Book review

Tam, King-fai and Wesoky, Sharon R. (eds.) (2018). *Not Just a Laughing Matter: Interdisciplinary Approaches to Political Humour in China.* **Singapore: Springer.**

Humour has an important role in establishing, maintaining, and reaffirming social relations. It has been analysed from various perspectives –psychological, anthropological, philosophical, linguistic– being widely recognised that this complex phenomenon is highly dependent on its context. When humour meets politics, the effects may be surprising. Politicians and citizens alike may use various types of humour (visual and/or verbal) to refer to the political situation either as insiders or as outsiders. Thus, humour is a double-edged sword that may be used "to reinforce the existing ideology" (p. 3) or to lead to "a tiny revolution" (Orwell 1970). As insiders, politicians may use humour for their own good, transforming it into a tool meant to reinforce the existing ideology or to attack members of the opposition. As outsiders, citizens rebel against a political regime, transforming humour into a tool of resistance.

In the volume under scrutiny, 12 contributors document in 8 chapters "China's road from trauma to triumph" (p. 4), focusing on a wide set of mediums for humour such as political cartoons, comic strips, films, political campaigns, or the Internet. Throughout the volume, humour is understood as "a *technology* of expression that can be employed in different settings for differing purposes" (p. 4, emphasis in the original). It is a daring view meant to sum up the techniques, methods, and processes that are employed in Chinese humorous discourse and it aims at revealing how humour has changed over time, but how it has also maintained core commonalities.

The first part of the volume, "Humour in China's Transitions Toward Socialism", contains three chapters which, in a diachronic manner, present China's transition from late Qing constitutionalism (1901-1911), the Second Sino-Japanese War (1937-1945) until the early days of socialism (1949-1957). The second part is titled "Joking in the PRC" and contains three chapters which trace the path of the Chinese verbal art *xiangsheng*, a popular form of entertainment, during the Reform and Opening-up period (starting in December 1978) until the Internet age. The third part contains two chapters which are dedicated to humour in Hong Kong, whose acronym SAR –standing for Special Administrative Region– is humorously transformed into "Special Amusing Region". In the end, the volume includes an interview with a local entertainer, Michael Hui, who has played an important role in the development of Hong Kong cinema in late the 1970s and through the 1980s. The way the volume is organised makes it easy for the reader to follow more than 100 years of Chinese political humour in its traditional and new forms. Each contribution includes historical references and explanations so that readers can understand the context.

In his contribution, "Illustrating humour: Political cartoons on Late Qing Constitutionalism", I-Wei Wu puts forward an analysis of political cartoons published during the reform movement initiated by the Qing court, at the beginning of the 20th century, in an attempt to strengthen the nation and open a debate regarding China's political future. The author identifies political humour in China as early as the 11th century BC, during the Western Zhou

period, when ballads and comic performances were used to admonish the emperor. Yet, pictorial humour seems to have developed at the turn of the 20ᵗʰ century in the form of illustrations – *manhua* and later *fengcihua*– once Western-style newspapers were introduced, and quickly became popular among the Chinese urban population. Illustrations reflected current affairs, being a useful source of information for the illiterate, but they were also criticising political actions, thus becoming a weapon against the government. Wu makes a lexicographical analysis of the names which have been used to refer to political cartoons and identifies 6 categories – *comical words*, *sentimental picture*, *allegorical and satirical picture*, *comical picture*, *picture criticism*, and *cautionary picture*– with *comical picture* being used most often, thus suggesting the main objective of cartoons: to amuse the reader. The author puts forward an analysis of cartoons published during the constitutional debates between 1907 and 1911, highlighting that political issues and events were presented with a humorous twist. The analysis brings to the fore the main strategies used by cartoonists to make fun of the inefficiency of officials and reform advocates: exaggeration, opposition between text and image, irony, satire, mockery. The analysis further suggests that by adopting a simple pictorial style, cartoons can become powerful tools to expose the incongruity between objectives and practical actions.

Visual humour in the form of comic strips and film is the focus of analysis in the chapter entitled "Humour, war and politics in 'San Mao joins the army': A comparison between the comic strips (1946) and the film (1992)" by Laura Pozzi. The author takes into account the socio-political context, i.e., the Second Sino-Japanese War, and dwells on one of the most popular comic serials of 20ᵗʰ century China, *San Mao Joins the Army*, which was later turned into a film. The main aim of the analysis is to make a comparative analysis of the comic strip and the film in terms of the different uses of humour. As a popular form of urban entertainment, humorous cartoons function differently: in peacetime, they are used "to highlight the incongruities of modern life and politics" (p. 40), while during the war, they are used to ridicule enemies, "to boost civilians' patriotic feeling and encourage them to participate in the war effort" (p. 40). Pozzi employs a narrative analysis of the comic strip and successfully identifies the humoristic situations, which mostly derive from the fact that the main hero, San Mao, is a child who is not meant to be a soldier. Yet, he succeeds in fooling the army officials and goes through a series of events that "are often the result of his good fortune more than his skill" (p. 44). The choice of a child soldier is strategic since it allows the creator of the comic strip to humorously highlight the vices of the Japanese enemy as well as the laziness of the Chinese soldiers. The comic strip was banned during the Mao era, but was later rediscovered in the 1980s and turned into a film in 1992. The comparative analysis brings to the front the difference in the rhetorical elements: while the original comic strip was a satire, the Chinese Communist Party politicised the film, turning it into overt ridicule of Japanese enemies, while deliberately introducing role models and "description of brotherly feeling between the members of the lower classes" (p. 54).

The early years of the People's Republic of China (1950-1957) brought about a sudden development of comedy film culture. Xiaoning Lu's chapter, "Chinese film satire and its foreign connections in the People's Republic of China (1950-1957): Laughter without borders?", examines laughter "as a transnational binding force for socialist communities" (p. 56) in the context of the early Mao years. A Cultural Revolution was not on Mao's agenda, but the Party feared comedy could have disruptive potential for the masses. In this context, Soviet comedies were allowed because they satirised the corruption of old regimes. Yet, socialist China was looking for a national model while interacting with movies from other socialist countries. While the Soviet film under scrutiny, *Did We Meet Somewhere Before?*, is indicative of "a more established and liberalised socialist state" (p. 71), the Chinese film, *The Man Who Doesn't Bother about Trifles*, can be better described as "a comic experiment" (p. 71), while its maker

tried to reconcile political demands, popular needs, and individual aspirations. The analysis put forward by Lu shows that laughter needed to be managed to construct "a harmonious socialist society" (p. 72).

David Moser's chapter, "Keeping the 'ci' in 'fengci': A brief history of the Chinese verbal art of 'Xiangsheng'", opens the second part of the volume with an outline of *xiangsheng*, a rapid humorous dialogue that has more than 100 regional varieties. This verbal art involves one or two performers who stand up on a stage in front of a live audience, reminding of classic American duos. In such performances, humour and satire (*fengci*) are at the core and are aimed at corrupt officials, social elites, prostitutes, pompous scholars, and even political leaders. It is interesting to note that a primarily anti-authoritarian form of entertainment could be turned into propaganda since the Chinese Communist Party leaders identified its potential to be used "as a tool for education and indoctrination" (p. 81). Thus, the Party began cleansing *xiangsheng*, the people's art, from "unhealthy content" in the 1950s: sexual humour, political figures, ridicule of the peasantry were off-limits. In the late 1970s, *xiangsheng* experienced a rebirth, being part of the televised annual Spring Festival Gala, but a new ice age began for this form of art after the student-led protests in June 1989. Although artists succeeded in embedding political critiques of the moral emptiness of the era, by the late 1990s, *xiangsheng* seemed to have lost its core audience (p. 89) and the rise of the Internet opened new spaces for humour and satire.

The 1990s brought about commodification of culture and tighter censorship of arts featuring political content. In this context, Howard Y.F. Choy puts forward an analysis of Chinese political jokes collected from private social gatherings and hearsay, whose main standing jests are the communist dictators. From the analysis in the chapter entitled "Laughable readers: A study of political jokes in Mainland China", it is obvious that *xiangsheng* jokes became an underground form of humour and their function seems to be as an alleviator of political pressure, "a defence mechanism in a time of severe totalitarian repression" (p. 99) that could be traced in other communist countries as well. It is interesting to note that Choy asks a very interesting question: "What if the Communists also make use of jokes as a propaganda device?" To answer this question, the author considers that the role of jokers needs to be understood. Political jokers are rather opinionists, not revolutionaries, and Chinese political jokes are a form of relief rather than resistance under political pressure: they function as "a lubricant, which helps prevent political conflicts and maintain social stability" (p. 113). Choy also foregrounds the idea that Chinese political jokes have become part of the global imaginary, especially with the rise of the Internet, since they are recycled and enriched with sounds and pictures, making them "more entertaining and spicy" (Ding 2013: 248).

Chinese Internet humour is further analysed by Sharon W. Wesoky and Ping Le in "The politics of cynicism and neoliberal hegemony: Representations of gender in Chinese internet humour", with a focus on representations of gender as examples of contemporary depoliticisation of society. The authors collected a set of recent jokes and put forward two main objectives: on the one hand, they are interested in examining the didactic jokes about marriage; on the other, they connect extramarital activity in contemporary China to the pervading socio-political cynicism that seems to characterise this particular society. It appears that, in the past decade, parody has revived in Chinese cyberspace and a particular slippery jingle, *shunkouliu*, has gained "a corrosive effect on the legitimacy of the Party" (p. 119). In their analyses, the authors focus on the content of the jokes, not on their linguistic characteristics. Thus, readers find out that today's gendered jokes have political implications since they reject Maoist feminism, which has emasculated men and masculinised women (p. 123). Another idea that is worth mentioning refers to the Internet humour in China, which is characterised by the "coexistence of multiple temporalities" (p. 123): the premodern (traditional), the modern, and the postmodern (consumerist), and deals with topics such as bodies and beauty, sex and adultery,

marriage and family, but these are often related to wider socio-political critiques (p. 121). In this context, the analyses reveal that Chinese society "suffers from the loss of moral virtue" (p. 128) and jokes reflect the critique of consumerist desires as well as anxieties about moral shortcomings that may backfire at the Communist Party.

The final chapters of the volume examine humour before and after the transition of Hong Kong to Chinese authorities in 1997. In "Political jokes, caricatures and satire in Wong Tze-wah's standup comedy", King-fai Tam focuses on stand-up comedy, a popular genre around the world, which is rooted in the real life and developed "an aesthetic of its own due to the cultural and political concerns of the time" (p. 135). Tam puts forward a content analysis of a professional stand-up comedian, based on the identification of main political topics. Thus, humour is targeted both at the active players in politics and the silent apolitical majority (p. 143). Based on the analyses, the author reaches a conclusion that is in line with previous research in the volume under scrutiny (see Choy's chapter): "political humour can galvanise the masses" (p. 144). In other words, citizens joke not to start a revolution, but to dissipate feelings of dissatisfaction. Thus, humour functions as society's safety valve.

Unlike most of the previous chapters, whose authors mainly chose to make the analyses based on the content of the jokes, in their chapter, "Constructing political identities through characterisation metaphor, humour and sarcasm: An analysis of 2012 Legislative Council Election Debates in Hong Kong", Foong Ha Yap, Ariel Shuk-ling Chan, and Brian Lap-ming Wai put forward an analysis of five televised debates in the framework of Conceptual Blending (Fauconnier & Turner 2002) to examine how politicians use metaphor, humour, and sarcasm. One of the characteristics of Chinese political discourse when analysed from an intercultural perspective "points to cultural and socio-political differences in what counts as permissible norms of politeness" (p. 150). Thus, off-record politeness strategies seem to be favoured because they can mitigate the impact of face-threatening acts, protecting the politician from being held responsible for what was not explicitly said. The analysis highlights politicians' use of two blended metaphors (the cushion and the ladder), which are framed and reframed to get the attention and trust of the public. This frames humour as a dialogical game of competition in which politicians negotiate and renegotiate their identities and want to make known their political stance and agenda.

The contributions in this volume lead to a common conclusion: humour alone cannot bring down a political regime, but it may be a useful dialogical tool if used persistently to expose pretensions, mock behaviours, etc. In contemporary China, political humour seems to be developing between tradition and modernity; it is a tactic with transformative potential. The analyses have highlighted the main changes over time and, at the same time, the preservation of core commonalities. Contemporary Chinese political humour can be best described in Choy's words: "PRC has actually adopted capitalism while still upholding its communist claim" (p. 106).

Each chapter may be seen as a piece of a puzzle that eventually uncovers the uses and abuses of humour in China for more than a century. The main strength of this volume resides in the diachronic overview of Chinese humour and its relationship to politics in a country that experienced social and economic downfall and recovery. This is a characteristic of almost all the chapters and it turns the volume into an easy-to-follow reading experience. The analyses throughout the volume could be mostly included in cultural studies with a few contributions dealing with linguistic aspects of humour. What the reader eventually gets from this collection is a chronicle of Chinese traditional forms of humour that have suffered changes in time so that they respond to the ideological needs of the Party. In modern times, jokes reveal mockery for increasing consumerist desires.

Overall, this volume is a comprehensive overview and a sound contribution to the research of humour in a specific social, economic, and political context, aiming at interdisciplinarity. That is why scholars in the field of cultural studies or sociopragmatics may find interesting points of view and useful directions for further research.

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