

COVID-19, Satirical Activism, and Chinese Youth Culture

An Introduction

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Abstract

This article introduces the key theme of the special issue on “satirical activism and youth culture in and beyond COVID-19 China.” It contextualizes the case studies offered by the five articles in the special issue in three key terms: COVID-19, satirical activism, and Chinese youth culture. It asks: What are the new and evolving forms and genres of satirical activism in China, and what is the implication of satirical activism on Chinese youth culture? The article points out the significance of the study of dynamics and politics of the relationship between humor and satire, youth, popular culture, and citizen activism in the era of digital connectivity and vernacular creativity; it calls for more research on the roles of humor and satire in manufacturing and managing consent and opinion.

Keywords: COVID-19, satirical activism, youth culture, humor and satire, China

To most Chinese people, the COVID-19 pandemic is full of stories of death and loss, pain and suffering, sorrow and frustration, tragedy and heroism. As Guobin Yang notes, “How are we going to document these months of tragedy, suffering, sorrow, and heroism? How to write about the life, death, and loss of each and every concrete individual?”¹ This is quoted from Xiao

1. Guobin Yang, *The Wuhan Lockdown* (Columbia University Press, 2022), chpt. 7.

Yin, one of many Chinese citizens to record the quotidian lives and human sufferings in COVID-19 China. Perhaps the most famous diary is from Fang Fang, whose *Wuhan Diary* “offers an angry and eerie view” about lives in quarantine.² The anger and despair is illustrated by Fang’s response to the death of whistleblower Dr. Li Wenliang in February 2020: “Yesterday Li Wenliang died. I’m distraught. As soon it happened, my circle of friends said that night all of Wuhan was weeping for him. Who could have guessed that people across the whole of China were weeping for him! The flood of tears became a mighty wave on the internet! That night, Li Wenliang was ferried into another world on all the tears shed for him.”³

The COVID-19 pandemic has not only left people with memories and records of suffering and anger but also various forms of humor, mockery, and wry laughter as people struggled to fight boredom, frustration, and despair in lockdowns and quarantine. From anonymous witty and sarcastic online comments about the “patriotic virus” in early 2020 to university students crawling on the ground (known as creepers) in late 2022,⁴ Chinese people resorted to textual, graphic, audiovisual, and physical formats of humor, sarcasm, or simply silliness to cope with boredom and stress, express frustration, voice, act or perform civil disobedience, or let oneself go.

There is a long history of humor, comedy, and satire in serving as a force for social change. Creative resistance has been a key feature of popular culture. The Internet, social media, data, and digital technologies have

2. Dwight Garner, “‘Wuhan Diary’ Offers an Angry and Eerie View from Inside Quarantine,” *New York Times*, May 15, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/05/15/books/review-wuhan-diary-fang-fang.html>.

3. “She Kept a Diary of China’s Epidemic. Now She Faces a Political Storm,” *New York Times*, April 14, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/04/14/world/asia/coronavirus-china-fang-fang-author.html>.

4. “The Mysterious Epidemic in Wuhan Was Seriously Exposed and the patriotic Virus Was Concealed,” France Broadcasting Corporation, January 17, 2020, <https://www.rfi.fr/cn/中国/20200117-中国武汉疫情严重遭曝料隐瞒-有爱国病毒冠称>; Lily Kuo and Pei-Lin Wu, “Life’s Tribulations Have Chinese Students Crawling—Literally,” *Washington Post*, November 16, 2022, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2022/11/16/china-university-students-crawling-groups/>.

brought creative resistance from the cultural to the digital domain. Across the world, with its widely varying norms and regimes of public speech, the digital domain is the primary site of articulation for popular discontent and resistance through satire and political humor in a multitude of genres and forms by a wide range of actors. People used jokes, comedy shows, graffiti, street art, cartoons, memes, mashups, and user-generated video clips to criticize political figures and the political systems, to shed light on the absurdity of their sociopolitical realities. The COVID-19 pandemic, with its absolute disruption of daily life, unprecedented state interventions, and the reliance on digital platforms for most forms of social contact, has encouraged a wide range of satirical and pointed humor across the region.

COVID jokes are abundant in all cultures and countries. From Facebook to TikTok, or from Douyin and Bilibili to Weibo and Zhihu in the Chinese context, people create and share digital humor—from jokes, memes, and GIFs to short videos—to relieve stress from COVID restrictions. Pandemic control strategies—from lockdowns and mask mandates to contact tracing, mass vaccination, and restrictions in mobility and economic activities—have caused grievance, complaint, resistance, and backlash. Even ill-spirited misinformation has adopted the discourse and format of satire and “funny” memes.⁵ There are abundant and telling examples across diversified age and geographical differences on how people used humor, satire, and networked practices (via liking, sharing, or commenting) to engage in social activism. In India, stand-up comedy has flourished in the country’s online video culture, engaging critically with the right-wing and authoritarian turn in the political domain as a form of creative resilience and political subversion, and WhatsApp as the carrier of the vernacular public sphere has become a vast network of sarcasm, wit, and politics.⁶ In Israel, people use

5. Jack Goodman and Flora Carmichael, “Covid-19: What’s the Harm of ‘Funny’ Anti-Vaccine Memes?” BBC, November 29 2020, <https://www.bbc.com/news/55101238>.

6. Farhan Ahmad, Sohaib Alam, and Anmolpreet Kaur, “Performative Retrieving of Humour for Socio-Political Subversion: Stand-Up Comedy as a Form of Creative Resilience,” *Cogent Arts & Humanities* 9, no. 1, <http://doi.org/10.1080/23311983.2022.2131968>.

humorous memes to mock, alleviate stress, and build solidarity in face of common enemies.⁷ In China, digital humor provides a critical mechanism for people to cope with the emotional and psychological stress and live with the country's strict zero-COVID policies, and such humor often has subversive functions as veiled criticism of their sociopolitical realities.⁸

Young people are often at the forefront of what I call *satirical activism*. Satirical activism involves using satire, humor, or humorous formats and genres to voice dissent and evoke collective resistance to the dominant discourse—in the Chinese context, the state-sanctioned discourse. It appears lighthearted in various forms of cynicism and pranking yet it embodies cognitive dissonance, if not changes, in public culture. Satirical activism is youth-led and youth-centered social activism in the era of digital connectivity. From climate change and social justice to political protests,⁹ youths have led the charge in using creative means and parody formats to question, mock, and challenge authorities and authoritarianism.¹⁰ What is absurd can be a mechanism for community-building, truth-telling, and surviving censorship.¹¹

7. Tsafi Sebba-Elran, "A Pandemic of Jokes? The Israeli COVID-19 Meme and the Construction of a Collective Response to Risk," *HUMOR* 34, no. 2 (2021): 229–57, <https://doi.org/10.1515/humor-2021-0012>.

8. Ji Pan, Gang (Kevin) Han, and Ran Wei, "Duanzi as Networked Practice: How Online Satire Shapes Psychological Well-Being, Social Support, and Issue Knowledge for Chinese with Different Social Capital during COVID-19 Outbreaks," *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health* 18, no. 18 (2021): 9783, <https://doi.org/10.3390/ijerph18189783>.

9. For example, see Neas Sally, Ward Ann, Bowman Benjamin, "Young People's Climate Activism: A Review of the Literature," *Frontiers in Political Science* 4 (2022), <https://www.frontiersin.org/articles/10.3389/fpos.2022.940876>; Guobin Yang and Min Jiang, "The Networked Practice of Online Political Satire in China: Between Ritual and Resistance," *International Communication Gazette* 77, no. 3 (2015): 215–31; Geoffrey Baym and Jeffrey P. Jones, "News Parody in Global Perspective: Politics, Power, and Resistance," *Popular Communication* 10, no. 1–2 (2012): 2–13.

10. Umut Korkut, Aidan McGarry, Itir Erhart, Hande Eslen-Ziya, and Olu Jenzen, "Looking for Truth in Absurdity: Humour as Community-Building and Dissidence against Authoritarianism," *International Political Science Review* 43, no. 5 (2022): 629–47, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0192512120971151>.

11. Siu-yau Lee, "Surviving Online Censorship in China: Three Satirical Tactics and Their Impact," *China Quarterly*, no. 228 (2016): 1061–80, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/26291589>.

Youth activism takes place in the digital space. Young people have long embraced social media and digital media technologies to make their voices heard, develop civic identities, and encourage social and political engagement in creative ways. The witty and humorous digital activism has taken on new genres and formats. From memes, online satires, webtoons, digital art, to deepfakes, it has also taken on more complicated features. In some instances, these new forms of dissent and citizen activism have weaponized social media platforms through satire, irony, and parody. This can be illustrated by the case of the Arab Spring in the early 2010s, when “Facebook, mobile phones, and Twitter became the primary means of circulating the jokes; jokes thus became one of the revolution’s most crucial weapons,”¹² or by the case of “TikTok intifada” during the 2021 Israel–Gaza warfare when Palestinian activists engaged in playful activism on the short-video platform through vernacular creativity in various forms of TikTok’s #challenges.¹³

This special issue aims to bring satirical activism to the center of enquiries on the politics of youth culture and digital publics during and beyond the COVID-19 pandemic. China is used as an ethnographic site in studies of human creativity and ingenuity among ordinary people who bore the economic, emotional, and psychological costs of COVID-related restrictions and lockdowns. The special issue examines digital interventions in the public sphere enacted through lighthearted, creative, and satirical communications in multimedia forms (from text and meme to short video and livestreaming) across digital platforms and networks. It highlights the lighthearted and humorous nature of such digital practices in everyday life, the vernacular and mundane agency of China’s digital generation, and the limitation of satirical activism as a form of social advocacy and political engagement.

12. Sabine Damir-Geilsdorf and Stephan Milich, eds., *Creative Resistance: Political Humor in the Arab Uprisings* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2020), 11.

13. Laura Cervi and Tom Divon, “Playful Activism: Memetic Performances of Palestinian Resistance in TikTok #Challenges,” *Social Media + Society* 9, no. 1 (2023), <https://doi.org/10.1177/20563051231157607>.

The Special Issue

The special issue on satirical activism and youth culture in and beyond COVID-19 China includes five articles from interdisciplinary scholars in digital media and communication studies, cultural studies, sociology, Chinese language and literature studies, and gender studies. It has discussed how everyday users, influencers, bloggers, journalists, activists, and professional comedians have used humor, comedy, and satire to deal with psychological stress and existential crisis and engage with social and political issues before, during, and after COVID lockdowns in China. It addresses two broad questions through empirical studies: (1) What are the new and evolving forms and genres of satirical activism in China? And (2) What is the implication of satirical activism on Chinese youth culture?

The special issue starts with Ying Zhu and Junqi Peng's article "From *Diaosi* to *Sang* to *Tangping*: The Chinese DST Culture Online," which sets the stage for the other articles and provide contextual discussions on the origin, evolution, and impact of youth cyber culture. The youth cyber culture is represented by three cultural phenomena in the title, *diaosi*, *sang*, and *tangping* (DST). The article explores the motivations, perspectives, and actions of participants of DST as well as reactions and responses of the Chinese government and the media. The three phenomena start with *diaosi*, a Chinese slang for underdogs, which first appeared on the Chinese Internet in 2010, capturing youth discontent amid cutthroat competition in China. The term became the most popular word by 2012 but would soon be overtaken by *sang* (bereavement), a new youth phenomenon akin to beatnik/hippie/punk culture in the West, which manifested itself in a variety of catchphrases and memes that amplified the weary and suffering human body. The rise in 2021 of the *tangping* (lying flat) movement continues the self-deprecating and self-mockery ethos among Chinese young people living under unrealistic societal pressures and political constraints to express moments of relief and freedom.

Such moments of relief are the focus of investigation in Shaohua Guo's article, "Moments of 'Madness': Cynicism in Times of COVID." The paper zeroes in on several transient yet significant moments that emerged in China during November- to December 2022, when the country's strict zero-COVID policy transitioned to an abrupt lift of all restrictions. It analyzes three types of phenomena to deepen our understanding of how cynicism operates as a coping mechanism for individuals to make sense of their everyday lives: (1) "literatures of madness" (*fafeng wenxue*), (2) group crawls on college campuses, and (3) pandemic jokes (*duanzi*) satirizing policy changes. The three selected moments illustrate a spectrum of cynical responses that challenge the distinctions between the real and the fictional, truths and rumors, and the playful and the political. Consequently, cynicism emerges as a diverse set of strategies on both textual and performative levels, aiding in the interpretation of the absurd. Further, an investigation of these cases sheds light on understanding contemporary youth culture in the context of a global health crisis. Amid the popular rhetoric about youth celebrating passivity, all three cases, as moments of madness, illustrate the liminal space in which youth navigates between passivity and agency, between disillusionment and hope.

In many moments of madness during the pandemic, Chinese women have led the charge in writing, laughing, performing, mimicking, or appropriating forms of satirical engagement with COVID politics and in COVID protests.¹⁴ Despite the social barriers, cultural bias and political repression, Chinese young women have been at the forefront of satirical activism. Their humorous writings—literally and metaphorically—onto their bodies and their society can make people laugh, think, and make changes. Three articles in this special issue are devoted to the gendered

14. This can be illustrated by the "White Paper Movement" led by female university students in November 2022. See Matt Murphy, "China's Protests: Blank Paper Becomes the Symbol of Rare Demonstrations," BBC News, November 28, 2022, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-china-63778871>.

perspective on Chinese satirical activism and youth culture in the networked, digital, and social media era.

Howard Choy studies humorous and satirical imagetexts found in eleven Chinese women's online diaries composed between 2020 and 2022 during the time of COVID-19, in his article "Laughter in the time of Coronavirus: Epidemic Humor and Satire in Chinese Women's Digital Diaries." The eleven Chinese female diarists recorded their everyday life from Wuhan, Xi'an, Chongqing, Chengdu, Shanghai, and New York City, across six Chinese social media platforms. These feminine expressions of comic feelings point to communal laughter as a strategy for survival, subversion, and non-violent resistance against unprecedented state surveillance and interventions in everyday life.

Epidemic humor and satire in these lockdown narratives are approached from interdisciplinary perspectives, including sociological studies, political philosophy, psychological theory, and literary criticism. The same approach is also taken by Shaoyu Tang in "Political In-Between: Streaming Stand-Up Comedy and Feminist Reckoning in Contemporary Mainland China." The article examines stand-up comedy, based on seven-month participant observation in comedy clubs in mainland China. Tang analyzes social media comments about women stand-up comedians and conducts textual analyses of comedians' performances in a popular online variety show, *Roast & Rock*. The article reveals the twisted joking and laughing relationships in female stand-up comedy and in turn argues that the debates over "what is the proper women's voice in public culture," or what Tang calls "feminist reckoning," have become a politicized feminist expression that is performed and embodied in-between online streaming and live club comedies. The article asks in which ways comedy and feminism can gesture political critique and resistance around public culture. It argues that the (re)politicization of stand-up comedy offers possibilities to make feminist media practices visible in mainland China's censored public culture.

Navigating the tension between freedom of expression and pervasive state intrusion, Chinese pan-feminist communities employ new discursive strategies, which Jingxue Zhang and Charlie Yi Zhang call “feminist counter-appropriation” in their coauthored article “The Power of Citation: Feminist Counter-Appropriation of State Discourses in Post-Reform China.” The article examines two types of counter-appropriation practices: *deliberate counter-appropriation* that involves parodic and satirical redeployment of the party-state’s stigmatizing framing of feminism and *promotional counter-appropriation* that embraces the sanitized version of feminism following the statist and nationalist logic yet creates room for discussion of gender-related social inequalities. These tactics entail strategic adaptation of the state-sanctioned discourses by feminist netizens to tell their own stories while shielding them from punitive measures. While acknowledging inherent limitations and susceptibility to manipulation by conservative forces, the article argues that feminist counter-appropriation demonstrates the resilience of civil societies in navigating censorship and oppression to subvert the oppressive intentions of the party bureaucrats, expose inherent flaws of the official languages, and challenge the entrenched gender inequalities in post-reform China.

Conclusion

Although COVID-19 provides the context of many of the case studies in the special issue, the significance of these studies goes beyond the COVID-19 context or China. The five articles in the special issue illustrate new dynamics and politics of the relationship between humor and satire, youth, popular culture, and citizen activism in the era of digital connectivity and vernacular creativity. As a safe entry into and exit from taboo topics or censorship, these practices can be wry and artfully witty in their entertaining and affective value or motivating and stirring in their instrumental value.

It is important to point out that what are powerful tools for artists, comedians, satirists, and activists in nonviolent resistance can be appropriated and used by the ruling elites to create, propagate, and manipulate messages of their own, as in the case of China, as illustrated by digital parody art *The Last G7* in 2021—created by an independent computer graphic illustrator to mock the G7 Summit as the Last Supper—that went viral in Chinese social media and made international headlines as the Chinese official visual propaganda,¹⁵ thus blurring the boundary between grassroots political activism, censorship, and propaganda. The political authorities and business establishments can also employ or reappropriate parodies to promote mainstream discourses and diffuse the potential of satirical activism for social change¹⁶ and as such blur the boundary between activism and propaganda. This is an area that calls for critical scholarship grounded in empirical research. I look forward to seeing more such work on the roles of humor and satire in manufacturing and managing consent and opinion.

15. Manya Koetse, “Digital Art or Visual Propaganda? China’s New Wave of Online Political Satire,” *What’s on Weibo*, June 19, 2021, <https://www.whatsonweibo.com/digital-art-or-visual-propaganda-chinas-new-wave-of-online-political-satire/>.

16. Shuning Lu, “I Have a Meme: Political Satire on the Chinese Internet,” *Sixth Tone*, October 20, 2016, <https://www.sixthtone.com/news/1454>.