



Chinese Feminist Comedy? An exploration of the opportunities and challenges faced by female stand-up comedians in China

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Abstract

In 2020, as the third season of the Chinese show 'Rock and Roast' (a talent competition for stand-up comedy that airs weekly in China) launched, female comedians have become 'rising stars' in stand-up comedy in China. Their success has unprecedented importance to the development of the stand-up comedy industry and the spread of feminist consciousness in China. Through case study and interview reflections, this article aims to explore some factors that impact the popularity and success of female comedians, which has resulted in heated discussions of gender among the young Chinese generation. Furthermore, this paper attempts to discuss the challenges faced by female comedians in China, and details some increasingly public debates about gender and sexuality among Chinese netizens after the show was broadcasted. In short, this paper will explain the reasons why female stand-up comedians have become 'rising stars' from the perspectives of performers, audiences, the stand-up comedy industry and the wider social environment to analyse this popular phenomenon.

Keywords

Chinese stand-up comedy; Chinese female comedians; Chinese feminism; gender relations

Stand-up comedy has a short history in China, but in recent years it has become more popular with the development of Internet and program production. Stand-up comedy in China (known as the "Talk Show" industry) is relatively young, having only been established 12 years ago with a small audience following (Feng, 2019). In 2012, Dragon TV (东方卫视) launched the "Talk Show of the post-80s tonight" (今晚80后脱口秀), as an online programme which eventually attracted a wider range of audiences. The subsequent talent competition show 'Rock and Roast' (first produced by Xiaoguo Company, 2017) broadcasts on multiple Internet platforms, gaining a great following amongst young people. The show gathers stand-up comedians from across the whole country, in order to select the stand-up champion of the year. In doing so, stand-up comedy has become a new form of public entertainment in China.

Although stand-up comedy has gained significant popularity among young people in China, academic research on the Chinese stand-up industry has been lacking. Because the 'Talk Show' was introduced from the West, this cross-culture humour in China has a diverse structure and utilises various methods of comedic expression from the Western context (Piwowarczyk, 2019). Thus, research on stand-up comedy often focuses on European and American cultures. Therefore, research on stand-up comedy in China lacks attention, and research on feminist humour in Chinese stand-up comedy is even scarcer.

Gender imbalances in stand-up comedy

Whilst the development of stand-up comedy in China has made many male comedians become famous, the number of female stand-up comedians is far fewer. Since the beginning of 'Rock and Roast' in 2017, male comedians have outnumbered their female counterparts significantly. Not only is this reflected in the participation of the show, but male winners of the show also outweigh female winners. In my interview with Liang, the principal of Xi'an Cola Comedy Club (西安可乐俱乐部), he revealed that the imbalanced gender ratio of men to women in the talk show industry is about 4:1. He noted that the reason there are such a small number of female comedians in the Talk Show industry was because women are traditionally the subject to be pleased: men are usually responsible for making women laugh, while women may not be so keen to make fun of others on stage. American stand-up comedy also had this kind of misunderstanding, but feminist comedians have gradually subverted the patriarchal culture using feminist humour (Votruba, 2018). In the third season of 2020, "Rock and Roast" (which aired in 2020), a total of three female talk show comedians had entered the top ten for the first time. They used humorous power to spread female voices surprising many people in China and reconstructing stand-up comedy by challenging patriarchy. This is an achievement that female talk show comedians have never achieved before.

Why they are so popular?

I have identified three main factors that have influenced the success of female stand-up comedians in China.

Using feminist jokes

In recent years, several female stand-up comedians have become well known by audiences because they start to introduce comedies from female perspectives. The success of the first season of "Rock and Roast" in 2017 brought a female talk show performer named Siwen into the public eye. She identifies herself as an independent woman, and often explores how women balance the relations between work and family, such as, the relationship between husband, wife and mother-in-law. Siwen's success is manifested by her being the first popular female stand-up comedian known to the mainstream, but her performance of being an independent woman only involves her own family and does not mention men more broadly, so her performance is considered non-aggressive to the majority of audiences. By 2020, several young female stand-up comedians had become popular, such as: Yang Li, Li Xueqin, Zhao Xiaohui, Yanyi and

¹ On 15th February 2021, I interviewed Liang via Wechat.

Yanyue. They, as female comedians, have begun to become more adept at intervening and observing issues from a female perspective and expressing feminist ideas (Chen, 2020; Yangchengwanbao, 2019). They evolved from Siwen's 'non-offensive' comedy to a slightly more offensive piece to reimagine the topic of gender.

Female comedians continue to integrate women's consciousness into their own text creation and performances. For example, in Yang Li's performance in the "Rock and Roast", each of her 'hot topics' reflects the concerns of current young Chinese women's concerns. For example, she tried to use Black Widow's status and superpowers to satirise women's employment discrimination and stereotypes of women as weak and subordinated:

It is a normal phenomenon that there are fewer women than men in every industry, isn't it? Just like the most modern and international industry now- the Avengers.

There is only a woman, Black Widow, among the first six superheroes.

And how dare this organization can be called 'Fulian复联' (Women's Federation妇联/Fulian)³

Do you know what Black Widow's superpowers are?

Because her genes have been modified, so she is aging much slower than others.

So how does this superpower save the world? Is it because she can live and survive longer than the bad guys?

Why is everyone's fantasy of women always young, beautiful, and good-looking. Why can't the superwoman be old? Why can't she be a 60-year-old superwoman?

She goes on to express her admiration for supermodels to satirise the male gaze on women's bodies:

Because when [a supermodel] walks in front of you, she was very proud, as if she was saying: "Hmph, what are you looking at? What you like more is the thing I have less of."

She also talks about the common problems that young couples might face, to discuss young Chinese generation's attitudes toward relationships:

When men argue with women, they usually say 'Why do you always make trouble without reason? Can you be more reasonable'.

² Black Widow is a character in Marvel's film who has superpower (The Avengers, 2012).

³ In Chinese, Avengers and Women's Federation have the same pronunciation as 'Fulian'.

So every time I want to say: 'hey, bro, do you think she chose to fall in love with you just because she is more intellectual than others?'

If she wants to be reasonable and want to show her logical thinking ability and cultural knowledge level, why does she want to talk with you? She can talk to her boss instead and maybe she can be promoted.

Not only Yang Li, other female comedians who performed in "Rock and Roast" also talked about women's anxieties, and the issues of women who were expected to get married by their families (被催婚). They created and performed the comedy through criticising the same problems that other young Chinese women are facing, and they achieved successful results.

Their voices resonate with women

Another reason for female comics becoming successful is because they resonate with a wide range of female audiences. Although Yang Li often used cynical language to satirise masculinity, she was strongly echoed by online and offline female audiences. When Yang Li was attacked by some male audiences on the Internet, she said that her stories were popular because they resonated with female audiences.

Watching stand-up comedy has become a new way for young people to release their tension. As John Limon defined, "stand-up is uniquely audience-dependent for its value because joking is, essentially a social phenomenon and a fully embedded phenomenon" (Limon, 2000: 12). As one of the topics that young Chinese people care about, gender has become one of the popular themes which are often used in 'Rock and Roast', especially by female comedians. Topics of gender usually help them to achieve better scores, and it indicates that stand-up comedy is more popular among young female audiences. Young Chinese women are paying more attention to gender and women's issues because there is a rapid development of feminism in China recent years (Lindberg, 2021). Even though the Chinese Communist Party put forward the policy of "gender equality" in 1949, women still bear the constraints of traditional Confucianism on women's identity and the unequal treatment they have suffered in society and workplaces (Liu, 2007). Thus, young women pursue comedy, not only because comedians can use humour to express the difficulties and pressures which they are facing in their daily lives, but also this humorous way could create a sense of resonance with their audiences and release their tension. This is reflected within the fans statistics of the Xi'an Cola Comedy Talk Show Club, where, up to 15 February, 2021, 63.6% of the WeChat followers of the Cola Comedy Club are women, in comparison to only 36.28% that identify as men (with 0.12% where the audience's gender is unknown).

Breaking gender stereotypes

Female stand-up comedians have faced serious gender stereotypes, but they shatter those with their outstanding comedic abilities, and this breakthrough made them gain more attention. In an interview with Zhao, who is a fan of stand-up comedy, he bluntly said that he prefers the performance of male talk show comedians because he believes

that male comedians show more depth, more logic in content, and more tension in their performances. And he thinks that if female comedians exaggerate “too much”, he will consider them as less intelligent. Even if he has high standards and low expectations for female comedians, he still admits that “female comedians are getting more and more funny than before”.

Even when ‘female perspective comedy’ complains about men, men find these claims hard to refute. The Chinese business celebrity Luo Yonghao also expressed: “Although I may be the one they criticised, I still want to watch their performances” (Tencent Video, 2020). Their success shows that female comedians were welcomed and resonate with audiences through their funny punchlines and excellent comic ability, even if some stories might cause men’s complaints.

Opportunities bring challenges: The obstacles faced by female comedians

At the end of 2020, a familiar name once again appeared on Sina Weibo⁴’s the most popular ‘hot topic’. The name of Ms. Yang Li has become a ‘hot topic’ many times in 2020, and each time it is accompanied by intense discussions on gender relations among Chinese netizens. This time, she became the centre of attention because she again mocked Chinese men in her talk show, but also because she was reported to the Chinese State Administration of Radio and Television (CSART) by male netizens, on the grounds that: “The content of the show was suspected of gender discrimination. Being discriminated against by insulting men, inciting internal contradictions in democracy, creating gender antagonism, is not conducive to the harmonious development of socialism with Chinese characteristics” (Wan, 2020-12-29). For example, Yang Li expressed her attitudes towards men many times during her performance, regarding those men as ordinary but full of confidence, she also points out that men may consider themselves as the ‘protagonist of the universe’, etc. Some male journalists have publicly stated that Yang Li’s performance was an attack on “straight men⁵”, claiming that Yang Li’s ‘bourgeois’ gender politics may threaten the solidarity of the working class (May, 2020). The practice of reporting Ms. Yang to the CSART has aroused applause from the male community on “HuPu”, (a Chinese sports BBS⁶) forum. Why can Yang Li, as a comedian, provoke discussions about gender identity and gender relations in China? The reasons behind it involve multiple factors such as social-policy, social-culture, and gender relations. I argue for three reasons behind the phenomenon of resistance.

Firstly, the image of a popular female comedian conflicts with the stereotypical female role. In the past, the stand-up comedy industry was dominated by male comedians, with women using self-deprecating ways to perform to identify themselves in traditional gender roles like housewives (Votruba, 2018). However, Chinese female stand-up comedians have aggressively criticised the gender inequality within the stand-up industry. Their critical performances challenged the patriarchal comedy industry and social structure.

⁴ Sina Weibo is a Chinese microblog website which is one of the biggest social media platforms in China.

⁵ “Straight man” is a Chinese Internet word, which originally refers to heterosexual men. The post-derivation is more negative to describe men who obstinately support traditional gender roles by Chinese feminist.

⁶ BBS stands for Bulletin Board System.

Secondly, the Internet was perceived as male technology where men have more power than women in the cyberspaces (Wajcman, 2006). A quarrelsome behaviour commonly targeting women which also happened in social media was defined as 'gender-trolling', and male netizens become the dominant group (Mantilla, 2013).

Thirdly, male netizens' backlash exposed the class gap and the changing gender relations in China's society. For example, online misogyny has been increasing for a while. As illustrated by the online debates on "The vagina's way/say"⁷, active male commentators used social media to vent their displeasure of feeling behind upper-class men, turning to attack women (Wu & Dong, 2019: 484). From men's perspectives, women's shifting social status highlighted the current struggles of the lower-class men. For instance, the young female generation in China, who were raised under the one-child policy, enjoy unprecedented opportunities to receive higher education. Therefore, young women are beginning to experience increasing autonomy which is the reason for gender relations changing.

Liang, as a stand-up comedian, however notes that female comedians have advantages in performances. For example, he suggests that female comedian's speeches on gender issues are more acceptable to audiences than male comedians. In his 'Talk Show' comedy club, when a female comedian teases her husband, she can achieve a good stage effect. However, when male comedians ridicule men, some female audiences might have no sympathy, and the audience's reaction is less ideal. If male comedians ridicule women, it will trigger gendered opposition and disgust in the audience. But female comedians are also facing various difficulties. He noted that female comedians are usually sentimental on the stage, and their talks are often accused of lacking depth in context. To some extent, his opinions represented the gender inequality within the stand-up comedy because female comedians are not supported by their male colleagues, so female comedians are facing obstacles in the male-dominated industry.

Conclusion

Stand-up comedy is still a niche culture in China. I research this topic because I discovered that this phenomenon in stand-up comedy reflects the situations of most feminists in the digital era in China. Gender topics have become increasingly popular due to the broadcast of the 'Rock and Roast' comedy show. In this article, I have described and illustrated the current situation faced by Chinese female stand-up comedians such as gender imbalance in the Chinese stand-up comedy industry, and the progress they have made to become popular. Then I summarised three main reasons for the success and popularity of female comedians in China: using feminist jokes, resonating with women, breaking gender stereotypes. Also, in considering the phenomenon of resistance by male netizens after female comedians becoming well-known, I analysed the reasons behind it: the conflicting female role of female comedians; the male-dominated cyberspaces; and the class gap and gender relations in China's society. By analysing the reasons for female comedians' relative success and the difficulties they have faced, I argue that the success of female stand-up comedians, as the new heads of comedy, has a certain correlation with the progress of Chinese feminism. The awakening of feminism in recent years has

⁷ The backlash faced by Beijing Foreign Studies University performance adaptation of Eve Ensler's *The Vagina Monologues*

made women pay more attention to the pressure on women and gender inequality more broadly. Women's awakening awareness has promoted the development of Chinese feminism, and female comedians have been influenced by this progression. Through their performances on the stage, Chinese feminism has been spread in a humorous way. Furthermore, the novel approach of comedy reinforces the influence of feminism on young Chinese women. In this process, female comedians' performances have been changed from a non-direct approach to confronting gender contradictions to tease men. This change has not only exposed female comedians to attacks from male netizens, but also brought more attention to feminism due to the gendered conflict online.

Overall, the progress of female stand-up comedians as 'rising stars' in comedy proves the breakthrough and resistance they have made under the patriarchal system of stand-up comedy. Their success has played a leading role in stand-up comedy and also Chinese feminism, expressing women's courageous and optimistic attitudes in a witty way to combat the gender injustice faced by women.

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