

## HUMOUR IN CRISIS

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IN FEBRUARY, at the height of the COVID-19 crisis in the People's Republic of China (PRC), a young folk singer from Gansu province, Zhang Gasong 张尕怂, made a video that went viral. Singing and strumming his snakeskin-covered *sanxian* 三弦 (three-stringed lute) with his bank card, an irrepressible, impish smile on his face, he sings in local dialect of all the things he would have done had he known his village would be put under lockdown, like stocking up on alcohol and fooling around with his girlfriend more. He would not have given his mah-jong set to a friend or spent 500 yuan getting his hair permed. The video ends with his grandmother approaching off screen and him breaking off the song

to ask, with a sheepish grin, whether she liked it. The gentle humour and (apparently unscripted) surprise ending of 'If I'd Known How Long I'd Be Stuck at Home' 早知道在家呆这么久, filmed in Zhang's rustic courtyard, was a humorous antidote to the nation's anxieties. In June, the *Beijing Daily* 北京日报 interviewed Zhang about his music and sense of humour and the joy he had brought to so many people in lockdown with the song (as well as about the time he dislocated his jaw from laughing too hard).<sup>1</sup>

Much of the humour that circulated on social media during the initial stages of the pandemic was, like the song, politically harmless,



China's great satirist, Lu Xun  
Source: ryanhicks49, Flickr

acting as a circuit-breaker for tension, anger, and grief. People in lockdown in Wuhan posted videos of themselves fishing in their goldfish tanks, turning over boxed chocolates with cotton buds as though grilling snacks at a night market and showing hand puppets pretending to catch and eat passing cars.<sup>2</sup> Jokes circulated in the form of memes, such as one purporting to explain social distancing and asymptomatic transmission: 'If A has the coronavirus, and gives it to B, and B gives it to another B ...' — an elaborate setup for the punchline 'Don't be the 2B', which is rude northern slang loosely translatable as 'moron'.

The *Beijing Daily* interview did not mention another video by Zhang that also went viral before the censors got to it. 'The Wuhan New Coronavirus

Song' 武汉新型冠状病毒肺炎之歌, sung in the same courtyard with the same cheeky smile, offered a darker take on the crisis, noting that it was not funny that old people unable to buy masks were using orange peel instead, castigating the Red Cross for skimming off donations and keeping reporters away, and suggesting: 'First wash your brain, then your hands and face' 洗完脑子勤洗手再洗把脸.<sup>3</sup>

China's long tradition of political satire stretches back to the *Book of Odes* 詩經 (compiled between 1000 and 600 BCE), which contains verses such as one mocking the nobility for exploiting the labour of others: 'You neither sow nor reap, so how do you fill so many bins with grain?'

The Republican-era writer and translator Lin Yutang 林語堂 (1895–1976), who was the first to transliterate the English word 'humour' as *youmo* 幽默 in the 1920s, once said that the goal of a journal to which both he and the great satirist Lu Xun 魯迅 were contributors, *Threads of Discourse* 語絲, was to 'smash the "face" of "scholarly dignity"' and foster 'healthy belligerence'.<sup>4</sup> In 'Funny, But Not Vulgar' (1944), George Orwell wrote: 'A thing is funny when — in some way that is not actually offensive or

frightening — it upsets the established order. Every joke is a tiny revolution.’ Humour, he wrote, was ‘dignity sitting on a tin-tack’; whatever ‘destroys dignity ... is funny’.<sup>5</sup>

President Xi Jinping 习近平 and the leadership of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) generally take their dignity very seriously. After netizens light-heartedly compared a 2013 photograph of Xi walking with then US president Barack Obama with an illustration of a plump Winnie the Pooh strolling with lanky Tigger, China’s censors scrubbed the Internet of all references to the fictional bear. After the American TV cartoon *South Park* satirised the ban, censors cleansed the Internet of any mention of *South Park* as well. The CCP’s war on humour extended to an official directive in 2014 banning the use of puns and character play (both venerable forms of Chinese humour) in broadcasting and other media. In 2018, officials shuttered a jokes app called *Neihan duanzi* 内涵段子 that had hundreds of millions of mainly working-class male followers, accusing it of ‘vulgarity’.

Hu Yong 胡泳, a professor at Peking University’s School of Journalism and Communication and commentator on new media, has called humour ‘a

natural form of encryption’.<sup>6</sup> In March, as central authorities continued to shift responsibility for the outbreak of COVID-19 on to local officials, Li Jiabao 李佳宝, the visionary, Shenyang-born artist and ‘technologist’, filmed herself performing a sassy ‘Toss Pan Dance’ 甩锅舞 — a play on the Chinese slang ‘toss the pan (or wok)’, which means blame shifting or buck passing. Posting it on YouTube at the end of March, noting that it was a perfect form of exercise for quarantine, Li invited viewers to ‘inform, criticise, and warn’ others about problems of evaded responsibility while creating their own interpretations. The video was reposted on Chinese social media but a search on Weibo in August for Li Jiabao and ‘Toss Pan Dance’ (in Chinese) turned up nothing.

On the 101st anniversary of the 1919 May Fourth Movement, Bilibili, a popular streaming platform, released a rather different sort of video. Titled ‘Next Wave’, it was narrated by the fifty-two-year-old television actor He Bing 何冰, who lectures in earnest, pontifical tones to his elders that, in essence, the kids are all right. Over a pacey montage of young people travelling the world, skydiving, and generally enjoying all that money

can buy, he tells Chinese youth that they are fortunate to have the ‘right to choose’ from life’s smorgasbord. He credits them with the fact that ‘the world likes Chinese people even more than ever’.

The video landed on a nation still struggling with the effects of the pandemic on society and the economy, and in a world that demonstrably was ‘liking’ China less and less (see Chapter 6, ‘The Future Repeats Itself: COVID-19 and Its Historical Comorbidities’, pp.167–177). Although He Bing’s narration proclaimed satire a ‘tool of the weak’, the video brought satirists out in force. A video titled ‘Waves of Garlic Chives’ 韭菜 parodied Bilibili itself for turning every kind of human experience into capital, via influencers and online marketeers. ‘You may honestly believe that you’re lucky to be living in the present age,’ goes the narration, ‘but Capital knows that it is far more fortunate to make your acquaintance.’<sup>7</sup>

In Hong Kong, political satire and humour grounded in the Cantonese dialect have long been a part of local culture — and one traditionally given free range. Humour enlivened the slogans and signs of the protest movement of 2019 and informed the

response to the security law of 2020 by protesters, who, forbidden to express anything ‘subversive’, held up pieces of blank paper.

The public broadcaster Radio Television Hong Kong (RTHK) furloughed the political comedy skit show *Headliner* 頭條新聞 ahead of the law’s implementation. In annual surveys conducted by the University of Hong Kong, *Headliner* typically ranked among the top twenty most popular programs in Hong Kong. Writer-performer Tsang Chi-ho 曾志豪 has called it a ‘pressure valve for Hong Kongers disillusioned with the political system’.<sup>8</sup> But in March, after the show satirised police as having more personal protective equipment than medical staff, Police Commissioner Chris Tang alleged that continuing to broadcast the show would ‘lead to a loss of confidence in the force’ (a statement, considering the record of police brutality in 2019, itself ripe for satire). That appeared to be the last straw for a broadcaster increasingly under pressure to toe the official line.

Hong Kong journalist Lee Yee 李怡, writing about the end of *Headliner*, noted that those who wield power ‘fail to appreciate that satire is an outlet, a kind of social release



'Surge Forth, Waves of Garlic Chives!'  
Source: STF臭豆腐弹, Bilibili

valve that gives people a way of coping with their frustrations'.<sup>9</sup> After the introduction of the security law prompted 'yellow' (pro-democracy) restaurants and other businesses in Hong Kong to take down now illegal images and slogans supporting the protests, some began putting up copies of Mao-era propaganda posters with slogans like 'Revolution is no crime!

To rebel is justified!'. As Lee Yee also observed, while the authorities are able to 'ban a TV show or forbid satirical sketches, they can't shut down the way the people of our city are really thinking and feeling'.<sup>10</sup> Or, to borrow lyrics from another Zhang Gasong song: 'People must all tell the truth. If you lie and deceive, wait for a brick to come your way'.<sup>11</sup>

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