A comparative and acceptance study of women's discourse in Chinese-American online stand-up comedy

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Abstract. As an emerging form of comedy, stand-up comedy has developed rapidly and attracted widespread attention in various countries today through the production and dissemination mode of new media. In order to better understand the cultural characteristics of stand-up comedy and provide methodological inspiration for contemporary feminist public expression, this essay focuses on online stand-up comedy in China and the United States. Drawing on relevant theories from feminism, gender sociology, reception aesthetics, and communication studies, this essay uses textual close reading and comparative analysis to examine the expressive characteristics and reception mechanisms of women's discourse in these two countries. Through analysis, this essay concludes that the female comedic discourse in China and the United States, which differs in perspective, expressive approach, and offense and its re-speaking, is repeatedly negotiating resistance or compromise at the intersection of the three influencing factors, namely, the diachronic socio-cultural traditions, the synchronic audience acceptance, and the external impact of the market and censorship.

1 Introduction

Stand-up comedy is a form of comedy in which a single comedian uses a microphone to interact directly with the audience. It first appeared in British music halls in the 18th and 19th centuries and later flourished in the United States in the second half of the 20th century. The development of stand-up comedy in China came relatively late, and it was not until the 1990s that Hong Kong actor Wong Chi-wah introduced the form to the Chinese community.

Today, driven by the rapid development of digital networks and social media, stand-up comedy has gained widespread attention and popularity on the Internet in the form of self-media and online variety shows. For example, the fifth season of the Chinese stand-up comedy online variety show "Rock and Roast" premiered in May 2022, and by December 31, 2022, the total number of views of the program had reached 500 million, demonstrating the attractiveness and influence of stand-up comedy in contemporary society.

In terms of social function, as a new artistic form for performers to share experiences and express viewpoints, stand-up comedy provides a channel for marginalized groups, represented by women who have long been structurally oppressed, to speak out. In recent years, more and more female comedians have emerged, focusing on women's life experiences and living conditions. Gender issues in stand-up comedy often attract a lot of attention and discussion on the Internet.

At present, Chinese academic research on stand-up comedy is mainly based on perspectives such as communication studies, semiotics, and socio-cultural studies to select and construct theoretical frameworks, with a focus on phenomenon-level stand-up comedy shows such as "Rock and Roast" and "Roast." However, there is still a lack of a global comparative perspective, and analysis and research from a feminist perspective are also relatively rare. Foreign scholars tend to focus on black female comedians and the expressive strategies of self-deprecation and marginality performance but pay less attention to the influence of the contemporary online media environment on feminist expression in stand-up comedy.

Therefore, the research scope is limited to online stand-up comedy, and it is placed in the feminist discourse for a cross-cultural comparison between China and the United States. This approach can further reveal the cultural characteristics in cross-national and cross-ethnic comparative research, as well as the practical expressive effects and construction strategies of feminist discourse in the digital consumer society.

Based on the aforementioned theoretical framework, this essay examines the textual qualities of feminist expressions in online stand-up comedies in China and the United States against the backdrop of contemporary new media as the main communication channel and specifically elaborates on the different styles of gender issues embodied by the two in terms of perspective, body expression and offense, analyzes the socio-cultural causes of this difference. The essay also explores the deep mechanism of feminist interpretation in the context of the growing audience of online stand-up comedies. Moreover, the essay discusses the interpretation of
feminism in online stand-up comedy, which has an ever-growing audience, in an attempt to understand the influence of specific social and cultural contexts and gender subjects on stand-up comedy and the underlying mechanisms of its reception.

2 Concept and cultural characteristics of Stand-up Comedy

2.1 Concept of stand-up comedy

Traditional stand-up comedy is a style of comedy performed in a theater. A single comedian stands on a theater stage and interacts directly with the audience, telling jokes and using body language to create a comedic effect. Another popular form of comedy is the talk show, which is an offshoot of stand-up comedy. A talk show is a television or radio talking program. The host and interviewee discuss predetermined topics to create a comedic effect through communication.

The selected research object and the term "stand-up comedy" used in this essay all belong to the narrow definition of stand-up comedy presented as a network product under the background of new media. Although the Chinese network variety show "Rock and Roast" contains the term "talk show" in its Chinese name, the performance content presented still belongs to the category of stand-up comedy in fact and is therefore included in the research scope of this essay.

2.2 Cultural characteristics of stand-up comedy

2.2.1 Offense as "Carnival"

The origins of Western comedy can be traced back to the folk burlesque of the ancient Greek rituals of the god of wine. Nietzsche suggested that in this orgy of wine sacrifice, each person achieves a harmonious unity with others, with the community, and with nature, which comes back to existence itself [1]. According to Gadamer, "carnival" is a specific time-space structure that differs from the linear form of time and belongs to a specific group [2]. In this special time-space field, the discontinuity between the individual and the external world is temporarily bridged, and the effectiveness of daily taboos, norms, and order is temporarily suspended.

For contemporary stand-up comedy, its performance space is a theater full of people, which actually defines a typical "carnival" field in space and thereby legitimizes its core element, which is the offense.

Offense is a collection of words and actions, criticism, ridicule, insult, belittlement, threat, and more [3]. Its expressive effect is a challenge to inherent concepts, taboo boundaries, and authority. In the field of stand-up comedy, offensive language targeting gender, class, and race issues is allowed and accepted with great tolerance [4]. Even those who express their non-acceptance of it may be further offended. American actress Joan Rivers opened her special "Don't Start with Me" by declaring the legitimacy of all her jokes with the sentence, "These are just jokes! You assholes!" [5], which is essentially the artistry of comedy that is not bound by specific moral standards.

2.2.2 The combination of personal experience and public discourse

Based on the characteristic of a "collective carnival", the integration of private life and public experience is achieved in stand-up comedy.

The humor of a stand-up comedian comes from within, but the performance is public in nature. Through the medium of the role the performer wants to present on stage, which serves as an intermediary between the performer and the audience, a two-way viewing relationship is formed. Thus, stand-up comedy has the dual characteristics of "spiritual-analytical confession" and "public speech." [6]

That is, even though stand-up comedy claims that the offenses it makes are only for the purpose of creating comedic effects, its public nature determines that it refers to and reflects specific emotional attitudes and ideological positions. Its humor and comic effects are inevitably based on introspection, reflection, and criticism of contemporary existence and social conditions.

2.2.3 Negotiation between mass culture and authoritative discourse

Precisely because stand-up comedy is a reflective and public humor that narrates the relationship between the subject's "self" and the "world," it essentially has a significant social function that cannot be ignored. Furthermore, stand-up comedy represents a force of resistance that comes from mass culture and works from the bottom up. It can accommodate voices and opinions from different groups and perspectives, thus exerting tension on mainstream ideological authority. Its emphasis on pure comedy is, on the one hand, to temporarily immerse audiences with different identity positions in the role of "spectators," thereby solidifying the legitimacy of offense. On the other hand, it is also a defense of offense that attempts to circumvent the strict control of mainstream values.

3 Comparison of women's discourse in Chinese-American online stand-up comedy

After clarifying the cultural characteristic of stand-up comedy, it can be understood that this art form provides a relatively safe and free channel for the representation of subjugated groups, especially women. Women and gender issues have indeed become one of the most important common themes in Chinese and American stand-up comedy. However, due to the socio-cultural differences between the two countries, the discourse of women in stand-up comedy in these two also shows
different styles in terms of perspective, expressive approach, and offense strategies.

In order to ensure the consistency of text production and performance and to examine the impact of the specific communication channel of the Internet, this essay limits the study of stand-up comedy texts to performances that are disseminated online in the form of videos. The Chinese stand-up comedy texts selected for this study are 32 performances by actresses Yang Li, Yan Yi & Yan Yue, Niao Niao, and Xiaolu, from the third to fifth seasons of the popular Chinese variety show "Roast and Roast," while the American stand-up comedy texts are from the comedy specials of Joan Rivers, Iliza Shlesinger, Michelle Wolf, and Taylor Tomlinson, four highly influential female comedians. The specials of these four American comedians all show obvious and typical feminist characteristics.

3.1 Entry perspective: micro family life and macro social system

One of the comparable aspects between Chinese and American stand-up comedy is the different perspectives in dealing with various feminist issues. Chinese stand-up comedy tends to enter from the micro-level of family life, while American stand-up comedy often involves macro-level social mechanisms.

When exposing and satirizing traditional patriarchal views and norms, most mainland Chinese actresses describe the expectations and control of the older and more powerful party in family life, even the competition for resources that the male figure at the top of the patriarchal family system provides.

In two performances by Yan Yi & Yan Yue in "Rock and Roast," they mentioned their mothers who urged them to get married and the vulgar plot in TV dramas that still repeats the competition between older and younger women for male favor [7].

On the same topic of marriage pressure, American actress Iliza Shlesinger focuses on the single anxiety publicized in magazines, books, articles, and other publications [8]. The misogyny implicit in religion is also a concern of American comedians that was not mentioned on the "Rock and Roast" stage. For example, in her special "Look at You," American actress Taylor Tomlinson portrays God as a manipulator who oppresses and deceives women [9].

The resistance and obstacles women face in their quest for equal social rights with men are a common concern in both Chinese and American stand-up comedy. In performance, American stand-up comedy tends to directly mention women's political and economic rights, such as the right to vote and equal pay. Iliza directly mentioned the words "vote" and "wage gap" in her performance in Confirmed Kills [8].

The controversial proposition of "independent women" is also a point that both Chinese and American stand-up comedy have touched upon. The core issue is whether women have the qualifications to be called "independent women" when they choose to enter into romantic relationships dominated by patriarchy and male centrist.

In "Rock and Roast," Yan Yi & Yan Yue express doubts about the compatibility of economic independence and romantic relationships. They believe that the label of "independent woman" should not become a shackle that binds women in their search for intimacy [7]. In contrast, American stand-up comedy takes a strong stance on the standard of feminism. For example, Iliza believes that some of the women's choices in intimate relationships are not beneficial to women's rights and bluntly says, "You're fucking wrong [8]."

These differences highlight that the family is the primary source for Chinese female comedians, while American culture has a deeper religious imprint. Additionally, American comedians have shown a more positive discourse orientation on public rights issues, but Chinese comedians are accustomed to achieving the social impact of their performances indirectly through private experiences. They also show a tolerant attitude toward individual women's choices when discussing the definitional standards of "independent women".

3.2 Body narratives: inwards and outwards approaches

The narrative of the female body is an important part of feminist discourse. In this regard, the issues addressed in Chinese and English stand-up comedy overlap significantly and even seem to be expressed in very similar ways.

When attacking sexual violence against women, Yan Yi & Yan Yue and Iliza use similar metaphors to describe sexual harassment as dirt on the body. Yan Yi & Yan Yue said, "So when girls go out to eat, they absorb some dirty things on their bodies, such as the smell of smoke, dust, and some men's hands [10]." Iliza said, "When someone is sexually harassing you, it's their energy on you. It feels like you're being shot with a dick gun [8]." Coincidentally, they emphasized that sexual harassment is a real violation of women's bodies.

Although the female body issues discussed in Chinese and American stand-up comedy are relatively similar, the expressive approaches they take show opposite dynamics. Chinese stand-up comedy tends to expose the manipulation of women's bodies in their interactions with society and family from the outside in, placing more emphasis on the interactive and structural nature of human relationships. American actresses tend to reveal the state of the female body from the inside out and to speak boldly about things that have long been considered indecent and shameful, such as women's sexual needs, menstruation and fertility. For example, Iliza uses the metaphor of a python devouring a goat to describe the female reproductive process [8].

Overall, compared to Chinese stand-up comedy, which focuses on real relationships, American female comedy based on the female body has a stronger sense of ontology, which more powerfully establishes the subjectivity of women's discourse.
3.3 Offense and its re-speaking

As mentioned above, offense is a core element of stand-up comedy. Although Chinese and American comedians often refer to offensive male behavior and unjust social phenomena, they reflect certain differences in the use of expressive forms and reflective discourse.

3.3.1 Offensive forms

When examining the performances of Chinese and American actresses, the essay finds that in terms of the specific language, the level of sharpness is about the same. In fact, the most direct and sharp comment collected in this essay is from Chinese actresses Yang Li, who said, "Men are trash." Therefore, the difference between the two is mainly reflected in the use of strategy.

Chinese stand-up comedy prefers to use cleverly arranged jokes to create offense, namely the unfamiliar logic of the text. For example, Yan Yi & Yan Yue first mentioned the female star Jin Sha using a scale to weigh salad, then mentioned a girl with a waist circumference of 18.5 cm. Finally, they said, "What do they want to do by choosing such a skinny girl? Is it to feed Jin Sha?" as the end of the whole routine, linking the two texts and forming a call-back to the previous text, thereby enhancing the irony.

American stand-up comedy tends to parody, achieving satire and offense by exaggerating the reactions of men and women in certain situations. Iliza, in her performance, mimicked the difficult act of women searching for various small items in their pockets and imitated the different behavioral habits of men and women when taking selfies, portraying men as sloppy gorillas and women as well-trained soldiers.

From this, it can be seen that the contrasting characteristics of female expression in offensive stand-up comedy in China and the United States lie in the different use of verbal and physical strategies rather than simply in the level of aggressiveness.

3.3.2 Re-speaking of offense

In stand-up comedy, the offense itself can be the object of creation and performance, which means re-speaking the content one has previously expressed. Re-speaking refers to the consciousness of comedians towards their own performance and performativity, meaning that the actors know that they are performing and can use performance skills to have a specific impact on the audience. Therefore, the actresses incorporate reflective expression as part of their performance, re-speaking to the audience and the public.

The re-speaking of Chinese and American stand-up comedy also reflects different characteristics. Chinese actresses write their counterattacks into full routines, with stronger reflexivity and dialogism. For example, Yang Li responded to the widespread protests and even insults from male netizens for satirizing "mediocre but confident" men by performing an entire routine, such as "This year, I learned the most important lesson in my life, which is to not tease men easily. If you have to, only tease the successful parts." She showed that she was aware of the impact of her own performance on public opinion and insulted the men who could not stand it in real life.

Most American actresses do not consciously create lines with the primary purpose of responding to such questions. Instead, they use this conscious reflection as a tool for transitioning between jokes, making the text more natural. For example, Michelle Wolf used the line, "I know, I talk about periods a lot, and I know, men, I know they're gross. Women know they're gross. We get it," as a connection between two jokes.

Therefore, it can be concluded that Chinese actresses tend to carefully consider the social impact of their own speech when expressing themselves, which is more sensitive compared to American stand-up comedy, which focuses more on text advancement.

4 The reasons for differences in women's discourse and reception in Chinese-American online stand-up comedy

4.1 Reasons for differences

After illustrating the various differences, it is necessary to analyze the reasons behind them. The works created by comedians all come from the actresses' personal observations and experiences in real life. Therefore, the socio-cultural roots behind the different expressions are explicit and easy to trace.

Regarding the different perspectives, one reason why Chinese actresses tend to show the unequal situation of women within the family is due to the deep-rooted patriarchal system and feudal hierarchy that have long restricted women in Chinese society. Another reason is that the importance and expectations of stable family relationships have been deeply internalized into the individual consciousness of women in China. That is the reason why Chinese actresses consciously or unconsciously imagine an ideal marriage and family life.

The reason why American actresses pay more attention to women's political and economic rights and religious issues can be attributed to the democratic tradition of active participation in political communities and the profound influence of religions in Western society. In contrast, China has long been a feudal, autocratic, and authoritarian society, and Confucianism has been the dominant cultural norm. It has not provided the same space for the growth of the public spirit as in the West, nor has it been dominated by an orthodox religion that has had a great historical and cultural impact, such as Christianity. Chinese culture is focused on practical, secular matters.

From the perspective of body narrative and offense, Chinese stand-up comedy tends to depend on dynamic interpersonal and social relationships to create texts and pays special attention to the impact of their own
performances on society; while American comedians focus more on the female individual and show women's physical characteristics. The possible reason is the opposing traditions of collectivism and individualism between China and the United States. The importance of collectivism is highly valued in the Chinese cultural context, and the Chinese tend to anchor their identity status through social relationships. In the Western cultural tradition, the individual self is the center of reference for understanding and representing the external world.

In conclusion, the textual characteristics of stand-up comedy as a specific form of artistic creation can be found in the diachronic socio-cultural traditions. The difference between the two is also, to some extent, a microcosm of heterogeneous civilizational differences.

### 4.2 On-site acceptance: the audience's interpretation mechanism of female comedy discourse

From the perspective of reception aesthetics, a performance cannot be achieved without the interpretation of the audience. This means that comedians must make assumptions about possible audience reactions and adjust their performance accordingly, which brings up a question closer to the essence of comedy: How do audiences discern whether a particular offense is feminist, thereby establishing the feminist nature of stand-up comedy?

Since this essay takes Chinese and American stand-up comedy as its research object, its audience includes not only the live audience that is set up during the recording of the performance to enhance the theatrical effect but also the vast number of network users who watch these performances videos on the Internet.

This essay argues that the gender of comedians is one of the most important factors influencing the audience's decoding of comedians' feminist positions. The same textual content has different effects when delivered by female and male comedians. In the special "Don't Start with Me", Joan wrote a joke about Brad Pitt's affair with Angelina Jolie, who was originally Jennifer Aniston's husband. However, she used the description "Angelina stole Jennifer's husband" without questioning the masculine side of the affair but depicting Angelina as a seductive figure—the latent stigma that is clearly less feminist [5].

The key is that Joan is an actress. In the minds of most viewers, one does not openly point the finger at the group to which one belongs, so it is easy to interpret this as a self-deprecating joke within the female community or even as a rhetorical jab at Brad Pitt. If a male actor were to make this joke about a female public figure, female audiences would be far more offended than they would otherwise be.

Based on the different audience reactions to comedians of different genders, it can be elaborated further that when comedy as an art form carries specific ideologies, its interpretive space is expanded due to the legitimacy of its offensive content and the audience's cognitive habits of identity recognition, forming a unique mechanism for a reception. The representative manifestation of this is that the audience perceives the offensive content as irony and self-deprecation and derives an interpretation that is completely opposite to its literal meaning. This interpretation mechanism is similar to Stuart Hall's oppositional code [14], but in a sense, the oppositional position formed by the audience is precisely the expressive effect that comedians intend to create.

### 4.3 Off-site acceptance: the counter-effects of market and censorship on female comedy discourse

As pointed out in the previous essay, feminist expressions in stand-up comedy have diverse socio-cultural roots, and their textual meanings are largely influenced by the audience's interpretative responses. In recent years, however, Chinese and American stand-up comedy has dramatically gained attention through new media production models. This attempt to bring a non-mainstream art form into the public and mainstream discourse inevitably reinforces the external forces, such as market rules and censorship, that constrain stand-up comedy.

#### 4.3.1 Utilization of market and capital

The networked and variety-show-like nature of stand-up comedy means that it has been incorporated into the consumption-driven capitalist market and the cultural industry, which requires the mass production of cultural commodities. To attract more viewers, "Rock and Roast" has adopted a strong entertainment program mechanism and set up competition rules such as light shooter and voting. In comparison, Netflix's online comedy specials do not have the characteristics of variety show entertainment, but in the age of Internet traffic, the attention of the masses is also a factor that cannot be ignored.

This variety show-like production method is actually a set of manipulation frameworks designed for a free artistic form that was supposed to be rebellious. The values that stand-up comedy would have followed inevitably be subjected to the market, focusing on topics that meet the interests of the audience. Women's issues happen to be in line with today's feminist trends. Expressing feminist positions and offensive discourses can effectively resonate with women's dissatisfaction with the current patriarchy and provoke repeated debates between the two genders in online media, thereby attracting extremely high attention to the program. This also means that, in some cases, feminist expressions are helplessly degraded to profit-making tools and public opinion gimmicks in the operation of capital.

#### 4.3.2 Control of the censorship system

The growing audience means that the socio-cultural impact of stand-up comedy is growing accordingly, and
the fact that online programs leave a more traceable trail of information on the Internet makes stand-up comedy more susceptible to relevant cultural regulation and censorship.

For the censorship system that serves the coercive power of the national ideology and the mainstream cultural concept, any discourse that appears in any form and can shake the orthodox ideology must be watched and regulated. Moderate, rebellious discourse can provide an outlet for people's dissatisfaction and have a calming effect on tense public opinion. However, once the discourse and consciousness that goes against the mainstream values overwhelm the original overall narrative, it will cause cultural turmoil, which is obviously not welcomed by the ruling class.

Therefore, in contemporary patriarchal societies, feminist expressions in stand-up comedy must obey the subtle boundaries set by cultural censorship institutions. When faced with this kind of coercive pressure, producers of online stand-up comedy often practice self-censorship and silence to protect the program from admonishment and punishment. According to statistics, the third and fourth seasons of "Rock and Roast" featured 10 and 11 feminist performances by actresses, accounting for 40% and 45.83%, respectively; in the fifth season, only 8 of the 32 performances by actresses made feminist statements, dropping to 25%.

From the above situation, it can be seen that the social publicity of stand-up comedy is in danger of being obscured by entertainment and leisure. On the one hand, the offensive speech that originally indicated the direction of feminist progress may gradually become a titillating and fast-moving product with shallow and impersonal content. On the other hand, the marginalized female discourse that resists patriarchal authority may be further weakened and silenced.

5 Conclusion

This essay focuses on the expression of feminism in Chinese and American online stand-up comedy and analyzes the similarities and differences between the two from three aspects: the entry perspective, body narrative, offense and re-speaking. It finds that the women's issues discussed by both are generally similar. However, Chinese stand-up comedy pays more attention to the unequal treatment of women within the family and adopts a more restrained offensive strategy based on dynamic interpersonal and social interaction. American stand-up comedy, on the other hand, emphasizes women's public rights and starts from women's individual physical characteristics, reflecting an exaggerated and assertive physical performance style.

The different characteristics of feminist expression in Chinese and American Internet stand-up comedy can be traced back to different social roots, such as political systems and cultural psychology, based on a materialist historical view. In contemporary times, the online mode of dissemination and production has intervened as a new influencing factor in the development of stand-up comedy, bringing increasingly deep entertainment function, marketability and exposure. This represents a crisis of instrumentality, vulgarity, and even speechlessness and ineffectiveness for feminist expression in the public sphere today.

However, this study has some limitations. The Chinese stand-up comedy examined in this essay has a stronger variety of show entertainment characters, and its completeness and capacity are weaker than those of Netflix-produced comedy specials, which may affect the accuracy of the conclusions. In addition, the research sample selected in this study is relatively small and limited to the performances and texts of female comedians, without an in-depth analysis of the gender discourse of male comedians, which makes the research scope narrow.

In conclusion, feminist expression in stand-up comedy is not only found in the relationship between comedians and audiences but also in the repeated negotiation and mediation of free speech, market logic, and cultural censorship. Feminist comedy discourse needs to be further explored and practiced in order to gain understanding and recognition from various groups and forces in contemporary cultural and public spheres and to produce progressive, gender-equitable diffusion effects.

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