

A COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF STAND-UP COMEDY IN CONTEMPORARY CHINA AND A COLLECTION OF CLASSIC CHINESE JOKES

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Abstract

Notwithstanding the fact that 幽默 *yōumo* ‘humour’ is a neologism and transliteration coined in the 1920s, the conception has been existing in Chinese civilisation for millennia. The earliest extant treatise on humour in Chinese literature is regarded to be an anthology 笑林 *Xiao Lin* ‘The Forest of Laughs’ cumulated circa 2ndc CE, yet the most illustrious pre-modern jestbook is a 1791 assemblage entitled 笑林广记 *Xiao Lin Guang Ji* ‘A Collection of Classic Chinese Jokes’. In the 2000s, stand-up comedy entered China’s entertainment market as a niche cultural import, though it was, and still is, mistranslated into 脱口秀 *tuokouxiu* ‘talk show’. Recently, stand-up comedy attains visibility in China by means of phenomenal online programmes. I postulate that Chinese stand-up comedy is featured by unique attributes, in that it is disparate from ‘A Collection of Classic Chinese Jokes’ and the traditional theatrical comedy called 相声 *xiangsheng* ‘cross-talk’, and it is not parallel to its equivalent in the West either. To be more specific, being subject to stringent censorship, stand-up comedy in China is circumspect about content appertaining to (homo)sexual titillation and supernaturalism. Nonetheless, I posit that in terms of inducing humorous effects, contemporary stand-up comedy still evinces similitude to ‘A Collection of Classic Chinese Jokes’ from phonetic, semantic and pragmatic perspectives.

Keywords: *Xiao Lin Guang Ji, tuokouxiu, paronomasia, homonymy, presupposition*

I INTRODUCTION

In this research, I compare and contrast stand-up comedy in contemporary China and a Chinese jestbook 笑林广记 *Xiao Lin Guang Ji* ‘A Collection of Classic Chinese Jokes; A Vast Record of the Forest of Jokes’. Stand-up comedy in China demonstrates unique features, as it does not accord with the form or terminology of the traditional 相声 *xiangsheng* and complies with government regulations concerning homosexual, pornographic and supernatural content. Despite differences between modern stand-up comedy and *Xiao Lin Guang Ji*, they demonstrate phonetic, semantic and pragmatic similarities.

Stand-up comedy, originated in the US in the mid-20th century (Lavin 2004: 1, Double 2017, Rappaport and Quilty-Dunn 2020), denotes a narrative monologue and rhetorical discourse delivered by a solo performer speaking directly to a live audience in a spontaneous fashion (Greenbaum 1999, Zoglin 2019, Brodie 2020). Recently, stand-up comedy, translated into 单口喜剧 *dankou xiju* (Lit. ‘solo comedy’) or more illustriously yet inaccurately renowned as 脱口秀 *tuokouxiu* ‘talk show’ (Qiu 2021), has gone viral both online and offline in China.

Stand-up comedy, or ‘talk show’ as a mistranslated terminology, first appeared in China in 2005. Compared with talk show, it was introduced into the Chinese market relatively late: in as early as 1999, Hunan Satellite TV acted as a pioneer striving to construct a ‘Chinese-style talk show’ conception, by means of launching a talk-show-esque programme entitled 说出你的故事 *Shuochu Nide Gushi* ‘Speak up’ (Wu 2020). The commitment regarding the promulgation of stand-up comedy in China is ascribed to the Shanghai-based China Dragon TV: it rejuvenated the modern Chinese comedy by broadcasting the first authentic stand-up comedy show called 东方夜谭 *Dongfang Yetan* in 2005, which, however, fell prey to official animadversion for vulgarity (Oriental Morning Post 2006). Following this transitory programme, the Dragon TV initiated a prototypical entertainment in the form of stand-up comedy, viz. 今晚80后脱口秀 *Jinwan Balinghou Tuokouxiu* ‘Tonight 80’s Talk Show’, which had been retaining high viewership ratings since its release in 2012 whereas ended its run five years later (Ifeng 2020). The success of this entertainment also inspired the former host of ‘Speak Up’ to initiate an online debate-structured variety show 奇葩说 *Qipa Shuo* ‘I Can I BB’ (Lit. ‘Weirdos Talk’) that premiered in 2014

and is characterised by realistic and controversial propositions as well as eloquent witty banter of contestants and mentors (Fan 2019). In terms of offline development, the first stand-up comedy club was founded in Shenzhen in 2009 (Qiu 2021). After two decades' endeavour, stand-up comedy recently attains visibility in China via popular stand-up-comedy-themed entertainments.

In terms of the 1791 anthology *Xiao Lin Guang Ji* (henceforward *Xiao*), it is the most renowned pre-modern jestbook in Chinese literature. *Xiao* is compiled by a scholar pseudonymised 游戏主人 Youxi Zhuren 'The Master of Games' or 游戏道人 Youxi Daoren 'Playful Learner of the Way', and it integrates over six hundred jokes in Ming (1368-1644) and Qing (1644-1912) dynasties, with its earliest extant version dating back to the eventful Reign of the Qianlong Emperor (r. 1735-1796) (Rea 2015: 22, Hsu 2015: 7, Leggieri 2020, 2021).

II LITERATURE REVIEW

Upon the introduction of the English expression 'humour' as a loanword into Republican (1912-1949) China in the 1920s, it was transliterated into a panoply of renderings with distinct literal meanings, exemplified by 语妙 yumiao by 李青崖 Li Qingya (1886-1969), 欧亚穆 ouyamu by 王国维 Wang Guowei (1877-1927) and 油滑 youhua by 陈望道 Chen Wangdao (1891-1977), among which the most established one is 幽默 youmo coined and promulgated in a 1924 article by 林语堂 Li Yutang (1895-1976), an illustrious cosmopolitan bilingual writer (Williams 2010, Qian 2011a: 1, Huson 2016). Owing to its original meaning manifested by its extant occurrence in an exemplary poem composed by 屈原 Qu Yuan (circa 340-278 BC) during the Warring States (5thc-3rdc BC) period, youmo was castigated by an iconic intellectual 鲁迅 Lu Xun (1881-1936) for its connotation of silence and thus potential miscomprehension (Zeng 1996, Ye 2015), yet this version attained myriads of accolades and hence has been adopted into the Chinese language as an officially-recognised terminology (Lin 1924a, Qian 2007, 2011b, Qiao 2014).

Although youmo is a neologism, the conception of humour has been existing in Chinese civilisation for millennia (Chan 2011, Chey 2011, Xu 2011): as pointed out by its translator Lin Yutang, who had conducted in-depth research on humour and was hence adulated as 'Master of Humour' (Zhong 2011, Ding and Zhao 2018), humorous writing can be attested in the classic 诗经 Shijing 'Book of Songs' cumulating poems composed in the Zhou (1046-256 BCE) dynasty (Lin 1924b, 1932, 1935, Sample 2011). Moreover, this historical period witnessed jesters substantially predating their modern counterparts, who were depicted in a masterpiece 史记 Shiji 'Records of the Grand Historian' composed by a court scribe and astrologer 司马迁 Sima Qian (circa 145-90 BCE) in circa 90 BCE (Allen 1981, Rouzer 2007: xi-xiii, Davis 2013, Kern 2015).

The earliest extant treatise on humour in Chinese literature is regarded to be an assemblage entitled 笑林 Xiao in 'The Forest of Laughs' by a calligrapher and literatus 邯郸淳 Handan Chun (circa 150-225 CE) during the Wei-Jin (220-589 CE) era (Lee 2011, Baccini 2014), followed by an anthology 肩颜录 Qi Yan Lu 'Record of Bright Smiles' by a witty court official 侯白 Hou Bai (581-618 CE) (Baccini 2016, Song and Guo 2017, Baccini 2020).

The Yuan (1279-1368) dynasty witnessed the emergence of specialised dramatic forms encapsulated by a type of theatrical comedy referred to as 相声 xiangsheng 'cross-talk; comic banter', which predominantly entails dialogues abounding in puns and allusions between two actors onstage, by means of deploying a plethora of homonyms in the Chinese language to create double entendres and cues for miscommunication and hence humorous effect (Link 1984, 2007, Zhang 2018). Xiangsheng reached the pinnacle of popularity in the 20th century and acted as a vehicle for satirising contemporary follies through making extensive use of subversive and critical materials, whereas its content was regulated by the propaganda department of the Chinese Communist Party, so as to facilitate ideological campaigns via designated topics and stringent censorship (Moser 1990, Cai and Dunn 2020: 10-11). As a consequence, after 1949, especially from the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976) onwards, the vast majority of xiangsheng practitioners are Party-trained, rendering this art form less appealing (Chey 2011, Rea 2015: 161). As pointed out by Moser (2004), '[t]he Chinese government has systematically stifled crosstalk by bowdlerizing its tradition, restricting its natural growth and evolution, and reducing

the form to a sycophantic, unsatisfying—and unfunny—shadow of its former self. Younger audiences exposed to only the lukewarm pap that now passes for crosstalk on Chinese TV have no way of knowing that it was at one time a freewheeling, vibrant, and even rambunctious art form'. In the 21st century, xiangsheng has resurged in popularity and appeared in the digital world and cyberspace as a transformed medium (Kushner 2013, Moser 2018), the catalyst of which is ascribed to the phenomenal 德云社 Deyun She 'Deyun Club' founded by a prominent cultural hero 郭德纲 (1973-) in 1996 (Cai 2016, 2017, Zhang and Ge 2018, Cai and Dunn 2020: 54).

III METHOD

To investigate features of Chinese stand-up comedy and compare it with Xiao, I hermeneutically scrutinise jokes compiled in Xiao and compare them with stand-up comedy performances from 'Tonight 80's Talk Show' as well as 脱口秀大会 Tuokouxiu Dahui 'Rock & Roast' (Lit. 'Talk Show Symposium') and 吐槽大会 Tucao Dahui 'Roast'.

'Rock and Roast' is an online talent competition produced by Shanghai Xiaoguo Media Company that is established by the former cast of 'Tonight 80's Talk Show' and has been leading the industry (Ren 2020). Since being launched in 2017, 'Rock & Roast' has garnered intense attention. For instance, on Weibo, a micro-blogging platform with approximately 605 million monthly active users in the third quarter of 2023 (Weibo 2023), its hashtag has accumulated 5.67 billion visits and 6.69 million posts by April 2021, and there are myriads of dedicated Weibo 'super topic' (超话 chao hua) virtual communities related to it. Apart from this phenomenal entrainment, Xiaoguo has produced an array of other online series, among which the most successful one is 'Roast' involving celebrities from various fields roasting each other and underbraging themselves, analogous to the American programme 'Comedy Central Roast' (Qiu 2021, Xu 2021). Analogous to 'Rock & Roast', 'Roast' also receives both plaudits and censure (Leng and Wang 2018, Beijing Youth Daily 2021, Ren 2021), and simultaneously, it is subject to surveillance and censorship (Zheng 2021).

Additionally, to demonstrate stand-up comedians' compliance with regulations concerning supernatural content, I draw on one example from an online radio programme 谐星聊天会 Xiexing Liaotianhui 'Chats with Comedians' (Trans. Mine), during which a small cohort of stand-up comedians' chat to each other and interact with audiences.

IV DISCUSSION AND RESULTS

The visibility of stand-up comedy in contemporary China is encapsulated by accolades from mainstream media and institutions, e.g. China Central TV, All China Women's Federation and Xinhua News Agency, China's state-run press agency: 'Rock & Roast' is adulated for promulgating optimistic mindset and thought-provoking reflections among young generations (Yang 2020), and its female participants are additionally acclaimed for defying traditional gender norms (Zhong 2020, An 2021), represented by 赵晓卉 Zhao Xiaohui who has hence been invited to the 2020 spring festival gala of a provincial TV station (Anhui TV 2020) and the 2023 spring festival gala of China Central Television (China Central Television 2023). Partially attributed to the popularity of the online 'Rock & Roast', offline stand-up comedy performances have also attained attention from the public, indicated by an ever-increasing volume of media acclamation on stand-up comedy enterprises such as 单立人 Danliren in Beijing (Niu 2017) and 泥乐 Nile in Jinan (Qilu Evening News 2019, Shen and Duan 2020).

Accompanied by the expeditious visibility of 'Rock and Roast', some outstanding and/or contentious contestants have risen to mega-stardom, exemplified by a female comedian 杨笠 Yang Li, who has obtained 2.31 million Weibo followers and a list of product endorsement opportunities through mocking men's self-confidence (May 2020, Zhang 2020, The Paper 2021, Xie 2021). There is no denying the fact that famed stand-up comedians have also caused fierce controversy and even legal issues, e.g. drug abuse, breach of contract, leakage of confidential information (China Banking News 2020, China News 2020), as well as dissension regarding massive complaints against Yang Li for 'insulting all men' and 'propagating hatred' (May 2020, The Paper 2021, Xie 2021).

Inspired by the political terminology 中国特色社会主义 Zhongguo Tese Shehuizhuyi 'Socialism with Chinese Characteristics', I perceive stand-up comedy in China as 'stand-up comedy with Chinese

characteristics’, in that it is disparate from the traditional xiangsheng yet not parallel to its equivalent in the West either. In this paper, I employ performances derived from episodes of ‘Tonight 80’s Talk Show’, five series of ‘Rock & Roast’ between 2017 and 2022, as well as five series of ‘Roast’ between 2017 and 2021.

To begin with, Chinese stand-up comedy is discrepant from xiangsheng in terms of both form and terminology, and as a cultural import, it is in line with its counterpart in the West. Although a trivial minority of xiangsheng takes the form of solo monologues, it is predominantly performed by two actors, i.e. an illogical 逗眼 dougen ‘joke-cracker’ narrating or playing the fool, as well as a straight 捧眼 penggen ‘joke-setter’ serving as an interlocutor in a chatty style of performance (Link 1984, 2007, Moser 2018, Isaacson 2019, Chen and Dunn 2020: 6). Chinese stand-up comedy, on the contrary, is conducted by a solo comedian, analogous to its Western equivalent.

In terms of the deployment of terminologies, notwithstanding identical concepts, Chinese stand-up comedians employ translations or transliterations of English expressions, rather than adopt pre-existing xiangsheng terminologies. For instance, comical elements are dubbed 包袱 baofu in xiangsheng but 梗 geng in Chinese stand-up comedy, which is transliterated from ‘gag’ in English; similarly, the xiangsheng terminology denoting improvisation is 现挂 xiangua, but it is not adopted by stand-up comedians. More significantly, Chinese stand-up comedy is more circumspect than its Western counterpart due to divergent censorship standards (Wu 2020). Compared with narratives in Xiao, Chinese stand-up comedy performances are more scrupulous too.

A conspicuous taboo topic in contemporary China is homosexuality. Same-sex sexual intercourse and emotional intimacy, especially male-male homosexuality, occurred in China millennia ago and was comprehensively tolerated during the vast majority of historical periods (Ruan and Tsai 1987, Hinsch 1990, Szonyi 1998, Wu 2004: 2). The embracement of homosexuality can be embodied by a myriad of classics, exemplified by three late Ming collections of male homoeroticism (Vitiello 1992, 1996), viz. 弁而钗 Bianerchai ‘Cap and Hairpins’ as a syncretic negotiation of crossed gender boundaries (McMahon 1988: 73-78, Wu 2017), 龙阳逸史 Longyang Yishi ‘The Forgotten Stories of Longyang’ as a portrait of male prostitution (Vitiello 2000a, 2000b, 2014), as well as 宜春香质 Yichun Xiangzhi ‘Fragrant Essences of Spring’ portraying exquisite sexuality sported by the elite (Wu 1995, McMahon 2002). Implicit and explicit depictions of male-male promiscuity can also be attested in masterpieces like 红楼梦 Hong Lou Meng ‘Dream of the Red Chamber’ (Edwards 1990, Liu 2009, Wu 2017) and 金瓶梅 Jin Ping Mei ‘The Plum in a Golden Vase’ (Lau and Ng 1989, Volpp 1996).

In Xiao, especially in a chapter entitled 僧道 Sengdao ‘Monks and Taoists’ (Trans. Mine), a substantial number of risqué jokes alluding to homoeroticism is compiled, as in Example (1) implying a monk’s homosexual intercourse with his disciple.

(1) 一僧嫖院，以手摸妓前后。忽大叫曰：“奇哉奇哉！前面的竟像尼姑，后面的宛似徒弟。”

A monk went to a bordello and touched a prostitute’s intimate part. He suddenly shouted: ‘How strange! From the front you feel like a nun, but from the back you feel like my disciple.’

(Xiao Lin Guang Ji. Monks and Taoists. Trans. Mine)

Nonetheless, since the rule of the Chinese Communist Party that regards itself obliged to mandate culture in all aspects of form, content, production, distribution and canonisation (Hockx 2015: 1-2), homosexuality has been subject to moral scrutiny and imposed on extra-legal sanctions (Chou 2001, Li 2006, Kong 2016), especially during the Cultural Revolution (Jones 2007, Worth et al 2017, 2019). To be more specific, homosexuality-themed media representation is under nation-wide surveillance, so allegedly offensive content is expurgated prior to official approval by the National Radio and Television Administration (Ng 2015, McLelland 2016, Zhao et al 2017, Wang 2019). As mentioned previously, ‘Speak up’ is China’s first talk-show-esque programme, yet in the late 2000s, the show was suspended by the authority due to an episode pertaining to homosexuality (Wu 2020). Similarly, an episode of ‘I Can I BB’ was removed from all streaming websites owing to its discussion on coming out of the closet (Sohu 2018). Apart from comedy, other textual and audiovisual works appertaining to homosexuality are also stringently controlled by the party-state’s cultural crackdown on ‘vulgar, immoral and unhealthy content’, exemplified by a literary genre dubbed 耽美 danmei that features male-male

romance/eroticism (Yang and Xu 2016, 2017a, 2017b, Zhang 2016), and a gay-themed serial entitled 上瘾 Shangyin ‘Addicted’ (Ellis-Petersen 2016, Yang and Tang 2018).

Even if homosexuality is circumspectly circumnavigated, obscenity is still subject to official censorship in the form of a series of anti-pornography campaigns launched by the National Office against Pornographic and Illegal Publications, Cyberspace Administration of China and other government departments (Jacobs 2012: 32, Ji and Long 2014, Ning 2014, Qin 2020). As a result of the crackdown on pornography, although ‘Roast’ attained attention from mainstream media prior to its release (China News 2016) and attracted over 30 million views within three days after being launched online, the first episode was banned due to obscene implications (Xu 2016).

It is worth mentioning that both xiangsheng and Xiao are prone to sexual titillation. Xiangsheng artists are not surmised to refrain from expressing obscenity, in that traditional xiangsheng abounds with liberated sexual jokes and vulgar comical elements (Cai and Dunn 2020: 3), and it possesses a subgenre called 荤口 hunkou (Lit. ‘meat [as opposed to ‘vegetarian’] mouth’) that is dedicated for suggestive themes and sexual humour (Link 1984, 1992, Moser 2018). In the contemporary era, some innovative xiangsheng works of Guo Degang are banned by TV stations and party censors by virtue of coarse elements of sexual and adulterous innuendoes (Cai 2016, 2017). Similarly, Xiao is replete with prurient jokes, especially in a chapter entitled 闺风 Guifeng ‘Inner Chamber Custom’ (Trans. Mine), as in Example (2). It is notable that this example entails homonymy that the character 快 kuai either describes ‘sharp’ status of weapons or functions as a slang expression ‘fast’ denoting premature ejaculation, thereby inducing humorous effects (see Section 4 for more discussion on homonymy).

(2) 新郎初次行房，妇欣然就之，绝不推拒。至事毕之后，乃高声叫曰，“有强盗！有强盗！”新郎曰：“我乃丈夫，如何说是强盗？”新妇曰：“既不是强盗，为何带把刀来？”夫曰：“刀在那里？”妇指其物曰：“这不是刀？”新郎曰：“此乃阳物，何认为刀？”新妇曰：“若不是刀，为何这等快极？”

When a bride had sex with her groom for the first time, she was very keen. After they finished, she cried: ‘Bandit! Bandit!’ The groom said: ‘I’m your husband. Why did you call me a bandit?’ The bride said: ‘If you weren’t a bandit, why would you have a knife with you?’ The groom asked: ‘Where’s the knife?’ The bride pointed at his penis and said: ‘Isn’t it a knife?’ The groom replied: ‘This is my cock. Why did you call it a knife?’ The groom said: ‘If it wasn’t a knife, how could it be so kuai?’

(Xiao Lin Guang Ji. Inner Chamber Custom. Trans. Mine)

The dissimilitude between Chinese stand-up comedy and Xiao can also be embodied by supernaturalism. As the ruling party, the Chinese Communist Party is indoctrinating people with an atheist ideology via political education programmes (Li et al 2018), and there are party-state constraints on religions (Chan 2005, Ying 2014, Tao 2017) and the so-called ‘feudal superstitions’ (Gao 2014, You 2020). Impinged upon by such an atheist ideology, the National Radio and Television Administration proscribes supernatural plots and narratives featuring ‘superstitious practices concerning physiognomy, fortune-telling, feng shui, divination, exorcism, etc’ (‘看相，算命，看风水，占卜，驱鬼治病等封建迷信活动’) (Trans. Mine) (National Radio and Television Administration 2009). Stand-up comedians, therefore, are scrupulous about complying with regulations. For instance, in an episode of ‘Chats with Comedians’, which is themed around superstition in daily life, several audiences talked about divination and religion, so comedians had to keep interrupting and changing topics (Example (3)) in case ‘the programme gets banned’ (‘节目不让播了’), and sensitive expressions from audiences have been bleeped out.

(3) [观众] 之前家里有人拜佛的时候答应了什么东西，然后没有还愿。要我去还愿。

[Audience] Previously my family failed to redeem a vow to Buddha, so I must make votive offerings.

[演员甲] 我大概明白了。咱们控制点儿节奏，是吧，防止我们变成一档封建节目。咱们还是社会主义国家。

[Comedian A] I seem to understand. But we need to be careful not to make the programme a superstitious one. We’re still in a socialist country.

[演员乙] 我们今天聊这个题目, 朋友们, 我们叫“当代玄学”, 都说“当代”了。就是很多平常这种小的...

[Comedian B] Today's topic, guys, is 'contemporary superstition', and the focus is on the word 'contemporary'.

What we mean here is just those little things in everyday lives...

[演员甲] 你说的还是大唐全盛时期, 咱们佛教从印度引进来。来, 这位朋友。

[Comedian A] What you said was the Tang dynasty, when Buddhism was introduced from India. Let's ask another audience.

(Xiexing Liaotianhui. Trans. Mine)

Nevertheless, being composed in pre-modern China, Xiao contains narratives featuring supernatural plots, as in Example (4). It is notable that supernatural storylines do not necessarily contribute to humorous elements: in Example (5), there is an immortal character, yet this deity is simply deployed to anathematise social injustice and corruption.

(4) 一道士过王府基, 为鬼所迷, 赖行人救之, 扶以归。道士曰: “感君相救, 无物可酬, 有避邪符一道, 聊以奉谢。”

While passing by an aristocratic mausoleum, a Taoist priest was possessed by a ghost. A passer-by saved him and escorted him home. The Taoist priest said: 'Thank you so much for saving my life. I have nothing else to show my gratitude, so please accept my amulet that can protect you against evil.'

(Xiao Lin Guang Ji. Monks and Taoists. Trans. Mine)

(5) 府取童生, 祈梦: “道考可望入泮否?” 神问曰: “汝祖父是科下否?” 曰: “不是。” 又问: “家中富饶否?” 曰: “无得。” 神笑曰: “既是这等, 你做甚么梦!”

A junior candidate prayed to a divinity in his dream: 'Will I pass this imperial examination?' The divinity asked: 'Is your grandfather a scholar-official?' He replied: 'No, he's not.' The divinity asked again: 'Are you from an affluent family?' He replied: 'No, I'm not.' The divinity laughed: 'Then what are you dreaming about?'

(Xiao Lin Guang Ji. Corruption. Trans. Mine)

Notwithstanding discrepancies between Xiao and modern stand-up comedy, I postulate that there are affinities between them from phonetic, semantic and pragmatic perspectives.

First, from a phonetic perspective, a strategy of 谐音 *xieyin* 'paronomasia' prevails among stand-up comedies and narratives in Xiao. Paronomasia denotes a rhetorical device conflating homonyms or near-homonyms in order to produce a humorous effect, or a comparable play on words and phrases of analogous pronunciations (McArthur et al 2018a). For instance, a comedian whose stage name is 王建国 Wang Jianguo is celebrated for deploying *xieyin*, which is repeatedly and jokingly denounced by his boss and friend 李诞 Li Dan, a renowned comedian and writer, yet Wang Jianguo intentionally reinforces the *xieyin* technique, rendering it a distinctive 'clichéd' property of his performance. In Example (6), the expression 'being so-and-so but wanting so-and-so' alludes to a well-known axiom, viz. 当婊子还要立牌坊 *dang biaozi haiyao li paifang*, which literally means 'being a whore and wanting a chastity memorial arch' (Trans. Mine) and metaphorically means 'you can't have your cake and eat it too'. However, out of audiences' expectation, Wang Jianguo says a 成语 *chengyu* 'idiom' 当机立断 *dang ji li duan* 'grasping opportunities resolutely' instead, generating three pairs of homonyms in total: *dang* and *li* share the same pronunciations with 'being' and 'wanting' in the axiom respectively, and *ji* additionally shares the same pronunciation with 鸡 *ji* that is a slang expression for prostitutes, which implies and corresponds to the 'whole' in the axiom.

(6) 我的朋友们听完就都理解了嘛, 但是有一个朋友理解得过于透彻, 听我说完之后很开心, 很兴奋, 指着我说: “我知道了, 你就是当那啥又想立那啥。” 我气得我说: “你说清楚当啥立啥,

当哪啥立哪啥? 来你说清楚。”他也很慌张:“不是,我不是那意思,就是当那啥,你不是,哎呀,当那个当立那个,你应该当机立断!”

All my friends understood me after my explanation, but one of them understood too much. He said to me excitedly: ‘I see. You’re being so-and-so and wanting so-and-so.’ I was pissed off and asked him: ‘What do you mean by “being so-and-so and wanting so-and-so”? Explain.’ He panicked: ‘No, I didn’t mean that. You’re not. Well, I mean, you should be resolute and wanting opportunities.’

(Wang Jianguo. Rock & Roast. Trans. Mine)

Analogously, in Example (7) extracted from Xiao, the noun 尺 *chi* ‘ruler’ and the verb 吃 *chi* ‘to eat’ are used as puns despite different tones, rendering a statement ‘to want the ruler’ into ‘to want to eat (excrement)’ in the context of a lavatory.

(7) 一裁缝上厕坑,以尺挥插墙上。便完忘记而去。随有一满洲人登厕,偶见尺,将腰刀挂在上面。少顷,裁缝转来取尺,见有满人,畏而不前,观望良久。满人曰:“蛮子你要甚么?”答曰:“小的要尺。”满人曰:“咱囚攘的,厕也没有厕完,你就要吃(尺)!”

A tailor went to the toilet and hung his ruler on a rack, but he forgot it and left. Then a Manchu man entered and hung his knife on the rack too. Soon after, the tailor came back for the ruler, but he was afraid of the Manchu man, so he waited aside. The Manchu man asked him: ‘What do you want?’ The sailor replied: ‘I want (to) *chi*.’ The Manchu man said: ‘Shit! I haven’t finished, and you want (to) *chi*!’

(Xiao Lin Guang Ji. Prowess. Trans. Mine)

Second, from a semantic perspective, homonymy is also widely deployed in stand-up comedy and Xiao. Homophones denote words sharing an identical pronunciation whereas diverging in spelling and meaning, the occurrence of which is predominantly ascribed to historical evolution entailing words of different definitions becoming phonologically parallel (McArthur et al 2018b). Example (8) entails two homophones of the character 娘 *niang*: the traditional use in the axiom is an archaic expression for ‘mother’, yet there is a newly-coined neologism meaning ‘sissy’. By employing homophony, a female stand-up comedian named 王思文 *Wang Siwen* teases about her husband 程璐 *Cheng Lu*, who is also a stand-up comedian, for not forgetting his ‘mother’, i.e. not forgetting his ‘sissy’ attribute.

(8) 程璐真的特别好,俗话说,娶了媳妇忘了娘,你看程璐结婚这么久了一点儿都没变,还是那么娘。

Cheng Lu is really good. As the saying goes, ‘A man forgets his *niang* as soon as he has a wife.’ But look at Cheng Lu, after getting married for so long, he hasn’t changed at all—he’s still so *niang*.’

(Wang Siwen. Tonight 80’s Talk Show. Trans. Mine)

In Xiao, there is also a prodigious number of jokes involving homophones. As mentioned previously, Example (2) extracted from Xiao entails homophony. Similarly, in Example (9), the former 大 *da* means ‘superior’ in terms of societal and familial status of the wife compared with the concubine, whereas the latter 大 *da* means ‘old’ in terms of age.

(9) 一家娶妾,年纪过长于妻。有卖婆见礼,问:“那位是大?”妾应云:“大是他大,大是我大。”

A family’s concubine was older than the wife. A saleswoman asked them: ‘Which one of you is more *da*?’ The concubine replied: ‘She’s more *da*, but I’m more *da*.’

(Xiao Lin Guang Ji. Inner Chamber Custom. Trans. Mine)

Third, from a pragmatic perspective, both stand-up comedy and Xiao deploy a pragmatic approach. Through a hermeneutic analysis of the performance of a comedian pseudonymised 池子 *Chizi* at ‘Roast’ (Example (10)), Yin (2018) propounds that humorous effect of stand-up comedy can be expounded by presupposition failure (Strawson 1950, 1964, Beaver et al 2021) as well as the Incongruity Theory attributing generation of humour to concurrence of items that should not appear coincidentally according to logic and familiarity (Schultz 1976, Suls 1972, 1983, Liu 2005, Morreall 2020). I posit that this strategy is also adopted by non-professional stand-up comedy performers such as a rapper whose stage name is 弹壳 *Danke*. During his performance at ‘Roast’, upon having established a presupposition that all rappers are valorously rebellious, *Danke* immediately ingratiates himself with idols’ devoted fanbases who can be ferocious in online trolling, which annihilates the presupposition and hence induces humorous effects and sarcasm on toxic fandom (Example (11)).

(10) 蔡国庆老师, 是中国流行音乐的男歌手, 上春晚次数21次。我很惊讶呀, 他是流行男歌手, 对不对, 什么时候中国流行音乐变成这样了。

Mr Cai Guoqing, a Chinese pop singer who has performed in the national New Year Gala for 21 times. I'm shocked. Is he a pop singer? Since when did his songs become pop music?

(Chizi. Roast. From Yin 2008: 59. Trans. Mine)

(11) 我是一个 rapper, 但是我特别不喜欢现在的 rapper, 包括我自己, 我说实话。原来我们做说唱的大部分都是怼天怼地怼空气, 不管你是谁, 你爱谁谁, 气质这一块绝对不能颓。你编剧作家, 我 rapper。你影帝影后, 我 rapper。你当红 idol, 我...respect。我也不是怕 idol, 主要我是怕那些粉丝老师们: 一句话要是说不对, 那是真揍你啊!

I'm a rapper, but I really don't like today's rappers, including myself, to be honest. We rappers used to be so wild. Whoever you were, we never gave a shit. You're playwrights and writers—I'm a rapper. You're best actors and actresses—I'm a rapper. You're idols—I...respect. I'm not afraid of idols, but their distinguished fans: if one of your words pisses them off, they really troll you to death!

(Danke. Roast. Trans. Mine)

Analogously, in Example (12) extracted from Xiao, readers' two presuppositions based on common sense are invalidated. The first surmise is that the doctor is competent, yet it is not borne out, in that none of his neighbours trusts the medicine he made. The second surmise is that medicine is supposed to cure diseases, yet it is not borne out either, in that the doctor's medicine can even cause diseases.

(12) 一医迁居, 谓四邻曰: “向来打搅, 无物可做别敬, 每位奉药一帖。” 邻舍辞以无病。医曰: “但吃了我的药, 自然会生起病来。”

Before moving home, a doctor thanked his neighbours: 'I've been grateful for your friendliness. I have nothing else to give you, so everybody please take some medicine I made.' The neighbours all refused by saying that they were not ill. The doctor said: 'You will get ill after taking my medicine.'

(Xiao Lin Guang Ji. Prowess. Trans. Mine)

V CONCLUSION

By means of exploring stand-up comedy programmes exemplified by 'Tonight 80's Talk Show', 'Rock & Roast' and 'Roast', I profound that stand-up comedy in China possesses unique characteristics, because it does not accord with the form or terminology of the traditional xiangsheng. More significantly, contemporary stand-up comedians are scrupulous about complying with party-state regulations of homosexual, pornographic and supernatural content, whereas Xiao abounds with such elements.

Nevertheless, notwithstanding discrepancies between modern stand-up comedy and Xiao, they demonstrate phonetic, semantic and pragmatic resemblances. To be more specific, the devices of paronomasia, homophony as well as presupposition failure and incongruity can be attested in both stand-up comedy performances and narratives in this pre-modern jestbook.

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