

Book Proposal: Hong Kong Humor

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1 Synopsis

Humor is universal. Every community has it in some shape or form. Yet, it is represented differently in different communities. Jokes and humor are also known to be culture-specific: What is funny to the locals provides an excellent window to observe the community and the cultures. Jokes are typically considered untranslatable, as the humor is often lost, when the context and references cannot be expressed in the translated jokes. Therefore, studying the diversity of humor in different cultures is critical to enhance our understanding of it.

Existing works in humor studies are limited by their focus on English-speaking regions. While recent publications on humor studies showcase the growing interest of the topic, such as *The Linguistics of Humor: An Introduction* by Salvatore Attardo in 2020 and *The Language of Humor: An Introduction* by Nilsen and Nilsen in 2018, the vast majority of publications in humor studies discusses jokes in English-speaking regions only. Even for studies on ethnic humor, the works have often been done through the lens of Anglophone world, e.g. *Ethnic Humor around the World* by Christie Davies in 1990 and subsequent works. In many cases, the ethnic humor is not always celebratory as humor in Anglophone cultures. The literature on East Asian humor remains limited to a few works on the humor in China (e.g., *The Age of Irreverence: A New History of Laughter in China* by Christopher Rea) and Japan (e.g., *Understanding Humor in Japan* by Jessica Milner-Davis, *Rakugo: Performing Comedy and Cultural Heritage in Contemporary Tokyo* by Lorie Brau), in addition to several journal articles.

The proposed book aims to contribute with the understudied topic of Hong Kong humor. As a city open to the world since the post war period, Hong Kong has long been famous for its entertainment industry and popular culture. However, comedy remains absent in the academic discussion of Hong Kong culture. Cultural and linguistic identities have become an important topic in the study of Hong Kong since the hand-over to China in 1997. After two decades under Chinese rule, the interest in defining the local culture and identity has increased greatly. Language and stories are at the core of the culture and identity of a community. The study of jokes and humor is therefore essential to the understanding of the community. However, despite its central role in entertainment and local culture, humor has received little attention. Given the rise of standup comedy in the 1990s and social media in the 2000s, the focus on movies limits itself from seeing the full scope of humor in Hong Kong. Although the two collections include contributions from prominent Hong Kong scholars, they are both written in Chinese with the general public as the target audience.

The proposed book is expected to be the first of its kind and contribute with a systematic investigation of various forms of humor in Hong Kong. In an era of rapid social changes, this study aims to provide a record and an analysis of the Cantonese / Hong Kong culture. By connecting the humor studies and the study of identity of Hong Kong, the proposed work is expected to contribute to popular culture and humor studies, especially in the Asian context.

2 Competing works

There is no existing work that competes directly with the proposed book. The titles below are related works. While existing works form a substantial body of literature in humor study, no previous work has focused on the Hong Kong humor. The section on “Humor in Asia” discusses how the proposed book differentiates itself from these previous studies.

2.1 Humor theories

Humor study is an area with a long tradition, but it has not been considered its own discipline until recently. Most works done in humor studies focus on jokes in English, or humor in English-speaking countries. In the past 10 years, there has been a number of comprehensive and introductory work on humor studies:

- Attardo, S. (2020). *The Linguistics of Humor: An Introduction*. Oxford University Press.
- Nilsen, D. and Nilsen, A. P. (2018). *The Language of Humor: An Introduction*. Cambridge University Press.
- Attardo, S. (Ed.). (2017). *The Routledge Handbook of Language and Humor*. Taylor & Francis.
- Attardo, S. (Ed.). (2014). *Encyclopedia of Humor Studies*. Sage Publications.
- Aaron, D. (2012). *Jokes and the Linguistic Mind*. Taylor & Francis.

The proposed book builds on these great works. These works do not appear to directly compete with the proposed book. Rather, the comparison indicates a growing interests in humor studies. It is therefore predictable that scholars and readers will be seeking for more in-depth investigation to specific topics. To complement the great works on humor based on the US or the UK, the proposed work aims to provide a dedicated analysis of humor in Hong Kong.

2.2 Humor in Asia

Compared to more traditional subjects of studies, such as history and politics, entertainment and popular culture in Asia receive much less attention in academic discussions. Publications on humor in Asia focus on more prominent cultures, such as China and Japan; studies on sub-national or other regions like Hong Kong, have always remain marginal.

- Tam, K.-f. and Wesoky, S. (2018). *Not Just a Laughing Matter: Interdisciplinary Approaches to Political Humour in China*. Singapore. Springer.
- Rea, C. (2015). *The Age of Irreverence: A New History of Laughter in China*. University of California Press.
- Rosenthal, A., Bindman, D. and Randolph, A. (Eds.). (2015). *No Laughing Matter: Visual Humor in Ideas of Race, Nationality, and Ethnicity*. Dartmouth College Press.
- Milner Davis, J. and Chey, J. (Ed.). (2013). *Humour in Chinese Life and Culture: Resistance and Control in Modern Times*. Hong Kong University Press.
- Milner Davis, J. and Chey, J. (Ed.). (2011). *Humour in Chinese Life and Letters: Classical and Traditional Approaches*. Hong Kong University Press.

- Milner Davis, J. (2006). *Understanding Humor in Japan*. Wayne State University Press.
- McGraw, P. and Warner, J. (2014). *The Humor code: A Global Search for What Makes Things Funny*. Simon and Schuster. (Chapter 5 JAPAN: When is Comedy Lost in Translation?)

Even when publications in Chinese are considered, the topic of humor is still understudied and peripheral, including only a few edited volumes listed below. Therefore, the proposed book will be unique as the first dedicated volume on humor.

- Man, Eva. (2014) *Hong Kong Cantonese Culture*. Commercial Press Hong Kong. (Title in Chinese: 香港嘅廣東文化)
- Cheung, Wai-hung (2015) *Self-Cultivation in Hong Kong Comedy Movies*. Hong Kong Film Critics Society. (Title in Chinese: 香港喜劇電影的自我修養)

3 Target audience

The target audience includes the following groups:

i) *Humor scholars*

Fellow scholars in humor studies will find the book useful, as the book provides particular case studies for Hong Kong humor. The book intends to bridge general theoretical studies on humor and culture with a focused discussion on Hong Kong humor. For humor scholars who do not possess prior knowledge of humor in Hong Kong or Asia, the book will provide empirical examples and analysis. For scholars who are already familiar with the Asian context, the book can offer important information that allows for comparative studies across regions in Asia.

ii) *Area studies scholars in Hong Kong, China and Asia*

The past decade has witnessed the growing interest in Hong Kong studies and Cantonese studies as a specialized sub-discipline that employs distinct methods and theoretical frameworks than China studies at large. To name a few examples:

- Society of Hong Kong Studies (<https://hkstudies.org/>)
- Hong Kong Studies Initiative at the University of British Columbia (<https://hksi.ubc.ca/>)
- Hong Kong-based journal “Hong Kong Studies” (published by the Chinese University of Hong Kong Press since 2018, https://cup.cuhk.edu.hk/index.php?route=product/product&product_id=3533)

These organizations and initiatives indicate the growing interest in inter-disciplinary studies on Hong Kong. Scholars and students in neighboring disciplines, such as media studies and cultural studies, will also find this book useful. The proposed manuscript will be an important part of the study of pop culture in Hong Kong and East Asia. Especially with the inclusion of chapters on stand-up comedy and online humor, this manuscript can fill the knowledge gap in existing literature, which is dominated by film and media studies. Discourse and narrative analyses have proved to be useful tools in area studies. Therefore, the discussion on verbal humor in Hong Kong will be a rich resource for analyses of the identity and culture of Hong Kong.

iii) *Readers who are interested in Hong Kong Identity*

In a time when the city has experienced drastic changes from social changes, the book is a timely contribution for serious readers who are not in academia. The interest in promoting and preserving Cantonese, a Sinitic language spoken by over 90% of the locals, has often been foregrounded in public debates. This is particularly evident under the increasing influence of standard Mandarin (or *Putonghua* ‘the common language’) as the official language. The publication of the Cantonese translation of *Le petit prince* in 2017 and the establishment of a Cantonese-language literary magazine *Resonate* in 2020 are two examples of the effort to preserve the language from the civil society. Given this increased interest in the study of Cantonese and the local identity, the proposed book is expected to attract readers who are curious about the manifestation and function of Hong Kong humor.

4 Proposed outline of the book

The entire manuscript is expected to be within 70,000 words. The first seven chapters are expected to be within 9,000 words, and the conclusion chapter is expected to be less than 7,000 words. Since the six content chapters discuss specific comedians or humor types, they are expected to include two or three illustrations or photographs each. The entire book should contain no more than 20 illustrations. For some comedians, it might help the readers to see a list of shows or filmography for context. The manuscript is anticipated to have 6-10 tables altogether.

1. Introduction: Why study humor in Hong Kong

In addition to the general introduction of humor and entertainment in Hong Kong, this chapter sets the stage for the subsequent chapters for analyzing how the Hong Kong identity is constructed and negotiated through the various forms of humor. The theoretical framework includes two approaches. First, the linguistic approach (e.g. Generalized Theory of Verbal Humor by Attardo and Raskin (2017) and Benign Violation Theory by McGraw and Warner (2014)) is effective in showing empirically how the jokes are funny to the audience. This is particularly effective for English-speaking readers, who are not expected to understand the jokes in the Hong Kong context. Second, the literature on humor studies from a socio-cultural perspective (e.g. Davies 1990; Gilbert 2004, Sørensen 2017) is also useful in revealing the issues behind the jokes. This contextualizes the jokes and helps readers understand how humor manifests the Hong Kong culture and identity.

The two approaches complement each other in that they reveal the different aspects of the same phenomenon of humor. The linguistic approach provides a grounded understanding of the internal dynamics of the jokes. The socio-cultural approach, on the other hand, provides the deeper reasoning on why the jokes have resonated with their target Cantonese-speaking audience in different eras. For example, jokes about foreigners or newcomers are often the target of humor. Who gets called foreign reveals the social structure and the Us/Them distinction. While the framework is already used in a lot of ethnic humor, the case of Hong Kong humor shows that such a distinction is beyond race. Across the different eras, we observe the manifestation of “foreigners” has changed drastically since the 60s, and not necessarily in the single progressive and inclusive direction.

2. Movies in the Post-WWII Era

This chapter investigates the popular comedy movies in the 1950s and 1960s. The movies, generally known as ‘Cantonese long films’ (粵語長片 in Cantonese) were important entertainment in the period. It has been reported that over 200 movies were produced per year at their peak. The humor in these movies often include misunderstanding among characters, such as slapstick and mistaken identity. A prime example is ‘Adventures of a fabulous man’ (《奇人奇遇》, 1956), an adaptation from Nikolai Gogol’s ‘The Government Inspector’. While the general plot follows the original, all the jokes are adapted to the Chinese context to appeal to the audience in Hong Kong.

By modern standard, many of the jokes in the period might seem predictable and simple. However, this chapter argues that the plots and resolution of conflicts were important for socialization purposes, through the reconciliation from misunderstanding and promotion of family value. The movies have also illustrated how the local Hong Kong identity was shaped through the Us/Them dichotomy (e.g. language barriers, characters visiting from foreign places). These movies are of great cultural importance and have been influential for latter generations, as they were often played on day-time television until the 1990s.

3. The Hui Brothers Show

This chapter studies the Hui Brothers Show (《雙星報喜》) aired in early 1970s. The significance of the sketch comedy show by the brothers, Michael and Sam Hui, lies in their portrayal of people in the working class. The show was very popular as entertainment, and was considered part of the collective memory of the generation. In addition to praising the Hui brothers in the construction of Hong Kong identity, which is well established among commentators, this chapter focuses on how their jokes and sketch comedy reflects the lives and anxiety of Hongkongers in the era. Specifically, many jokes dealt with issues with the influx of immigrants from the mainland China and the rapid economic growth.

The other implication of studying Hong Kong humor in the 70s (and also the 60s with the black-and-white movies) is related to the construction of the Hong Kong identity without a national China as a reference point. Since China’s “reform and opening-up policy” launched by Deng Xiaoping in 1978, the interest in the national identity of China has overshadowed all its regions. Being part of the People’s Republic of China, the Hong Kong identity has almost exclusively been studied and interpreted in relation to the Chinese nation. The study on the Hui Brothers Show provides a unique perspective to Hong Kong identity, in which the Hong Kong identity is not defined in relation to the national China.

4. Stephen Chow’s Non Sequitur Humor

This chapter discusses Stephen Chow’s comedy movies that embody his signature non sequitur “*mo lei tau*” humor (無厘頭 in written Chinese), which earned its own wikipedia page. In his movies, Chow often plays the underdog protagonist that eventually rises to the challenge in his life journey. Chow’s protagonists are unique in that they often start their journey with selfish motivations, such as using superpower for gambling in “All for the Winner” (《賭聖》, 1990), and extraordinary of hard punch for professional boxing in “Fist of Fury” (《新精武門》, 1991). Throughout the journey, these protagonists often learn to be a better person and use the gift for more altruistic purposes.

Chow’s signature non-sequitur humor is often represented in asynchronism in period pieces, such as modern style dialogues in “Justice, My Foot!” (《審死官》, 1992)

and verbal sparring between characters. While non-sequitur humor can be classified as incongruity humor, this chapter shows that Chow's humor is deeply anchored in the Hong Kong culture. Chow's jokes frequently referenced works by other local filmmakers (e.g. Wong Kar-wai's arthouse movies and the popular gambling films in the late 1980s) or even Hollywood movies (e.g. the outfits of the main characters in *Léon: The Professional*). Chow's humor marks the significance of individualism in defining the Hong Kong identity. His protagonists come from various backgrounds (new immigrant from mainland China, elite police officer, or unspecified in many movies). However, the identities of them are all defined in terms of the moral choice and behavior of the characters. In this sense, the idea of "non-sequitur" (literally *It does not follow* in Latin) can also be taken metaphorically as the separation of one's origin and the value / identity of the person. The superpowers can be seen as a metaphor for the miracle of economic success of Hong Kong in the 1970s-1990s. Having a superpower/ shortcut to success, Chow's movies provide not only escapism from underdog stories, they also embody life lessons that helps the audience process overnight success and reassure that their own identity is not changed by sudden gain of wealth.

5. Dayo Wong, Cynicism and the Fish Ball Theory

This chapter focuses on Dayo Wong Tze-Wah's rise as a pioneer of standup comedy in the 1990s. Wong's stand-up comedy style is primarily observational humor. He often addresses larger issues in life. His famous "fish ball theory" addresses what he considers a typical Hong Kong mentality to fairness. Wong once teased that his audience, when faced with inequality, such as getting fewer fish balls (a common street food) than other customers, Hongkongers would rather have the extra fish ball taken away from the others, instead of receiving more fish balls for themselves. This joke has been seen by many as an accurate characterization of cynical and negative Hongkongers.

Another aspect of Wong's humor is his reflection on individual identity in relation to the society. One of his comedic routines describes the perfect excuse to justify morally questionable choices in life. Setting up with a dialogue between a celebrity and a paparazzi, Wong proclaimed that the paparazzi should defend himself with "I'm just trying to make a living". If this initial response was not good enough, one should invoke "Is it against the law?" and "Do you think I want to do it?" as the second and third steps to dissolve any moral lecture. The routine indicates Wong's strategy to assume an exaggerated and cynical onstage persona, making this persona available for critique and allowing for the audience's reflection. Taking the self-deprecating nature of the joke and the wide resonance from the audience, this chapter aims to elucidate how Wong's comedy shows the cynical and self-aware aspects of the Hong Kong identity.

6. Vivek Mahbubani, Ethnic Diversity and Hong Kong Identity in 2000s

This chapter focuses on Vivek Mahbubani, a Hong Kong-based stand-up comedian of Indian descent. As a second generation immigrant to Hong Kong, Mahbubani's performance in both Cantonese and English earned him the title of "Hong Kong's Funniest Person" in 2007 and 2008. What makes Mahbubani's comedy stand out is his materials based on his experience of the "perpetual foreigner" stereotype. While humor scholars have long noted the role that ethnic humor and self-effacing wit play in response to oppression (Juni and Katz, 2000), the study of Mahbubani's work provides a unique lens to this "humor as self-defense" process in the East Asian context, which is often manifested very different manners from the contexts of the United States or other English-speaking regions.

While the chapter will be based on my journal article “Identities Are No Joke (or Are They?): Humor and Identity in Vivek Mahbubani’s Stand-up” (currently under revision), it will also include Mahbubani’s more recent materials of observational humor about the fast-paced city life in Hong Kong and his active role in the local standup community. Both topics reflect directly on the local identity based on the shared experience in the city, rather than ethnicity or nationality.

7. Humor Online: Trendy Posts and Where to Find Them

This chapter discusses the uncharted domain of online humor in the Hong Kong community and illustrates how satire and parody in Cantonese become a vehicle to express the local Hong Kong identity. The chapter analyzes humorous “trendy posts” from the Encyclopedia of Virtual Communities in Hong Kong (similar to ‘cypypasta’ parodies in English). What makes trendy posts special is the heavy use of Cantonese and references to local subculture and celebrities, often with the intention to mock and defy the narrative of mainstream television and films.

This chapter argues that such in-group connection and identity building are often a decentralized and bottom-up process. Online contents are generated by users, who organically negotiate authenticity and membership through sharing and other social media features. The chapter also argues that an “online culture” distinct from the offline, real-world Hong Kong culture is no longer meaningful. Serving the need for story retelling, humor and parody are argued to be the perfect vehicle for collective memories and identity building for online communities. This study demonstrates how the trolling and parody have been an effective tool to subvert the mainstream narrative of a national and ethnicity-based identity of being Chinese, and instead negotiate for an local identity defined by language and popular culture.

8. Implications / Conclusion

The concluding chapter summarizes the findings throughout the chapters and discusses the significance of Hong Kong humor generically. There are two major veins in this book: First, the jokes and humor across eras have often illustrate how the Hong Kong identity was/is defined. Specifically, the identity has been defined with a changing “Us/Them dichotomy” over the decades. Moreover, Stephen Chow’s movies and Dayo Wong’s stand-up comedy both show a non-national, individualistic definition of being a Hongkonger. With the rise of the internet fora, humor in Hong Kong has also witnessed the rise of participatory culture in entertainment.

Second, the chapter also summarizes the general trends in the development of Hong Kong humor over time. It argues that the evolution of the themes and formats in Hong Kong humor mirrors the similar development of entertainment in other regions. While Hong Kong humor has its uniqueness, the book will also show that Hong Kong humor is an interesting case study, where identity is constructed at a subnational level with a language largely seen as a dialect. Given the paucity of previous studies on Hong Kong humor, this book is hoped to be the first in the area that inspires further follow-ups.