

# Deconstructing Authority with Humor - The Cultural Adaptation and Reinvention of Women's Discourse in Stand-Up Comedy of China

Jiahe Cao\*

Centre for Cultural, Literary and Postcolonial Studies; SOAS, University of London; London, UK

**Abstract.** This paper explores the adaptation and alienation of Western postmodern approaches to female empowerment in China through an analysis of female discourse in the stand-up comedy industry. I used textual analysis to examine the discourses and audience feedback of female performers in the representative Chinese talk show "Rock & Roast". The results of this paper are divided into two parts: 1. the three main portraits and discourse strategies of female stand-up comedians extracted from their words; and 2. a comparison of public opinion on the acceptance of different female discourses and images in the first part with the audience's evaluation. The findings of the study show that female stand-up comedians are mainly moulded through language into three categories: women in traditional relationships, feminist fighters and highly educated independent women. The audience's feedback suggests that a new system of authoritative judgement between Western thought and traditional Chinese gender values is in the process of being born. In stand-up comedy, a model image of women that demands independence but without touching on gender issues is being promoted as the "most qualified" representation of women's image. The category of female discourse has an underlying premise of male discourse, and thus all talk of female discourse is inextricably bound up with male-centrism. Here, the term discourse is important for all normative forms of human life, in addition to what is commonly thought of as forms of speech. For example, Foucault's discourse of power and Said's theory of postcolonial discourse in the East start from all normative forms in life. When we analyze women's discourse in Chinese communication, we also focus on the normative forms of their lives in addition to words, exploring the crux of the problem from the deep psychological factors of culture, history, and anthropology. Generally speaking, women's discourse in contemporary Chinese communication is often characterized by several problems: misinterpretation, deflection, and pleasing, etc. Even though there are a number of feminist movements in contemporary China, they may not be able to truly and correctly address feminist issues. This does not lie in the strength of male power in China, but in the biased arguments and misperceptions of this issue in women's visions.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Stand-up comedy originated in the taverns of 18th century England as a way of forming communities to discuss social issues, with skilled talkers often taking center stage (Limon, 2000). The main source of this is the wide gap between people's lofty ideals of equality and social reality. The rise of stand-up comedy is often seen as a product of post-modernist culture. In terms of performership, stand-up comedy has broken the monopoly of traditional authority on discourse and given the underprivileged and ordinary people the opportunity to express themselves [1]. In terms of content, stand-up comedy uses humour and offensive language to reconstruct abstract and serious social issues into everyday minutiae (Ruiz-Gurillo & Linares-Bernabéu, 2020) [2], leading the public to reflect on 'accepted truths'. It can be said that stand-up comedy is a performance form aimed at "decentering", characterized by the disappearance of depth patterns, distance, and

historical meaning in postmodernist cultural products, as Jameson (1989) suggested.

Along with the decentralization of discourse brought by the popularity of mass media in China, local Chinese stand-up comedy shows have become one of the most popular cultural events among millennials [3]. The most influential and groundbreaking one is the competition-based online talk show "Rock & Roast", which is attended by ordinary people. Surprisingly, while the main contestants were all male actors, the few female participants received the most attention during the competition [4]. In fact, from the development of stand-up comedy, women's discourse and feminism have entered the discussion as early as the 1950s, along with social movements in the West. The famous Mrs. Mercer and Phyllis Diller, among others, challenged various 'gender labels' by expanding the discourse space (Fraiberg, 2014) [5]. Such a struggle has undoubtedly been a long one, but in China since stand-up comedy entered the

\* Corresponding author: [andycao712@outlook.com](mailto:andycao712@outlook.com)

public arena in 2010, it seems that female stand-up comedians aimed to go through fifty years' road of pioneering women's discourse in the West in four to five years. The short-lived dramatic change is bound to bring opposition. Particularly in a culture where feminine modesty and politeness are virtues, stand-up comedians have generated a great deal of controversy and debate in their attempts to revolutionize the female discourse from a 'gazed at object' to a 'vocal subject'.

In this essay, my aim is to discuss the cultural adaptations and challenges faced by female discourse of stand-up comedy in the postmodern context in China. I chose the female performers' performances and audience feedback from "Rock & Roast" as the main material for my analysis [6]. Apart from the fact that it is the most representative stand-up comedy show in China now, the competition format also allows me to directly understand the audience's attitudes towards different female figures in the show based on the results and evaluations of the competition. In the first part that follows, I analyze the three main feminine images and discourse strategies constructed by the show's female comedians [7]. I then discuss the Chinese public's acceptance of different female discourses within the competition results and the textual content of the audience feedback, and reflexive reconfiguration. It is also a reflection of the adaptability and local reinvention of Western post-modernist ideology-guided approaches to female empowerment in China.

## **2.The Construction of Female Images and Discourse Strategies**

In this section, I have divided the representative female stand-up comedians of the show into the following three categories based on performance style, content topic and discourse strategy [8]. Their common denominator is a deliberate effort to empower women's voices with humor (Bernabéu, 2019) as part of the purpose of their performances. But the varying image constructions have resulted in completely different audience feedback. I will analyze in detail the construction of these female figures and discourse they adopt.

### **2.1.Traditional images of women in relationships**

The first female creators of the show set themselves the image of the "sharp housewife". This is like the way Phyllis Diller came on stage in the West as a "mother of five" last century to roast family relationships. In this approach to image construction, the actor does not portray herself as broadly conceived as a woman but places herself in a traditional domestic or romantic relationship, emphasizing that she is the "housewife". The most famous actress in this genre is called Siwen, and what she talks about is often a mismatch of identities with her husband, who is also a stand-up comedian. The absurdity of multiple identities is reflected in being treated as a "wife" in a serious work relationship and as a "colleague" in what should be a romantic relationship [9]. On the one hand, the content of Siwen expresses the multiple social

expectations faced by the so-called 'independent women' trapped in traditional Chinese family relationships in the new era, and the exhaustion of negotiating with husbands, parents and the in-laws in the extended family. On the other hand, this expression attempts to reduce the offensiveness of the satire by confining it to the small family of the individual. According to Zhao (2021), whenever Siwen's sarcasm becomes more intense on the show, the camera quickly switches to a close-up of her husband off-stage, using his smile to suggest that the sarcasm is "allowed by her husband".

### **2.2.Feminist fighters**

The subsequent emergence of a feminist fighter-type female contestant sparked the highest level of buzz compared to the confinement of Siwen to her family. Yang Li, who has received a lot of heat and skepticism because of his phrase "men are so ordinary yet so confident", is the most obvious person to be labelled as such. She broke out the circle of personal relationships, and in her performance offers a direct and fierce criticism of the male community with female discourse [10]. Yang Li's text begins each time with a fake obedience to the established rules, then advances emotionally in a satire of the phenomenon, and finally reaches the end of the unveiling (Wang, 2021). She portrays herself as a female figure in semi-public relations who conforms to stereotypes of the desire to fall in love, and as the audience follows her perspective into the context of re-observing men in mate selection, they are inevitably struck by her judgement of male repression and gazing.

### **2.3.Highly educated independent women**

The exploration of the boundaries of feminist discourse in "Rock & Roast" is not a linear process; beyond the upper two feminist discourses that directly point out gender inequality, the shows have also produced several high-level intellectual female figures who focus on public discourse beyond gender issues. This category of female images includes urban white-collar workers and graduates of prestigious universities. The articulation of their female voices was embodied in a reflection and deconstruction of the invisible inequalities of power structures from the specific gender position. In their discourse, they place themselves in an identity other than gender, and their satire may be directed at teachers, bosses or public opinion, so that the audience can feel the "special treatment of women" without realizing it. For example, one of the actors told the audience about the latest discovery by archaeologists of two 3,800-year-old remains that were named as "Loulan Beauty" and "Dryad II". To laughter, she then added, "I actually made this up, but doesn't it seem particularly plausible to you?" This discourse technique allows the audience to suddenly find themselves in the dual position of being both victim and perpetrator. The implicit suggestion of the gaze on women's appearance anxiety also points to the "alienation" of values on a social level.

### 3. Cultural Adaptation and Reinvention

#### 3.1. New social expectations for female

The feedback from the audience indicates a clear public preference for a specific female image. As a show that gives a voice to regular people guided by post-modernist values, Rock & Roast shows us the possibilities of different female orientations. However, not every image has been equally included and positively evaluated. One of the things that particularly surprised me was the aversion shown by the audience to the traditional Chinese portrayal of women in family or marital relationships. In terms of subsequent audience feedback, the initial support Siwen received stemmed more from the gender scarcity in the early stand-up team than from the success of the portrayal, and subsequent actors of her ilk, including her own on-topic content, have suffered criticism. Viewers described the topic of women's family life as "trite" and "boring". To some extent, the Chinese talk show audience's image of the new-age Chinese ideal woman as presented by talk shows is highly influenced by Western values. The female discourse in talk shows is given the meaning of presenting Chinese women as 'progressive' and 'liberated'. The 'correct' progress is to follow the Western standard of femininity. In contrast, women in the traditional Chinese family are seen as stuck in their ways and do not conform to the 'correct' image of women.

As I mentioned above, the very first female comedians in the West also focused on family topics, and the representation of women in stand-up comedy has diversified and reached their present state of co-existence over the decades as women's roles in society have enriched (Piwowarczyk, 2019). The change in women's discourse in the Chinese stand-up comedy industry has been modelled on Western achievements to reach the same effect in a very short period. As a result, the Chinese public sees the stereotype-compliant image of women who focus on the family as an enemy that hinders progress and tries to cut it off as quickly as possible. It can be argued that the need for a gradual development of stand-up comedy as a way of restructuring power contradicts the strong Western-guided feminist aspirations at the Chinese society level. The quest for efficiency of change has resulted in the absence of a complex process of public reflection, with just a simple right or wrong judgement based on a template. And the dominant image of women in the past has been judged as undesirable in an entirely negative way, rather than as one of the choices. Even stand-up comedians who construct 'thinking' housewives for satirical and reflective purposes are seen as the antithesis of modern 'model women' because they place women too much in domestic contexts. The exploration of female discourse brought by talk shows has served to diminish stereotypes of women by presenting them in multiple facets, but simultaneously establishing a new set of criteria and 'central values' for the evaluation of women that supposedly meet Western-type modern needs (Sardar, 1998).

#### 3.2. Women's discourse stigmatized as 'Western poison'

In addition to the more pronounced demarcation of traditional female identities than in the West in the localization of women's discourse in Chinese stand-up comedy culture, the articulation of radical feminist discourse is in danger of being stigmatized as a national ideological struggle. As a language art that intends to challenge authority (Schwarz, 2009), stand-up comedy requires the practice of offending in a pleasing manner in China. Any use of language beyond the comfort zone of authority would no longer even be rejected as radical feminine discourse but would be reconstructed as a "Western conspiracy". Whereas Siwen's satire of the husband's role within the enclosed space of the family still requires the display of a husband's smile to delineate the safe confines of violating social authority, a female discourse that directly criticizes men in a fully public context is left fully exposed to public questioning. Some of the criticism directed at the male population as a whole was even reported by some viewers as being "sexist".

As Antoine (2016) mentioned, the greatest resistance to women reaching a reconfiguration of power through discursive change is to carry out actions that threaten men's vested interests in the context of a patriarchal society. This is a situation where slightly radical discourses risk being purposefully reinterpreted and redefined by those in authority in the social context. And the deeply Western imprint of stand-up comedy provides a direct rhetoric for those wary of female power in stand-up comedy to justify the transfer of gender issues into national conflict. As many hidden gender inequalities were not often mentioned until women were given a platform to express themselves, the sharp contradictions between the sexes in China were re-described as a 'malady' brought on by Western forms of expression. Discourses that directly criticize male privilege turn into purposeful Western imports that inflame gender tensions in China. The two attitudes of the Chinese public show the double standard they adopt in evaluating women's discourse in stand-up comedy. On the one hand, discourses that are anchored in traditionally female contexts are critiqued as not being sufficiently independent, as in the West. On the other hand, discourses that attempt to directly deconstruct male authority, even in the guise of humour, are alienated as "poison from the West". In this way, the Western postmodernist approach to empowerment in stand-up comedy has not only become a criterion for Chinese women's discourse, but has also been used in turn as a tool for dissolving gender equality promotion. The underlying gender contradiction is in danger of being hidden in the overemphasized surface of regional ideological differences.

#### 3.3. Women as Perspectives

More than feminine discourses dominated by gender issues, the increasing public discussion of women's perspectives in stand-up comedy is the most obvious local re-creation in China. Performers of this style implicitly

structure seemingly rational social systems by placing themselves in different social roles as structural weaklings. This type of female figure fits into the public imagination of feminists of Western origin, while adopting a euphemistic and subtle approach to avoid direct conflict with the hegemonic discourse. Females are not presented here as a specific gender identity, but only as a lens through which to observe the implicit inequalities of society from a marginal position. In terms of the results, such a representation does not offend the male audience, as they are sometimes unaware that they belong to the implicit power holders being criticized either. Ironically women's discourses that do not address gender issues may have produced the best results in promoting gender equality awareness. These multiple layers of logic and 'thought-provoking' content were described by the audience as 'true stand-up comedy'. In turn, most of this content was created by highly educated, middle-class female comedians. In this way, audience responses show an expectation of an ideal female expression of stand-up comedy localized in China: a middle-class woman who is good at wrapping sensitive issues in ingratiating discourse. This imagined representation of middle-class women as a perspective provides a standard answer to the balance between Western feminism and the bottom line of Chinese hegemonic discourse. With the rapid development of Internet technologies such as big data and cloud computing, the full popularization of smartphones and the rapid rise of mobile Internet, the communication field is undergoing a profound change, from microblogging, weibo and mobile clients, from government websites to social media, and from live broadcasting to community network platforms, the way of collecting, disseminating, receiving and feeding back information has changed from unidirectional and closed to interactive and open. The way of information collection, dissemination, reception and feedback has changed from one-way and closed to interactive and open. The discourse of traditional media has been deeply influenced by traditional patriarchal culture, and men have always been the dominant social discourse and the maintainer of the established order. In the new media environment, the development of new communication technologies and the interactivity and openness of diversified media platforms have changed the public's discourse expression, cultural ecology, and political participation characteristics, and the discourse power has begun to shift from the traditional media to the public, which undoubtedly makes women's right to participate in society and the right to discourse slowly rising, and women's social status in the communication order slowly changing. In recent years, China has been paying more and more attention to participating in the international discourse system of gender equality, and "gender mainstreaming" has been gradually upgraded to a national strategy for promoting gender equality. At present, China is a member of the Executive Board of the United Nations Entity for Women (UN Women) and the United Nations Commission on the Status of Women (CSW), and one of the 49 countries that have made commitments to gender mainstreaming, which not only provides an opportunity for China to actively

participate in global governance. This not only provides an opportunity for China to actively participate in global governance, but also provides a good platform for China to play an important role in the world women's movement.

## 4. Conclusion

To be concluded, the Western postmodernist inspiration received by the female discourse in Chinese stand-up comedy is both ambiguous and alienating. Rock & Roast presents a multifaceted portrayal of women in the program through gender discourse, from the "wife" and "daughter-in-law" in private households, to feminist fighters with a strong banner, and further to the "working professional" in public social settings. In general, this presentation reduces stereotypes of women and further dissolves the authority of male discourse in the realm of public statement. However, this multifaceted representation does not deconstruct the universal values (Auslander, 2004) as post-modernist feminism would expect, but rather creates new criteria of judgement under the constraints of Western thought and the hegemonic discourse of gender in China. The dominant Western image of the middle-class independent woman is seen as the group with the 'most power' to speak out for Chinese feminism, while the traditional family-focused image of the woman is rejected.

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