Games Gamblers Play* (鬼馬雙星, 1974), *The Last Message* (天才與白痴, 1975), *The Private Eyes* (半斤八兩, 1976), *The Contract* (賣身契, 1978), *Security Unlimited* (摩登保鑣, 1981), and *Chicken and Duck Talk* (雞同鴨講, 1988), Hui specialized in a "mean little man" character well known to Cantonese comedy since the 1950s, whose self-serving shrewdness and frequent but invariably failed get-rich-quick schemes exemplify the hazards of the relentless capitalism that was then transforming Hong Kong society.

Yet although Michael Hui—like his brother Sam Hui (許冠傑, Hui Koon-Kit), an equally famous Cantopop star with whom Michael co-starred in television and his early films—is for these reasons typically characterized as a distinctly local per-

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sonality, due to his vernacular comedy and the self-consciously referential and often realistic on-location shooting of his movies, the star's fame abroad should also testify to the universal quality of his humor and social satire. Long beloved to Japanese audiences, popular in Taiwan, the Philippines and even parts of Europe, Michael Hui deserves to be recognized alongside Bruce Lee—Michael's Golden Harvest contemporary, and a star with whom Michael was in fact often cross-promoted—as a Hong Kong icon whose resonance transcended local and ethnic Chinese contexts to instead speak to oppressed and disenfranchised populations throughout the globe. In this interview conducted in 2013, after more than four decades in the public eye, Michael Hui reflected upon the legacy and origins of his signature blend of comedy and social critique, including the challenges of political humor within the changing circumstances of post-reunification Hong Kong.

10.1 Background

Q: Let's start with you and the relationship between your life and your work. You're often credited with helping to save Cantonese filmmaking and setting Hong Kong film onto its glory years in the mid-1970s and 1980s, through reviving the local color once associated with social realist filmmaking of the 1950s and 1960s and for introducing a new standard of realism very different from the studio productions of Shaw Brothers. (I'm thinking particularly of the opening scene in *The Private Eyes*, with the location shots of crowds in the streets.) Where did your inspiration come from? How much was inspired by your own life, and how much was a response to contemporary and local traditions of filmmaking?

A: Well, the way you ask the question, is hard to answer. My way of thinking is analytical; I look at something and I analyze it, watch how people behave. You know I studied sociology; I like to think I am a creator or writer, not an actor. I would see my father, he worked for the same family for over 20 years, but at the end, all he got was a gold watch. I didn't think that was right. Twenty years, and just a watch? So I try to tell stories that show the absurdity of life.

Like gambling, in my first film *Games Gamblers Play*. So many people love to gamble, but it never makes sense. They lose money, maybe they lose money they don't have. I don't understand it. So I made a movie about how crazy people are, how they want things and do anything to get them.

Q: So you're not a gambler?

A: No, definitely not! (smiles and shakes head vigorously)

Like, for example, in *The Private Eyes*, I have this idea about people being robbed in the movie theater. That comes from life. At that time in Hong Kong, so many crimes were everywhere. You could walk in the street and people would rob you. Old people, even a little kid could be robbed. So I thought, why not show people getting robbed at the movies? The movie theater was my idea, but the robbery comes from real life. All my stories come from life; I just take them and show them, make them absurd.

Q: So when did you know you wanted to go into show business?

A: I was a child living in the public housing estate, my parents were artists. My father was a musician and my mother was a singer. But they always tell me, don’t be a performer. That is not good. Always in the street, dependent on others. So I was in school, studying, working a lot of different jobs. We didn’t have money for the school fees so I worked different jobs to pay for school.

Q: You mean, you were working in TV and going to school at the same time?

A: Yes, I was working any kind of job to get money to pay for school! (smiles)

Q: How did your parents feel about your work in show business?

A: In the beginning, my mother I think was a little worried. After a while, she was ok. (smiles)

So I was looking for a job, and saw that the television station was looking for someone. Someone said, hey, you speak pretty well. You can do English, Chinese, maybe you can try hosting this show. And that went pretty well. And you know at that time my brother Sam was already famous as a singer. So someone had the idea that we do a TV show together. That became our show, *The Hui Brothers Show*.

Then when I was popular on the television show, this famous director, Li Han-hsiang (李翰祥), saw me, and thought, hey this guy is funny, he has a good face, he can talk a certain way. It was his idea that I can do movies. He took me and said do this, be funny. Even though it [*The Warlord* (大軍閥), a 1972 comedy set in the last vestiges of the imperial era] is from a long time ago, he told me, it’s a satire (Fig. 10.1).

I was so lucky, from director Li I learned so much. Every night, after shooting, he would take me back to his home, talk to me about the shooting, the story, the script. He was always working on the script. He would ask me, you’re young, you know the young people, what they think is funny. How would you say this? How would you change the script?

Fig. 10.1 Hui’s film debut in Li Han-hsiang’s 1972 period satire, *The Warlord*

Fig. 10.2 Hui confers with John Woo (here, production manager for *The Private Eyes*, previously also production assistant *on Games Gamblers Play*)

Q: So he really trained you; you did your apprenticeship with him.

A: Yes, I was very lucky. I learned so much from him. Also John Woo. You know he was already at Shaw. He was very helpful too (Fig. 10.2).

Q: What kinds of things did you learn from John Woo? Camera set-ups? Stage blocking?

A; Yes, camera set-ups, everything. From Director Li it was more the script.

10.2 Marketing and Artistic Ownership

After several years as a Shaw contract player on television and in his breakout film role in *The Warlord* Hui was invited by former Shaw executive Raymond Chow to join Chow's new venture, Golden Harvest, which broke with Shaw's studio tradition to offer its stars creative and financial interest in their productions. Although Chow's first coup was securing Bruce Lee, Lee's untimely death in 1973 meant that it was Hui's number one hits in 1974–76, 1978, and 1981 that meant Golden Harvest and its celebrated role in sponsoring the careers of such singular Hong Kong icons such as Jackie Chan owes as much to Hui as to Lee.

Q: Another thing I am interested in is your transition from Shaw to Golden Harvest. Along with Bruce Lee and Jackie Chan, you were one of the big stars to have your own creative partnership with Golden Harvest. Who initiated the idea for the partnership?

A: Back then, Shaw was still very traditional. You know when you sign a contract with Shaw, it was for 8 years! By the time you finish the contract, your career may be over, no one would want you any more. And Shaw was changing, not making so many movies. So Raymond Chow got the idea to do something else. He already had Bruce Lee, and they had a lot of success before his (Lee's) death. He came to me and suggested the same: you put up some money and I put up some money, and together we share the profits. I liked this idea, so I said, ok.

Q: So who owns the films?

A: Both of us together.

You know I am not so different from Bruce Lee! (smiles). Back then my movies were often released as double features—usually the first film is Bruce Lee, the second was me. Sometimes I make a joke about that. When I have a fight, I use sausages like he (Bruce Lee) does the nunchucks (Fig. 10.3).

Q: It's funny that you mention that, because I just saw some programming material from a New York City Chinatown theater of your film, *Games Gamblers Play*, which was to be screened after Lee's *Enter the Dragon*. So this practice of linking you with Bruce Lee was true of your markets abroad, too.

Fig. 10.3 "I am not so different from Bruce Lee." Hui parodies Lee's iconic kung fu skills in *The Private Eyes*

10.3 Inventing a Highly Exportable Humor

Interestingly, although comedy as a genre is often thought to be difficult to export, due to its reliance upon linguistic and cultural context, one aspect of Hui's achievement is his popularity abroad, in countries throughout Asia and even in Europe. Always an ambitious and responsive filmmaker, Hui followed many of his Hong Kong contemporaries in testing his movies at special midnight screenings, attended by producers and the director, who monitored audience response in order to make last minute cuts and edits before the movie's official release. The star also was greatly influenced by American silent stars, a lineage often suggested about the physical invention of his colleague Jackie Chan, but rarely noted as a key influence in Hui's physical comedy. Both of these aspects of Hui's artistic influences and market sensibility show his overarching authorial control. In addition to providing the multiple roles of producer, director, screenwriter and star, Hui was often deeply involved in editing, and although he has said good films should aim for a laugh every minute his comic genius is evident in virtuoso moments such as a famed four-minute sequence in *The Private Eyes*, where plans to follow a cooking show's instructions to prepare chicken go awry when the television channel is abruptly switched to an exercise program (Fig. 10.4).

Q: Speaking of double-billing and global popularity, part of your success with Golden Harvest has been your international fame, as you are also a huge star in other Asian markets such as Japan. Are there things you have learned about comedy through this international fame?

A: To be funny, it has to be familiar. Like, you know, I have this joke, this gag, about cooking the chicken from the television show. Everyone can understand this experience. They have a TV, they see the television shows. So I have the idea, what if someone changes the channel? From there is the humor (Fig. 10.5).

Fig. 10.4 Led astray by channel surfing, Hui prepares a chicken dinner by exercising in *The Private Eyes*

Fig. 10.5 Hui with Golden Harvest's Steenbeck editing machine

Also I learned a lot about timing, editing. Usually Mr. Chow let me do my own thing, he never asked to see anything while I am shooting and hardly came to my set. Instead he just said, "that's fine, give me everything when you are ready." Only once did he tell me to change something. That was that scene in *The Private Eyes*, which is several minutes. When Raymond Chow and the other producers saw the print, he said, "this is too long, it's not funny, you have to cut it, no one will laugh." But then when we showed the film in the midnight screening, everyone was laughing from start to finish, without stopping. After that he said "ok, you're right," and he never asked me to cut again.

Q: I know you also were very interested in early Hollywood silent film. Sometimes you've been compared to Harold Lloyd, but I feel that you have so much in common with Charles Chaplin.

A: Oh yes, to me, Chaplin to me is the number one, the best model of comedy without language. I was influenced by all the old movies, but especially Chaplin. To me he is number one. He is the best.

10.4 Michael Hui After the Millennium

Now with more than a half century in the public eye, Hui continues to entertain, doing occasional comedy tours and even returning to his roots in television hosting. Although his film appearances are now considerably fewer, perhaps reflecting an inevitable scaling back on the extraordinary multi-layered creative involvement in his films from the 1970s, it may also be driven by retraction within the local film industry itself, which underwent a sudden and precipitous decline in the years before Hong Kong's 1997 reunification with China. In recent years China's explosive emergence as a film market has meant that many Hong Kong filmmakers seek funding and revenue through co-productions with mainland Chinese companies or at least by making carefully vetted stories calculated not to offend the Chinese government. Thus while younger comedians like Stephen Chow (周星馳) and Ronald Cheng (鄭中基) have shown their willingness to work in Putonghua—despite resembling Michael Hui in having initially made their name by highly colloquial and vernacular comedy targeted at local audiences—Michael Hui remains perhaps the most enduring source of a distinctly local Hong Kong comedy that continues to critique contemporary society. Indeed, as was the case with Hui's earlier movies, one hopes that Hui's work continues to appeal not only to Hong Kongers, but for any audience that recognizes Hong Kong as an exemplar of cultural and political trends within the modern world at large.

Q: How do you think comedy has changed over the years?

A: Things are not as funny anymore. Nowadays, you know, because of China and all the co-productions, the movies have to be careful, have to worry about all the audiences, what they are feeling, what they might think. There are things you can't say anymore.

For example, I always have the idea that I would like to make a movie about the Chief Executive, where I am the Chief Executive.

Q: That's a movie I'd like to see!

A: Yes, but no one wants to do it. I already wrote some of the script, I showed it to people, but they are too worried. (raises hands in gesture of befuddlement)

Q: What are your current projects? What would like to do next? What is there left for you?

A: Someday I will make that movie where I am the Chief Executive. (smiles)

Transcribed directly from an English interview conducted in Hong Kong on December 15, 2013.

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