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Hilarious lessons: The construction of a nonconformist individual through humor in China

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ABSTRACT

This paper discusses how individuals can use humor, sarcasm and mockery to question the governmental policies in China regarding issues such as tradition, democracy, values of education in general and of critical thinking specifically. Drawing on research on individualization of the Chinese society (discussed later), the paper interprets the use of humor by an individual Chinese while teaching English in a test-preparation school in China to illustrate how the authorities and their policies in diverse areas of Chinese life can be challenged. Focusing on the images that the teacher constructed in his jokes on the basis of personal experience, the analysis identified how he projected an attitude of a critical, rational, reflexive and self-reliant nonconformist person towards the political establishment by mocking it for its promotion of traditional and nationalistic discourses, as well as its problematic practices. Since such individuals arguably constitute the backbone of the civil society for a better China, there is a need to acknowledge in research their efforts to contest the discursive and ideological constraints when pursuing the path to remain “individuals” in a post-totalitarian society.

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Every joke is a tiny revolution (George Orwell)

1. Introduction

Humor is an important strategy for individuals to cope with, endure and even resist contextual reality in totalitarian and post-totalitarian states and it deserves research attention. The use of humor, or “jokes, narratives or anecdotes, [...] irony, banter, hyperbole, [...] mockery and parody” (Bell, 2011: 143), serves a variety of vital functions such as regulating human relationships and helps the powerless challenge authority in a non-violent manner (Attardo, 2008; Bell, 2011). However, the use of humor may also function as a “safety valve” to help create “communities of complicity” that maintains the status quo (Steinmüller, 2011: 36). This paper highlights the use of humor as “nonviolent resistance to oppression” in the post-totalitarian China (Sorensen, 2008: 168). As a case study, the author investigates use of humor at English lessons by a Chinese teacher, with reference to research on individualization of the Chinese society (Gao, 2014; Yan, 2010).

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Luo Yonghao, a Chinese teacher of English language, whose teaching methods are analyzed in this case study, is one of the nationally famous bloggers known for his critical comments on socio-political issues in the Chinese mainland in the 2000s (Zhai et al., 2009). According to his autobiography (Luo, 2010), Luo did not complete his secondary education but somehow managed to become a teacher in one of the most famous test-preparation schools in 2001, teaching courses on the verbal section of Graduate Record Examination (GRE), the most challenging test for those who apply for admission to graduate schools in North America. He became one of the most famous Internet Citizens (netizens) in 2005 and 2006 after thousands of Chinese netizens circulated the recordings of his English lessons, titled *Selected Lessons of Luo* (老羅語錄, the title can be interpreted as the netizens' attempt to mimic the *Selected Sayings of Chairman Mao*, 毛主席語錄), in online discussion forums in China. Following his Internet success, he left the test preparation school and was invited to be on a lecturing tour at universities across the nation (Luo, 2010). His blog received nationwide attention because of its content. As a result, he has been forced to close it down repeatedly, while trying to reopen it times and again, earning a nickname 'the owner of Beijing Switch Factory' (北京開關廠廠長, 'switch' in Chinese means 'close down' and 'open') (Zhai et al., 2009). In 2010, he published his autobiography with a title mimicking that of Adolf Hitler's *Mein Kampf* (Luo, 2010).

This study draws on transcripts of *Selected Lessons of Luo* (老羅語錄) and examines the content of the jokes that Luo cracked at these lessons. The aim is to identify how individuals like Luo use humor to challenge the authorities and their policies in diverse areas of Chinese life by projecting themselves as a non-conformist individual who deviates from an individualization process carefully controlled by the political establishment in China (Yan, 2010). From the spontaneous laughter of those present at these lessons (as captured by the recordings) and those listening to the recordings, one may speculate about the potential impact that such hilarious lessons may have on the course of individualization of the Chinese society. The contention is that a civil society, instead of being "communities of complicity", is likely to emerge through Chinese netizens' appreciation of and influence by the jokes like Luo's (Steinmüller, 2011: 36). Critics may question validity of a single case study and its findings (Flyvbjerg, 2006). Nevertheless, 'good social science is problem driven and not methodology driven in the sense that it employs those methods [...] that best help answer the research questions at hand' (Flyvbjerg, 2006: 242). Therefore an in-depth analysis of Luo's use of humor allows for 'analytical generalization' with regard to the deepened individualization process (discussed in section 3) of Chinese society in the new millennium (Yin, 1994: 44).

In the coming sections, I first briefly outline the use of humor by the powerless against the powerful in China and refer to research on the Chinese society's individualization (Yan, 2010) as the intellectual background for the inquiry. I then describe the data sources and methodology explaining how the analysis was conducted before I present the images that Luo constructed about himself and people surrounding him in his jokes. His projection of himself as a critical, rational, reflexive and self-reliant nonconformist person who mocks the political establishment for its problematic practices and promotion of traditional and nationalistic discourses will be emphasized.

2. The use of humor in contemporary Chinese society

Research on the use of humor by the powerless as a non-resistance strategy to oppression has revealed the "dual and even paradoxical qualities" of humor (Tang and Bhattacharya, 2011). On the one hand, humor allows powerless individuals to issue critical censures and enables them to challenge hegemonic powers in a given context. On the other hand, it helps them to reconcile their inability to take any serious actions, such as revolt, against the powerful with the realities of life. Thus, the use of humor actually "reflects political powerlessness [of people]" and "unwittingly and ironically serves to make [them] resign to [the powerful's] domination" (Tang and Bhattacharya, 2011).

In China, the dual and paradoxical functions of humor have been reflected in the rise of 'Canon-mocking' culture' after the tragic crushing of the pro-democracy movement in 1989. In this Canon-mocking movement, canonical works of the Chinese literature have been rewritten and reshaped into parodies to challenge "the cluster of regulative cultural, ethical and political powers embodied by those [canonical] texts" (Tao, 2007: 205). With nihilism and cynicism dominating the Canon-mocking literature, writers can express their discontent through their sarcasm at risk-free objects. Consequently, such use of humor, more specifically, sarcasm, may be "the only viable means of resistance for young generations" in a post-totalitarian society, but it is also a compromise that has 'received tacit consent and even cooperation from the state's authority' due to its limited ability to challenge the political establishment (Tao, 2007: 217). Ethnographic studies of the daily use of humor (Steinmüller, 2011: 36) have also discovered that humor was instrumental in creating "communities of complicity" that helped maintain the status quo. Apart from that, humor does play a significant role in political movements in different contexts and in more than one instance humor has successfully helped political parties to win victories over dictators.¹ Even within China, the use of humor played a visible role in mobilizing netizens across the country, successfully forcing the government to back down from the proposal to make the installation of content-control software on all computers mandatory (Tang and Bhattacharya, 2011). There is also a need to recognize the profound impact of humor on social transformation of both: those who perform it and those who are at the recipient end. This is where the seeds of civil society, long suppressed by totalitarian states, flourish and compete with the political establishment for the discursive rights and space (Zhai et al., 2009). To better understand these processes in China, one needs to examine the Chinese society's individualization progress that is taking place in the last few decades (Yan, 2010).

¹ Sorensen (2008) examined the use of humor in the Serbian Otpor movement that brought down Slobodan Milosevic.

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