

# ‘She is like a Yakshini: character construction via aggressive humour in Chinese sitcom discourse

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Abstract

*This paper looks at the importance of aggressive humour in the discursive construction of a ‘Yakshini’ character in a popular Chinese sitcom, *Ipartment*. The exaggerated, aggressive nature of such a stereotypical character undermines traditional cultural norms of Chinese femininity. Such characterisation of a heroine through aggressive humour in a popular sitcom reflects the fact that empowering women has become (or is becoming) more acceptable in contemporary China.*

*Keywords: aggressive humour; impoliteness; sitcom discourse; Chinese.*

## 1. Introduction

Interactions in entertainment-oriented TV genres are predominantly light-hearted and amusing, with only occasional shifts towards a serious or even conflictive interpersonal engagement between characters (Wu 2013). Sitcoms are one such genre in which humour is produced through characters’ verbal and/or non-verbal interaction (Kozic 2012). Due to a general trend towards “confrontainment” (i.e. entertainment relying on an overt and dramatic performance of

verbal aggression) (Lorenzo-Dus et al. 2013), sitcom producers often intentionally entertain TV viewers by having one character degrade and humiliate another character (the target) through the use of humour. Distinctive for its unconventional and creative expressions, such aggressive humour produces a higher level of entertainment than it would in a natural conversation. More importantly, aggressive humour in sitcoms is a potent linguistic device for portraying a character's identity by reinforcing their subversive aspects (Bubel 2006).

While there have been studies of this type of humour in English-speaking contexts (Haugh, 2014), there is very little research on aggressive humour in Chinese sitcoms on the topic of character identity — especially when it comes to the exploration of the interaction between humour and the linguistic manifestation of femininity in Chinese sitcom discourse. Considering that humour has high cultural specificity (Haugh 2010), more research must be conducted to unpack the link between humour and the portrayal of characters in Chinese-speaking contexts.

This paper seeks to address the research gap in this area by revealing how aggressive humour serves to construct characters in Chinese sitcom discourse and examines one leading female character in particular in a representative Chinese sitcom, *Ipartment* (爱情公寓 àiqíng gōngyù “love apartment”). The character simultaneously defies expectations about females while taking on stereotypical attributes of femininity (such as hospitality), and her identity is constructed largely through her aggressive yet humorous utterances. An analysis of this character, therefore, is instrumental in furthering an understanding of how this construction constitutes a significant feature of Chinese sitcoms and contributes to the new representations of gender images in Chinese culture.

The analysis is carried out from three angles: (1) aggressive humour in self-/other-presentations of the character; (2) aggressive humour initiated by the character, and (3) the character's responses to other characters' aggressive humour.

The rest of this paper will be divided into four further sections. Section 2 is a brief review of the literature and key concepts. Section 3 provides an overview of the sitcom *Ipartment*, and an investigation into the key female character, as well as the term *pōlà nǚ*, which is used to describe her identity (by other characters on the show in addition to the show's viewers). Section 4 presents the data analysis, and is followed by the conclusion in Section 5.

## 2. Aggressive humour, impoliteness and character identity

### 2.1. Aggressive humour and impoliteness

The term *aggressive humour* in this study refers to humour that relies on the speaker's adoption of impolite expressions with the intent of amusing the other participant/s in the conversation (Ferguson & Ford 2008). It also refers to humour produced by the speaker where the utterance is not intended to be humorous and yet is considered as such by the hearers who are not verbally attacked (Dynel 2013).

Although terms and views may differ, researchers generally agree that aggressive humour can be divided into the categories of playfully aggressive humour and genuinely aggressive humour (Dynel 2013, 2016; Haugh 2014). This study defines both playfully aggressive and genuinely aggressive humour based on the speaker's intention and the reception of aggression/humour from respective hearers.

Playfully aggressive humour refers to the style of humour that is characterised by a speaker's explicit cues to induce the hearer/s to accept his/her remarks in a non-serious manner, so that the hearer/s interprets the remarks as playfully aggressive (Haugh 2014; Haugh & Bousfield 2012). Playfully aggressive humour implicates an intrinsic playfulness of humorous aggression, which is not intended to inflict genuine harm, and requires the target's recognition of the speaker's aggression as jocular (Dynel 2013). Playfully aggressive humour normally

serves for affiliative ends, such as: to enhance group solidarity, to highlight similarities, and to clarify and moderate boundaries among speakers (Dynel, 2008; Lampert & Ervin-Tripp, 2006).

On the other hand, genuinely aggressive humour relates to the term “disaffiliative humour” (Dynel, 2013, p.113), and it refers to the speaker’s impolite remarks to the target with the aim to insult the target. The target is not meant to enjoy it and may even be oblivious to the humour, but other hearers are aware of the potentially humorous nature of the aggressive remarks (Dynel 2013). Genuinely aggressive humour involves the speaker’s display of superiority over, and disaffiliation from, the target of a joke (Dynel 2013), the target’s recognition of the intentional derogatory remarks toward her/him, and a third party’s perception of humour. This type of humour usually serves disaffiliative roles, such as to foster conflicts, to control the target’s behaviour, and to set boundaries between the speaker and the target (Boxer & Cortes-Conde 1997; Lampert & Ervin-Tripp 2006; Norrick 1993).

## 2.2. Aggressive humour and character identity in sitcoms

Aggressive humour, especially the genuine kind, has been observed more frequently in sitcom interactions than in natural conversations for its important role in constructing character identity (Culpeper, 1998; Dynel, 2011). To explore aggressive humour and character identity in a sitcom, it is essential to bear in mind that there are two communicative levels in sitcom interaction.

Previous studies refer to the two communicative levels as the level between the production crew and TV viewers, and the level among characters (Brock 2015). At the first level, aggressive humour is contrived to amuse TV viewers and is used as a tool to portray/build characters (Bednarek 2012). At the second level, aggressive humour serves a role similar to those it plays in natural conversations, such as to unite with, or divide from, other participants (Boxer & Cortes-Conde, 1997) and to construct or deconstruct identities (Crawford 2003).

As articulated in Babel’s (2006) study, aggressive humour is observed as a potent device to portray a character’s identity in sitcom discourse. Character identity, in this case, “identities of characters in fictional genres” (Bednarek 2010: 97), is analogous to the concept of identity in natural conversations (Gray 2005). Culpeper (2001) describes the process of characterisation as the way in which writers imbue the “people” in their texts with certain identities. That is, characters are constructed in discourse and readers infer certain characteristics from the discourse (Culpeper 2001: 34) through linguistic cues, including self- and other-presentations, lexis, implicatures and conversational behaviours. Culpeper also argues that impoliteness plays a significant role in the portrayal of characters’ identities (2001: 36). Building upon Culpeper’s study, Bednarek (2012: 2015) investigates how taboo words serve to construct a character’s identity. These studies confirm that impoliteness plays an important role in displaying characters’ subversive aspects, and it entails a notable break with stereotypes such as gender roles.

The strong link between aggressive humour and character identity in scripted conversations has been identified by many researchers. For instance, Babel and Spitz (2006) explored the portrayal of female characters in the American comedy drama, *Ally McBeal*, through their telling of dirty jokes. Dynel (2011) analysed how humour serves to deconstruct gender stereotypes in Polish films. She also affirmed the relation between disaffiliative humour and the display of character identity in sitcom discourse (Dynel 2013).

In studies of humour and identity, aggressive humour and gender have increasingly attracted scholarly interest. Female interlocutors, especially those of a higher social status (e.g. female leaders), often use aggressive humour to legitimate their display of power and to resist the stereotypical views of femininity in male-dominated settings such as the workplace (Holmes 2008; Schnurr 2008). Disguising aggressive remarks in a humorous frame can mitigate the face-threatening force and the sincerity of the aggression of their utterances, and provide the speaker

a chance to reclaim their non-serious intention when their remarks offend their recipients (Holmes & Marra 2002). Aggressive humour also helps female interlocutors achieve binding interactional purposes; for instance, to display their authority while maintaining harmony with other interlocutors and to avoid being associated with negative attributes, like bitterness or harshness (Schnurr, 2008). In addition, females sometimes use aggressive humour in distinct ways when talking with different genders. They tend to use more aggressive humour when talking with males as a means to balance the power asymmetry (Lampert & Ervin-Tripp, 2006), and use less aggressive humour to display femininity and reinforce affiliation when talking with females (Holmes et al. 2001).

Aggressive humour is a potent tool for deconstructing gender stereotypes (Crawford 2003). Gender stereotypes indicate the attributes that people believe are more typical and appropriate to one sex over the other (Eagly & Mladinic, 1989). Specifically, attributes such as sensitivity or affection are considered as more typical of females, whereas attributes such as aggression or courage are viewed as more typical of males (Williams et al., 1999). Stereotypes are shared across many cultures, as they stem from comparable historical divisions of labour (Eagly & Mladinic 1989). Feminine stereotypes are constituted by both positive (supportive, gentle, sensitive) and negative (fussy, whining, nagging) attributes (Lopez-Zafra & Garcia-Retamero 2012). However, existing studies have mainly focused on how verbal aggression serves to portray Western middle-class women (Bednarek 2015; Bubel 2006). Few studies have examined the roles that aggressive humour play in representing a subversive image of Chinese women. The potential significance of aggressive humour in resisting and reshaping gender stereotypes that are deeply ingrained in TV viewers' minds is also in need of thorough investigation. This study aims to fill this gap in the current body of literature. The character, Hu Yifei (胡一菲), in *Ipartment* and her character identity as a *pōlà nǚ* portrayed through aggressive humour provide us an expedient example to achieve this aim.

### 3. *Ipartment*, the character being investigated, and the stereotype of *pōlà nǚ*

The data of this study are derived from *Ipartment*, one of the most representative Chinese sitcoms for its prevalent use of creative and aggressive humour (Wu 2016); it has also set new records for ratings in the history of Chinese sitcoms (Wu 2013). It was reported that the cumulative views of *Ipartment* on Bilibili and ACFun, the most influential video-sharing websites among young netizens, reached more than 10 million (Wu 2016), and that the first season of the sitcom was named as one of the top three most popular TV series in 2009 (Luo 2009). In addition, its social and cultural impact on young Chinese at the time was similar to that of its American counterpart, *Friends*, on American youth culture (Tang 2014). The popularity and influence of *Ipartment* is nearly unrivalled in the history of Chinese sitcoms, since it was the first and most influential in its focus on youth culture in China (Tang 2014). By reflecting on the difficulties that many young Chinese experienced while living in big cities, the stories in *Ipartment* resonated with young TV viewers and inspired them to be retrospective and improve their own lives (Yang 2011).

This study focuses on the first season of *Ipartment*, which consists of 20 episodes. This was a critical period, given that the early episodes of a TV drama are considered especially important in establishing characters (Bednarek 2011). The corpus of this study consists of the transcripts of 9,412 conversational turns in the 20 episodes.<sup>1</sup>

The character at the centre of this study is Hu Yifei, one of the three leading female characters in *Ipartment*. There are two reasons for choosing this character. First, Yifei is the

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<sup>1</sup> The conversational data of the first season of *Ipartment* were transcribed by the corresponding author Ying Cao. Derived data supporting the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author on request.

most popular, and the most controversial, character in the sitcom. As the most widely used Chinese searching engine Baidu Index discloses, Yifei was voted the most popular character in *Ipartment* by viewers (mostly aged in their 20s and 30s) in 2011. Ten years later, Yifei was still considered the most popular female character of all five seasons of *Ipartment*, according to the Baidu Index 2020.<sup>2</sup> The TV viewers' positive reception of Yifei reinforces the idea that characters are popular because they are visible; and the more visible they become, the more self-evident the feminist content of their work is made to appear (Perkins & Schreiber 2019).

A description of Yifei on an online fan forum is presented as follows:

Hu Yifei is distinct for her dual traits, both *pōlà* and gentle. She is the most dominant, aggressive and powerful character with highest level of educational in *Ipartment*, holding a PhD and teaching politics at a university.

baike.baidu<sup>3</sup>

As the above description indicates, Yifei is a highly-educated young woman who takes on salient masculine-agency characteristics (domineering, aggressive and powerful), while also maintaining positive feminine traits (gentle). Yifei's image as a university lecturer with salient masculine traits forms a sharp contrast to the stereotypes of well-educated females in modern China, who are expected to talk and behave in a humble and restrained manner (Zhang & Liang 2008).

Additionally, Yifei is viewed as a stereotypical representation of *pōlà nǚ*, and her popularity is largely attributed to her distinct identity as a *pōlà nǚ*<sup>4</sup>. In Chinese, the expression *pōlà nǚ* means *pōlà* female. The word 泼辣 *pōlà* consists of two characters. The first, 泼 *pō*, means active, vibrant and lively, and the second, 辣 *là*, originally refers to a kind of gustation (i.e. spicy). In classical Chinese literature, the term *pōlà nǚ* is originally used as a negative evaluation of women who are fierce and unreasonable (Zhao 2011). However, *pōlà nǚ* seems to have evolved to demonstrate different meanings in the contemporary Chinese vernacular; this term now also delivers positive connotations in certain contexts (Zhao 2011). The concordance lines retrieved from the Chinese internet corpus supports this claim, as Table 1 shows.

Table 1. The concordance of *pōlà* on the internet in China  
(retrieved from *A collection of Chinese corpora and frequency lists*<sup>5</sup>)

1. 老板娘既 泼辣 又热情	1. The landlady is <i>pōlà</i> and hospitable
2. 湖南女子的泼辣 与善解人意	2. Women in Hunan are <i>pōlà</i> and understanding
3. 她很漂亮，作风 泼辣 又温柔	3. She is pretty, and acts in a <i>pōlà</i> and gentle way
4. 由于她待人阴险 泼辣	4. Because she treats others in a treacherous and <i>pōlà</i> manner.
5. 陈启明的后娘是个不讲理的泼辣货	5. Chen Qiming's stepmother is an unreasonable and <i>pōlà</i> woman.
6. 男经理发起拒娶 泼辣 女行动	6. Male managers planned a 'never-marry <i>pōlà</i> girls' campaign.

<sup>2</sup> According to the Baidu index, Yifei is the most popular character in *Ipartment* with 57,939 votes from netizens in 2011 and is the most popular female character in *Ipartment* with 5,691 votes from netizens in 2020. Retrieved April 26, 2021 from [https://www.bilibili.com/video/BV1M7411H7o8/?spm\\_id\\_from=333.788.videocard.7](https://www.bilibili.com/video/BV1M7411H7o8/?spm_id_from=333.788.videocard.7)

<sup>3</sup> The original text is in Chinese and has been translated by the author.

Retrieved February 4, 2020 from <https://baike.baidu.com/item/%E8%83%A1%E4%B8%80%E8%8F%B2#5>.

<sup>4</sup> Retrieved February, 4 2020 from <https://baike.baidu.com/item/%E8%83%A1%E4%B8%80%E8%8F%B2#5>.

<sup>5</sup> Retrieved February, 4 2020 from <http://corpus.leeds.ac.uk/query-zh.html>.

As can be seen, the word *pōlà* occurs with positive words, such as 热情 (hospitable), 善解人意 (understanding), and 温柔 (gentle); and negative words such as 阴险 (treacherous) and 不讲理 (unreasonable) in Chinese discourse. Basically, *pōlà nǚ* indicates the group of women who possess salient masculine attributes (boldness and competitiveness), while not completely devoid of positive feminine attributes (Zhao 2011). *Pōlà nǚ* may be a negative stereotype for those who endorse the more traditional traits of a gentlewoman, but it may also be a positive stereotype of modern feminists with strong personalities. In most cases, *pōlà nǚ* embodies a positive female image, with occasional negative evaluations — mainly from males. The connotations of *pōlà* need to be carefully evaluated in their respective contexts, since speakers could have different interpretations of *pōlà* concerning their attitudes towards women (Zhao 2011).

Yifei's popularity heralds an increasing presence of *pōlà nǚ* in Chinese TV discourse over the past decade; by analysing the traits of leading female characters in the top 15 popular Chinese comic movies from 2010 to 2020, we find that *pōlà* is observed as one of the common traits that these characters displayed (Kong, 2020). The positive acceptance of *pōlà nǚ* characters can be superficially explained as *pōlà nǚ* representing a group of females who subvert negative stereotypical views of femininity (such as timid women) and instead, display an image of modern femininity that is bold and powerful. The successful representation of *pōlà nǚ* reflects the increasing visibility of groups of independent, powerful and educated females in modern China. This is also in line with the changing landscape in television contexts across the world, where independent and strong women have been increasingly represented, and the rise of “womencentric” roles and shows in global media (Perkins & Schreiber 2019).

#### 4. Data analysis

Given Haugh and Bousfield's (2012) argument that the speaker's intention and the hearer's response/s are two essential factors for analysing the co-existence of humour and aggression in an utterance and for dissecting the ultimate interpersonal effects of humour, this study analyses aggressive humour by considering the speaker's intention and the hearer's response/s, especially in regard to their situated context. When analysing the speaker's underlying intention, we can consider accompanying paralinguistic features, such as facial expressions and bodily movements, and metapragmatic clues, including self-explanation, as ways of providing information. When exploring the speaker's response/s to humour, we will examine both their semantic content and pragmatic functions, such as the realisations of either affiliative or disaffiliative functions.

The analysis covers two aspects: (1) aggressive humour as explicit cues of character identity; and (2) aggressive humour serving as implicit cues of character identity. The character's use of and responses to humour are further classified as either genuinely aggressive or playfully aggressive humour, along with humorous and non-humorous responses. Each aspect is illustrated with an interactional episode between the character and other characters on the show. Since the analysis of aggressive humour pays attention to a synoptic summary of how aggressive humour across the whole season establishes a character (Yifei), multiple extracts are presented as representative of the season.

The following sections focus on the multi-faceted character identity constructions of Yifei. The aggressive humour explicitly portrays Yifei through her self- and other-presentations. Additionally, a quantitative analysis of her preference for different forms of aggressive humour is given, with examples of how the genuinely aggressive humour she initiates indexes her identity. Her initiation of playfully aggressive humour for affiliative purposes provides further

data for her identity construction, as does her use of genuinely aggressive humour to retaliate against the male characters' aggression and to disassociate herself from them. Finally, Yifei's impolite and non-humorous rejection of other characters' aggressive humour tactics shows how these reinforce the subversive aspects of her identity.

#### 4.1. Aggressive humour in self- and other-presentations

Self- and other-presentations provide the most explicit evidence of character identity (Culpeper, 2001). This study focuses on those presented in a form of aggressive humour. While such an analysis might not produce a full picture of the characteristics of Yifei, it does show a considerable amount of relevant information, as Table 2 demonstrates.

Table 2. Yifei's self- and other-presentations

Personalities	Self- and other-presentations
Indomitable	(1) 一菲: “我就不信了, 老娘我一世英名, 居然弄不过一个小丫头片子 (canned laughter)。不可能, 不可能。” Yifei: “I just don't buy this nonsense. I, an old mama with good fame will be beaten by a little girl (canned laughter). No way, no way!”
Graceful in looks but mad in actions	(2) 展博: “人们都亲切地用八个字来形容她, 静若处子, 动若疯兔(canned laughter)。” Zhanbo: “People use eight words to describe her, looks like a graceful girl but acts like a mad rabbit (canned laughter).”
Manlike	Context: Ziqiao says there are four and a half men sitting in the car, but only three in fact. Zhanbo feels confused. Xiaoxian explained to him as follows. (3) 小贤: “子乔的意思是, …… 一菲算两个(男人) (canned laughter)” Xiaoxian: “What Ziqiao means is that, ... one, two, Yifei can be counted as two (males) (canned laughter).”
Violent, shrewish	(4) Context: Yifei checked Ziqiao and Xiaoxian's phones and found that she was secretly named as ‘夺命女魔头’ (Heinous Female Monster) by Ziqiao and ‘洪兴十三妹’ <sup>6</sup> (Sister Thirteen) by Xiaoxian. <sup>7</sup> (5) 关谷: “你说她 (一菲) 像个母夜叉, 小心她杀你灭口(canned laughter)。” Guangu: “You said she (Yifei) is like a Yakshini, so you'd better watch out for her wanting to kill you over it (canned laughter).”
Powerful, independent	(6) 展博: “更何况我老姐 (一菲), 还是狮子座的黄金剩斗士 (canned laughter)。” Zhanbo: “Not to mention my sister (Yifei), who is a Leo-signed Golden Leftover Fighter (canned laughter).”

As the excerpts show, in the self-presentation (line 1), Yifei appraises herself as more intelligent and sophisticated by describing herself as an ‘old mama with good fame’ and by contrasting her other-presentation of another female character of the same age as ‘a little girl’.

<sup>6</sup> 十三妹 (Sister Thirteen) is the lead character in the Hong Kong movie 洪兴十三妹 (*Portland Street Blues*). It tells a story about how Sister Thirteen fights her way to become the leader of the gang from being a low-level mobster.

<sup>7</sup> Canned laughter appears when these two names are shown on the screen.

The exaggerated expression of ‘I...will be beaten...no way!’ explicitly depicts Yifei as a boastful and confrontational person.

The other-presentations of Yifei (lines 2-6) are mostly by male characters, depicting Yifei negatively, yet creatively. Most take the form of humorous analogies between Yifei and fictional female characters (Heinous Monster, Sister Thirteen, and Yakshini). Borrowed from films and literary works, these characters usually possess negative attributes. For example, in Chinese culture, 母夜叉 (Yakshini) traditionally refers to females who are fierce and unreasonable. Ancient Chinese literary works borrowed the Yakshini image from Buddhism, endowing it with new characteristics, such as being malicious and powerful. The character 孙二娘 (*Erniang Sun*) in 《水浒传》 (*Water Margin*) is the first and most typical Yakshini image in Chinese literature and is portrayed as a woman with strong legs and arms and a murderous expression (Wang, 1984). Interestingly, although Yifei is described as a Yakshini by other male characters, Yifei’s appearance more closely resembles the original image of Yakshini in Buddhism, who has a beautiful face and an attractive body shape.

The last other-presentation above describes Yifei as a 剩斗士 (literally, a leftover fighter). The term 剩斗士 is a derogatory homophonic pun on the 12 圣斗士 (saints), manga characters in *Saint Seiya*, a Japanese anime series, which substitutes the word 圣 shèng (saints) with a similar sounding word 剩 shèng (leftover). “Leftover fighter” is used jocularly to refer to “leftover women”, women in their 30s or older who are unmarried (roughly equivalent to the negative English lexical terms of spinsters and old maids). Most “leftover women” in China are well-educated, tough and independent; but are usually judged negatively by people who prioritise traditional ideals about getting married at an appropriate age (Zhang & Liang, 2008). In the sitcom, Yifei is not only termed a 剩斗士 (leftover fighter) but also 狮子座的黄金剩斗士 (literally, a Leo-signed golden leftover fighter). The most powerful saint in *Saint Seiya* is the Leo-signed gold saint who is ambitious, righteous and strong. This indicates that she is regarded as more independent, powerful, and more unlikely to get married than other ‘leftover women’. Such aggressive analogies by the male speakers allow them to vent their negative reactions to Yifei’s “bossy behaviour”. They imply that her personality is manlike but, at the same time, demonstrate the speaker’s wit and good sense of humour. Thus, self- and other-presentations serve to demonstrate Yifei’s masculine characteristics, consistent with the stereotypically negative evaluations of *pōlà nǚ*, from the perspective of the other male characters.

#### 4.2. Aggressive humour strategies and responses

Among the 9,412 conversational turns in *Ipartment*, 2,789 turns are identified as instances of humour. Yifei contributes 475 instances of humour, which constitute 34.62% of the total humorous turns. Of the 475 instances, 438 are examples of aggressive humour. These instances include both Yifei’s introduction of aggressive humour and her responses to genuinely aggressive humour from the other characters.<sup>8</sup> Regarding Yifei’s responses, there should be four major subtypes: (1) using playfully aggressive humour; (2) using genuinely aggressive humour; (3) using non-aggressive humour as a response strategy to another’s genuinely aggressive humour; and (4) non-humorous responses. However, as the occurrences of subtypes (1) and (3) are nearly negligible in Yifei’s humorous turns, they are not included in the following discussion.

Table 3 below presents the frequency and percentages of genuinely aggressive humour and playfully aggressive humour, and the two major ways in which Yifei responds to others’ genuinely aggressive humour:

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<sup>8</sup> The instances where Yifei responds to the other characters’ playfully aggressive humour is not found in the first season of *Ipartment*.

Table 3 Distribution of Yifei's use of and responses to aggressive humour

Use	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Genuinely aggressive humour	289	82.57
Playfully aggressive humour	61	17.43
Total	350	100
Responses to others' genuinely aggressive humour	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Using genuinely aggressive humour to retaliate against others	88	42.11
Non-humorous responses	121	57.89
Total	209	100

As indicated in Table 3, Yifei shows a preference for genuinely aggressive humour (82.57%) rather than playfully aggressive humour (17.43%). When being disparaged by other characters' genuinely aggressive humour, Yifei demonstrates an inclination to respond in a non-humorous and impolite manner (57.89%), while the frequency of using genuinely aggressive humour as a response strategy follows closely (42.11%). Additionally, Yifei's use of aggressive humour (350 instances) is more frequent than her response to aggressive humour (209 instances). This supports the claim that Yifei deviates from stereotypical gender norms, given that cultural gender expectations are for women to be passive and receptive rather than active and initiating (Coser 1960, as cited by Kotthoff 2006).

The following sections present the analysis of these four situations in detail. They have been chosen for their frequency and their direct link to the portrayal of *pōlā nǚ* even though Yifei occasionally delivers and responds to aggressive humour in a way that is at variance with these four situations.

### 4.3. Genuinely aggressive humour in the character's utterances

This study observed that Yifei's humour features genuine aggression, especially when talking with males. The following example illustrates how, when Yifei talks with three male characters, her initiation of genuinely aggressive humour characterises her as a harsh, eloquent and dominant female.

#### Example 1

Context: [Season 1, Episode 9] Zhanbo (Yifei's younger brother), Xiaoxian, Ziqiao and Yifei are travelling in a car. As a learner, Zhanbo drives slowly. Suddenly, another car overtakes them in a dangerous way, and that provokes Yifei.<sup>9</sup>

83. 展博： 可能是嫌我开太慢了。

Zhanbo: Maybe they think I am too slow.

84. 一菲： [嫌慢怎么不去当宇航员啊，小树不修还不直溜了，上去问候他祖宗十八代]，  
(canned laughter)

当警察和探头都不在的时候，总得有人伸张正义吧。

Yifei: [If he wants to go fast, why doesn't he drive a rocket instead? Saplings will not  
(canned laughter)]

<sup>9</sup> The examples should be read in conjunction with the transcription convention in Appendix.

**grow straight if they are left untrimmed. Let's drive up to him and tell him to screw himself and his whole family<sup>①</sup>**]. When police and cameras are not around,

- someone needs to stand up for justice, right?
85. 小贤: 骂人也算伸张正义?  
Xiaoxian: Is swearing a way of upholding justice?
86. 一菲: 要不怎么说[君子动口不动手? ]  
(canned laughter)  
Yifei: Sure, thus the adage [A gentleman uses his words, not his fists.]  
(canned laughter)
87. 展博: 我不会骂人, 太难听了。  
Zhanbo: I won't swear. It's too rude.
88. 一菲: [那你就冲上去朝他吐痰, 以示谴责, 那些足球明星, 大罗, 小罗, 小小  
(canned laughter)  
罗, 都是这么做的]。  
Yifei: [Then go and spit at them to signal your condemnation<sup>②</sup>, just like football stars  
(canned laughter)  
do, like Ronaldo senior, Ronaldo junior, and C. Ronaldo.]
89. 展博: 我不要, 冲人吐痰的都吃红牌了。  
Zhanbo: No way. those who spit would receive a red card.
90. 一菲: 就是因为新手都像你这么面, 才会被老司机欺负, **别婆婆妈妈的, 这些小  
事都不敢做, [还敢穿耐克! Just do it! 懂不懂啊你! ]**  
(canned laughter)
- Yifei: Learner drivers get bullied by veteran drivers because they are cowardly and sissy<sup>③</sup>,  
just like you. **Don't be a namby-pamby<sup>④</sup>. [ If you are afraid to take such a small  
challenge then take off your Nikes<sup>⑤</sup>! Just Do It, will you<sup>⑥</sup>! ]**  
(canned laughter)

Clearly, Yifei is the dominant speaker making impolite or aggressive remarks (lines 84, 86, 88 and 90), and those utterances all fall in the categories of conventionalised impoliteness formulae proposed by Culpeper (2011, pp. 135-6). While utterance ① is an instance of the negative expressive category, ② and ⑥ fall in the category of message enforcer, ③ and ④ are from the insult and condescension categories respectively, and ⑤ conveys threats. Yifei's utterances perform a range of face-threatening acts, including conveying ill-wishes ('tell him to screw himself and his whole family'<sup>10</sup>) and giving commands ('go and spit on their face'; 'Just Do It, will you!'). Yifei's swearing and her display of power and dominance are indexed for masculinity (Coates 2007). Genuinely aggressive humour in this context can be interpreted as a means to overtly display masculine traits (e.g. being decisive and bossy) and to blend in as 'one of the boys' (Schnurr 2008).

Yifei's impolite utterances are, however, all accompanied by canned laughter. These expressions signal humour to TV viewers, and the popularity of the sitcom itself is consistent with, and validates, these humour markers<sup>11</sup>. The humour is mainly derived from two incongruous elements. First, Yifei and the three male characters exhibit reversed gender roles in this conversation, which breaks the TV viewers' expectations of gender stereotypes. That is, Yifei, the only female here, speaks violently and aggressively, while the males are rather peaceful and submissive. Second, Yifei's witty retort of the idiomatic phrase 'a gentleman uses

<sup>10</sup> In Chinese, the slang expression 问候你祖宗十八代 (literally, greet your ancestors of 18 generations) is conventionally used as an indirect way of swearing, which conveys an extremely offensive meaning.

<sup>11</sup> The viewers of *Ipartment* commonly observe that the entertainment effect is heightened when the presence of aggressive humour is accompanied by canned laughter, as shown in Yang's (2011) survey.

his words, not his fists' (line 86) and the well-known commercial line 'Just Do It'<sup>12</sup> (line 90) also produce incongruity and carry humorous potential to TV viewers.

From the flow of the conversation, we can see that Yifei is the one controlling the conversational floor and extending the conversation by constantly refuting the others' points. For example, when Xiaoxian questions the way in which she upholds justice (line 85), Yifei refutes him by saying 'a gentleman uses his words, not his fists.' She distorts the original idiom, 'a gentleman reasons things out and does not resort to force,' to imply that a gentleman swears rather than fights to defend her behaviour of swearing and assertiveness. It is evident that the humour presented in this example serves to index Yifei's disaffiliative stance, that is, not to display support and empathy towards the target (Haugh 2010) but to appear superior and have control over the target's action (Dynel 2013).

Yifei delivers these utterances in an authoritative voice to disparage the driver who overtook them (line 84), to rebuke a male speaker's point (line 86), to correct the other male speaker's wrong behaviour (line 88), and to instigate his actions (line 90). These lines explicitly display Yifei's superiority and sophistication. Her genuinely aggressive humour is exploited to challenge the hegemonic masculinity and to subvert the conventional views of proper femininity, and, in turn, make her identity as a *pōlà nǚ* salient.

#### 4.3. Playfully aggressive humour in the character's utterances

Playfully aggressive humour has been observed in Yifei's utterances as well, albeit at a lesser frequency, and typically only with female characters. In contrast to her interactions with male characters, Yifei initiates aggressive humour with the explicit indication of her playful intention when talking with females. In these situations, aggressive humour normally functions to preserve face and maintain in-group bonding, and therefore it is affiliative in nature. Below is an example of Yifei's playfully aggressive humour.

##### Example 2

Context: [Season 1, Episode 15] Yifei asks Wanyu why she is holding a stack of serviettes during a party. Wanyu replies that the serviettes were given to her by male attendees who wished to date her; they have written their phone numbers on the serviettes.

79. 一菲: 你做了什么?

Yifei: What did you do?

80. 婉瑜: 我什么都没做, 就是站在这儿, 不断有男生上来要电话, 还非要把他们的电话号码留给我。

Wanyu: Nothing, I just stood there, and guys kept approaching me one after another asking for my phone number and stuffing me with theirs.

81. 一菲: 婉瑜, [苍蝇不叮无缝的蛋, 说明你要注意形象, (0.2) 回头分点给我]。  
(canned laughter)

Yifei: Wanyu, [flies don't flock to eggs that do not have cracks in them. You should mind your behaviour<sup>7</sup>. (0.2). Share some with me later].  
(canned laughter)

82. 婉瑜: <Smiling>

Wanyu: <Smiling>

After finding out that Wanyu has been accosted by several handsome guys, Yifei heightens her voice and asks Wanyu, 'What did you do?' with eyebrows raised to indicate her

<sup>12</sup> "Just Do It" is a trademark slogan of the athletics company Nike, and it is one of the core components of Nike's brand. Retrieved May 9, 2021 from <https://www.nytimes.com/2009/08/20/business/media/20adco.html>.

astonishment. Wanyu's response, 'I did nothing but stand there', appears to be an act of boasting. Although there is no clear evidence to determine whether Wanyu has the intention to boast or not, her words implicitly threaten Yifei's standing, given that no male had approached Yifei during the party. Then, Yifei initiates aggressive humour to convey a criticism of Wanyu's behaviour, which can be interpreted as a means of preserving face. She uses an idiomatic expression in line 81, 'Flies don't flock to eggs that do not have cracks in them' (an English alternative could be 'there is no smoke without fire'), in a serious voice. This idiomatic expression implicitly threatens Wanyu, since it negatively implies that it is Wanyu's inappropriate dress or behaviour that makes her attractive to males. She then continues to criticise Wanyu by commanding, 'You should mind your behaviour' (⑦), which explicitly threatens Wanyu's character.

After a short pause, Yifei smiles and performs a redressive action by saying, 'Share some with me later' in a jocular voice. This utterance functions as a linguistic cue to signal the non-seriousness of her previous aggression and to mitigate the face-threatening force towards Wanyu. This is also indicated by the sharp contrast in the inferential meaning conveyed in the commands, 'Mind your behaviour' and 'Share some with me later'. This creates a sense of incongruity, which gives rise to humour. Yifei's smiles and her jocular voice, along with the redressive remark, signal the playful nature of her previous aggressive utterances. In line 82, Wanyu indicates through a smiling face that she acknowledges and appreciates the humorous nature of Yifei's utterance. Wanyu's appreciation of humour confirms an achievement of their mutual alignment.

The use of playfully aggressive humour indexes Yifei's superiority and her alignment with other females. By initiating aggressive humour (the first two sentences of line 81), Yifei preserves her status and places herself in a superior position to criticise and correct Wanyu's seemingly inappropriate behaviour (i.e. flaunting her popularity with males while Yifei fails to attract any male's attention at the party). The repair strategy in the third sentence of line 81 signals Yifei's playful intention, implicates the seriousness in uttering line 80 as ostensible, and shows her willingness to prevent herself from being judged negatively by Wanyu, thus enhancing their in-group bonding.

Yifei's deployment of playfully aggressive humour implicitly reinforces the point that she is not completely devoid of feminine traits, as opposed to how other male characters describe her (as shown in line 3 in Table 2), since valuing in-group bonding and the desire to be accosted by males are traditionally taken as indexing femininity (Kotthoff, 2006).

#### **4.4. Using genuinely aggressive humour to retaliate against other's genuinely aggressive humour**

Using genuinely aggressive humour to retaliate against other's genuinely aggressive humour indicates a situation where the target is offended by the speaker's aggression and retaliates with an act of genuinely aggressive humour, with the humorous effect delivered to the speaker him/herself or other non-targeted hearers. In a sitcom scenario, characters deploy genuinely aggressive remarks as offensive or defensive/retaliatory strategies, and while their remarks are negotiated under the frame of impoliteness, they simultaneously serve as contributions to a humorous exchange on a communicative level. This situation might be difficult to imagine in natural conversations, but it is rather pervasive in, and central to, sitcom discourse, where TV viewers perceive humour in the characters' interaction, where it is intentional, but the exchange *between* the characters is not framed as being necessarily humorous. This introduces a novel way of viewing such interactions, which is at variance with other studies that focus on natural conversation.

Notably, the extension of the humorous frame in this context is different from the co-construction of humour in natural conversations, which is contingent upon a collaborative style of talking with supportive contributions from both speakers and hearers (Hay, 2001; Matsumoto, 2014). However, using aggressive humour to genuinely retaliate against a previous speaker's aggression is completely non-collaborative. It reverses the target of aggression against the previous speaker and demonstrates the hearer's disagreement by contesting his/her content and action. The following example demonstrates Yifei's aggressive yet humorous response.

### Example 3

Context: [Season 1, Episode 1] Xiaoxian and Yifei are candidates to host a wedding ceremony. Yifei proposes a western-style ceremony while Xiaoxian insists on a traditional one. They start to tease each other about their plans.

20. 小贤: 这就是你所谓的特色? 我说你弄那么多假洋鬼子来干嘛, [新郎新娘又不是外国人, 搞不清楚的还以为要嫁到墨西哥去! ]  
(canned laughter)

Xiaoxian: This is what you called unique? Tell me why you'd want to hire so many fake foreigners. [Neither the bride nor the bridegroom is foreign. The guests will get confused into thinking the bride is marrying in Mexico!]  
(canned laughter)

21. 一菲: 照你这么说, [我要是弄两只企鹅过来, 新娘还得嫁到南极去是不是?]  
(canned laughter)  
你的方案好, [一拜天, 二拜地, 你这是结婚还是上坟啊! ]  
(canned laughter)

Yifei: Going by your logic, [if I put two penguins there, people would think that the bride was marrying at the South Pole?] **Your plan is fantastic. [ Kowtowing to heaven and kowtowing to the earth, it sounds more like you're planning for tomb-sweeping rather than a wedding<sup>⑧</sup>].**  
(canned laughter)

In this segment, the production team uses Xiaoxian to introduce aggressive humour to amuse TV viewers, while Xiaoxian's remarks are intended to mock Yifei's plan to disguise guests as foreigners to create the exotic vibe of a western-style wedding. He disparages Yifei by saying 'the guests will get confused into thinking the bride is marrying in Mexico' (line 20). The stressed ironic tone in uttering the words 'unique' and 'Mexico,' and the exaggerated and clearly untrue expressions, such as 'marrying in Mexico' enhance the humorous effect. Clearly, Xiaoxian's aggressive remarks are not intended to amuse the target of the comments, but to convey derision towards Yifei and his challenge towards her proposal to be a good host.

In retaliation and to maintain face, Yifei replies to Xiaoxian's genuinely aggressive humour with two instances of her own genuinely aggressive humour. The first mirrors Xiaoxian's humour and acts as a retort: 'If I put two penguins here, people would think that the bride was marrying at the South Pole' (line 21). This mocks Xiaoxian's exaggerated reaction and unreasonable rebuke about her proposed wedding plan. As an intensified reprimand, Yifei then contributes another instance of aggressive humour. She ironically mocks Xiaoxian's traditional wedding arrangements by saying, 'Your plan is fantastic. Kowtowing to heaven and kowtowing to the earth' (line 21) which is an important part of ancient Chinese wedding rituals. Although it is unclear whether this traditional ritual is included in Xiaoxian's wedding plan, Yifei makes it clear that she intends to let her western-style plan dominate by mocking Xiaoxian's outdated thinking. Her teasing then becomes even more offensive when she remarks, 'You're planning for a tomb-sweeping rather than a wedding'<sup>⑧</sup>; the two ceremonies have completely opposite purposes.

In Chinese culture, death-related topics, such as tombs or tomb-sweeping, are conventionally regarded as taboo topics in many interactional contexts (Liu, 2010), except on Tomb-Sweeping Day.<sup>13</sup> Using these expressions is viewed as culturally and socially unacceptable, especially during festivals or celebrations such as weddings (Liu, 2010). In this sense, when Yifei relates Xiaoxian's arrangements to tomb-sweeping activities, it conveys a more offensive message from the viewpoint of social and cultural conventions, compared with Xiaoxian's reprimands. Although the co-presence of tomb-sweeping and a wedding ceremony formulates a register clash and therefore can be possibly interpreted as humorous by a third party, the target, Xiaoxian, can hardly be amused by its severe, face-threatening force.

Yifei responds to aggressive humour through an intensification of aggression which is intended to compete with the other, to refute the other's points, to reprimand the other's behaviour, to display intelligence, and to assert superiority; all of which are taken as typically masculine behaviours (Kotthoff, 2006).

By viewing the extracts in this and the two previous sections, we observe that Yifei's aggressive humour largely relies on a witty retort of adages, proverbs and idioms, including 'a gentleman uses his words, not his fists' in Example 1, 'flies don't flock to eggs that do not have cracks in them' in Example 2, and 'kowtowing to heaven, kowtowing to the earth' in this example. Compared to male characters, the occurrence of exploiting humour from adages and proverbs appears to be more frequent in Yifei's humorous turns. It is consistent with Yifei's identity as a university lecturer with a PhD, who appears to be better educated than other male characters in *Ipartment*. It also implicitly indexes Yifei's superior position over the males with regard to their levels of intelligence. Yifei's self-presentation in season 1, episode 11, "我的男人, 要么比我聪明, 要么比我强壮, 要不然凭什么征服我" (my man should be either smarter or stronger than me, otherwise how could he conquer me) supports this claim. Yifei is self-described as more intelligent and powerful than average males. Given this, Yifei's intent to exploit humour from quotes and proverbs as a means to outwit males appears appropriate.

#### 4.5. Non-humorous response to others' genuinely aggressive humour

This section demonstrates Yifei's non-humorous and impolite response to others' genuinely aggressive humour. Common impolite responses to humour include: condescension, scorn, ridicule, using taboo words, disassociation, challenging the speaker, shouting and repeating (Bell, 2009). In contrast to the types of responses discussed in Section 4.4, the responses discussed here contain no humorous elements (i.e. no humorous incongruity) but verbal aggression only, and no indication of humour appreciation is presented (i.e. no canned laughter) in conversations either. Non-humorous responses implicate the target's disagreement towards the message conveyed via aggressive humour and a suspension of the humorous frame.

The following example illustrates how impolite responses (such as taboo words, cursing and threats) reinforce Yifei's subversive aspects, consistent with the idea that using taboo expressions can be a potent tool to resist and overthrow ideals of femininity (Bednarek 2015).

#### Example 4

Context: [Season 1, Episode 19] Yifei tells Zhanbo and Xiaoxian that she is going to make some chocolate for her boyfriend.

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<sup>13</sup> 清明节 Tomb-Sweeping Day is a traditional Chinese festival. It falls on the first day of the fifth solar term of the traditional Chinese lunisolar calendar. During this day, Chinese families visit the tombs of their ancestors to clean the gravesites, pray to their ancestors and make ritual offerings.

Retrieved November 8, 2020 from

<https://cidian.cnki.net/cidian/Search/SimpleSearch?Key=%E6%B8%85%E6%98%8E%E8%8A%82&range=CNKIDICT&searchtype=Entryword>.

53. 小贤: [他做了什么对不起你的事情, 你要毒死他? ]  
(canned laughter)  
Xiaoxian: [What wrong did he do by you that you would want to poison him to death?]  
(canned laughter)
54. 一菲: 我要毒第一个毒死你。  
Yifei: **If I was to poison someone, you'd be my first choice** <sup>⑨</sup>.
55. 展博: 我姐(一菲)做的东西毒不死人, 毒药看上去很诱人, 才会有人要吃。我上次看见她做的巧克力, [好家伙]。  
(canned laughter)  
Zhanbo: My sister (Yifei) will never poison anyone with what she makes. Food laced with poison has to look delicious to get people to eat it. I once saw her homemade chocolate, [**Oh, my gosh!**]  
(canned laughter)
56. 小贤: (Laugh)我知道你不是要毒死他, [你<sup>是</sup>要吓死他, 对吧 (laugh)].  
(canned laughter)  
Xiaoxian: (Laugh) You don't intend to poison him, [**you want to freak him out, right?**]  
(canned laughter)
57. 一菲: 你们俩是不是活腻了!  
Yifei: **Drop dead**<sup>⑩</sup>, both of you!

In this example, Xiaoxian initiates a genuinely aggressive humorous statement towards Yifei by comparing her homemade chocolate to poison (line 53). While Xiaoxian's exaggerated facial expressions and rising tone are indicative of his intent to amuse the other male hearer, Zhanbo, these remarks threaten Yifei's character since they imply that her chocolate is inedible and, indeed, poisonous.

By viewing the subsequent response, we observe that Yifei disagrees with these negative messages and responds with a curse/threat (⑨). Using an overtly offensive response to retaliate against another's teasing has been traditionally ascribed to a masculine style of talk (Holmes 2008). Yifei adopts this impolite response to defend herself and to challenge her aggressors.

Ignoring Yifei's cursing, the other male character, Zhanbo, co-constructs Xiaoxian's teasing with another instance of teasing (line 55). Zhanbo concludes his teasing with an exclamation, 'Oh, my gosh!' in a sarcastic tone, which intensifies the face-threatening force. Zhanbo's teasing reinforces Xiaoxian's point that Yifei's chocolate looks awful. Then, Xiaoxian collaboratively extends Zhanbo's teasing by saying, 'you want to freak him out, right?' (line 56). Although Xiaoxian's laughter indicates his non-serious intent, Yifei refuses to interpret it in a humorous way (line 57) and her response contains no element of humour. The absence of canned laughter further reinforces this point.

This example shows that the reason why Yifei adopts non-humorous and overtly impolite responses is because the male characters' co-construction of a teasing sequence aggravates the degree of offence for Yifei. Previous studies confirm that the presence of third parties can increase the likelihood of an intensification of aggression in a speaker's teasing towards the target, and that this is exacerbated when the third party joins in the teasing sequence to disparage the target (Xia & Lan 2019). The co-construction of teasing heightens the face-threatening force to the target (Holmes 2000). This study supports this point by illustrating how Zhanbo and Xiaoxian's co-construction of a teasing sequence, which compares Yifei's chocolate to poison → awful poison → awful and disgusting poison, intensifies the degree of aggression experienced by Yifei.

Severely offended, Yifei seizes the conversational floor and responds with a threat, 'Drop dead, both of you' (⑩), amplified by her raised voice and the intensification of her annoyance

towards the joint teasing from cursing them to threatening them. These impolite responses serve to balance the power asymmetry, to undermine the augmented in-group bond between the two males, and to maintain her status as an elder sister to Zhanbo. Yifei's identity as a competitive, indomitable female with high self-esteem can be largely constructed through these overtly aggressive responses.

## 5. Conclusion

Based on the data collected from the sitcom *Ipartment* (爱情公寓), this study investigates how aggressive humour serves to portray the character Yifei as a *pōlā nǚ* or Yakshini. The portrayal of the leading female character in *Ipartment*, through the incorporation of aggressive humour, is indicative of an attempt to portray an unconventional image of Chinese women and to endow them with more power and status.

This study suggests that the instances of aggressive humour, occurring in self- and other-presentations, show how *pōlā nǚ* is frequently described in a negative way in other-presentations as contributed by males. But there is a dual aspect to the *pōlā* identity, taking on salient positive masculine traits while also subverting negative stereotypes about women, and this dual aspect is largely portrayed through the character's strategic use of aggressive humour. In addition, the significant occurrences of genuinely aggressive humour in Yifei's comments and her inclination for impolite responses to others' genuinely aggressive humour might not conform to the normative practice of femininity in natural conversations. But the unconventional use of humour gives rise to a contrast between the subversive female image portrayed in TV discourse and the gender stereotypes engrained in TV viewers' mind, which might boost the perception of "confrontation".

Investigating a female character's aggressive humour in sitcom discourse has implications for the exploration of the representations of femininity in Chinese discourse. Although, on the whole, there is probably an increasing use of genuinely aggressive humour by females in both natural and fictional conversations, the evaluations of such practices continue to be filtered through stereotypical perceptions of femininity, since impolite expressions (e.g. expletives and swearing) are inherently aggressive and considered to be 'masculine' features of discourse (Dynel & Poppi 2019). Women's use of aggressive humour and impolite responses are associated with a manifestation of masculinity and empowerment, and they offer a way to subvert gender stereotypes (Dynel 2011). This study supports these points by illustrating the extent to which the female character diverges from conventional gender norms and what the potential impact might be.

The increasing visibility of *pōlā nǚ* in Chinese TV genres appears to be associated with new female social types in China (Zhang & Liang 2008) which, to a large extent, disrupt the patriarchal ideology of the delicate and submissive Chinese females (Zhao 2011). However, the mix of aggressive and affiliative acts in Yifei's behaviour implicates a more complex possibility which overthrows negative stereotypes and performs positive stereotypes in an unpredictable manner, and which is presumably indicative of a greater change in gender roles in modern Chinese society. Femininity is, on the one hand, an ideological construct, which embraces prototypical features and behaviours. On the other hand, it is a constructed identity in a situated context. The stereotypical views of femininity are constantly being reinforced or challenged, whether in sitcom discourse or in everyday language.

The wide reception of *pōlā nǚ* characters reflects the 'rebellion' against conventional perceptions of women and the 'reconstruction' of ideal women in the Chinese film industry (Chen, 2008). It is also in line with the general trend in western society where women are perceived to have increased their masculine agency characteristics over time (Lopez-Zafra

& Garcia-Retamero 2012). The new representations of women are reflective of an increasing public demand of gender equality. It may influence the perceptions of traditional gender roles in a Chinese family, such as males as breadwinners and females as homemakers, or even in the whole society, where females are subjected to patriarchal power (Zhao 2011).

Yifei should be considered as a representation of a modern Yakshini who breaks the negative stereotypes of Yakshini in the Chinese classics. Yakshini, who are deviant from normative feminine practices, are conventionally described as females who look awful and malicious and are seldom favoured as positive characters in ancient Chinese literature. However, Yifei is described as a Yakshini but with an appealing feminine appearance, and is admired by a few males (e.g. her boyfriend) in *Ipartment*. Furthermore, the positive reception of Yifei among TV viewers reflects the changing attitudes, especially from males, towards the Yakshini-like girls in contemporary China.

It is hoped that the insights gained from studying specific Chinese sitcom interactions will enrich the understanding of aggressive humour and characterisation, and advance research into the characteristics of the use and the response of aggressive humour in Chinese cultural contexts in (and possibly beyond) the sitcom discourse. A comparative study of humour in different genres of Chinese sitcoms is also a topic that is worthy of further exploration.

## Appendix

### Transcription Conventions

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She's out.	Period shows falling tone in preceding element
Oh yeah?	Question mark shows rising tone in preceding element
<b>damn</b>	Bold characters indicate emphatic stress
(0.2)	Brackets enclose the time length (second as a unit) of the speaker's noticeable pause between words
<u>but</u>	Underline indicates an incomplete or cut-off sentence
[at all]	Aligned brackets enclose simultaneous speech by two or more participants

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