Political In Between

Streaming Stand-Up Comedy and Feminist Reckoning in Contemporary Mainland China

SHAOYU TANG

Abstract

China's strict censorship not only depoliticizes stand-up comedy but creates obstacles for feminist activities. With an experimental approach that compares comedy shows online and offline, this paper asks in which ways comedy and feminism can gesture the political critique and resistance around public culture. Based on seven-month participant observation in comedy clubs in mainland China, I analyze comments and criticism toward women stand-up comedians and offer textual analyses of comedians' performances in a popular online variety show, *Roast & Rock*. Beginning with an issue that a woman professional comedian's performances received laughter and applause offline but criticisms online, I reveal the twisted joking and laughing relationships in women's stand-up comedy and in turn argue that the debates over "what is the proper women's voice in public culture," or what I call *feminist reckoning*, have become politicized feminist expression that is performed and embodied in-between online streaming and live club comedies. Revealing the (re)politicization of stand-up comedy, I envision possibilities that make feminist media practices visible in mainland China's public culture.

Keywords: stand-up comedy, political expression, feminist reckoning, Zuiti

> I've found that many girls in their early twenties are very anxious. They get a feeling that age thirty is coming. Not like me, who is saying farewell to age thirty [audience laughter (All laughter shown in this paper comes from audiences)]. I am thirty-one years old now, and I've found that girls are afraid of admitting their real age after thirty. If others ask, "How old are you," the answer is always the same: "Guess!" [laughter]. Oh, God! Can you imagine how demanding it is to guess how old a girl is? I need to analyze your skin elasticity, smile folds, and cervical stripes. After figuring out the result, I will quietly minus five [audience laughter] and gingerly ask if it is twenty-seven [laughter]. The interlocutor will be satisfied and say, "A-Ha. I am already thirty-two!" [Loud laughter and applause]. And you have to follow up: "Really? Cannot recognize it at all!" [Laughter].[1]

These are the opening lines performed by Xiaolu, a renowned and professional female Mandarin-language stand-up comedian.[2] The first time I watched this show was in June 2022 when I was participating in an offline open-mic session in a small café in Dalian, China. There were about thirty audience members and another seven performers. The ratio of women to men audiences that night was about 2:1, as is often the case in most open mics I visited around mainland China. Xiaolu's five-minute act criticizes the anxiety that women in China in their very early life experience, the inevitability of aging, by parodying a scenario in which one protagonist sophisticatedly delights the woman interlocutor by wittingly estimating her age. In this way, the persona Xiaolu enacted not only identifies the cultural taboo against identifying a woman's age but navigates it and contests the ridicule of such cultural norms. To some extent, her punch lines address a feminist resistance to a compelling social expectation that women should be forever

1. When referring to women, Xiaolu uses *nü haizi*, which literarily means "female children." I translate it as "girl" to indicate that she is not directly saying *nüren* ("woman") in the show.
2. In this essay, when I say "female," I mean people who identify as female but were not necessarily born with female anatomy.

young, beautiful, and childish. Her thirty-one-year-old body becomes heroic when she questions in the next few lines, "I think that is wrong! Why should we feel shame about aging?" As a woman, Xiaolu's uproarious and penetrating performance releases audiences' anxieties but meanwhile stresses women's unseen quandaries and, in turn, opens space for criticism and reflection. Her performance received a great response of laughter and applause.

However, months later, I witnessed the same act being harshly criticized and extensively discussed online. Xiaolu performed in the first round of a stand-up comedy competition's online variety show, *Roast & Rock* (season 5), hosted by China's most influential comedy company Xiaoguo.[3] She has eight years of professional performing experience yet was unexpectedly knocked out by an amateur performer in the first round. What puzzles me is that although her live performance in the open-mic session received incredible laughter and applause, the same act being streamed online was subject to controversies. Meanwhile, despite the performance speaking very much to the male gaze and patriarchal forces that oppress women, it nevertheless has been criticized by a bunch of "women voices" online.[4] The online debate was heated about whether Xiaolu's performance is capable of representing women's oppressed conditions and their resistance in a male-dominated Chinese society.

Both of Xiaolu's only two performances in the competition were condemned by some Chinese netizens. Given her first show mocks women for their "unnecessary" anxieties of being investigated about age and their "childish" and "blind" belief in celebrity advertisements for body lotion, her second show engages with the unavoidable makeup duty of Chinese women.

3. The company's full name is Shanghai Xiaoguo Culture Media Co., Ltd. The variety show is a flagship competition of stand-up comedy in mainland China. Since its third season, many comedians have made a name for themselves. In this spirit, its fifth season in 2022 is seen by both public audiences and professional comics as the only magnificent gathering of professionals.

4. Because of online anonymity, I cannot identify whether those who criticize Xiaolu are men or women (maybe both), but most of them claim to speak on behalf of women. For example, they say, "As a woman . . . "

As she said right after the performance, through making jokes about how bewildering it is that women have no choice but to put on their makeup every day, she strives to express that "women should have enough freedom to decide whether doing makeup or not." Ironically, all these efforts at giving a voice to Chinese women's struggles did not satisfy some intended beneficiaries, at least in the digital world. For example, one comment on social media says, "I believe her ultimate goal is good, but her ways of expression are troublesome, which always stands her on the opposite side." Another netizen posts, "As a woman, Xiaolu's lines make me feel disconnected. She is indeed expressing for us, yet at the same time laughing at us." Some even accuse her of performing the male gaze on women's anxieties. In short, these online comments censured Xiaolu for "offending" women audiences with her "father-style" (*die wei*) scoffing at the absurdities that women are compelled to approach in mainland China.

Why are Xiaolu and her performances, though recognized as having positive purposes, challenged by "women" online viewers? Why do some audiences laugh offline yet others criticize the same show online? An observational bias here is that I can only "hear" the collective laughter in a club without noticing who was not laughing or clapping hands. Similarly, I can barely "hear" laughter from netizens' bedrooms, kitchens, and dining rooms—wherever they watch the show through laptops or smartphones—but "see" and "read" online comments and criticism. However, such observational bias inspires me to take the comparison of online and offline comedy as a central analytical approach.

Laughter is immediate and sometimes spontaneous when people sit crowdedly in small clubs. To a certain extent, the open-mic audiences are entertained. However, the changing of space, temporality, and relationality of comedy performance transforms the original reception of this show. Consuming comedy as text and public culture, online audiences tend to be more critical and stricter as the performance is streamed on their smartphones, pads, laptops, and televisions. Hence, while audiences' offline reactions present voices of joyfulness, online reactions to some extent foreground the

humorlessness of comedy.[5] In other words, the gap between club performance and online streaming entails a conversation in public culture between the amused and the offended, which provokes public negotiations about what are "politically correct" women's jokes. The question, therefore, has turned into why some audiences feel amused while others are offended, which draws the analysis back to anthropological discussions about joking and laughing relationships. What changes when joking and laughing relationships are digitized and physically stretched? In this paper, I argue that such a gap between live and online comedic performances opens space for the collective performative expression of Chinese women, what I call *feminist reckoning*, which marks a new form of feminist resistance in China's public culture.

The idea is mainly built upon anthropologist Jessica Winegar's conceptualization of "reckoning" as a descriptive framework within which unfolds the agentive and processual processes of delineating appropriate cultural ideas. Since reckoning "captures people's sense of having to deal with (or discover) things that appear to have already been set,"[6] it is useful to epitomize Chinese women's ongoing engagement with a variety of social forces and discourses regarding the authenticity of Chinese feminism. In other words, "reckoning" not only stresses the interminable conceptualization of Chinese feminism but identifies the inherent agency of women in negotiating with patriarchal structures about gender equality. It is such practices of feminist reckoning that generate and present resistance toward state hegemony and authoritarian sovereignty that are based upon patriarchal structures in mainland China.

This article reflects on how female Chinese stand-up comedians provoke and practice feminist reckoning around public culture. It starts with a contextual discussion of comedy and humor in relation to feminism and

5. Lauren Berlant, "Humorlessness (Three Monologues and a Hairpiece)," *Critical Inquiry* 43 (Winter 2017): 305–40.

6. Jessica Winegar, *Creative Reckonings: The Politics of Art and Culture in Contemporary Egypt* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2006), 6.

censorship in China, which is followed by an explanation of methodology. It then conceptualizes the online buzzword *zuiti*, or "mouth substitute," with anthropologist James Scott's theory of "hidden transcript" and identifies the relationship between stand-up comedy and ordinary citizens in mainland China. Based on that, this article further examines the twisted laughing relationship in Xiaolu's comedy shows and the online debates over feminist voices she invoked. It elaborates on the practices of feminist reckoning with both my own field experience and textual analysis of pieces of comedic shows from Yang Li, another female stand-up comedian. Finally, this article concludes that feminist reckoning, observed in this essay as provoked by the gap between live comedy shows and online streaming, helps express women's resistant voices in Chinese public culture where state censorship and patriarchal forces depoliticize and restrict feminist voices and activities.

Comedy, Feminism, and Censorship

Comedy, humor, and laughter are often expected to potentially transform and remake the social structures and cultural norms they stemmed from. They serve as minoritarian critique of hegemonic structures and thereby resist existing authorities.[7] However, comedy and humor also reinforce hegemonic oppression over ordinary people in the realms of gender, race, and religion.[8] As Lauren Berlant and Sianne Ngai conclude, "Comedy has

7. Lanita Jacobs, "'The Arab Is the New Nigger': African American Comics Confront the Irony and Tragedy of 9/11," in *A Decade of Dark Humor: How Comedy, Irony, and Satire Have Shaped Post-9/11 America*, ed. Ted Gournelos and Viveca Greene (Jackson: University of Mississippi Press, 2011), 47–56. Also see Marwan Kraidy, *The Naked Blogger of Cairo: Creative Insurgency in the Arab World* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2016).
8. Paúl Pérez, "Learning to Make Racism Funny in the 'Color-Blind' Era: Stand-Up Comedy Students, Performance Strategies, and the (Re)production of Racist Jokes in Public," *Discourse & Society* 24, no. 4 (2013): 478–503; Raúl Pérez, "Racist Humor: Then and

issues" because it not only delineates distinctions but, more significantly, groups people together with joyful disturbance in which feelings of unruliness resonate.[9]

In China, comedy and humor are deeply involved in contesting and configuring political discourses and ideologies. Since Mao's era, comedy and humor have been used effectively by the state in regulating subject feelings and facilitating propaganda, on the one hand, while being deployed, on the other hand, by public intellectuals to creatively formulate subjectivities.[10] In the same vein, before 2012, the satiric skits on the annual Spring Festival Gala on China Central Television, by enacting figures of "country bumpkins" whose victory over the state is shared and enjoyed by audiences, have established a comedic platform where "the populace and the state can meet, contest, negotiate and compromise."[11] However, such a platform was eliminated after 2012, which signals "the new stage in China's postsocialist condition."[12] The retreat of comedy's political potential reflects one of the central concerns of an "empire of tedium" that "where in the past there was wriggle room a straitjacket now awaits."[13] That is, comedy has issues but not in contemporary China. However, I argue that approaches such as textual analysis and audience studies are not sufficient in comedy studies. Taking an anthropological stance, I offer a reading of female stand-up comedians' performances as a comedy complex that

Now," *Sociology Compass* 10 (2016): 928–38; Jessica Winegar, "The Power of Nonsense: Humour in Egypt's Counter/Revolution," *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies* 48, no. 1 (2021): 44–58.

9. Lauren Berlant and Sianne Ngai, "Comedy Has Issues," *Critical Inquiry* 43 (Winter 2017): 233–49.
10. Ping Zhu, Zhuoyi Wang, and Jason McGrath, eds., *Maoist Laughter* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2019).
11. Hongjian Wang, "From Court Fools to Stage Puppets: Country Bumpkins in the Skits on CCTV's Spring Festival Gala, 1983–2022," *China Quarterly* 250 (2022): 557.
12. Wang, "From Court Fools," 569.
13. Greme Barmé, "Empire of Tedium," China Heritage, accessed November 4, 2022, https://chinaheritage.net/xi-jinpings-empire-of-tedium/.

comprehends comedian-audience relationships, digital media, feminist activities, and state regulations.

My investigation of comedy's political potential is in the context of China's strict censorship and the constraints it imposed on women's expression and feminist resistance. Feminist activities that penetrate the patriarchal convention and stress women's rights and justice have been overly obstructed and suppressed by state regulations over the past decade. Feminist activists and public events have been policed.[14] In 2015, the Chinese government arrested five young feminist activists on the charge of "picking quarrels and provoking trouble (*xunxin zishi zui*)." The detention of five activists has been seen as epitomizing the party-state's growing authoritarian control and intolerance toward feminist protests and movements, as well as a turning point of China's feminist practices.[15] Feminist media practices have become critical since coercive policing limits public space for in-person feminist activities.[16]

Feminist scholars have observed and documented ways for (social) media and digital platforms to become major fields for women's expression and feminist practice in mainland China. Sociologists Jun Li and Xiaoqin Li, for example, underline that media can be strategically used to draw public attention to feminist activities and to access political resources.[17] They report that through addressing feminist practices around public discussions,

14. For example, documentary director Nanfu Wang documented how a group of feminist activists are subjugated and policed because of their public protest. See Wang, dir., *Hooligan Sparrow* (New York: Little Horse Crossing the River, 2016).
15. Zheng Wang, "Detention of the Feminist Five in China," *Feminist Studies* 41, no. 2 (2015): 476–82; Jia Tan, "Digital Masquerading: Feminist Media Activism in China," *Crime Media Culture* 13, no. 2 (2017): 171–86; Sara Liao, "Feminism without Guarantees: Reflections on Teaching and Researching Feminist Activism in China," *Asian Journal of Women Studies* 26, no. 2 (2020): 259–67.
16. Xiao Han, "Searching for an Online Space for Feminism? The Chinese Feminist Group Gender Watch Women's Voice and Its Changing Approaches to Online Misogyny," *Feminist Media Studies* 18, no. 4 (2018): 734–49.
17. Jun Li and Xiaoqin Li, "Media as a Core Political Resource: The Young Feminist Movements in China," *Chinese Journal of Communication* 10, no. 1 (2017): 54–71.

the media make visible women's voices and legitimize feminist movements. Witnessing the emergence of digital and social media, recent scholars have identified the subversive power of online feminist movements such as #Metoo, a global online movement that challenges gender inequality and sexual violence. The #Metoo movement stimulates "intersectional digital feminism" that enables Chinese women to actively speak in public and participate in gender politics.[18] However, though the #Metoo movement and its followers in China creatively moved feminist practices online, they still face two obstacles: the state censorship and surveillance over feminist practices and the public backlash against feminism.[19]

These two major limitations can be seen in a violent event that happened on June 10, 2022, in Tangshan, Hebei Province. In a small barbecue restaurant, nine drunk men brutally and ruthlessly beat and trampled four women who resisted their intentional sexual harassment. The closed-circuit television recording quickly spread on social media, which invoked a wave of nationwide anger toward not only these barbarous men but also the horrific gender violence and gangster culture and the state's failure to protect its (women) citizens. Some social media articles highlighted that the violence reflects how being female in China is dangerous and horrible. Yet they were quickly identified as exhibiting "Chinese pastoral feminism" and the public was asked to be "rational, neutral, and objective."[20] Chinese Internet witnessed an heated debate overnight over whether the Tangshan incident was a gender issue or simply a matter of public security. However, three days after

18. Siyuan Yin and Yu Sun, "Intersectional Digital Feminism: Assessing the Participation Politics and Impact of the MeToo Movement in China," *Feminist Media Studies* 21, no. 7 (2021): 1176–92.
19. Yin and Sun, "Intersectional Digital Feminism," 1187–89; also see, for example, Qiqi Huang, "Anti-Feminism: Four Strategies for the Demonisation and Depoliticisation of Feminism on Chinese Social Media," *Feminist Media Studies* 23, no. 7 (2022), 1–15, https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/14680777.2022.2129412.
20. Chinese pastoral feminism, or *tianyuan nüquan*, is a stigmatization of feminist activism. "Rational, neutral, and objective" are together called *lizhongke* (*lixing*, *zhongli*, *keguan*) in mainland China. Such terms valorize efficient, reasonable, and well-structured rationality while at the same time disdain being sentimental, irrational, reckless, and hysterical.

the incident, almost all online articles highlighting gender issues were censored and deleted. The fact clearly shows the hostile public attitude toward Chinese feminism and the state's conservative regulation over gender topics and feminist activities.

Likewise, censorship is a critical concern for stand-up comedians. When I started to learn stand-up comedy, a semi-professional comedian suggested an online video introduction.[21] The video was made by another professional stand-up comedian who runs a senior club in a major eastern city in China. It is informative and useful for beginners, not only because of the techniques and skills it teaches but also because it provides sincere and useful suggestions for people who aim to become professionals. One of his prior pieces of advice is "to start cleanly." That is, as the video maker stresses, "All performers should prepare their lines carefully to avoid being censored." The unbearable obscenities and lines that go against state censorship should be avoided. Accordingly, in major cities such as Beijing and Shanghai, all lines should be submitted to the government office for checking, and the comics must follow what they submitted when performing, even in the improv host part (the hosts must prepare questions and predict audiences' responses). For other cities, it is said that only commercial shows are required to be censored, and open-mic sessions are randomly checked.[22] Another note is that online shows and offline performances are censored by different bureaus, and thus the content of live shows is freer than online shows.[23] The video maker finally concludes his way of understanding censorship: "Delete

21. I choose not to provide the link and the video makers' accurate information to anonymize them.
22. As this paper was under review, a political issue happened to China's stand-up comedy industry, which resulted in the suspension/cancellation of *Rock & Roast 6* in 2023 and the decline of the Xiaoguo company. Since then, as far as I know, almost all cities have required strict censorship for both commercial performances and open-mic sessions. Yet there are still gray spaces and exceptions.
23. Online shows are censored by the National Radio and Television Administration (NRTA), which is at the national level; offline shows are censored by the Municipal Administration of Culture and Tourism (MACT), which is city level.

whatever you suspect will be censored." He then listed rules he knew, such as no mocking of governmental officials, no distortion of traditional Chinese stories or history, and no homosexual jokes.[24] Particularly, he stressed that comics must not provoke the antagonistic relationship between men and women, nor could they talk in a general voice. For example, one can complain that his girlfriend is silly but cannot say, for example, "You know, women always do silly things."[25]

Feminist media scholars have discussed various approaches that activists use to navigate through censorship in China. For example, media scholar Jia Tan reveals how feminists practiced and posed "digital masquerading" on social media to avoid Internet censorship.[26] Ling Han and Yue Liu developed the idea of "#metoo activism without [the] #Metoo hashtag" to theorize the contribution of celebrities' sex scandals under public debates to the visibility of feminist discussions such as gender inequalities.[27] In this paper, by comparatively examining women stand-up comedians' live and online acts, I join these feminist media scholars in developing a more comprehensive understanding of "the politics of visibility" of everyday feminist resistance in contemporary China.[28] To make it clear, I experimentally locate my research at the intersection of comedy studies and feminist media studies. I ask in which ways that comedy and feminism, both of which are under strict blanket censorship and surveillance in contemporary China, can gesture the political critique and resistance around public culture.

24. Homosexual jokes are allowed in some cities and most open-mic sessions, but officially the topic and key words are censored.
25. The real offline situations were not that severe by my observation in multiple cities, yet this list of rules reveals how stand-up comedy, a form of performance of personal expression, is under control of the state.
26. Tan, "Digital Masquerading," 176–77.
27. Ling Han and Yue Liu, "#metoo Activism without the #MeToo Hashtag: Online Debates over Entertainment Celebrities Sex Scandals in China," *Feminist Media Studies* (2023): 1–18, https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/14680777.2023.2219857.
28. Fan Yang, "Rethinking China's Internet Censorship: The Practice of Recoding and the Politics of Visibility," *new media & society* 18, no. 7 (2016): 1364–81.

Methodology

Comedy is not mere text, cultural product, or comedian-audience interactions. It is also about where and when audiences watch the show, who engages in producing the lines, and how jokes, laughter, and criticism are mediated. Therefore, I combine ethnographic investigation and textual/media analysis in this research to examine women's stand-up comedies as a comedy complex. Since June 2022, I mainly conducted participant observations in comedy clubs in Dalian and Shenzhen. I spent about three months in total at each site, with several visits to other clubs in adjacent cities. I not only participated in commercial shows and open-mic sessions but also performed by myself. After shows, I often talked to professional and amateur comics, as well as audiences, and discussed questions such as "Why do you think the joke is funny?," "How can I improve the joke?," and "What jokes do you want to write?" I also formally interviewed thirteen comedians, four of whom are women. I participated in several online workshops for beginners to revise their lines, known as "script reading workshops" (*du gao hui*). All online events I participated in and collected data from acknowledged "a researcher's presence."

In addition to ethnographic data, I offer textual analysis of both online stand-up comedy and social media posts. Except for a few lines I borrowed to serve as examples from other comedians I know as friends (with their permission), most comedic texts in this paper came from the variety show *Rock & Roast* (seasons 4 and 5). Posts and comments on social media were collected from China's popular social media platforms such as Weibo and Xiaohongshu (the RED).[29] When collecting social media posts, I avoided

29. The RED, Xiaohongshu, is seen as a popular social media platform that attracts numerous women users. Many comedians and clubs are using the Red Book to attract potential audiences. Also see a discussion of how the RED exerts impact on the representation of femininity: YuanHang Liu and Xinjian Li, "'Pale, Young, and Slim' Girls on Red: A Study of Young Femininities on Social Media in Post-Socialist China," *Feminist Media Studies* (2023): 1–16, https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/14680777.2023.2226830?needAccess=true.

identifying any personal information and having private conversations with those accounts. Instead, I focus on the content of these posts.

Zuiti ("Mouth Substitute"): Enacting Hidden Transcripts Online

"These comedies are trivial jokes! Why should we take them such seriously?" many Chinese netizens complained online. A sophomore college student who is also a dedicated fan of stand-up comedy told me that she never seeks to be educated when watching stand-up shows. Indeed, people normally watch stand-up shows for fun and laugh unintentionally. However, stand-up comedy has become more significant and powerful in contemporary China within a depoliticized public culture. In this section, I examine a buzzword that emerged in China's digital world called *zuiti*, or "mouth substitute," and demonstrate the central role stand-up comedy plays in online encounters of the dominant and the subordinate.

In *Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts*, James Scott offers a story of Mrs. Poyser, a character in George Elliot's *Adam Bede*, who bravely spoke to the elderly Squire Donnithorne with her "hidden transcripts."[30] By staging her hidden transcripts in front of Donnithorne, which is not a normal interaction between tenants and squires, Mrs. Poyser broke consent and social norms and hence triumphed temporarily in this very short encounter. Such hidden transcripts, though they were shared within the local community of tenants, had no chance of being expressed, even among intimate relationships. Therefore, "judging from how rapidly the story traveled and the unalloyed joy with which it was received and retold, the rest of the community also felt Mrs. Poyser had spoken for them as

30. James Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1992), 6.

well."[31] Other tenants are empowered because Mrs. Poyser uses her own mouth to speak about what they want to say but dare not. To use that Chinese buzzword, Mrs. Poyser becomes her neighbors' *zuiti*.

As an online buzzword, *zuiti* has been constantly conceptualized by netizens, especially young people. It is not only a speaking out of the unsayable but a smart "speech act" with which people grapple with their enemies.[32] For instance, a netizen can find an online *zuiti* to say, "I hate my boss, he is horrible." He/she can also find another *zuiti* countering their boss through mocking: "I see my boss as my grandson only to whose stupidity I show all my patience and love."[33] Online *zuiti* provide people with a digital body substitute. It serves as an embodied scapegoat for those who intend to avoid penalties for what they say. The employee cannot directly complain in public, nor can they tease the boss with mockery. Yet they win temporarily in the digital world by finding a *zuiti* to counter the stressful reality.

Zuiti also help address resistance to the state's public transcripts. It stresses the agentive choice people make to give others authority to speak for them. China's state propaganda and grand narratives often overshadow individual voices. Ordinary citizens' expressions of subjective feelings and thoughts, as well as moaning and mourning, are overshadowed by the central and sonorous announcement of a socialist triumph of overcoming struggles and difficulties and uniting all dissidents. Besides being represented, personal voices are also silenced in contemporary China, as is the case when reading anthropologist Jie Yang's work about social aphasia (*shiyuzheng*), that individuals lose their rights to express themselves and as a result lose their identities of self.[34] In this spirit, *zuiti* serves as a substitute for individual expressions that otherwise are enfolded in the state's positive speeches.

31. Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance*, 7.
32. See J. L Austin, *How to Do Things with Words* (London: Oxford University Press, 1962).
33. Idea borrowed from stand-up comedian Yang Mengen from *Roast & Rock*.
34. Jie Yang, " 'Bureaucratic Shiyuzheng': Silence, Affect, and the Politics of Voice in China," *HAU: Journal of Ethnographic Theory* 11, no. 3 (2021): 972–85.

Stand-up comedy by nature provides *zuiti* for Chinese audiences.[35] The first lesson I learned in a stand-up comedy workshop is to find a negative feeling of mine. The instructor asked us to fill in the blanks of the sentence: Regarding ___, what makes me feel ___ is that ___. The first blank requests a topic that most audiences can understand. The second blank is expected to be filled with one of the four feelings—namely, demanding, awkward, fearful, and silly (*Nan*, *Guai*, *Pa*, and *Chun*). The third blank is about a real experience that happened to the comic. For example, one wrote: "Regarding colleagues, what makes me feel silly is that young men around their twenties often say 'When I was young.'" This is this comedian's own experience. Meanwhile, many Chinese people encounter similar situations in their own lives. Therefore, it has the potential to become a punch line in performance: "You know, I am so annoyed with those 'boys' around their twenties who keep saying, 'When I was young.' Damn, you fucking idiot, was merely a germ when you were young! [Laughter]." People who suffered from having to pretend to be polite to those young men boasting about their past will then name this comedian as their *zuiti* since they speak for their uncomfortableness. Meanwhile, the obscenities also punch these men back with comedic expressions. Without this *zuiti*, they would never vent their anguish and dirty words out in public spheres.

Many posts on social media regarding stand-up shows praise the comics as their *zuiti*. Streaming stand-up shows online facilitates this, in that netizens could easily make screenshots of the punch lines and spread them on social media as their own voices. As a result, these lines of comics' debunking, mocking, and disdaining social inequalities, structural violence, and cultural authorities become contagious in public culture. Such contagion embodies people's resistance within stand-up shows that help enact hidden

35. Here, I am especially thinking of online shows. For live shows, audiences pay for tickets and expect to be entertained. Yet online shows are often screenshotted and reposted by netizens to express their ideas. However, I am not saying that in-club comedies cannot serve as *zuiti* (actually, I did hear audiences talk about it). Nevertheless, this is also a difference between live and online acts.

transcripts online. By finding an alternative, digital, and comedic body, Chinese netizens "speak" what is silenced and "practice" what is restricted, and thereby reconfigure their selves and subjectivities in a digitized encounter with the state's public transcripts. However, in Xiaolu's case, online stand-up shows have also highlighted the twisted joking and laughing relationships, thus inducing controversies.

Twisted Laughing Relationships: "Laughing at" and "Laughing With"

Laughing relationships bring external perspectives to the roles of joking and being joked. Anthropologist Susan Seizer's ethnography of the special drama in Tamil villages furthers a Freudian paradigm of dirty jokes in which a woman is the object of the joke while men are joke-tellers and consumers.[36] She found that women in rural India can enjoy comedy with dirty jokes only when the male buffoons and musicians on stage enact the joking relationship between two men—one makes jokes at women, and the other laughs at these jokes. In this way, women, as the object of these jokes on stage, enjoy the jokes as external spectators. So far as they laugh at the comedy, they laugh with men who laugh at women themselves.

Scholars have elaborated on the significance of distinguishing between "laughing at" and "laughing with" in comedy and humor studies. To be conscious of the nuance of laughing relationships is to be sensitive to power and structures, as well as cultural boundaries and (both comedians' and audiences') identities, in stand-up comedy.[37] By using different voices and speaking in various styles, the comedians make the audiences laugh *at* their stories

36. Susan Seizer, *Stigmas of the Tamil Stage: An Ethnography of Special Drama Artists in South India* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2005).

37. S. Katherine Cooper, "What's So Funny? Audiences of Women's Stand-Up Comedy and Layered Referential Viewing: Exploring Identity and Power," *Communication Review* 22, no. 2 (2019): 91–116.

or laugh *with* them to laugh at others' absurdities, and sometimes even the audiences themselves.[38] The nuance is, by "laughing at" the stories, the audiences together identify something or somebody as funny and laughable; by "laughing with" comedians, the audiences stand with comedians' stage self. They laugh at things based on their own values while sharing with or are subject to the stage persona's values when laughing with the comedians.

For example, the twin comedians together performed at the same online variety show Xiaolu participated in and talked about women's clothing struggles:

A: Recently, I've found that, for example, when I went out to do the COVID-19 PCR test, I always forget to put my keys in my pocket.
B: Because—[pause]—I have no pocket. Have you guys recognized that women's clothes—[pause]—have NO POCKETS! [Camera shot at women in the audience: "Yes!"]
A: I checked all my summer clothes. I found that even if there is a pocket, it is a fake one.
B: They stitch it on.
A: Or they draw one for me [laughter].
B: It seems like women cannot approach pockets.
A: Why? Women will not stain pockets.
B: Exactly! Pockets are not ancestral tombs [laughter and applause].
. . .
A: We intentionally researched why women's clothes cannot have pockets.
B: Because pockets will break the curves of women.
A: But men think that being curvaceous means being appealing.
B: Having curves means having fluid mechanics.
A: Having fluid mechanics means being attractive.

38. Jeremy Beckett, "Laughing with, Laughing at, among Torres Strait Islanders." *Anthropological Forum* 18, no. 3 (2008): 295–302. Also see John Carty and Yasmine Musharbash, "You've Got to be Joking: Asserting the Analytical Value of Humor and Laughter in Contemporary Anthropology," *Anthropological Forum* 18, no. 3 (2008): 209–17.

B: Therefore, when women go out and eat midnight snacks, their bodies will attract dirty things.

A: For example, smoke, dust, and some men's hands [screaming, laughter, and applause].

Audiences first "laughed at" a funny exaggeration of fake pockets on women's clothes. They then "laughed with" two comedians twice about women's struggles in Chinese society. First, women are restricted from sweeping ancestral tombs because females (in Chinese, *yin*) are seen as contaminations for patriarchal sacredness. Second, women are subject to danger from male sexual harassment and violence. The show uses "midnight snacks" and "men's hands" to refer to the Tangshan incident (mentioned earlier). Neither the absurdity of hypothesizing the reason why women cannot have pockets nor wittingly misunderstanding curvaceousness as physical attractiveness is funny enough on its own. Audiences may not laugh that hard if performer A in the last sentence lists, for example, "smoke, dust, and men's *eyeballs*." They scream, laugh, and applaud to stand with female performers for their courage to talk about this censored and suppressed issue. Even male audiences laugh with these women performers because the tension between ordinary citizens and the government's authoritarian censorship has been released in comedic expressions.

The twin stand-up comedians countered both the male gaze and the state authority, and thus audiences laughed with them. Yet this might not be the condition of Xiaolu. Her performance speaks in an agender voice about the anxieties of women's aging, rather than with a strong female identity. She dressed in quasibusiness casual, with short hair, a brown suit, and trousers. The variety show also endeavored to make her a superior figure by listing her titles for audiences: "The first generation of professional stand-up comedians in mainland China, Chinese 'Ali Wong,' Big Sister to other young competitors (Sister Lu), and a Confident candidate for the final champion." She is a woman on stage. While her screen image also represents a kind of "masculinity," such as the robust, successful, and confident woman—her

"masculine" but female body speaks in a sort of agender voice and thus enacts the Freudian man-man joking relationship—to which woman is the object—as a twisted woman/man-woman/man joking relationship. Indeed, her performance penetrates women's anxieties about aging. Yet who is parodying and mocking an anxious woman? Who is the target of the joke? Who is the audience? Although Xiaolu's female body and expression challenge a conventional patriarchal joking relationship, which excepts the downtrodden woman, her performance creates a complicated comedic situation. Nonfemale audiences can both laugh at her jokes and laugh with a smart and strong woman. However, female audiences are troubled by Xiaolu's lines since the jokes directly laugh at women themselves. Neither do they want to laugh with the female figure Xiaolu embodied, despite her representing female public expression. Therefore, they reject admitting to or entering Xiaolu's joking relationship and identify her performance as "father-style." One comment on the RED articulates why Xiaolu's own female figure matters:

> Xiaolu said her main point is that she hopes women can choose not to put on make-up. Yet her jokes did not show that. The lines are all about women's make-up practices under the male gaze. If it was a man saying like this, then we can understand it as anti-anxiety about one's appearance. I can only feel that Xiaolu's opinion comes from a female perspective, but the final show was not for women at all.

Xiaolu's skillful and professional performances twisted the laughing relationships in stand-up comedy. It is funny and insightful as a sophisticated observational comedy, and thus people laugh at the jokes and laugh with a sharp, confident woman. However, it is also offensive in that Xiaolu embodies a Freudian paradigm of joking relationships between men in her female body, as well as in her public expressions on behalf of women. Streaming comedy online amplifies the contrasting reactions to female comedic expressions. The intersections of humorlessness and joyfulness of comedies, as well

as voices from the offended and the amused, spiral from the twisted laughing relationships and generate a new form of expression in the gap between live performances and online shows. It is worth mentioning here that even as *zuiti* stand-up comedians could help with expressing the unsayable in public culture, they are still under state censorship and surveillance. That is, the digital mouths are also constrained from being directly political.

Feminist Reckoning and the Politics of Visibility

Under the title "Xiaolu says," people on WeChat who are buying tickets for Xiaolu's offline comedy special *Nüer Hong* ("Girl's red") see the sentence: "Clustered by laughter, those shameful topics, reticent traditional norms, and embarrassments that silence men and tear women, all dance openly and uprightly on the stage of comedy." In this comedy special, Xiaolu talks about the shamefulness of the menstruation she has experienced as a woman. She also implicitly responded in a video blog interview to the online vitriol toward her acts after being knocked out of the online competition:

> All punchlines I created speak for myself. I think something is awful and disgusting: My female body encounters a lot of suffering. Sometimes I feel I lost my dignity, and thus I want to talk about this. I am an ordinary person and I speak for myself. It would be my honor if you have the same experience and think I am speaking for you. That's great. But if you don't, it just means you did not suffer from this, then it is even better.[39]

She does not speak for women—rather, she speaks only for herself as a woman. However, her disclaimer provokes a rethinking of the representation

39. Kimura Takushu, "小鹿：你能做的只有事情本身，其他是浪的问题 | 某某与我" [Xiaolu: All you can do is the thing itself, the rest is a matter of waves], xiaoguo gongchang, October 14, 2022, https://mp.weixin.qq.com/s/Ro1XCRISUneQzKJEvu5MFA.

of feminism in public culture. Why is a woman's voice not the voice of women? The debate between laughing audiences and offended viewers exposes these questions in what I call *feminist reckoning* in contemporary China.

The connotations of Chinese feminism are contentious, not only for outsiders but for those who see themselves as feminists. The Chinese translation of the word *feminism* entails two main dimensions of practicing feminism—namely, "for gender equality" (*nüxingzhuyi*) or "for women's rights" (*nüquanzhuyi*).[40] The former is seen as relatively neutral while the latter often refers to activists. Though in academia, it is argued that *nüquanzhuyi* is included in *nüxingzhuyi*, I find my interlocutors often used the two translations interchangeably.[41] When being asked if those female comedians I examined in this paper are *nüxingzhuyi*, for example, some of my female interlocutors automatically changed the term to *nüquanzhuyi* in their answers and vice versa. A female beginner of stand-up comedy who has a master's degree in gender studies told me that she feels the two translations are almost the same; however, in the "Chinese feminist community," people dislike those who use the translation *nüxingzhuyi* instead of *nüquanzhuyi*.[42] Besides the internally undefined understanding, disparaging terms such as "feminist whores" and "Chinese pastoral feminism" are also used to depict feminists as selfish, irresponsible, paranoid, and deviant women who protest and resist only to avoid fulfilling their social responsibilities.[43] However, such contentiousness of Chinese feminism invokes a powerful "reckoning" that challenges the dominant men's culture.

40. Mizuyo Sudo and Michael G. Hill, "Concepts of Women's Rights in Modern China," *Gender & History* 18, no. 3 (2006): 472–89.
41. See Jinhua Dai, *After the Post-Cold War: The Future of Chinese History* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2018).
42. She uses the word *nüquanshequn* (女权社群).
43. Angela Xiao Wu and Yige Dong, "What Is Made-In-China Feminism(s)? Gender Discontent and Class Friction in Post-Socialist China," *Critical Asian Studies* 51, no. 4 (2019): 471–92.

In a stand-up comedy club's WeChat group (fifteen members), I witnessed an online debate over "whether women's rights [*nü quan*] should be reduced as a part of human rights [*ren quan*]." The discussion started with a meme image sent by a woman comedian (W1) picturing a Chinese wife doing housework despite getting COVID-19 while the husband weakly lies in bed and cries to God.

W1: Women's lives are unimportant and cheap.
W2: A glance at women's domestic status. That is why the rate of marriage is decreasing.
M1: I feel like this meme is intentionally inciting antagonizing relationships between men and women. I've never seen such situations from [young] couples around me, except for those elder generations.
W1: I often see girls posting on online forums. The point is, they not only are unaware of the issue but do not allow others to persuade them. [They discussed how to consume jokes that contrast personal values.]
W2: Xiaolu's show about makeup duties makes me feel disgusting. [Here W2 also discussed another sketch comedy in another variety show.]
W2: Many married women are explaining the unequal distribution of "housework and parenting duties" as "both my husband and child cannot live without me; I am so important!"
W1: That is what I saw on online forums.
W2: After getting married, I often travel out on my own for my work, both short- and long-term trips. The feminist man [*nüquan nan*, what she calls her husband] has no complaint, but my mother asks, "How about [her husband's nickname]'s meals?" How could I grapple with her?
M4: Why grappling? Just tell her the truth. Isn't it an ordinary "caring?"
W2: Of course not! She thought it is the wife's duty to cook and assumed that I am not doing [this] well. Because that is what she does at home.
W1: Haha, I have no interest in discussing such topics. All in all, they are the same. I think the couple should live in ways that make them happy.
M4: Why call it "wife's duty [*qizhi*]?" The word is too harsh! Just responsibilities! Both wife and husband have their responsibilities, right? "You

travel out, then have you made sure of your family?"—I think that is what your mother meant. In other words, if your husband travels out, I believe his mother will also ask about you [his wife].

W2: No, at least my mother will not.

W1: [emoji/onlook]

M4: Society should not make distinctions of male/female rights. There should only be "human rights," about each of us having [equal] rights to be a human.

W2: People who silence others always say that. Please read *Misogyny* [by Chizuko Ueno, favored by many Chinese women].

M4: Just discuss. When we respect a person, it should not be due to his/her gender/sex but activities, right?

W2: If you are right, then there is no BLM [Black Lives Matter]. Whose lives do not matter?

W2: I am only contesting the point that "we should not distinguish male/female rights"

M1: Damn! I know there must be a quarrel!

The topic of the group discussion changed from whether this satiric meme properly jokes at contemporary gender inequality, how comedies and humor should be consumed and enjoyed, to whether people should stress women's rights instead of generally talking about human rights. The group members' attitudes and opinions, which are complicated, changing, and sometimes (self-)contrasting, are not only about memes, humor, and comedy but also Chinese women's living conditions and, tacitly, Chinese feminism and its representations in public culture. Everyone agrees that personal values are not prioritized when consuming humor and jokes. However, women members are annoyed with and sympathetic to the in-family gender inequalities the meme reflects. Meanwhile, men in this chat group suspected the intention behind the meme: Does it intend to incite men-women opposition? In other words, though all group members agree that "jokes are merely jokes," none of them really takes the satiric meme as trivial entertainment. The

same comes to stand-up comedy: another woman comedian (W2) tolerates many well-written male comics' jokes that debunk their wives or girlfriends, which contrasts her own values, yet she feels Xiaolu's online performances are disgusting.

How and what should a *knowing* woman do is discussed. I say *knowing* because women in this chat group are distinguishing themselves from those "unconscious" women in online forums. Albeit W2 dismisses Xiaolu's comedies as misogynistic and thus disgusting, her attitude toward other misogynistic novels and art pieces (most of which are made by male creators) is relatively mild and lenient. Although W1 is aware of the patriarchal exploitations of women in families, she claims that she is reluctant to participate in negotiating the "proper and equal relationship between couples." Although W2 had relatively moderate attitudes toward a patriarchal social condition, she angrily countered a male group member's blind reduction of women's rights to human rights.

The group founder's uncomfortableness and embarrassment—"Damn, I know there must be a quarrel!"—brings me back to the censored feminist voices in the Tangshan incident. Whether or not the incident is a gender issue doesn't seem politically crucial—yet the online debate deeply challenges the privilege of men. It is too powerful to be overlooked by the patriarchal authority and thus is censored. Likewise, a group discussion about women's conditions and rights scares and embarrasses men who strive to hide their structural privilege and retain being "objective and rational," even though there is not always consensus about what women should say and how women should act. The online debate, discussion on humor, and the "quarrel" seen by men—all what I call *feminist reckoning*—becomes powerful and undeniable female expression that makes visible feminist resistance in public culture.

As an ethnographer and ordinary urban Chinese man, I have encountered similar quarrels and debates, online and offline, between men and women, and among women and feminists in the past few years. Male comedians often complain to me about female comedians'

"privilege" of "freely abusing men" on stage. "Many women comedians are unconsciously drawn to feminist topics—are such hostile attitudes [to men] real? Then why do you keep a boyfriend?" What are or are not feminist topics? Is "misandry" totally opposite to "having a boyfriend?" These questions from male comedians may not be questions for women. Indeed, the authenticity and essentialness of Chinese feminism are subject to ongoing negotiations and debates. However, rather than adopting opposite stances—namely, the radical feminists versus aloof women—public debates provide Chinese women with a variety of opinions and practices to formulate a spectrum on which each problem they encounter in the real world is deliberated and resolved.[44] It is on this spectrum that Chinese feminisms are presented in the plural to subvert "systematic oppressions that often exercise their power by creating, maintaining, and consolidating binary structures."[45] That is, Chinese feminisms are reckoned by women in everyday encounters with patriarchal forces, gender inequalities, and misogynistic voices.

Such "reckoning" is embodied and performed in Yang Li's stand-up shows. Yang Li sets up her stage persona as a woman of ordinary appearance and a desire for love from straight men. Concurrently, she humorously talks about her difficulties finding a "normal and ordinary" male lover. Her performance stabs at the arrogance of men in a patriarchal society:

> Nothing changed since last year. I am still single [laughter]. I have been single for such a long time! You know, I think performing stand-up comedy just worsened my life [laughter]. I cannot understand why I have been single for such a long time. I think many boys have misunderstood

44. Yinhe Li, *Nüxing Zhuyi* 女性主义 [Feminism] (Ji' nan: Shandong Renmin Chubanshe, 2005).

45. Ping Zhu and Hui Faye Xiao, "Feminisms with Chinese Characteristics: An Introduction," in *Feminisms with Chinese Characteristics*, ed. Ping Zhu and Hui Faye Xiao (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 2021), 2.

> me. They thought my punch lines made me very aggressive and always want to attack them. They may suspect that I hate men. No. Rather, I attack you guys only because I love you guys [laughter]. It is true! I love you so much. [Camera shot to two male audience members, laughing cheerfully.] I love you so much that I cannot be hard-hearted to pick up only one of you to date [laughter]. Wonderful beings, men. I have to make a choice?! [laughter]. Men not only are brilliant but are also quite mysterious. You can never figure out what he is thinking in his little and cute head [rustling laughter]. That is: Why is he so ordinary but looks so confident> [Camera shot at female audience members, laughter and applause.]

The public packed the last line into the buzzword *puxinnan* ("ordinary but confident man"), which made Yang Li a nationwide representative of feminist comedians. Meanwhile, she has been harshly criticized by male netizens for being overly offensive. However, in her performances, she does not refuse to fall in love with straight men. Neither does she directly protest for gender equality. She even positions herself lower than men by portraying herself as a poor single woman who desires but fails to even take a sip of a romantic relationship. In her other piece, Yang Li tells a story of her hangover. She "complains" that the male friend who sent her home just left without doing anything further. Clearly, she is implying her expectation of having romantic/sexual affairs with him. Audiences laughed.

All her storytelling depicts Yang Li as an ordinary woman who desires to be loved by a man and even tries to flirt with men. The self-portrayal of a woman failing to attract a man seems to be objectifying women again in a heterosexual power relationship. However, her lines also address a manifesto, as feminists often do, that as an ordinary woman, she has the freedom to choose to love, to judge and criticize men, and to refuse to make any compromises to the patriarchal forces. Her seemingly frivolous flirting with men in the hangover joke occasionally echoes the slogan of the 2012 performing

art feminism protest: "I [women] can be provocative, but you cannot harass me."[46] As a result, even Yang Li does not identify herself as a feminist, but the performativity of reckoned women's voices marks a potential feminist resistance in her acts.

None of the women comedians mentioned in this paper directly claim that they are feminists (*nüquanzhuyizhe*). Yet the Chinese Internet has witnessed feminist discussions regarding their performances. While these comics insist that they are merely telling personal stories, they subtly engage in the ongoing negotiation about the proper feminist voice in public culture. Such essentialization of feminist expression embodies the dynamic process of *feminist reckoning*. Through reckoning, women in contemporary China navigate through the patriarchal cultural traditions, changing political conditions, new media and censorship, and complicated feminist discourses to figure out forceful and penetrative ways for self-expression and resistance in public culture. They enable women in contemporary China to imagine, articulate, and determine the ideal lifestyle they want by making the essential and proper public female voices inherently undefined and unsettled.[47]

Conclusion

Past "celebratory" scholarship claims that comedy has transformative political forces. However, in contemporary China, its emancipatory, Bakhtinian spirit of the loosening of social control and structural violence suffers from the growing authoritarian forces that have advanced the state's regulation of popular cultural productions. The promotion of the digital Internet intensifies both creative resistance in popular culture and government surveillance

46. "Wo keyi sao, ni buneng rao" (我可以骚，你不能扰), in the feminist protest against Shanghai Metro Company.
47. Elizabeth W. Won, *Embodied Reckonings: "Comfort Women," Performance, and Transpacific Redress* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2018).

and censorship. In other words, the social and political conditions for the interplay of politics and humor are not as optimistic as foreseen.[48] It is therefore important to reexamine the interconnections of comedy and cultural politics in contemporary China, particularly in the digital arena. A better understanding of how comedy is politicized and depoliticized contributes to examining interactions between ordinary citizens and the governing forces in public culture.

On the one hand, the nation-state is dedicated to obstructing feminist activities, as well as downplaying public debates over gender issues. On the other hand, feminism invokes powerful quarrels and debates among ordinary citizens in everyday lives and private spheres. Rhetorically and textually, such quarrels refer less to the political resistance toward social-cultural patriarchal forces than to men-women interactions and lifestyles (for example, husband-wife, father-daughter, and mother-son). However, in assessing the performative as feminist reckoning, these discussions and debates highlight and foreground gender inequality and women's quandaries in public culture. In this spirit, female stand-up comics' performances, moving back and forth between offline and online, offer to politicize everyday discussions regarding gender-related power dynamics as expressive resistance. Such rhetoric and practice resist not only patriarchal forces endorsed by the nation-state, as reflected in gender debates around the Tangshan incident, but more significantly state hegemony and authoritarian sovereignty that censor and control feminist protests and gender politics.

As such, this paper observes a new form of female expression in public culture—feminist reckoning—that is generated and embodied in the comedy complex consisting of women comedians, digital media, and audiences' cathartic expressions of praise and discontent. The complicity

48. For example, see Xue-Liang Ding, "Freedom and Political Humour: Their Social Meaning in Contemporary China," in *Humour in Chinese Life and Culture: Resistance and Control in Modern Times*, ed. Jessica Milner Davis and Jocelyn Chey (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2013), 231–53.

of stand-up comedy and Chinese feminism illuminates women's agentive countering of state regulation and the censorship of popular culture and gender-related public discussions. The politicization of comedy and humor marks women's hidden transcripts contesting gender inequality and male dominance in public culture, where public transcripts from the state create obstacles for feminist expressions and resistance. In other words, though it is not difficult for the Chinese government to strictly censor, replace, or downplay feminist resistance and gender-related public debates, audiences' uncontrollable and unruly preference and criticisms (because it is often apolitical, random, and trivial) toward female stand-up comedy makes feminist resistance a visible fact. How could people's comments on stand-up comedy be censored or controlled? In this paper, I point out that stand-up comedy is not merely objective text or context but a presence of the ongoing negotiations among comics, audiences, and state regulators regarding what is laughable, what should be discussed, and how the present can be narrated. In this way, I contend that political expression/action not only derives from comedy or humor per se but also stems from the gap between between the performance online and offline. In people's laughter and vitriol—online, offline, and in-between—we might continue to discern the playful irreverence in a country of imperative consensus.

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