

## TOPPLING LIU XIAOBO

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AS THE LUNAR NEW YEAR approaches, Chinese households might paste onto their front doors a diamond of red paper with the character for ‘prosperity’ or ‘good fortune’, *fu* 福, upside down as 𠄎. This folk custom is based on an aural pun: the verb *dao* 倒 — meaning to turn upside down, invert, or topple — is a homophone of *dao* 到, to arrive. To turn prosperity upside down is to express the wish that the New Year will bring prosperity to one’s door. *Dao fu* 倒福 leads to *fu dao* 福到.



Invert 'prosperity' and it will arrive  
Source: Wikicommons

The inversion of characters conveys allegorical meanings ranging from the auspicious to the innocuous to the hostile. Joke books of the early twentieth century would invert the character for ‘laughter’ 笑 on their covers to indicate that the reader would be toppled by or bowled over with laughter 笑倒, a phrase that also appears as the title of a Ming dynasty joke collection.

On 5 August 1903, the Chinese-language Melbourne daily *The Chinese Times* 美利賓埠愛國報, following a practice common among anti-Manchu newspapers, expressed its hope that the Qing government would fall by printing the characters for Qing 清 and Empress Dowager Cixi 慈禧太后 upside down.

On 19 December 2013, Taipei’s *Apple Daily* 蘋果日報 newspaper re-



Lunar New Year's couplets reading 'Success will arrive when Ma is toppled.'  
Source: apk.tw

ported on a New Year's greeting coined by a member of the opposition in Taiwan's legislature.<sup>1</sup> The president at the time was Ma Ying-jeou 馬英九, whose surname, Ma, is the character for 'horse'. From the time of his election in 2008, the Taiwan press would routinely report that Ma's visits to constituents were 'an instant success,' punning on the idiom 'victory as soon as the horse arrives' 馬到成功. Democratic Progressive Party legislator Lee Chun-yi 李俊佗 suggested that citizens post New Year's couplets with the character Ma inverted: 'success will arrive when Ma is toppled'.

Laughter and political protest alike feed on inversion and subversion. On 18 September 2006, the cultural critic and human rights activist

Liu Xiaobo 刘晓波 wrote an essay about 'political humour in a post-totalitarian dictatorship' in which he analysed the rise of *e'gao* 恶搞.<sup>2</sup> The term refers to a culture of parody, mockery, hoaxing, and facetiousness and their various expressions in the Internet age. Over two short years, he wrote, Chinese netizens had begun *e'gao*-ing everything and anything, but especially the authoritative, the faddish, and the self-important. Liu credits the Internet with enabling this culture to flourish by radically expanding access to information. But he also traces its tone of sarcasm back to 1980s rebels such as the singer Cui Jian 崔健 and the writer Wang Shuo 王朔, both of whom appropriated and subverted the ideological language of China's Communist Party-state in their work.

Having seen its 'passions for freedom impaled on bloody bayonets' during the 1989 Tiananmen Massacre, Liu wrote, a generation turned from making defiant statements to expressing opposition through sarcasm and mockery. Wang Shuo's legacy to later generations, including the netizens of today, was a flair for merging popular slang — in his case, Beijing's urban argot — with pompous official jargon to create a new language entirely: cool,

playful, insouciant, and ironic. In doing so, he spurred the rise of a new culture of amusement.

Liu Xiaobo recognised that the *e'gao* trend had negative effects too, especially in how it fostered malice and cynicism, and saw it partly as a symptom of 'spiritual hunger and intellectual poverty at the same time'. Cynical laughter inoculates against genuine rage leading to meaningful political action; it placates and pacifies. But Liu also saw hope, observing that in places such as Czechoslovakia 'truth-telling and joke-making have worked hand-in-hand to dismantle post-totalitarian dictatorships'. A few fearless people of conscience tell the truth, while joke-makers dig away at the base of the wall of popular support for the regime. 'Without the truth-tellers, there would be no open expression of popular resistance or of moral courage; without the jokesters, the words of the truth-tellers would fall on barren ground.'

On 26 June 2017, the Liaoning Prison Administrative Bureau announced on its website that Liu, who had been awarded the 2010 Nobel Peace Prize while incarcerated under vague charges of state subversion, was suffering late-term liver cancer and

had been released on medical parole. During the following weeks, Chinese state media broadcast images of Liu receiving medical attention in hospital, smiling for the camera and assuring viewers that he was being well cared for. The diagnosis and treatment both having arrived too late, this carefully orchestrated media spectacle did not last long. Liu Xiaobo died on 13 July 2017.

Liu Xiaobo's true crime was not just his truth-telling — his advocacy of free speech, democracy, and political freedoms, or his broadcasting of collective will in *Charter 08* — but also what he shared with China's joke-tellers, namely irreverence toward a government that demands obedience from citizens and claims immunity from their



**Liu Xiaobo**  
Source: Andy Shuai, Flickr

criticism. Liu professed that he was not motivated by personal animus, that he had ‘no enemies, no hatred’; his critical writings also show that he revered no sacred cows and would inveigh against dissidents as readily as against dictators. The state’s response to Liu’s refusal to defer to power, real or symbolic — his lack of reverence — was: no clemency.

Over a decade ago, Liu recognised that the Internet was a boon to Chinese civil society. It had enhanced freedom of expression and emboldened a culture of impertinence that delighted in breaking taboos and venturing into prohibited zones of speech and thought. Individual truth-tellers might be silenced, but a collective voice is harder to tame. A viral *e’gao* campaign pitting Grass-Mud Horse 草泥马 (*caonima*) against River Crabs 河蟹 (*hexie*) — a homophonous ‘fuck-your-mother’ 操你妈 (*caonima*) against ‘[the] harmonious [society]’ 和谐 [社会] (*hexie*)

[*shehui*] — which evaded censorship for a time, was one of the many subsequent signs that he was right. By that time, early 2009, Liu had already spent months in detention in what was to be his final stint of imprisonment; he was formally arrested in June and in December sentenced to eleven years. Liu was the first Nobel Peace Prize laureate to die in custody since Carl von Ossietzky died in a Nazi prison in 1938.

A critic who understood both the power and the limits of political humour, Liu would have appreciated one irony occasioned by his horrific fate. In toppling him, the Chinese Communist Party made him an even more powerful symbol of political resistance. Death is inevitable, but not martyrdom, and this reversal of fortune has ensured that memories of Liu Xiaobo’s moral courage — and of the regime’s brutal response — will remain potent well into China’s future.

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