Received: 2 June 2022 | Accepted: 14 November 2023

DOI: 10.1111/aman.13980

AMERICAN ANTHROPOLOGIST

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Can anthropologists get humor? A collaborative experiment on empathetic knowing at a time of predicaments

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Abstract

As a pandemic-era collaborative writing project undertaken amid rising geopolitical tensions, this article demonstrates understanding humor in contemporary China as an ethnographic project leading toward deep, empathetic knowledge at a time when in-person fieldwork became difficult. Through deciphering and translating layered meanings "encrypted" in and intentions signaled by humor in a new comedy program launched in 2021, we dive deep into the lively social life in contemporary China. Humor, via "thick description," offers valuable insights into life in "fieldsites" that were hard to access during the pandemic time, amid political tensions. It provides a unique lens to examine the unspoken but shared sentiments in societies where humor has become a fundamental mode of public expression. It alerts us to existential anxieties in social life, the subtle voices of social critique, and the yearning for empathy. Humor is not only a valuable object for anthropological inquiry but also a vantage point to reflect on ethnographic methodology and epistemology. We examine humor, with its sentimental and ethical potentialities, and through spontaneous collaboration of mutual support, envision new possibilities in anthropological knowledge production.

KEYWORDS
China anthropology, collaboration, empathy, humor, knowledge production

Resumen

Como un proyecto de escritura colaborativa en la era de la pandemia realizado en medio de crecientes tensiones geopolíticas, este artículo demuestra el entender el humor en la China contemporánea como un proyecto etnográfico que lleva a un conocimiento profundo, empático cuando el trabajo de campo en persona llegó a ser difícil. A través de descifrar y traducir significados en capas "encriptados" e intenciones indicadas por el humor en un nuevo programa humorístico lanzado en 2021, profundizamos en la vida social animada en la China contemporánea. El humor, vía "descripción gruesa", ofrece conocimiento valioso en la vida en los "*fieldsites*" que fueron

Jing Xu and Yang Zhan contributed equally to this study.

difíciles de acceder durante el tiempo de la pandemia, en medio de tensiones políticas. Provee un lente único para examinar los sentimientos tácitos pero compartidos en sociedades donde el humor ha llegado a ser un modo fundamental de expresión pública. Nos alerta sobre ansiedades existenciales en la vida social, las voces sutiles de la crítica social y el anhelo por empatía. El humor no es solo un objeto valioso para la investigación antropológica sino también una posición ventajosa para reflexionar sobre la metodología y la epistemología antropológicas. Examinamos el humor, con sus potencialidades sentimentales y éticas, y a través de colaboración espontánea de apoyo mutuo, concebimos nuevas posibilidades en la producción de conocimiento antropológico. [humor, antropología de China, colaboración, empatía, producción de conocimiento]

摘要

本文是疫情和日益紧张的地缘政治局势之下的互助写作产物。我们将理解当代中国的幽默作为一种民族志实践, 在实地田野调查困难重重的境况下, 这种实践有助于达致深度、共情的知识。本文以 2021年在中国推出的一档新型喜剧节目为案例, 通过破解和翻译幽默所 "加密 "的多重含义以及幽默所暗示的各种意图, 深入探讨当代中国生动活泼的社会生活。由于疫情以及地缘政治的缘故, 有些 "田野点"难以企及, 而幽默则通过"深描"提供了关乎这些田野点生活状况的宝贵洞见。在幽默已成为一种基本公共表达方式的社会中, 它成为一个独特的视角来审视那些含蓄却又共通的情感, 也提醒我们去辨明社会生活中存在论意义上的焦虑、微妙的社会批判之音以及人们对共情的渴望。幽默不仅是人类学研究的重要对象, 也是反思人类学方法论和认识论的有利视角。我们通过阐述幽默的情感和伦理面向, 并且经由自发的互助合作, 来展望人类学知识生产新的可能性。

INTRODUCTION

In a small research workshop during the first year of the COVID-19 pandemic, we heard this comment from an anthropologist based in the United States: "People in China call their president 'Xi Dada.'" Literally translated as "big-big," the phrase "Dada" actually means "Uncle Xi" or "Big Daddy Xi." From this observation, the anthropologist extended an informal critique: "How can Chinese individuals ever attain a mature sense of self?" Unspoken but clearly implied was the conviction that the familiar American version of the individual and self should be the universal definition, if not the superior framework for evaluation. People in the "free world" would not revere a ruler to such an extent as to address him as "Uncle/Big Daddy." The assumption was that those living in authoritarian regimes do not have an autonomous, individual self. Comments like these are encountered often in American news and social media.[1] Yes, "Xi Dada" has become a popular vernacular phrase in China. True, there are people in China who do revere the president. But some China observers did not seem to understand that on many occasions, Chinese people use this term as a sarcastic expression, and many who hear it also understand the humor.

Through a case study of a new, popular comedy program, we dive deep into the lively social life of people in contemporary China and bring to light Chinese millennials' creative social critique. Joining other anthropologists, we see humor as fundamentally a creative social practice and in some contexts a political action, rather than merely a literary form or some ephemeral reflection of reality (Goldstein, 2003; Trnka, 2011). Humor is predicated upon social relations and produces shared sentiments and knowledge. In other words, humor is only effective when the audience gets it (Bernal, 2013). But beyond humor as anthropological material, we highlight the affinity between humor and ethnography itself. We urge anthropologists to take humor seriously: cultural translation via collecting and understanding ethnographic material is a central problem in anthropology, and humor is an important yet difficult form of cultural translation. To decipher unstated messages in humor, discern its layered social critique and intentionality, and elucidate its signaling-via-encryption function (Flamson & Bryant, 2013), intimate local knowledge and ethnographic thick description are essential. Therefore, humor offers unique insights into the enduring challenges and value of anthropological cross-cultural translation. Examining humor is also an act of paying tribute to the people we study, as humor encapsulates their ethnographic insights into their own society.

The comment in the opening vignette could have come from anyone, and the fact that the comment came from an anthropologist is not especially important. What matters is that the ideas expressed reflect deep-seated US centrism, which echoes the essentialized binary imaginary of current "New Cold War" narrative.[2] Encountering these ideas reminds us of the workings of "the geopolitics of knowledge" with which anthropological knowledge is ultimately enmeshed (Mignolo, 2000; Zhan, 2022). Our article aims to understand Chinese humor as an ethnographic project in the current moment, one of escalating Sino-US tension. Under the trope of "the authoritarian Other versus the liberal democratic self" in the current geopolitical atmosphere, Chinese people are often relegated to a convenient category of those manipulated by authorities and without any possibility of self-reflection, an abstraction that builds on and reinforces biases. This black-and-white narrative discourages sophisticated and productive intellectual communication. Even for those who have sincere interest in deep China, lacking a sensibility toward the unspoken yet important social sentiments still runs the risk of Othering in the name of understanding, of politicizing differences at the cost of obscuring shared political struggles. The current geopolitical tension poses further challenges for knowledge production. Scholars are often caught up in the geopolitical tensions that tend to produce polarized stances instead of nuanced conversations, facing difficulties articulating their positions (Zhan, 2022). Chinese scholars' national origin easily feeds into simplified imaginations.[3] As a recent report suggests, many Chinese scholars in Euro-American institutions can hardly "talk about China without feeling guilty, apologetic or defensive" in peer reviews, academic talks, and other professional venues (Zhang & Kho, 2022).[4]

For a long time, we did not know how to respond in such situations, worrying that whatever we said would be misinterpreted as venting Chinese nationalistic sentiment or defending power regimes. We both grew up in China and received anthropology training in the United States. As diaspora anthropologists, we are caught up in between. It was through talking about our shared predicament that we came to realize that our difficulties could serve as an epistemic advantage to reflect upon anthropological knowledge production in our time. Such honest and empathic sharing motivated us to write this article together.

We were baffled by the fact that some Chinese terms were taken at face value and packaged into anthropological critique in English, yet the deeper meanings and intentions were not just lost in translation—they were ignored completely. A very important aspect that these simplistic interpretations missed was the humor. In a similar manner to using "Xi Dada," for example, during the Shanghai lockdown that exposed bureaucratic impotency, angry netizens used "Daddy" (*die*) on Weibo to refer to the Chinese government, but as a satiric expression—as in, "Looks like everyone has been slapped awake by daddy." The "Xi Dada/Daddy" case reminds us of a parallel example, "Dong Wang," a popular phrase among Chinese netizens, a nickname for Donald Trump during his presidency. Literally meaning "King of Omniscience," it refers to "Donald Trump the Know-It-All." Rather than expressing their reverence for a foreign ruler, many Chinese netizens used this phrase to mock Trump for acting as if he knew it all—for example, on coronavirus. Another example is that Americans have also, called Trump "daddy," some as satire and others out of reverence.[5] Why, then, did some anthropologists not "get" humor in Chinese public culture? Or, to borrow an exemplary metaphor, why do anthropologists obsess with "twitching" but fail to see "winking" (Geertz, 1973, 7)—and further, why couldn't they see that the winking is funny?

What would we miss if we missed humor in today's China? Chinese humor has a long tradition, with distinctive linguistic features and rich social, cultural, and political critique. Built upon this evolving tradition, humor is becoming a vital mode of public expression today, with various forms flourishing, from formal comedy programs to ingenious internet expressions. The popularity of humor is intimately connected to its environment, where the government exerts tight control and close surveillance over information flow. In this challenging environment, humor becomes ubiquitous yet precarious. Moreover, the Chinese term *youmo*, literally meaning "subtle and deep silence," indicates that humor discloses people's intimate self-reflections, tacit mutual-signaling and empathy, and subtle social and political critique. Although understudied, humor in public culture sheds unique light on "deep China," the psychological texture and moral pulse of Chinese society (Kleinman et al., 2011), at a time when in-person fieldwork is challenging and when superficial, problematic binaries dominate discussion of "China." Through the case of China, we argue that studying humor can generate deep knowledge about latent yet crucial social sentiments and provide a unique window into engaging with a society's undercurrents.

We take humor seriously as a unique cross-cultural translation practice that offers valuable epistemological insights on making anthropology empathetic at a challenging time. We allow ourselves to be driven by our shared sensibilities and concerns, which leads to our recognition of the importance of "getting humor." On the first level, getting humor is a communicative action. Getting humor is about knowing the texts, the contexts, and the various possibilities of recontextualization so that the underlying meanings and ironies can emerge in communication. On the second level, getting humor is a social or even political action/practice. Without fully spelling out yet comprehending the implicit messages, people who get humor together recognize their shared sensibilities and common circumstances. Such mutual recognition builds the foundation for solidarity and support. Theoretically, getting humor is an exemplary effort toward empathetic knowing. At this historical moment, empathic knowing can potentially equip us with the ability to sense commonality and achieve some form of reconciliation in a world that has become increasingly divided. Empathic knowing is informed by a pragmatic approach to anthropological knowledge production: We not only attempt to contribute to anthropological theory through our analysis but also hope anthropological knowledge can help us to muddle through life in the current predicament. Therefore, our article is not a critique of thoughts or actions that appear to be "off" or "miss the point" but an invitation for making anthropology more collaborative and empathic.

UNDERSTRANDING CHINESE HUMOR (*YOUMO*) AS AN ETHNOGRAPHIC PROJECT

Humor is ubiquitous in human societies and public culture. It is important for understanding cultural sentiments and lived experience, and it is also crucial in anthropological work—for example, in establishing rapport and mutual understanding with interlocutors during fieldwork. Yet humor is also hard to explain, translate, or generalize, and is therefore understudied in anthropology (H. Driessen, 2016). Our perspective is inspired by the philosophy of "relevance theory" (Sperber & Wilson, 1996), which has guided studies of humor in many behavioral science fields but is rarely applied in cultural anthropology. Relevance theory starts with this fundamental assumption: that speakers and listeners are engaged in a joint effort to infer intentions and search for relevance. Human communication is not merely about semantic encoding and decoding. It is about the relevance of the speaker's intended message to the audience. For example, what makes a joke "funny" is not just the surface content but a relationship between the surface content and the implied meaning understood by both the speaker and the audience (Flamson & Bryant, 2013). Moreover, humor, and especially staged comedy, is a typical case of "ostensive-inferential communication" (Wilson & Sperber, 2004, 611) because it's an overt act to direct an audience's attention toward the communicator's intention, yet understanding such intention requires inferences.

Relevance theory aligns with our vision of humor as an ethnographic project: we aim to empathetically understand the relevance of humor produced by and for urban Chinese millennials through discerning its intentions and bringing to light the tacit knowledge and latent sentiments. Even the naming of modern Chinese humor, *youmo*, points to deep knowledge, inferential communication, and empathy. *Youmo* is a neologism, combining transliteration from English and suitable Chinese characters of layered cultural meanings (Davis & Chey, 2013, 2–3). Two adjectives, *you* (deep and subtle) and *mo* (tacit), combined into *youmo*, originally meaning "silence" in ancient poetry and Buddhist texts, gained new life as "humor." When the Republican-era intellectual Lin Yutang coined this term (Lin, [1934] 2000), he was inspired by traditional Daoist thought of irony in life and the Confucian principle of reasonableness (Qian, 2007), but he also emphasized the spirit of sympathy and humanizing.[6]

Recently, humor in public expression has gained traction in cultural anthropology, as it provides an important lens to understand contemporary political culture. Political parodies are booming, both in liberal, democratic countries (Boyer & Yurchak, 2010; M. Driessen, 2019; Haugerud, 2013; Molé, 2013) and in societies under centralized or authoritarian regimes (Bernal, 2013; Trnka, 2011). Although observers of political humor in liberal societies have pointed out the limits of its critical power (Boyer & Yurchak, 2010; Molé, 2013), we join other scholars to consider certain forms of Chinese humor as political acts in and of themselves (Mina, 2014). Chinese humor has such double effects of providing an alternative lens to "observe not only reality but also representations of reality," where a centralized regime produces dominant discourses that "overdetermine representations of reality" (Bernal, 2013, 304).

Moreover, our study goes beyond recent anthropological discussion on explicit political parodies to emphasize the broader implications of humor in understanding important undercurrents—the deep and tacit (*youmo*)—of a society. Popular culture of social critique in China, ranging from playful mockery to massive protest on the internet, had become a new cultural genre by 2011 (Meng, 2011; Yang, 2009). However, regulation on entertainment has been tightened recently, such as the "Curb Entertainment Rules," policies issued by the National Radio and Television Administration (NRTA) in 2011 and 2013 that delineated and prohibited certain types of television entertainment programs to prevent deviation from the official discourse (Chin, 2016). The discourse of positive energy (*zhengnengliang*) became an all-encompassing yet semantically vague guideline for popular culture (Yang, 2022, 32–35; Richaud, 2021). The term generally refers to messages and content that signify positive instead of negative or critical sentiments. It became a catchphrase in Xi's era, linking citizens' self-pursuit with nationalistic agendas, as the president and the government appropriated this discourse and made it into the official ideology of promoting public cultural content that portrays the nation and the party in a positive manner. Entertainment shows scramble to realign themselves with the "happiness campaigns"; at the same time new genres of comedy gained traction, transgressing the hegemonic "positive energy" discourse through covert yet powerful artistic tactics (Chen & Gao, 2021).

Against this backdrop, we focus on a new and popular comedy program, *Super Sketch Show*, to examine how tactful social critique was "encrypted" by the producers of humor yet manifest to and amplified by the audience. "Humor as signaling via encryption" (Flamson & Bryant, 2013), a concept inspired by relevance theory, explains humor as a means of honestly signaling compatibility between the speakers and the audience by relying on the detection of shared but "encrypted" information. This idea helps us understand Chinese humor today, which grows from a rich tradition of wordplay and flourishes in a controlled and monitored information environment, where people must come up with more "encrypted" forms of signaling. So far, humor is diffusing across the public and has become a popular mode of social expression, transmitting and facilitating shared yet tacit understanding. It offers invaluable—and to some extent, irreplaceable—insights into what is unspoken but at stake in Chinese society. We highlight humor's unique value for understanding the latent social, moral, and political sentiments in China, sentiments that are otherwise easily obscured or misread. A striking example is the recent White Paper movement, the eruption of such latent sentiments. The defining symbol of this movement, a blank sheet of paper, marked the culmination of encrypted signaling.

Finally, humor is not only a valuable *object* for anthropological inquiry but also provides a vantage point to reflect on ethnographic epistemology. Humor shares a similar epistemological commitment with ethnography, making the familiar strange and making the strange familiar (H. Driessen, 2015). What's more, humor is people's own ethnographic representation of their reality, their own social analysis, which makes it all the more valuable to anthropology. Chinese humor has gained traction in a variety of fields, such as history (Yue, 2010), literature (Rea, 2015), communication studies (Meng, 2011), and cultural studies (Mina, 2014), but it is rarely addressed in anthropology as a focal theme. "Encrypted" Chinese humor poses a challenge for ethnographic translation, partly due to its linguistic characteristics. As literary scholars have observed, Chinese humor

might lose its effect and charm when translated, because its force partly depends on "the rich tonal characteristics of Chinese dialects, with their multiple possibilities for verbal punning" (Ding, 2013, 233). But translating Chinese humor also presents an opportunity for anthropologists and reminds us of our ethnographic responsibility: At a time when popular discourse reinforces polarization and simplification, bringing the unspoken to light, however difficult it is, becomes an exercise of communication and humanization. Such ethical potentialities offer inspirations for collaborative anthropology and for ethnography more broadly. Our work is a humble attempt in this spirit.

COLLABORATIVE ANTHROPOLOGY AND EMPATHETIC KNOWING

This article is a piece of pandemic writing, as COVID shaped it at both methodological and epistemological levels. First, the pandemic forced scholars to experiment with digital materials as in-person fieldwork became more difficult. Many lamented the impossibility of China as a fieldsite, with its stringent COVID rules and surveillance politics. But this means it's even more important for anthropologists to explore alternative ways to learn about what's happening on the ground. In new Chinese comedy shows, an emerging, popular form of public culture, we found much-needed emotional comfort and intellectual inspiration. Interpreting humor offered us a unique opportunity for vicarious fieldwork to gain up-to-date knowledge of China.

Our collaborative writing is driven by a shared epistemological dilemma amid intensifying ideological tension between China and the United States. Since the COVID outbreak, we have seen the rise of "New Cold War" rhetoric entangled with pandemic nationalism. US anthropology has never been completely outside of US racial and ethnic politics. Anthropologists have been reflecting on the racial politics within US anthropology for over three decades. Taking colonial history as the key reference point, anthropologists of the African diaspora have offered powerful critique of anthropological theory and method (Allen & Jobson, 2016). The recent movement of world anthropologies has further brought world power systems to the fore to advocate plural anthropologies in knowledge production (Ribeiro & Escobar, 2020). Compared to the abovementioned critical standpoints, postsocialism and the unfolding "New Cold War" has acquired less weight. The effort to articulate the epistemic difficulties in talking about China has not been sufficient. We do not agree with the hypernationalistic and statist rhetoric, but we also find the liberal discourse unconvincing. It is in this context that we advocate for empathetic knowing in anthropological research on China as our response to the predicament.

In our writing process, humor was not just a research subject but also something that informed our collaborative methodology. The kind of empathetic knowing that we showcase in this study starts from our own empathy toward each other. Though we have known each other for a long time, we had never thought about collaborative research before. We come from different theoretical orientations. Our research topics and even political sensibilities diverge. We were used to working like lone wolves in our respective fieldsites.[7] Our collaboration started when we shared our own experiences of watching Chinese comedy shows and laughing together in our Zoom meetings. In these moments of shared vulnerabilities, laughing and discussing humor together brought us comfort, mutual support, and eventually new research interests.

Collaborative work is becoming a new frontier in anthropology (Boyer & Marcus, 2021). Particularly, situated within the feminist tradition, collaborative approaches to anthropology "recenter ethnography along dialogical lines" (Lassiter, 2005) and "challenge narrow Western conceptions of autonomy and authorship through shared authority and fluid roles" (Hong, 2019). We would like to highlight the emotional aspects of collaboration, especially the entanglement of frustration and laughter, of the positive and the negative. As discussed earlier, this piece is driven by dissatisfaction, as we were both puzzled and frustrated by the blunt simplification of Chinese experience in recent years. We were united by such feelings and were motivated to do something about them. At the same time, our shared sense of humor also matters. It allowed us to gain confirmation and reassurance through each other's laughter. Our collaboration did not start from a monolithic theoretical interest but rather a desire to speak for ourselves. It is our shared sense of humor that really makes us transcend differences in research specialization and made this collaboration possible in the first place.

Empathetic knowing extends to our relationship with our research subjects. We write about the cultural practice of the post-1980s (equivalent to millennials in the West) in urban China, our own generation of the middle-class population. Born in the Reform era, this generation came of age during China's massive social change and is now caught up in the society's various contradictions (Chen & Gao, 2021). What made them anxious or angry? What made them laugh? How were they coping with their social and political reality? We examine these questions both as anthropologists and as "subjects" of anthropologists. This epistemological position is of course an experiment, one that requires careful contextualization and communication. It is both an intellectual and political project. We hope to humanize the people we study and at the same time explore new analytical possibilities.

PUTTING "SUPER SKETCH SHOW" IN CONTEXT

Super Sketch Show, a new comedy program launched in 2021, was produced by the Chinese media company MeWe. One of the company's founders, Ma Dong, is the son of one of China's most well-known comedians, Ma Ji, a crosstalk performer who rose to fame after his brilliant performance at China's first National Spring Festival Gala in 1983. Through a shared sense of humor in comedies, Chinese people created a shared understanding of

reality and future in the postreform era. Very quickly, thanks to the popularization of TV, crosstalk and folk sketch shows became the most popular comedic genres for their effective humor, sarcastic lines, and mocking traditions. In the early to mid-2010s, China's provincial TV stations and online platforms created comedy competition shows. The majority of the performers were heavily influenced by the style of the Spring Festival Gala.

However, crosstalk and folk sketch shows have become less successful in recent years. Many Chinese viewers found that the folk sketch shows were "just not funny" anymore.[8] *Super Sketch Show* was born at this moment. To distance it from traditional folk sketch shows, the producer of the *Super Sketch Show* deliberately avoided using the Chinese term 小品 (*xiaopin*, folk sketch show), even though much of the content in the show fused various old and new comedic genres. At the beginning of the program, Ma Dong, the host, introduced the English term "sketch" and asked the performers to discuss "what is sketch." Through differentiating the older folk sketch shows and this "sketch" show linguistically, the producer and performers consciously created a new and refreshing form of comedy, catering to Chinese urban millennials' tastes.

We examined two performances in the *Super Sketch Show* that strongly resonated with Chinese urban millennials. One performance can be considered a social critique, where the performers offer a satire of young people's addiction to digital devices. The other performance is a political fable. It is not an explicit political parody, but it highlights the richness and potential of humor.

"WHERE HAS THE TIME GONE": SOCIAL CRITIQUE AND EMPATHETIC KNOWLEDGE

Humor works when it is grounded in shared experience, which builds the foundation for contextualization and recontextualization, enabling mutual recognition, social bonding, and layered critique. Quite a few sketch show pieces had successfully captured the shared feelings and common struggles of young people today. "Where Has the Time Gone" is one example. This 14-minute show told a story about a young scriptwriter who tried to meet a deadline but failed miserably because he was constantly distracted by electronics and social media. The show offered vivid social analysis about Chinese urban professionals' love/hate relationship with social media. It was the most-viewed and widely discussed sketch show on Chinese internet in 2021.

Shared experience as the context of jokes

The main character, a scriptwriter, was played by a scriptwriter in real life, which accentuated the comedy's self-mocking and self-ridiculing tone. The young scriptwriter came onto the stage talking on his phone. He promised his boss to submit his manuscript before midnight. "If I cannot submit it by the deadline, then I am a dog," the scriptwriter said, hanging up after reassuring his boss. The clock on the wall pointed to 10 p.m. He had 2 h to finish the work. This opening resonates with young professionals trapped in a toxic work culture.

Just as the scriptwriter started working on his laptop, an actor dressed in a green vest popped out onto the stage. Thanks to the messages on the green vest, the audience immediately knew that he represented the WeChat app, the most successful Chinese social media app. The scriptwriter warned the "WeChat" figure that he had work due in 2 h and asked "WeChat" to make an announcement so that he would be left alone until he finished the work. "WeChat" sarcastically told the scriptwriter to stop "showing up flags" (*li* flag), a Chinese-English hybrid word, depicting situations where a person ambitiously announced goals that turned out to be unrealizable. Then "WeChat" pulled out a box of small red flags representing all those ambitious statements the scriptwriter had made before. Most WeChat users could relate to this scriptwriter's experience of being distracted by social media. At this point, the show was no longer about a scriptwriter on the stage. It was about people having a chance to laugh about their own weaknesses together.

The young scriptwriter failed to resist "WeChat" when it persuaded him to "just read a few posts while being here already." "WeChat" pulled out a scroll of posts on his timeline and read them out loud. "WeChat" reported to the scriptwriter that his boss, Mr. Yang, had updated his trip every step on the way, from boarding the plane and passing through security to getting off the plane. The scriptwriter commented in a sarcastic tone, "No one would like to see his boss live broadcasting the trip." He was about to ignore the updates sent from Mr. Yang. Yet "WeChat" reminded him that his colleagues had all "liked" Mr. Yang's posts. Reluctantly, the scriptwriter picked up a heart-shaped token and handed it over to "WeChat," saying "then here it is." The audience all laughed because this small and subtle interaction with "WeChat" happens to almost every user every day. Typically, in Chinese work culture, employees are pressured to give "likes" when their superiors have posted updates on WeChat.

Then "WeChat" tried to direct the scriptwriter to a new post. The scriptwriter wanted to ignore it. But "WeChat" announced, "If you don't click on this post, then you are not Chinese!" The audience laughed at this punchline because they recognized this tactic—jokingly resorting to nationalistic rhetoric—that online media use to attract readership. "WeChat" did not stop there. It read out loud another title to the scriptwriter: "*The Most Beautiful Women on Earth, You Would Not Believe Who Is Ranked Number One.*" It was another widely used title on the internet, and the audience immediately recognized it. The scriptwriter then said, "Let me scroll down to the bottom and see who the most beautiful woman really is," and "WeChat" announced, "the most beautiful women are our mothers! Please click the link below to purchase a gift for your mother." The audience laughed even harder. They recognized not only this trick of internet ads but also how the tricks work: people read the posts because they are morally obligated to agree with the familiar trope of praising mother love.

The first 5 min of the show were effective, encapsulating many familiar scenarios. Someone must be part of this particular internet culture to identify with the character on the stage. Without shared experience, the punchlines lose relevance. Those who struggle with similar dilemmas would empathize with the scriptwriter and appreciate the humor.

Social analysis of difference

After rounds of interactions with "WeChat," the scriptwriter found out that half an hour had already passed. In panic, he drove "WeChat" away. Just as he tried to concentrate on his writing, another figure appeared. The figure came onto the stage with a mechanical sound in the background. Chinese internet users would recognize the sound of Weibo reminders. Weibo is the Chinese equivalent of Twitter. The "Weibo" figure dressed in yellow and came out with a vendor cart that very much resembled the carts on Chinese trains. "Melons! Melons! Fresh melons!" "Weibo" acted like a train vendor. Melons (*gua*), again, is an internet idiom. Chinese millennials use the term to refer to juicy and scandalous news, such as pop stars getting divorced. Relatedly, "eating melons" (*chi-gua*) refers to participating in the online spectacle of watching and commenting on such scandalous news. "Weibo" approached the scriptwriter, put a napkin around his neck, and prepared him for the melons. The scriptwriter could not resist.

The show captured how social media platforms work. Different from WeChat, Weibo brings information beyond one's friend circle. Any Weibo user would know that Weibo always recommends "hot searches" (*re-sou*) and ranking hot topics in circles of entertainment, businesses, and politics by the minute. Weibo users often could not resist glancing through the most widely discussed topics, just like the scriptwriter on the stage. He asked "Weibo" to bring him some "hot melon." "Weibo" said in a mysterious voice that "a star with the surname Xu was in a romantic relationship." The scriptwriter showed strong interest and guessed who that famous star was. Then "Weibo" revealed that "Xu Zhisheng's love relationship is exposed." But Xuzhisheng only began to rise to fame as a new stand-up comedian. The scriptwriter complained that "the melon has no taste at all!" But "Weibo" continued to make a big fuss about trivial things to, again, generate internet traffic. "Weibo" suddenly could not control the melon in his hand. The melon turned upside down and then turned over again. The scriptwriter said the punchline: "Fanzhuan la!" *Fanzhuan*, literally meaning "turning over," refers to scandals being debunked or new revelations appearing online. This punchline speaks to the audience's experience on Weibo, where sensational stories can easily turn in an opposite direction.

When "Weibo" left the stage, the scriptwriter tried to start writing for the third time. Yet he found himself facing the ultimate challenge, TikTok. The "TikTok" figure came with demon-like ears. When "TikTok" appeared, the scriptwriter begged: "*A dou* [the nickname for *douyin*, the Chinese term for TikTok], finally you came. Could you please let me go, as I really cannot see you tonight!" Then "TikTok" smirked and said, "How on earth are you going to resist me? Today I will take a double click from you with my 'guessing what you like' function." Laughter broke out in the audience as TikTok users recognized the addictiveness of the app. The scriptwriters kept resisting but only found himself humming the catchy music with "TikTok." Then the scriptwriter threw hearts and likes at "TikTok," screaming "just take them all!" As "TikTok" started suggesting more videos, the scriptwriter convinced himself to spend 5 min with "TikTok." He danced with "TikTok" to a piece of romantic music, having a good time. When the scriptwriter thanked "TikTok" for a happy 5 min, he found out 1 h had already passed.

The sketch show weaves together Chinese millennials' online experience in a highly condensed manner. It also succinctly teases apart subtle differences between digital platforms: WeChat facilitates interactions of people within a social circle, Weibo allows people to quickly browse what is going on in public discourse and is essential in creating the fan culture, and TikTok uses algorithms to lock in its users. Sorting out the subtle differences requires comedians to develop deep understanding of the cultural logic and then articulate the logic on behalf of the audience. Such sharp, "ethnographic"-like representation earns praise from the audience. One of the comments said: "How come they have got every interaction I had with my phone? I feel like they must have set up a camera in my bedroom."

Empathetic knowledge and self-reflexivity

When "TikTok" left, the scriptwriter realized in shock that he only had 1 min before the deadline. There was no chance he could finish his work. The scriptwriter spoke to himself: "Who designed this? It must be a devil to gulf our time! No, no, I won't give up. Even if there is only one minute left, I will work on my manuscript." He started typing on his laptop frantically. Right at that moment, a man dressed exactly like him came onto the stage and patted him on his shoulder. The scriptwriter responded with a panicked voice: "Who on earth are you?" The man sat down and said slowly, "I am yourself in a dark night. It's midnight already. I am sorry that I am born human." The audience burst into laughter as they recognized the last sentence, *sheng er weiren*, *wo hen baoqian*. First written by a Japanese poet and then associated with writer Osamu Dazai's seminal work *Human Lost*, this statement conveys an apologetic attitude of a person unable to fit into society. In Chinese popular culture, it signals a deep sense of alienation, of being excluded from society. Since the 2010s, Chinese urban millennials have appropriated this statement to express a depressed feeling in a lighthearted manner.

The scriptwriter responded to his "mirror self" in a shaky voice: "Oh, it's the EMO's turn." He typed even more frantically and spoke in a high volume: "The world does not deserve all this! I am a true dog!" Then the whole sketch show ended in the background music. This last part of the

show is dense because many cultural symbols appeared in less than 10 s. "EMO" is used by many Chinese youths when they feel down. "The world does not deserve all this" (*renjian bu zhide*) was a popular internet idiom intended to comfort those who pour their hearts and souls into the world but then get heartbroken. Young people took on this to distance themselves from the failure and frustration in life. The last line, "I am a real dog," refers back to the beginning scene, when the scriptwriter came onto the stage and said if he could not finish his work on time he would be "a dog." The intertextuality ties the show together. The expression "I am a real dog" was also a popular idiom among gamers. Since the Chinese pronunciation of "dog" is *gou* (狗), the same as *gou* (苟), the idiom refers to ignoble existence and conveys a sense of powerlessness.

This last part brought the show to the next level. It resonated with Chinese millennials' self-reflection of their situation. They were not blindly "trapped" in social media. This show captured that level of self-reflexivity and self-mockery and manifest it to the audiences through encrypted yet ostensive communication.

"TO LAUGH OR TO DIE": A POLITICAL FABLE

Humor offers a creative method to detect and convey political sentiments beneath the surface. "Laugh! Piolevich" is a superb example. Set up in an extreme authoritarian context, this piece is about performing humor in a place where humor is banned. It is simultaneously a meta-comedy, a comedy about comedy itself, and a political fable, therefore offering meta-reflections on humor and power.

Humor and censoring humor

This comedy tells a fictional story in an interrogation room at a Nazi-occupied area bordering the USSR on the eve of Germany's surrender during World War II. The target of interrogation was comedians, and the purpose was to kill humor and deter those who dare to make people laugh. The plot consists of four parts. First, a prelude to present the background of the story and the prohibition and hence death of humor under authoritarian censorship. Second, a short dialogue between two comedians, before the interrogation, to explain how they were caught because they secretly practiced jokes to animals in the goose shed and chicken coop late at night, and did so to save their friend Piolevich, an imprisoned comedian who slipped into a coma because his "humor cells" had died, a dire consequence of the "humor ban." Third, the interrogation: conversations between comedians and a Nazi officer. As an interlude, the news arrived that Piolevich was rescued, and the comedians decided not to disguise their humor anymore. They were killed by the officer while telling jokes. And fourth, the end: the news of Germany's surrender arrived, and a patriotic Soviet song was played. The officer recalled a joke told by the comedians before being shot. He burst out laughing.

The show began with a voiceover to set the stage: "In 1942, in the Nazi-occupied area, at a cracking-joke [*doumenzi*] performance, a senior officer died from laughing too hard. The army immediately issued a decree prohibiting all funny behavior [*gaoxiao*] and ordering whoever found performing humor be executed on the spot. Three years have passed, no more laughter in the occupied area. At this very moment, nobody knows yet that it is the night before the victory of the World Anti-Fascist War."

This brief introduction already shows creative hybridity, allusion, and recontextualization, setting the tone for the entire story. First, introducing a remote and absurd historical context, this narration alludes to China's reality, escalating restrictions on entertainment content, and tightening censorship. Moreover, it blends Chinese vernacular words into a different context, hence a poignant reminder of a familiar world: For example, *doumenzi*, "telling jokes," is a traditional phrase in northern Chinese dialect, especially in Tianjin, a city well known for its culture of humor. *Gaoxiao*, a verb/noun/adjective in one, is a new internet word, an overarching term for humor. Even the phrase "the World Anti-Fascist War" has a distinct Chinese flavor, given the Chinese experience in WWII.

The show proceeds with jokes expressed in encrypted codes, and only those familiar with Chinese humor in its various forms and genres can understand. Therefore, it requires multiple layers of unpacking to decrypt its intentions.

Wink or twitch

The first critical juncture is the transition from the pre-interrogation dialogue to interrogation, presenting the key message, "to laugh, unbridled" (*siwujidan de xiaoba*). The two comedians, Student and Teacher, discovered that they were caught for the same reason and motivated by the same goal, to save their friend Piolevich. Student lamented, "Wish I could tell jokes for him, even if just perform *diaodeng* [falling from the bench or stool]!" He suddenly fell from the bench. On the surface, this action doesn't make any sense. But those familiar with Chinese crosstalk (*xiangsheng*) would immediately recognize the pun: "falling from the bench" is a skill to portray the state of shock in some unexpected situation. Teacher told him a secret: "Tonight at 10 p.m., Dr. Robert and a few students will rescue him [Piolevich] and escape from here." Student asked, "Where are they heading to?" Teacher answered, pointing afar, "To Moscow. To [Saint] Petersburg!" Student added, "To watch comedy. To see the circus. And to visit Stanislavski!" Here they evoke a familiar name to a Chinese audience: Stanislavski's method, a Soviet actor training system, has been quite influential in the

People's Republic of China (PRC). Teacher responded: "Laugh! Laugh, unbridled!" He turned to Student, "But we, we must first live on." Student echoed, "Live on! Go to Moscow!" At that moment, the officer entered the room, and the two comedians immediately fell from the bench, startled. After reiterating the crime of and punishment for funny behavior, Officer asked if they just committed a crime: "Did you just *diaodeng* [falling from the bench]?" Officer was, apparently, an insider of the comedy culture. He understood the pun.

The whole interrogation proceeded as an intense, cyclic game: Officer perceptively detected humor, and comedians denied and disguised humor, but ironically via more covert, sometimes unintentional, forms of humor. Another pivotal moment came when Officer received the news that a doctor and several students rescued a prisoner, now on their way to cross the border. When the comedians heard the news, Student asked Teacher, "What should we do?" The officer announced that he would pause the interrogation and go out to arrest those prison breakers. When he was about to open the door and leave the room, the comedians' action echoed the beginning of the interrogation: they fell from the bench again.

Despite the same action, what they said was the opposite, from "twitching" to "winking" in ethnographic terms. Last time, when the officer accused them of doing humor, they denied it. They explained that it was just an accidental slipping, using a word in northeastern Chinese dialect, *chu liu hua*. This time, in contrast, before Officer said anything, they proactively confessed, "Officer! We fell from the bench!" A loud applause emerged from the audience: they got the message. The two comedians overtly violated the ban. They started performing intentional and ostensive humor in order to keep Officer from leaving the room and gain precious time for their friend Piolevich. Evoking a traditional genre of humor, they went on to tell lame jokes from the internet until one joke became another pivotal point in the layered political satire.

Terror and memory

Student cracked this joke: "One day, a small ant got lost and couldn't find the way home. A friend of his happened to pass by. The ant asked his friend: 'Hi bro! How do you find the way returning to the ant nest [*hui yi wo*]?' The friend paused for a moment, then asked him back, singing: 'With a smile or a very silence?'" To understand this joke, one has to: (1) recognize a homophonic pun circulating on the internet in recent years; and (2) connect it to the lyrics of a hit Mandarin pop song inscribed in the memory of Chinese millennials, our generation. The pun involves two phrases with similar sounds but different tones: *huí yǐ wō* (回蚁窝), "return to the ant nest," and *huí yì wǒ* (回忆我), "remember me." The sentence in the famous lyrics goes like this: "How would you remember me, with a smile or a very silence?"

Both comedians laughed. Teacher raised his hand, "I have another one [joke]!" But the officer began to shoot them. The audience went silent, a solemn look on many faces. Student and Teacher exchanged cheerful remarks about their effort being not in vain. Echoing the scene before the interrogation started, Student said, "Being able to laugh out, unbridledly … [more gunshots at them] … is so good." Both died. But the "remember me/return to the ant nest" joke did not end there.

The next moment, the news of Germany's surrender was broadcast. Then, with the Soviet song "March of the Defenders of Moscow" playing in the background, Officer recalled and retold this joke: "How would you *hui yi wo* [return to the ant colony], with a smile or a very silence?" This cold-looking man suddenly laughed out loud. The show ended when the enforcer of punishment and perpetrator of crime against humor, speech, and humanity openly expressed his appreciation for a joke. Appropriated in this ironic but tragic context, the *hui yi wo* joke was no longer a lame *duanzi*—a playful, light joke (Yang & Jiang, 2015), or an unexpected "cold joke" (*leng xiaohua*) (Hong, 2019). It gained new significance, pointing to the heavy question of censorship, memory, and terror: How will we be remembered by those who come after us? Will our story be told, and our laughter permitted, or will it be silenced?

The spoken and the unspoken

This piece mixed traditional Chinese humor with contemporary elements, such as stand-up comedy, internet jokes, and pop songs. But beyond the surface content of "humor-about-humor," when the jokes and the comedic skills are appropriated in the seemingly fictional context of authoritarian censorship, "Laugh! Piolevich" signals an ostensive yet tacit political message. Most creatively, the comedic reflections and the political connotations were expressed simultaneously, in the same joke. For example, one genre of Chinese humor contested during the interrogation was "reversed words" (*fan zheng hua*), words spoken in a reversed order. But the comedians denied the officer's accusation, insisting that they were not performing that—they were just speaking a different language called *boxi*. The "reversed words" joke, honoring traditional Chinese crosstalk, echoes popular and creative remix culture in today's China. A recent example is netizens using reversed texts to circumvent, mock, and resist censorship during the Wuhan lockdown at the beginning of COVID-19 pandemic (Yang, 2022, 135–42).

This show exemplified multivocal dialogicality (Bakhtin, 1984), that one's voice always "appropriates" voices of others in concrete sociocultural settings, with a history of meanings (Wertsch, 1993). Every joke was in dialogue with something else, a genre of speech, a political story, or even multiple things and speech genres. Therefore, audiences were brought into a complex maze of meaning. To navigate this maze, we need to be familiar with jargon and genres referenced in this piece and also attuned to the political reality in China. Through deciphering intertwined chains of

references, the audience can empathize with the characters in the story, appreciate the beauty of "unbridled laughing," and grasp the intended political critique.

Many netizens praised this performance. One video commentary on Bilibili, a popular platform among young people in China, even had this bold title: "'Laugh! Piolevich mocks the government for banning humor, but it [humor] is our faith!" The video blogger asked: "On banning entertainment, who do you think this show is mocking?" On the show's final award ceremony, "Laugh! Piolevich" was awarded "the best comedy" prize. The committee applauded this piece as "a love letter to comedians." Notably, the formal announcement only mentioned its artistic merit, without saying anything about its political connotation.[9] But watching that award ceremony, we sensed what was unspoken: a strategy like the aesthetic principle of "leaving space" (*liubai*) in classical Chinese art (Yang, 2021, 973). The committee's reaction mirrored the drama itself: With the theme of saving humor in a place where humor is banned, everything ostensibly said on stage quietly directed people to what was unsaid. This comedy and the reactions from its live audience, professional reviewers, online commentators, and us together constitute an ethnographic allegory (Clifford, 1986) of power, speech, and empathetic knowing.

CONCLUSION

In May 2023, while we were revising this article, this news broke: A joke had terminated a stand-up comedian's career and resulted in a $2 million fine to his company, which might strike a blow to the company's booming stand-up commedy program in China.[10] Many fans of Chinese comedy posted the "Piolevichi" video to tacitly signal their frustration. At a minimum, this article has documentary value when anthropology has yet to pay attention to Chinese humor today, like the lyrics appropriated in Piolevichi: "How will you remember me, with a smile or silence?"

Moreover, we take understanding Chinese humor as an ethnographic project. Whereas "China" has increasingly become a politicized abstraction, through "decrypting" humor in popular culture, we gained deep knowledge about the complex textures of Chinese social life and its undercurrents. These cultural materials shed light on what is most *relevant* to Chinese millennials' everyday life today, and from their own perspectives, beyond simplistic political statements and Othering discourses that have dominated media and scholarly discussion. We approach humor not just as a type of cultural material but as an epistemological lens for doing anthropology. We were drawn to Chinese humor for its intriguing charm: the charm of blending the dark and the bright, and the painful and the amusing, in creative ways. The very ability to endure and even delight in contradictions is the foundation for creating and appreciating humor.[11] Recognizing and understanding this condition is also crucial for anthropological sensibilities as we interpret and translate culture. Chinese society, with its dazzling paradoxes and looming uncertainties, is an important site for exercising such sensibilities. The Chinese government has been forcefully promoting a political campaign of "positive energy" that imposes itself onto every domain of public culture and broadens its censorship on social critique. The phenomenal popularity of new entertainment programs such as *Super Sketch Show*, however, reminds us of the undercurrents of "negative energy." It reveals the desire for creative social critique despite the enormous challenges of overt resistance and signals people's yearning for expression, empathy, and solidarity. Such humor allows us to discern existential anxieties, tacit knowledge, and latent sentiments that are crucial for understanding a society. Through reading and writing about such humor, we extend our empathy to those who endure, through "an art of endurance" (Yang, 2022, 72),[12] the many predicaments of living, in China and beyond.

Someone left a comment after watching "Laugh! Piolevich": "Those who get it get it [*dong de dou dong*]."[12] This comment echoes our key message: the alignment between humor and ethnography in empathetic knowing. The materials presented in this article are people's own ethnographic representation and critique of their society. Beneath those hilarious lines and playful moments is sincere exposure of vulnerabilities and reflexive analysis of social realities, the core of ethnography. Humor, via "thick description," offers unique insights into life in "fieldsites" hard to access during the pandemic and/or due to political tensions. We examine humor to advocate for creative ways to produce anthropological knowledge, and China is a critical case reminding anthropologists of our responsibility. Despite and because of all the obstacles against in-person fieldwork and amid dehumanizing political discourses, we need to attune ourselves to materials and methods like humor (*youmo*)—the deep, the subtle, the tacit, and the silent. It requires shared knowledge and accurate contextualization. It demands deciphering communicative intentions often hidden below the surface of people's statements and behaviors. "Getting it" is what anthropologists should pursue in knowledge production—that is, to understand others through grounded experience instead of predetermined categories.

Empathetic knowing through humor requires effort. Even though we share some common background with our research subjects, we are not saying that "native" anthropologists necessarily understand humor better. Humor provides the most subtle and rich cultural materials as well as ethnographic reflections. No one can "get it" easily. Not every joke comes naturally to us. For example, neither of us are familiar with the TikTok platform, and we had to consult frequent users to understand its addictive features. We also needed to conduct research to understand some of the folk Chinese comedic concepts, such as *diaodeng*. We learned a great deal in the process of "decrypting" humor together. And we all need to stay reflective about our own positionalities. But taking the effort to "get it" leads us to an epistemic direction more sensitive to our interlocutors' experience, and therefore closer to deep understanding. The willingness to make the effort helps us become more conscious about the arrogance and ignorance embedded in the power dynamics of knowledge production.

Empathetic knowing calls for new forms of collaboration among anthropologists. Before this collaboration, our "fieldsites" were more or less fixed. But the collaborative work shaped a new territory of inquiry for both of us. Above all, our collaboration is an open-ended process,

accomplished through equal contribution, thoroughly out of mutual support and into mutual support, in an increasingly precarious institutional environment.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The authors contributed equally to this piece and their names are alphabetically ordered. Jing Xu's work was funded by a Hunt Postdoctoral Fellowship from the Wenner-Gren Foundation. Yang Zhan's work was funded by the Hong Kong Research Grant Council (Grant numbers 15603121 and 25607320). We have received generous support from many people. We thank the editor Dr. Elizabeth Chin and three anonymous reviewers for the time and energy they put into our manuscript. Their critical feedback in every step of the review process greatly helped improve our work. We presented this work in the 2022 AAA meeting, and we are grateful to our co-panelists, Drs. Jie Yang, Mengqi Wang, Jing Wang, and Mengzhu An, for their sincere encouragement and valuable comments. We also appreciate the wise advice from Drs. M. Gabriela Torres, Chaoxiong Zhang, and Chunyan Su.

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ENDNOTES

[1] We use this example not to criticize any individual scholar, but to expose and reflect on some implicit, yet widespread biases unaddressed in our field.
[2] There have been many reflections on the existing power systems in anthropology. This paper does not include an elaborative discussion of these works, because to elucidate the linkages and divergences between these movements in American anthropology and Chinese studies is beyond its scope.
[3] Many scholars haven spoken about these dilemmas, for example: https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2021/oct/05/west-china-threat-real-place-domestic-agendas
[4] See the recently terminated, controversial "China Initiative," a program launched under the Trump administration's Department of Justice that had prosecuted numerous researchers of Chinese origins and had created a climate of fear among the scientific community: https://www.nature.com/articles/d41586-022-00555-z
[5] See for example: https://www.redbubble.com/shop/daddy+trump+posters; https://jezebel.com/matt-gaetz-days-after-calling-trump-daddy-suddenly-1849786748
[6] Although Lin initially defined humor in a narrow way, to distinguish it from other forms such as parody and mocking, *youmo* has evolved into a generic term in China that covers a wide spectrum of all things funny.
[7] Despite recent discussions on collaborative anthropology, most anthropologists still find it hard to identify a common ground, from power positioning to epistemological envisioning, to collaborate.
[8] This is a comment that we encounter frequently on Chinese online forums and social media platforms.
[9] https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=O9_T71IerqU&t=233s
[10] https://www.cnn.com/2023/05/17/asia/chinese-firm-fined-army-joke-intl-hnk/index.html
[11] See for example, an anthropological perspective on stand-up comedy: https://allegralaboratory.net/learning-to-make-people-laugh-a-semiotic-anthropology-of-stand-up-comedy/
[12] Yang (2022) used this phrase to characterize those who endured the Wuhan Lockdown through persistent diary writing. Such diary writing employed creative tactics of expression and bottom-up, active exploration of social critique.

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How to cite this article: Xu, Jing, and Yang Zhan. 2024. "Can anthropologists get humor? A collaborative experiment on empathetic knowing at a time of predicaments." *American Anthropologist* 126: 434–45. https://doi.org/10.1111/aman.13980

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