

# From Court Fools to Stage Puppets: Country Bumpkins in the Skits on CCTV's Spring Festival Gala, 1983–2022

Hongjian Wang\*

## Abstract

The satiric skits (*xiaopin*) on the annual Spring Festival Gala on China Central Television (CCTV) are arguably the most popular performances in the most-watched show on the most-censored television channel in China in the reform era. Through witty satire of emerging social problems, these performances help the audience to relieve anxieties accumulated in a fast-changing society. In particular, country bumpkin characters play a crucial role in providing a platform for the populace and the state to meet, contest, negotiate and compromise. However, they suddenly disappeared after Xi Jinping took power in 2012, which, examined in the context of socialist comedy, signals a new stage of China's post-socialist condition.

**Keywords:** CCTV Spring Festival Gala; satiric skit (*xiaopin*); country bumpkins; post-socialist condition; China

---

Scholarship on modern China tends to focus on violence, suffering and trauma. While some pioneering scholars did venture into the comic world of modern China earlier,<sup>1</sup> it is only in recent years that studies of modern Chinese humour and comedy have gained momentum, revealing long-overlooked vigour, dynamism and complexities in Chinese culture and society.<sup>2</sup> In particular, a 2019 edited volume, *Maoist Laughter*, corrects the stereotypical grim view of Maoist China by demonstrating that prior to the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976), not only did the government actively tap into comedy for propaganda purposes but writers and artists also exercised ingenious innovations to create healthy laughter that contributed to the construction of a new sense of subjectivity and new social relationships. The end of the Cultural Revolution witnessed a revival of not only comedy in mainland China but also the government's interest in manipulating and regulating it for its own objectives. Although the social

\* School of Languages and Cultures, Purdue University, West Lafayette, IN, USA. Email: [wang2512@purdue.edu](mailto:wang2512@purdue.edu).

1 See Link 1984, 2007; Du 1995; 1998.

2 See Bao 2008; Davis and Chey 2013; Rea 2015; Zhu, Wang and McGrath 2019. See also a 2008 special issue on “Comic visions of modern China” in *Modern Chinese Literature and Culture* 20(2) and a 2018 special issue on “Comic mutations” in *Journal of Chinese Cinemas* 12(2).

environment under “reform and opening-up” and the rapid development of technology in the forms of television, internet and social media have allowed writers and artists unprecedented space to be innovative, playful, irreverent and provocative, the state’s surveillance is never far away. This situation creates an intriguing cultural and political dynamic that begs further scholarly attention.

This paper delves into that dynamic by examining the satiric skits (*xiaopin* 小品) performed at the Spring Festival Gala, which is broadcast annually on the state-run China Central Television (CCTV).<sup>3</sup> The CCTV gala has been an integral part of Chinese people’s New Year celebrations since its inception in 1983. Attracting millions of domestic and overseas viewers every year, it has the largest viewing audience of any programme in China. The popularity of the gala’s *xiaopin* is particularly interesting because although the *xiaopin* offers a witty satire of emerging social problems in the reform era, hence providing a comedic valve for the members of the audience to relieve their accumulated anxieties in a fast-changing society, these sketches are written and performed under the close scrutiny of state censorship. As arguably the most popular performance in the most-watched show on China’s most-censored television channel, the gala *xiaopin* finds itself caught between the audience’s desire for provocation and the state’s demands for propaganda. Relying on the audience’s immediate response for success and on the state’s permission for survival, the gala *xiaopin* provides a unique lens through which to investigate political discourse in contemporary China and specifically how the populace and the state contest and engage with each other through laughter.

It is also worth noting that since Xi Jinping’s 习近平 rise to power in November 2012, and particularly following on from his Mao-style talk on literature and art in October 2014,<sup>4</sup> Chinese audiences have complained bitterly about the lack of funny content in the gala *xiaopin*. This is partly because the positive characters, whom the gala *xiaopin* used to ridicule, have become almost perfect and always triumphant, glowing with “the true, the good, and the beautiful” (*zhen shan mei* 真善美), as mandated in Xi’s talk. More significantly, there has been a sudden disappearance of unruly characters in *xiaopin* under Xi. This paper examines how the country bumpkin, a prominent character type in the CCTV gala *xiaopin* that used to provide a platform through which the populace and the state could meet, contest, negotiate and compromise in the reform era, has been transformed from a court fool to a stage puppet. In the context of the history of peasant heroes in socialist comedy, this transformation signals a new stage in China’s post-socialist condition.

3 For a succinct account of the history, format and popularity of *xiaopin*, see Du 1998. The term “*xiaopin*” has been translated as “theatrical skits” (Du 1998), “mini-drama” (Zhao 1998), “comic skits” (Mu 2004) and “comic sketches” (Liu 2010).

4 Xi 2014.

## Court Fools with Chinese Characteristics

Since the gala's inception in 1983, country bumpkins have played an important role in its *xiaopin* sketches. During the very first broadcast of the gala, renowned comedian Yan Shunkai 严顺开 (1937–2017) delivered a one-minute-and-20-second-long stand-up performance entitled “Ah Q's monologue” (*A Q de dubai* 阿 Q 的独白).<sup>5</sup> Ah Q, the protagonist of Lu Xun's 鲁迅 (1881–1936) influential novella, “The true story of Ah Q” (*A Q zhengzuan* 阿 Q 正传, 1921), is probably the most well-known peasant in modern China and embodies the essential Chinese “national character” (*guominxing* 国民性): he is ignorant, superstitious, lazy, selfish, slavish, opportunistic, self-deceptive and hopelessly complacent. In his performance, Yan depicts two examples of Ah Q's notorious “spiritual victories” (*jingshen shengli* 精神胜利): when slapped in the face for using the surname Zhao, he indirectly insults his victimizer by calling the abuse a bastard son's rebellion; and when chastised for a romantic advance, he congratulates himself for getting rid of the nuisance of sexual desire.

The skit is amusing not only because it satirizes Ah Q's absurdity but also because it is vulgar, or in Mikhail Bakhtin's word, “grotesque.”<sup>6</sup> In this short act, Ah Q curses three times (“f\*\*\* your mother” *mamade* 妈妈的), once even at the audience, and unabashedly refers to sexual desire (“craving women” *xiangnüren* 想女人) and sexual intercourse (“sleep with you” *gen ni shuijiao* 跟你睡觉). In the video recording of the performance, the audience laughs hard at such vulgarity. Their laughter comes largely from shock – not at hearing the country bumpkin's crude language but at hearing such profanities uttered on the stage of a tightly censored state-run gala. In other words, from the beginning, *xiaopin* owes its success and popularity to the characters' unruliness, which allows the audience an opportunity to exercise a vicarious irreverence towards the solemn state.

Ah Q's lack of respect in this skit is particularly striking when compared with the original story. Lu Xun interweaves direct quotes from Ah Q in a formal, Westernized and sophisticated overarching narrative. In so doing, Ah Q's vulgarity is mediated through the author's voice, which creates a distance between the character and the reader, enhancing the reader's sense of superiority and the story's seriousness. By contrast, Yan's performance removes the authorial voice and strips away the surrounding narrative, positioning the character face-to-face with and on the same level as the audience, which not only allows the character to tease and taunt the audience directly but also gives the audience a chance to share the character's irreverence.

That said, Yan's portrayal of Ah Q's vulgarity is still restrained. At least three factors are at work to keep a distance between the audience and the vulgarity. First, the skit was adapted from one of the most important novellas by one of

5 See <https://v.qq.com/x/page/h08070z0dcs.html>. Accessed 15 June 2021.

6 For a discussion of grotesque realism, see Bakhtin 1984[1965], 18–29.

the most revered modern Chinese writers, which links the performance to a serious literary tradition and lends it gravity. Second, Yan is wearing a black Western suit and a black bowtie. The “wrong” costume testifies to Yan’s acting talent on the one hand, but on the other hand, it packages Ah Q’s vulgarities in the opposite signifiers: he looks educated, sophisticated, modern and decent. Last but not least, Yan’s Ah Q uses Mandarin, which differs in diction, pronunciation and connotation from the Zhejiang dialect that the original Ah Q is supposed to use. As Jin Liu perceptively notes, in *xiaopin* performances, Mandarin usually represents “the central, official discourse from above,” while local dialects often articulate “the peripheral, folkloric discourse.”<sup>7</sup> Yan’s use of the official-sounding Mandarin partially neutralizes Ah Q’s vulgarity and helps to channel the audience’s laughter *at* Ah Q, as opposed to *with* him. In other words, because of the character’s literary origins and the actor’s attire and language, the audience is three steps removed from the raw, earthy vulgarities of the country bumpkin, which is probably why the skit was allowed to be performed at the gala in the first place. The contrast between vulgarity and restraint serves as *xiaopin*’s inborn mission in that it pleases two masters at the same time – the audience, which thirsts for vicarious provocation, and the state, which strives to maintain control.

In the early years of the CCTV gala, *xiaopin* sketches experimented with combinations of various comic routines such as mime, opera, crosstalk, gymnastics, and so on, before becoming established as a 10–15 minute theatrical comedy sketch with a focus on a topical social issue. It was not until 1987, in a skit entitled “In front of the delivery room” (*Chanfang menqian* 产房门前), that the country bumpkin character found the most fitting and lasting self-expression.<sup>8</sup> This skit dramatizes a brief encounter between a young peasant and a young government cadre who are waiting in front of a delivery room for their wives to give birth. The two characters are polar opposites in almost every way. The cadre wears a sleek Mao suit and shiny leather shoes, his hair lightly permed and neatly combed. The peasant, in contrast, wears an unflattering jacket, loose-fitting pants, cloth shoes and a military hat with the brim flipped upwards. The cadre talks in standard Mandarin and looks calm, confident and cultured; the peasant speaks Shaanxi dialect and has no control of his emotions or actions. More importantly, the cadre appears liberal and scientifically minded about his child’s sex, whereas the peasant is unapologetically obsessed with having a son.

The skit promotes gender equality by satirizing the traditional Chinese gender bias against girls, an issue that became increasingly pressing as the country adopted the one-child policy (1980–2015). However, despite the propagandist message, the sketch became an immediate hit because it not only mocks the peasant’s farcical fixation on a male heir but also takes a ruthless swipe at the hypocrisy of the cadre. While the audience laughs at the obvious contradiction between the peasant’s scientific claims and his insistence on his wife’s vinegar

7 Liu 2010, 104.

8 See <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qfDSR5NHuzo>. Accessed 15 June 2021.

consumption – a traditional superstition that associates a craving for sour food with being pregnant with a son – it laughs even harder when the cadre reveals his own preference for a son right after giving a pompous speech on the importance of gender balance. Although the audience obviously enjoys the peasant’s slapstick reactions – yelling, crying, jumping and stomping – upon receiving bad news (by mistake), and his laughing, singing, dancing and hip-wagging when given good news, it seems to derive more pleasure from seeing the cadre collapse onto a bench, moaning in anguish, after hearing the news of the birth of his daughter.

More interestingly, language plays a prominent role in the skit’s satire: both characters use a combination of formal and colloquial speeches yet for starkly different reasons. The Mandarin-speaking cadre uses formal language most of the time, making him sound scientific and authoritative. When he lectures the peasant, he adopts a cadence and style typically heard in official speeches, such as the frequent use of “Ah” (*a* 啊), an interrogative word to prompt audience reflection and agreement, and “this” (*zhege* 这个), a filler word often used to show serious thinking. Irony strikes when he inadvertently reveals his own deep-seated gender bias. Inspired by the birth of a boy to another family, he unselfconsciously resorts to colloquial language, touting a theory on “delivery-room gender contagion”: boys are often born together in a “bang” (*dingling-guanglang* 叮呤咣啷) while baby girls flock in a “whimper” (*xilihuala* 稀里哗啦). Compared with his earlier formal style, his use of colloquial language sounds much more natural, joyful, sincere and confident. This sudden switch betrays not only the cadre’s true feelings but the artificiality and emptiness of state propaganda spouted in the official speech style.

By contrast, the dialect-speaking peasant, whose speech is dominated by colloquialisms, freely appropriates formal expressions from diverse official contexts, in usually the wrong context, for personal matters. For example, he tells his wife that “persistence is victory” (*jianchi jiushi shengli* 坚持就是胜利), a revolutionary slogan from the Communist era, to encourage her to maintain faith in having a son. To reiterate the importance of having a son, he stresses that everyone in the village has “placed ardent hope” (*jiyu le yinqie de xiwang* 寄予了殷切的希望) in them, a formal phrase used to describe more serious matters. He even claims that he has “undertaken investigation and research” (*jingguo diaocha yanjiu* 经过调查研究) to find the hospital with the highest male birth rate, justifying his unscientific behaviour with scientific jargon.

The contrast between these expressions’ official meanings and the peasant’s vulgar use of them generates an immediate comic effect. On a deeper level, the peasant’s blatant disregard for the official contexts and determined selectiveness in his appropriation evince a strong sense of freedom and agency that is exhilaratingly refreshing. His encounter with the cadre succinctly demonstrates how he picks and chooses official discourse as he sees fit. For the most part, he bluntly resists the cadre’s lecture, but at the end, upon hearing about the birth of his son and the cadre’s daughter, he readily applies the cadre’s own theory – “we are

balanced” (*zanmen lia pinghengle* 咱们俩平衡了) – dealing the cadre a final blow. Despite his ignorance and conservatism, the peasant is the true master of discourse. Instead of passively accepting state propaganda and indoctrination, he shrewdly twists official discourse to serve his personal goals. The members of the audience may not agree with his gender bias, as they laugh at him, but they also laugh with him and share and enjoy his temporary victory over the almighty state.

“In front of the delivery room” represents a significant development in the country bumpkin character in the CCTV gala *xiaopin*. In this sketch, the peasant finds his unique look, voice and position. In the following decades, these characters continue to appear ridiculous and act foolishly, but at the same time, they also, out of their naiveté and vulgarity, confront the mainstream represented by the urban, the intellectual and the official in a playful way. They may be the laughingstock, but they also reveal the absurdity of the mainstream, exposing ignorance, hypocrisy, greed, corruption, and so on. More importantly, by inviting the audience to laugh with them, they transform *xiaopin* into a platform where the populace and the state can meet, contest, negotiate and compromise.

In one sense, the country bumpkin characters resemble the court fools in medieval Europe.<sup>9</sup> Court fools (clowns or jesters) in the Middle Ages were lower-class entertainers who were invited to court to perform under the auspices of their patrons. They had distinct costumes (motley, bells and marotte) and a variety of skills (storytelling, acrobatics, mimicry and so on). They were traditionally licensed to speak the truth boldly and mock everybody without being punished.<sup>10</sup> They also tended to voice their criticism indirectly instead of using outright blasphemy or iconoclasm.<sup>11</sup> Similarly, the appearance of the country bumpkins in the CCTV gala has to be approved by the state – every performance has to pass strict censorship before reaching the stage. The bumpkins have a distinctively rustic presence, including in their appearance, language, ideas and behaviour. Their deliberate offences are tolerated because of their presumed ignorance and folly. Last but not least, their provocative mockery is mostly indirect and somewhat restrained, and so pleases both the audience and the state at once.

The gala’s country bumpkin skits enjoyed a golden age following the emergence of Zhao Benshan 赵本山 (born 1957), a peasant comedian from north-east China who came to represent the epitome of the country bumpkin characters. Zhao came from a background of *errenzhuan* 二人转, a comic and grotesque folk performance enjoyed in the rural north-east.<sup>12</sup> Often wearing a loose-fitting Mao suit and an old military hat with a warped brim, he was China’s Charlie Chaplin on the CCTV gala stage. Having performed at all the galas from 1990 to 2011, except in 1994, he was synonymous with *xiaopin*. During his gala career, which spanned over two decades, he created an unforgettable peasant jester

9 For a comprehensive account of the social and literary history of the fool in the West, see Welsford 1935.

10 Erasmus 1913[1509], 71; Kaiser 1963, 7; Mullini 1985, 99.

11 Warde 1913, 2; Welsford 1935, 317; Goldsmith 1955, 78.

12 For an introduction to *errenzhuan* and its commercial development in the 21st century, see Ma 2019.

character, who, speaking in a distinct north-east dialect, was at once timid and candid, clumsy and witty, unsophisticated and insightful. Together with other peasant comedians from the north-east, Zhao not only brought national fame to the north-eastern humour, but, more importantly, brought the common sense of the north-eastern peasant to the national stage. It is this seemingly naïve common sense that scathingly deflects the ignorance, hypocrisy, greed and corruption of the urban, the intellectual and the official.

Jin Liu, focusing on the linguistic features of Zhao's performance, has cogently argued that his peripheral, folkloric discourse conforms to and subverts the official discourse at the same time.<sup>13</sup> This is in line with *xiaopin's* inborn mission to serve both the audience and the state at the same time. Throughout Zhao's career on the CCTV gala, he incorporated propaganda in his performances, advocating positive social relations, promoting state campaigns and lauding the greatness of the Party leadership. At the same time, however, he also perfected the satirical skills of a country bumpkin, which was the main reason for his popularity.

In 1995, Zhao staged a skit entitled "Uncle Niu gets promoted" (*Niu dashu tigan* 牛大叔提干).<sup>14</sup> It centres on an old meter reader called Niu, played by Zhao, who visits a state-run company on behalf of his village to request some window glass, which has been long promised to the village school. Niu has never managed to meet Manager Ma because the latter is always busy with business meals. This time, Ma is absent again because he has been hospitalized from working too hard – by overeating and drinking. To Niu's surprise, because of his physical resemblance to Ma, Secretary Hu invites him to impersonate the manager – hence, he is "promoted" – and go drinking with Ma's business partners. Niu accepts this invitation for the sake of the window glass. While preparing for his role, Niu comes to realize the extravagance of Ma's business meals and is stunned to see that when the guests decide not to come at the last minute, Hu simply orders the food to be thrown away. At the same time, he sends Niu away empty handed because "the company is under too tight a budget to fulfil the villagers' request." The skit's criticism of government bureaucracy, extravagance, waste and corruption is clear and pronounced. As such, it fitted well with the anti-corruption campaign of the 1990s. However, instead of a direct attack on the wrong doers, the skit uses a fool, an uneducated meter reader from the countryside, to voice the criticism.

Zhao, in his usual costume, portrays a cowardly and naïve country bumpkin, whose folly, in sharp contrast to the secretary's worldliness, is at once laughable and thought provoking. For example, Niu appears nervous in front of the authorities: his legs and back are slightly bent, his head is lowered and he looks up meekly at Hu. He keeps worrying about being exposed and either being prosecuted by the anti-counterfeit campaign or investigated by *Oriental Horizon* (*Dongfang shikong* 东方时空), a popular morning show on CCTV. When it is

13 Liu 2010.

14 See <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rukOglb15DI>. Accessed 15 June 2021.



time for the guests to arrive, he almost faints and nearly escapes. Hu, by comparison, is confident and composed, seeing nothing problematic in this fraud. Niu is also simple-minded: since Ma is always at business meals, he seriously wonders if the company has turned into a restaurant. When people shower him with excessive respect by mistake, he concludes, without irony, that a company manager differs from a meter reader by the way he carries his briefcase. When learning that Hu invented the stringing up of turtle eggs, an expensive delicacy, to facilitate their consumption, he expresses genuine admiration for Hu's talent. While Niu is the obvious object of ridicule, it is actually through his cowardice and naiveté that government corruption is indirectly satirized amid the confusion of right and wrong, rampant snobbery and obsequiousness, and the limitless squandering of public funds.

Moreover, the skit mocks the official speech/work style of cadres through Niu's simplicity. When requested to prepare a toast for the guests, he merely manages to come up with a plain invitation to "eat well and drink well" (*chihao hehao* 吃好喝好), as he is completely unacquainted with the elaborate feast rituals in the cities. Urged on by the unimpressed Hu, he reverses the word order and repeats the same phrase twice. When Hu offers to write a script for him, he suddenly gets excited and imitates Ma's commanding style by chanting "I say" (*woshuo* 我说), "this," and "Ah" in an emphatic manner. However, even with Hu's script, all he can produce is a combination of these three words in exaggerated intonations. The real reason for this gibberish is his illiteracy, but to the audience, this "speech" is a brilliant and mocking re-enactment of the official speeches that are all too familiar to them: ghost-written, jargon-ridden, pretentious and hollow, just like the empty promise of the window glass.

Finally, Niu's language is vulgar, which, in addition to adding comic effect, is rich in implication. For example, when Hu promises to fulfil Niu's wish if he agrees to impersonate the manager, Niu, overjoyed, exclaims that he will do anything for the window glass, even "pretend to be a grandson" (*zhuangsunzi* 装孙子). This is pejorative slang to describe someone who pretends to be pitiable, since a grandson usually has the lowest status in a Chinese patriarchal family. Niu's use of the phrase apparently distorts its original meaning, as he is merely declaring his full cooperation. However, by offering to debase himself to the level of a despicable grandson, as an opposite example of the manager, he foregrounds his actual powerless status in front of the state.

When he first sees the turtle eggs strung together, Niu good-humouredly describes the dish with a north-eastern slang phrase, *chedan* 扯蛋 ("stretching the egg"), which means "bullshit." On the one hand, the unlikely association testifies to Niu's naiveté; on the other, it draws the audience's attention to the absurdity of government extravagance. More interestingly, when Hu coldly turns him away after he is no longer useful, Niu, instead of launching a protest, asks for a string of turtle eggs so that he can explain his failure to the villagers: "although I didn't get the window glass, I've learnt *chedan* here." This vulgar statement apparently refers to the waste of public money on extravagant



banquets, but it also points at the secretary's blatant lie, hence Niu discreetly inserts an insult at the state that turns a blind eye to the ordinary people's plight. For Chinese audiences familiar with government bureaucracy and corruption in the reform era, Niu's sense of powerlessness and frustration is all too familiar. However, his statement brings the audience powerful comic relief not only because of its triple connotations but, more importantly, because it comes from the mouth of an illiterate peasant who has licence to use crude language, and so, vicariously, the audience can vent its own pent-up frustration with the government.

It is noteworthy that Niu does not accomplish his mission in the end and no wrong is redressed. Unsatisfactory though it may look, it saves the skit from becoming a dry propaganda piece and fits the tradition of the fool. Roberta Mullini observes that while the fool serves as a spokesman for "the common sense of the audience," "[the] truth of the fool's discourse cannot be utilized to change the situation: it belongs to the time-off period of games and the sender of the message is licensed only so long as his satirical comments do not intrude into the sphere of action."<sup>15</sup> After all, a fool is neither a sage nor a saviour but rather a ridiculous creature himself who, like a prism, refracts the absurdity of the world. Likewise, the country bumpkins in the CCTV gala *xiaopin* cannot really change themselves or the situation, but this renders their satire of social problems no less powerful. They present a platform upon which the populace can confront the state in a playful way, and the platform's existence itself brings the audience a cathartic relief. In retrospect, during the first three decades of the gala *xiaopin*, much of its charm and power derived precisely from that platform.

### Stage Puppets under Xi Jinping

Since 2013, however, the peasant characters have basically disappeared from the CCTV gala. Zhao, after missing the 2012 show because of medical reasons, fully withdrew in early 2013. Huang Hong's 黄宏 (born 1960) portrayal of a fast-food vendor in 2012 was the last character with the lifestyle, manner and moral values of a peasant. Among the 58 gala *xiaopin* staged between 2013 and 2022, all except one skit take place in cities, and only three feature migrant worker characters from rural backgrounds. More significantly, in the four skits that do portray "rural" characters, none of these characters looks, thinks or acts like a country bumpkin. Although this change could possibly be attributed to the drastic urbanization in China, it is difficult to overlook the sudden loss of the candid, witty and insightful common sense that peasant characters used to embody in the gala *xiaopin*.

In a 2013 sketch entitled "You're in trouble" (*Ni tanshang shier le* 你摊上事儿了), a conscientious and principled security guard from rural Shandong refuses to let

15 Mullini 1985, 100, 102.

anyone without a permit enter an urban office building.<sup>16</sup> The comedy is largely built on the misunderstanding between the security guard and a company manager who owes wages to some peasant workers. The story ends happily and tearfully as the manager, despite her own financial difficulty, borrows money from a friend to pay the peasant workers and, out of admiration for the security guard, offers him a position in her own company.

Indeed, the skit highlights the urban–rural differences from the perspective of the security guard. Notably, the urbanites have blurred gender boundaries: the female manager looks rather manly while her male friend appears feminine. Moreover, the security guard decidedly distinguishes himself from the city people who believe they can bend the rules with power or money. The manager tries to enter the building by calling the security guard’s supervisors, mostly in vain. When the manager’s friend offers to buy his way into the building, the security guard proudly proclaims: “your money might conquer a corrupt official, but just cannot subdue an upright security guard.”

However, this security guard differs from the previous peasant characters in significant ways. First, he is fairly urbanized, looking and acting no differently from any city dweller. He wears a sharp-looking uniform and, despite having a Shandong accent, talks in a refined and formal manner. Moreover, he whole-heartedly embraces his profession with a strong sense of responsibility and pride, seeing himself as an embodiment of principle and justice. Second, he is neither ignorant nor naïve. Having developed a knowledge of people from all walks of life in the city, he is now “used to” the bizarre phenomenon of gender confusion among the urbanites. Sensitive to corruption, he claims he can spot instantly, although mistakenly in the skit, anyone who plots to escape with embezzled money. Unlike Uncle Niu, whose misconceptions result from his naiveté and simplicity, the misunderstandings in this sketch stem from the overthinking and over-analysis of the security guard.

Last but not least, the security guard takes the moral high ground throughout the story. A paragon of good conduct, he resists the pressure of power and the temptation of money despite his lowly status. He stands up for the disenfranchised peasant workers and even launches a passionate criticism, albeit misdirected, at the manager: “Who do you think you are?! You think, because you have money, you can avoid paying your debt?! You think, because you have power, you can pocket the state’s money?! You think, because you can forge four household registrations, you can control the judiciary?!” He even attaches political significance to his job, proudly announcing that “anti-corruption starts with a security guard” (*fanfu cong baoan zuoqi* 反腐从保安做起). His slogan-like speeches receive instant applause from the audience as they reference the rampant corruption in Chinese society. However, these speeches are different in tone to Uncle Niu’s use of the word “*chedan*.” Instead of a stealthy insult by a timid,

16 See [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uca8az\\_nii4](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uca8az_nii4). Accessed 15 June 2021.

powerless peasant, they are a direct, full-power attack by someone who is all-knowing, all-powerful, flawless and fearless. At this point, the guise of a migrant worker from the countryside can no longer hold up as the security guard emerges as a mouthpiece of the state, which, under Xi, had launched the largest anti-graft campaign in the reform era.

In other words, by transforming the peasant character, the state usurps the vicarious position of the populace onstage and puts up a puppet to spread its propaganda. The platform where the populace and the state used to meet and contest is turned into a podium where the state delivers indoctrinating lectures.

In a 2014 sketch entitled “I’m such a person” (*Wo jiu zheme ge ren* 我就这么个人), a young porter from rural Henan witnesses how an obsequious scriptwriter at a state-run press attempts to bribe his supervisor to approve his script.<sup>17</sup> Since the supervisor is not home, the scriptwriter changes his mind four times about whether to leave or take the gift away as the maid tells him of the supervisor’s retirement, thus exposing his utter pragmatism and blatant hypocrisy. It turns out that the supervisor, although retired, has been re-hired as the interim department head and has already approved the script, which, ironically, satirizes sycophancy. More importantly, the supervisor, with admirable probity and wisdom, foresees the scriptwriter’s visit and pre-emptively his bribery.

Similar to “You’re in trouble,” this skit fits squarely with Xi’s anti-graft campaign. What is interesting is the presence of the migrant worker here. Indeed, the porter has many of the silly traits of a rustic fool: he has a strong Henan accent and an odd appearance – he is short and dark-skinned, with a round head, a round body and round eyes. He is also simple-minded and gullible: he insists on being called “kiwi,” and not “potato,” because of his short hair, and he is easily persuaded by the scriptwriter to cancel his service fee in exchange for opportunities to meet pretty girls. Like most pre-Xi peasant characters, he also seems to harbour an untainted candidness, tossing out blunt comments about the sycophant from time to time.

At the same time, however, he is very different from the pre-Xi peasant jesters. First, his look and naiveté serve only as the butt of a joke. Second, his unguarded honesty about the scriptwriter’s obsequiousness is mixed with a jadedness and cynicism, as if he has seen too much of it. Gone are the witty insights and snide remarks of the peasant jesters. Last but not least, he remains literally on the margins in the sketch, as a passive observer. Owing to the absence of the supervisor, he is unable to even meet the state representative, let alone confront or taunt him. On the contrary, with his candid comments directed solely at the scriptwriter, he shares the position of the supervisor and, by extension, the state. In other words, this migrant worker has ceased to provide the platform

17 See [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=W\\_UEA-Tq2is](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=W_UEA-Tq2is). Accessed 15 June 2021.

where the populace and the state meet and contest. The state appears no longer as an equal player in a game but is now a referee who has the final say.

In 2017, the *xiaopin*, “Small love in a big city” (*Dacheng xiaoai* 大城小爱), focused on a rural couple.<sup>18</sup> It tells of a surprise reunion between a couple during the wife’s trip to Beijing to find her husband, who has not returned home for over a year. As it turns out, the husband has become a certified high-rise window washer but refuses to tell his wife the truth in order to save her some worries. Like the security guard in “You’re in trouble,” he takes great pride in his job, considering it worthwhile because the city people sincerely appreciate it, giving him the thumbs up. After a heart-warming reconciliation, the husband takes his wife on a romantic tour of the capital city covered in snow – the two performers, attached to a long rope draping from the roof of the studio, swing around in circles in the air to sentimental music, while at the same time exclaiming “Hello Beijing! I love you, Beijing!”

The skit is filled with fat jokes, ugly jokes, cheat jokes and stingy jokes, but it has jettisoned the unique look, voice and position of the peasant jesters. First, the couple’s peasant identity is unrecognizable. While the husband looks professional in his company uniform, the wife appears rather urban and fashionable, and both are a little too pale-skinned for their alleged profession, a window washer and a farmer. Also trained in *errenzhuan*, the two performers use a faint north-eastern accent, which, with no particular connection to a rural origin, serves merely as a linguistic decoration. Moreover, none of their jokes is peasant-specific. In fact, most of the gags are taken from another skit staged for the 2016 Spring Festival Gala put on by a Shanghai TV station and have nothing to do with peasants or current social issues.<sup>19</sup> More importantly, the man and woman exhibit no thoughts, concerns or emotions that would distinguish them as peasants and show no inclination to mock the urbanites. On the contrary, they praise the mutual respect shown between the migrant workers and the city dwellers.

The skit is effectively touching and its depiction of a harmonious urban–rural relationship is almost convincing. It shows the rural people as not only urbanized in their look and career but also as completely assimilated into city life and welcomed as an integral part. However, this contradicts the popular literature and actual events concerning the urban–rural relationship in Beijing at the time. For example, in August 2016, Hao Jingfang 郝景芳 (born 1984) won the Hugo Award for Best Novelette for *Folding Beijing* (*Beijing zhedi* 北京折叠), a dystopian science fiction novella that visualizes Beijing’s exclusive social stratification in a city that separates the rich and the poor, the urban and the rural, by physically folding itself.<sup>20</sup> In April 2017, the still prevalent discrimination against rural people and the dire living conditions of migrant workers were exposed in an autobiographical story by a Hunan nanny working in

18 See <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=baFA-DAnPrI>. Accessed 15 June 2021.

19 See <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1pfdQbe6Xc>. Accessed 15 June 2021.

20 Hao 2015[2012].

Beijing entitled “I am Fan Yusu” (*Wo shi Fan Yusu* 我是范雨素), which went viral on social media.<sup>21</sup> In November 2017, tens of thousands of migrant workers – people just like the couple in the skit – were labelled as “low-end population” (*diduan renkou* 低端人口) and were evicted from Beijing almost overnight.<sup>22</sup>

In comparison, the skit’s tear-jerking depiction of the harmonious urban–rural relationship, specifically in Beijing, amounts to wishful thinking at best and deceptive misrepresentation at worst. Given the notorious censorship around the gala performances, one cannot help but feel the heavy hand of the state behind this misrepresentation, as the “peasant” characters perform onstage like puppets. By artificially removing the urban–rural divide, the skit eliminates the alternative position embodied by the peasant characters in the pre-Xi era. By bumping the real peasant characters offstage, the opportunity is lost for the populace and the state to meet, contest, negotiate or compromise.

A 2019 skit called “Performed for you” (*Yanxi gei ni kan* 演戏给你看) portrays a “real” peasant.<sup>23</sup> The story is set in an impoverished mountain village where the village chief ignores the villagers’ suffering while deceiving his supervisors about his misdeeds. The peasant has been coerced for years to sing the praises of the village chief to inspectors from higher-level governments for the sake of a subsidy to repair his decrepit house. In this skit, he inadvertently reveals the village chief’s secret to an inspector, who is determined to uphold government policies against official fraud and punish the village chief.

The peasant character is supposed to look real. The skit highlights the story’s setting by erecting in the background a giant painting of a rural home in the mountains, with braided dried corn hanging off the eaves and a donkey drinking from a bucket in the courtyard. The peasant character has a rustic nickname, Sun Erlengzi 孙二愣子, which literally means “Dumb Sun II.” He also wears a long, blue military coat, paired with a scarlet knitted scarf, which strikes a stark contrast with the village chief’s flashy leather jacket and the inspector’s plain but formal-looking outfit. Last but not least, he assumes a posture common among northern peasants, crossing his arms in front with both of his hands inserted in the opposite sleeve, a position usually assumed for the sake of keeping warm in cold weather.

However, many things in the skit simply do not fit. Gaudy though Sun’s clothes may appear, they actually look well-fitted, crisp and new. Equally new are Sun’s tennis shoes, which, with the white rims untainted by dirt, seem to belong to someone ready to go to the gym rather than a poor peasant who has to toil in the field. In addition to new clothes and nice shoes, Sun can also afford a smartphone and its service fees, making it difficult to believe that his house is about to crumble. The familiar posture, although suitable for a peasant in

21 Fan 2017.

22 Denyer and Lin 2017.

23 See [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cf3\\_DormrjE](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cf3_DormrjE). Accessed 15 June 2021.

northern China, appears to be wrong for the season. Both the village chief and the inspector are wearing light jackets, indicating warm weather, which makes it unnecessary and odd for Sun to seek warmth in his sleeves.

Moreover, despite his nickname, Sun is not dumb at all. Similar to the security guard in “You’re in trouble,” who is played by the same actor, Sun is neither ignorant nor naïve nor fearful. Unlike most of the peasant characters discussed above, Sun speaks in standard Mandarin, which obscures his rural origins and suggests a formal education. From his inadvertent admissions to the inspector, it appears that he understands all too well the village chief’s tricks against both the villagers and his supervisors. He also shows an impressive talent for acting, which is why the village chief always chooses him to perform for the inspectors. He knows exactly who the village chief fears – the inspectors from the higher-level governments. He even dares to confront the village chief, openly criticizing his failure to do anything to improve the villagers’ lives and his fraudulent behaviour. One may wonder why Sun, being so clear-sighted and bold, has gone along with the village chief for so long, why he voted for him in the local elections and why he did not report him to the other inspectors who visited before. Another pertinent question would be why, despite his talents and cleverness, he has not found a way to improve his own life or repair his own house.

All in all, the character of Sun lacks authenticity and only half-heartedly attempts to pass as a real peasant. He has been created by someone who does not know or care how a real peasant looks, talks, acts or thinks, and has been presented with some superficial features of an imaginary peasant. Although there seems to be a three-way interaction between the peasant, the inspector and the village chief, it is actually a two-way struggle between good and evil, with the all-knowing inspector dominating the entire scene. The audience knows nothing about Sun except that he needs some government subsidy. While Sun outsmarts the village chief, he is promptly outsmarted by the inspector, who plays the role of the villagers’ ultimate saviour. All of Sun’s complaints about the village chief are perfectly in line with the inspector’s criticisms. In fact, Sun acts like a government official in the guise of a peasant, who is deployed here to echo the inspector.

Thus, the peasant characters in the CCTV gala *xiaopin* have completely transformed under Xi. The former fools have been banished from the court, along with their distinct appearance, voice, wit and the playful provocations that are often expressed in vulgarity. In their place, we now see stage puppets who not only fail to look or act like peasants, but who identify themselves with the intellectual, the urban and the official. Vulgarity is out of the question, so is any stealthy irreverence. When audiences lament the loss of fun in the gala *xiaopin*, what they really miss is the vehicle or platform, in the form of the peasant jesters, through which they could confront the state vicariously.

### Peasants as Comic Heroes in Post-socialist China

While the changes in the portrayal of peasant characters in the CCTV gala *xiaopin* are striking, this is not the first time comic peasant characters have

undergone drastic transformation in modern China. The changing portrayal of peasant heroes in socialist comedy provides a meaningful reference for us to evaluate the post-socialist condition in contemporary China.

Peasants used to frequent Republican-era comedies as objects of ridicule. This became politically incorrect once the Communist Party took over in 1949. According to Perry Link, pre-revolutionary crosstalk built much of its humour on country bumpkins and sexually suggestive jokes, but the Communist state deemed both to be inappropriate and the performers worked hard to clean them up.<sup>24</sup> Similarly, as Christopher Rea notes, in the 1950s, performers of Shanghainese farce (*huaqixi* 滑稽戏) aggressively revised traditional routines that originally mocked country bumpkins, because “peasants were now a venerated social class,” and reoriented the ridicule towards the class enemies.<sup>25</sup>

In new comic productions, even if country bumpkins are featured, which is relatively rare, it is usually their innocence, honesty and kindness that are accentuated, in contrast to the corruption, vice and greed of the rich and powerful city people in the pre-revolutionary era. For example, *Sanmao Learns to Do Business* (*Sanmao xue shengyi* 三毛学生意, directed by Huang Zuolin 黄佐临, 1958), a film adaptation of a popular 1956 Shanghainese farce, tells the story of a bankrupt peasant from northern Jiangsu, named “Sanmao,” who ventures to Shanghai in search of a livelihood only to witness the degeneration of the glamorous cosmopolitan city. Ying Bao perceptively points out the distinctive power of dialects used in this satire and the unique characterization of Sanmao as a fool and trickster, who, “as both a target and source of humor and laughter ... contradicts, opposes, or distorts normative social order and status through trickery or disguise.”<sup>26</sup> It is worth noting, though, that unlike the court fools discussed above, Sanmao’s own ignorance and naiveté is not supposed to be taken as such, but testifies to his pure mind and heart. Moreover, since the film is set in pre-1949 Shanghai, the “normative social order and status” it contradicts, opposes or distorts belong to the old society. The target of Sanmao’s mockery is not everybody, especially not the Communist state, but rather is a group of class enemies that is officially sanctioned to be ridiculed. By contradicting, opposing or distorting the *old* normative social order and status, Sanmao the fool endorses and reinforces the legitimacy and rectitude of the *current* normative social order and status.

In the “eulogistic comedy” (*gesong xiju* 歌颂喜剧) that emerged in the late 1950s, comic peasant heroes are usually portrayed in a positive light. For example, a 1959 ethnic film entitled *Five Golden Flowers* (*Wuduo jinhua* 五朵金花, directed by Wang Jiayi 王家乙) tells of a young man, who, in a romantic search for a young woman called “Golden Flower,” makes numerous mistakes and reunites with his lover after encountering four other young women with the same name. As a lively romantic comedy set in exotic Yunnan, the story is

24 Link 1984, 98.

25 Rea 2015, 7.

26 Bao 2008, 160.



anchored in the collective energy and sense of socialist devotion among the main characters, all of whom are model peasants.<sup>27</sup> The source of laughter is the situation, which is replete with coincidence and misunderstanding, not the protagonists themselves who, although susceptible to harmless mistakes, are free from serious flaws.

During the high socialist era, comic peasant heroes gradually disappeared. Instead, peasant heroes are often portrayed as impeccable and solemn. For example, *The Golden Road* (*Jinguang dadao* 金光大道, directed by Lin Nong 林农 and Sun Yu 孙羽, 1975), a film adaptation of Hao Ran's 浩然 (1932–2008) famous novel, portrays a flawless peasant leader during the rural collectivization, who is ideologically enlightened, politically steadfast, selfless, tireless, handsome yet undistracted by libido. Even his name, Gao Daquan 高大泉, has the same pronunciation as “lofty, great, perfect” (*gao da quan* 高大全). Peasant heroes like this are supposed to be worshiped and not taken lightly, not to mention consumed comedically.

The glorious image of peasants suddenly collapsed with the end of the Cultural Revolution. Not only did the state media stop churning out unrealistic peasant heroes but the latent urban prejudice against peasants quickly resurfaced. China's cultural elite, who had then recently recovered from political condemnation under Mao and reclaimed their cultural authority, denounced Communist rule by attacking its hallowed idols. Negative portrayals of peasants as an unenlightened, insensitive and cruel mass abound in literature (such as the root-seeking literature and the avant-garde literature) and cinema (such as the movies by the fifth-generation filmmakers). In a highly controversial TV documentary, *River Elegy* (*Heshang* 河殇, 1988), peasants are presented as the polar opposite of intellectuals, and their ignorance and backwardness are blamed for the political disasters that engulfed the country in the previous decades.

Later, the presence of peasants became increasingly irrelevant in the national discourse until the actor Wang Baoqiang 王宝强 (born 1982) swept the Chinese audiences off their feet in the early 2000s. Wang's sometimes comic portrayals of innocent, honest and kind country boys presented idealistic icons in sharp contrast to the rampant greed and corruption in contemporary China, inspiring among audiences a new conviction in the ultimate good of human nature. Although Wang's comic bumpkin characters in many ways recall Sanmao, they are not products of state propaganda nor do they denounce class enemies. Instead, they redeem the wealthy urbanites. They owe their popularity to the profound anxieties among Chinese people about the accelerated commercialization and the growing gap between rich and poor. Unfortunately, these rosy portrayals of peasants did not last long, perhaps as reality became too bleak to sustain them. In 2011, Wang portrayed an economically and morally bankrupt

27 For more discussion of this movie, see Wang 2019.

peasant in the film *Mr Tree* (*Shu xiansheng* 树先生, directed by Han Jie 韩杰) and has not played a country-boy character since.

Against this background, the country bumpkin characters emerged in the CCTV Spring Festival Gala in the early 1980s. They differ from all the previous peasant types and signal a whole new political climate and cultural dynamic. The appearance of Ah Q in the 1983 gala was a breakthrough. He not only disregarded the socialist taboos against both peasant mockery and sexual innuendos, but demonstrated unprecedented unruliness, hurling vulgarities at the audience. After “In front of the delivery room” was broadcast in 1987, the country bumpkin characters became a staple of the CCTV gala *xiaopin*. On the one hand, their absurdity recalls the peasant characters in pre-revolutionary comedies and conforms to the contemporary urban and intellectual prejudice against peasants. On the other hand, they turn their absurdity to their advantage, flaunting their licence to speak the truth and laugh back at the mainstream. Like Sanmao, they are both the target and source of humour and contradict, oppose or distort the normative social order and status, except that they are not always innocent, honest or kind, and they challenge the normative social order and status of right now without the assurance that the good and the righteous will prevail. For the same reason, although similar to Wang Baoqiang’s country-boy characters in that they expose urban greed and corruption, they differ from Wang’s characters by making no effort to fix their own flaws or transmit “positive energy” (*zhengnengliang* 正能量).

In other words, the country bumpkins on the CCTV Spring Festival Gala represent a new type of comic peasant hero in China. They are not Communist models and are unconcerned by revolutionary ideology and political correctness. They are neither the scapegoat of national political disasters nor a modern-day embodiment of moral purity. Instead, they are flawed figures who, despite strict censorship, have reclaimed some liberty to be irreverent, vulgar and blunt. More significantly, they have turned *xiaopin* into a platform where the populace and the state can meet, contest, negotiate and compromise in a playful manner. Their creation and proliferation, especially in the 1990s and 2000s, indicate a relatively liberal environment in post-socialist China, when the people were allowed a channel, however limited, through which to project a different view from the state’s.<sup>28</sup>

In contrast, the sudden disappearance of the country bumpkins from the CCTV gala stage since 2013 indicates that such a platform and channel have been annihilated. Some of the peasant characters since then are similar to the comic peasant heroes of the socialist era, for example the security guard in “You’re in trouble.” These characters resemble the protagonists in eulogistic comedy – they are prone to harmless mistakes but ultimately are a model of conduct. Some revert back to the pre-revolutionary peasant characters, such as the porter in “I’m such a person,” and serve mainly as objects for mockery.

28 A similar liberal environment is noted in Du 1995.

Others, such as the window washer in “Small love in a big city” and the impoverished peasant in “Performed for you,” are indeed unprecedented, but this is because they have no root in reality. The larger-than-life hero in *The Golden Road* is also unrealistic, but his artificiality is not about his appearance, manner or lifestyle, all of which fit a real peasant quite well, but about his moral purity and political superiority, which mechanically embody Communist ideology. By contrast, the phony peasants in recent CCTV gala *xiaopin* are artificial, both inside and out, and bear no real peasant characteristics; they are puppets on the stage and vehicles for state propaganda.

The heavy presence of the state in the CCTV gala *xiaopin* since 2013 reminds one of the socialist era, but the resemblance should not be overstated. The fact that the portrayal of peasants can be so off the mark shows the probably irreversible loss of political significance for Chinese peasants. The current state, although still claiming to be grounded in Communist ideology, has actually moved far away from its core tenets. Meanwhile, the socialist state apparatus continues to function, as witnessed in the powerful censorship over the CCTV gala, and seems to be increasingly assertive and aggressive since Xi’s rise to power, as exemplified by the manipulation of the peasant characters in the gala *xiaopin*. Paul Pickowicz registers a post-socialist condition in Chinese society in the early 1990s that combines “a massive loss of faith” in socialism and ever more deeply entrenched socialist institutions and habits.<sup>29</sup> Contradictory although the condition may look, it gave rise to a relatively liberal social and cultural atmosphere of scepticism, which made the emergence of the unruly country bumpkins in the CCTV gala *xiaopin* possible. By the 2010s, however, it seems that the post-socialist condition has entered a stage where the socialist faith is no longer debunked, but forgotten without a trace, while the socialist institutions are accepted as a given and continue to dig in and expand their control. Xi’s rule is at once a product and a propeller of this new condition.

## Acknowledgements

The author thanks Perry Link and the anonymous reviewer for their insightful comments and generous suggestions.

## Conflicts of interest

None.

## Biographical note

Hongjian WANG is an assistant professor of Chinese and Asian studies at Purdue University. Her research interests include modern and contemporary

<sup>29</sup> Pickowicz 2012[1994], 297.

Chinese literature, cinema, theatre and cultural history. She has published articles on the photographic representation of modern masculinity in the *Liangyou* pictorial, the performative mode in Chinese independent documentaries, the cult following of a Hong Kong comedy film in mainland China, and cynical idealism in contemporary Chinese experimental theatre. She is the author of *Decadence in Twentieth-century Chinese Literature and Culture: A Comparative and Literary-Historical Reevaluation* (Cambria Press, 2020).

**摘要：**中央电视台春节联欢晚会上小品可以说是中国改革开放以来在审查最严的电视频道上的收视率最高的栏目里最受欢迎的节目。中国老百姓在改革时期的社会巨变中不断积累深重的焦虑，而春晚小品正是通过对层出不穷的社会问题的机智讽刺帮助他们纾解这些焦虑。其中，乡巴佬的人物形象扮演了尤为重要的角色，因为他们为中国老百姓提供了一个可以和政府对峙、交锋、博弈、妥协的平台。然而，自从习近平2012年上台以来，春晚小品中的乡巴佬形象突然消失了。在社会主义喜剧的大背景下来看，他们的突然消失显示中国的后社会主义状况进入了一个新阶段。

**关键词：**中央电视台春节联欢晚会；小品；乡巴佬；后社会主义状况；中国

## References

- Bakhtin, Mikhail. 1984[1965]. *Rabelais and His World* (Helene Iswolsky (trans.)). Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- Bao, Ying. 2008. "In Search of Laughter in Maoist China: Chinese Comedy Film 1949–1966." PhD diss., Ohio State University.
- Davis, Jessica M., and Jocelyn Chey (eds.). 2013. *Humour in Chinese Life and Culture*. Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press.
- Denyer, Simon, and Luna Lin. 2017. "Mass evictions in freezing Beijing winter sparks public outrage but little official remorse." *The Washington Post*, 27 November, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/worldviews/wp/2017/11/27/forced-evictions-in-freezing-beijing-winter-sparks-public-outrage-but-little-official-remorse/>. Accessed 15 June 2021.
- Du, Wenwei. 1995. "Xuetou: comic elements as social commentary in Suzhou pinghua storytelling." *CHINOPEL* 18(1), 33–44.
- Du, Wenwei. 1998. "Xiaopin: Chinese theatrical skits as both creatures and critics of commercialism." *The China Quarterly* 154, 382–399.
- Erasmus, Desiderius. 1913[1509]. *The Praise of Folly* (John Wilson (trans.)). London: Oxford University Press.
- Fan, Yusu. 2017. "Wo shi Fan Yusu" (I am Fan Yusu). *qq.com*, 25 April, <https://news.qq.com/a/20170425/063100.htm>. Accessed 15 June 2021.
- Goldsmith, Robert Hillis. 1955. *Wise Fools in Shakespeare*. East Lansing, MI: Michigan State University Press.
- Hao, Jingfang. 2015[2012]. *Folding Beijing* (Ken Liu (trans.)). <https://uncannymagazine.com/article/folding-beijing-2/>. Accessed 15 June 2021.
- Kaiser, Walter. 1963. *Praisers of Folly: Erasmus, Rabelais, Shakespeare*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Link, Perry. 1984. "The genie and the lamp: revolutionary *xiangsheng*." In Bonnie S. McDougall (ed.), *Popular Chinese Literature and Performing Arts in the People's Republic of China, 1949–1979*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 83–111.

- Link, Perry. 2007. "The crocodile bird: *xiangsheng* in the early 1950s." In Jeremy Brown and Paul Pickowicz (eds.), *Dilemmas of Victory: The Early Years of the People's Republic of China*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 207–231.
- Liu, Jin. 2010. "Ambivalent laughter: comic sketches in CCTV's 'Spring Festival Eve Gala'." *Journal of Modern Literature in Chinese* 10(1), 103–121.
- Ma, Haili. 2019. "Chinese entertainment industry, the case of the folk *errenzhuan*." *Asian Theatre Journal* 36(1), 79–100.
- Mu, Aili. 2004. "Two of Zhao Benshan's comic skits: their critical implications in contemporary China." *Concentric: Literary and Cultural Studies* 32(2), 3–34.
- Mullini, Roberta. 1985. "Playing the fool: the pragmatic status of Shakespeare's clowns." *New Theatre Quarterly* 1(1), 98–104.
- Pickowicz, Paul. 2012[1994]. "On the eve of Tiananmen: Huang Jianxin and the notion of postsocialism." In *China on Film: A Century of Exploration, Confrontation, and Controversy*. Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 271–300.
- Rea, Christopher. 2015. *The Age of Irreverence: A New History of Laughter in China*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.
- Wang, Ban. 2019. "Laughter, ethnicity, and socialist utopia: *Five Golden Flowers*." In Ping Zhu, Zhuoyi Wang and Jason McGrath (eds.), *Maoist Laughter*. Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 19–36.
- Warde, Frederick. 1913. *The Fools of Shakespeare: An Interpretation of their Wit, Wisdom and Personalities*. New York: McBride, Nast and Company.
- Welsford, Enid. 1935. *The Fool: His Social and Literary History*. New York: Farrar and Rinehart.
- Xi, Jinping. 2014. "Wenyi buneng zai shichang dachang zhong mishi fangxiang" (Literature and art should not lose their direction in the tides of marketization). *Xinhuanet*, 15 October, [http://www.xinhuanet.com/politics/2014-10/15/c\\_1112840544.htm](http://www.xinhuanet.com/politics/2014-10/15/c_1112840544.htm). Accessed 15 June 2021.
- Zhao, Bin. 1998. "Popular family television and Party ideology: the Spring Festival Eve happy gathering." *Media, Culture and Society* 20, 43–58.
- Zhu, Ping, Zhuoyi Wang and Jason McGrath (eds.). 2019. *Maoist Laughter*. Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press.