

Introduction: Comedies in East Asian Media: Laughing in Bitter Times

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The Japanese screwball comedy master Segawa Masaharu 瀬川昌治 comments on the nature of comedy by using his collaborator Frankie Sakai's フランキー堺 performance in the *Journey* (*Ryokō* 旅行) series (1968–1972) as an example: “There’s always a victim in the dreams [of Sakai ... in the series]. It’s funny because there’s a victim.”¹ The most famous Korean comic actor of his generation, Koo Bong-seo 구봉서, would concur with Segawa’s view as Koo thinks the best comedies are those “blended with tears” because “[if the audience] only laugh, then after the film is over, nothing remains.”² The Taiwanese comedy director Kevin Chu 朱延平, recently honored with the Outstanding Contribution Award at the 24th Taipei Film Festival, similarly states that the best comedies are tragicomedies that “touch one’s heart, warm one’s soul and remain in one’s memory for a long time.”³ As a mentee of the romantic-comedy filmmaker Zhu Shilin 朱石麟, the Chinese comedy screenwriter-director Sang Hu 桑弧, known for his satirical comedy *Long Live the Teacher!* (*Jiaoshi wansui* 教師萬歲, 1944) and his collaborations with the romance writer Eileen Chang 張愛玲, also stresses the importance of “bitterness” in a good comedy.⁴ Michael Hui 許冠文, the winner of the 70th Hong Kong Film Award for Lifetime Achievement, expressed a similar opinion in a recent interview when he explained why he found Woody Allen’s films less attractive nowadays:

when we watched Woody Allen’s films in the past, we thought that the world he depicted was absurd, but it still made us laugh at ease while discerning that

¹ Masaharu Segawa, “Masaharu Segawa: An Interview,” interview by Mark Schilling, in *Asia Laughs! A Survey of Asian Comedy Films*, ed. Roger Garcia (Udine, Italy: Centro Espressioni Cinematografiche, 2011), 91.

² Koo Bong-seo, “An interview with Koo Bong-seo,” interview by Kim Hyun-beom, translated by Darcy Paquet, in *Asia Laughs! A Survey of Asian Comedy Films*, ed. Roger Garcia (Udine, Italy: Centro Espressioni Cinematografiche, 2011), 116–17.

³ Kevin Chu, “Taiwan’s King of Comedy: An Interview with Kevin Chu (Chu Yen-ping),” interview by George Chun Han Wang, in *Asia Laughs! A Survey of Asian Comedy Films*, ed. Roger Garcia (Udine, Italy: Centro Espressioni Cinematografiche, 2011), 177.

⁴ Sang Hu, “Interview with Director Sang Hu (1916–2004),” interview by Lu Hongshi, translated by Shaoyi Sun, in *Asia Laughs! A Survey of Asian Comedy Films*, ed. Roger Garcia (Udine, Italy: Centro Espressioni Cinematografiche, 2011), 31–32.

absurdity. But now, Allen almost looks at that absurdity in its eye. It is no longer that funny as if he doesn't care if it's funny or not, as being absurd seems to be more important than being amusing. I think that is over the top. We don't need him to tell us the reality is absurd. We've known it by heart that it is tragic even without explanations.⁵

Although active in different historical periods and local industries, these legendary East Asian comedians share the view that a good comedy must address and relieve the audiences' real-life frustrations by walking the fine line between bitterness and laughter. Perhaps for this reason, we find growing market demand for quality works from the genre in times of social change and crisis. This special issue, hence, draws together studies of East Asian comedic media and examines the understudied functions of humor in the region, demonstrating how it may offer underdog agency for producers and consumers to speak up, survive, or simply have fun in all kinds of difficult times.

TRANSLOCAL AND TRANSMEDIAL INFLUENCES IN EAST ASIAN MEDIA COMEDIES

From the silent films of Charlie Chaplin and Laurel and Hardy to Mr Bean sitcoms, comedy has a long history in European and American popular media culture, and comedy studies has largely been confined to Western traditions. However, in the past decade, there has been an increasing amount of research on comedic media products, particularly films, made in China,⁶ Hong Kong,⁷

⁵ Michael Hui, "Michael Hui: 'I'm running out of time,'" interview by Tsang Kam Shing, in *Art and Piece* 10 (2022): 44, 51–2.

⁶ Shuyou Kong, "Genre Film, Media Corporations, and the Commercialisation of the Chinese Film Industry: The Case of 'New Year Comedies,'" *Asian Studies Review* 31, no. 3 (2007): 227–42; Hui Liu, "Black Comedy Films in Postsocialist China: Case Study of Ning Hao's *Crazy Series*," *Journal of Chinese Cinemas* 12, no. 2 (2018): 158–73; eds. Ping Zhu, Zhuoyi Wang, and Jason McGrath, *Maoist Laughter* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2019).

⁷ Tom Cunliffe, "Romance as Business in the Capitalist Metropolis: Johnnie To's *Don't Go Breaking My Heart 1 and 2*," in *After "Happily Ever Happy": Romantic Comedy in the Post-Romantic Age*, edited by Maria San Filippo (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2021), 145–61; Fiona Yuk-wa Law, "Making Merry on Time: A Feast of Nostalgia in Watching Chinese New Year Films," in *A Companion to Hong Kong Cinema*, ed. Esther M. K. Cheung, Gina Marchetti, and Esther C. M. Yau (Chichester, UK and Malden, MA: Wiley Blackwell, 2015), 391–409; Kenny K. K. Ng, "The Romantic Comedies of Cathay/MP&GI in the 1950s and 60s: Language, Locality, and Urban Character," *Jump Cut: A Review of Contemporary Media* 49 (2007): n. pag. <http://www.ejumpcut.org/archive/jc49.2007/Ng-Cathay/index.html> (accessed November 16, 2022); Marco Wan, "Laughing at the Law: Johnnie To's *Justice, My Foot!*" in *Film and Constitutional Controversy: Visualizing Hong Kong*

Taiwan,⁸ Japan,⁹ and South Korea,¹⁰ which provides a basis for understanding the local histories and discourses of comedy in different East Asian societies. The growth can be seen as a response to the call to de-westernize studies of East Asian media culture, including comedies.¹¹ Note that although “Western” theories are mobilized in this issue’s articles, as Wayne Wong discusses in his analysis of kung fu comedy through the lens of the Bakhtinian carnivalesque, our contributors are aware of the contextual difference between the theories and their subjects of analysis. They, therefore, put them in critical dialogue with each other and with non-English intellectual writings and scholarship. Contributing to this expanding body of academic literature, our special issue critically engages “East Asia” as a framework to offer more holistic insights into the region’s translocal and transmedial influences on comedic culture.

To provide a breadth of understanding, contributions to the issue cover comedies produced in different contemporary periods, locations, languages, and media forms. Despite their diverse areas of focus, the research articles in this issue examine the performances and directed works of some regionally known figures, including the Hui brothers (Michael Hui, Stanley Hui 許冠武, Ricky Hui 許冠英 and Sam Hui 許冠傑), Dayo Wong 黃子華, Donnie Yen 甄子丹, Stephen Chow 周星馳, Feng Xiaogang 馮小剛, and Japanese performance comedy. Considering

Identity in the Age of “One Country, Two Systems” (Cambridge, United Kingdom: Cambridge University Press, 2021), 46–60; Luke White, *Legacies of the Drunken Master: Politics of the Body in Hong Kong Kung Fu Comedy Films* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2020).

- ⁸ Evelyn Shih, “Two Fools: Comedy as Dialectical Tension in Mid-Century Chinese Cinemas,” *Journal of Chinese Cinemas* 12, no. 2 (2018): 127–41; James Udden, “Taiwanese Comedies under the Shadow of the Chinese Market,” *Journal of Chinese Cinemas* 12, no. 2 (2018): 174–86.
- ⁹ Michael Baskett, “Dying for a Laugh: Post-1945 Japanese Service Comedies,” *Historical Journal of Film, Radio and Television* 23, no. 4 (2003): 291–310; David Humphrey, “On Mediating Laughter: Japan, Television, and the Discourse of Cheer,” *The Journal of Japanese Studies* 44, no. 2 (2018): 361–84; Leon Wolff, “Laughing at the Law: A Socio-Semiotic Analysis of Legal Comedy on Japanese Prime-Time Television,” *International Journal for the Semiotics of Law* 32 (2019): 923–38; Rie Yamasaki, “The Films of Mitani Koki: Intertextuality and Comedy in Contemporary Japanese Cinema,” *New Voices in Japanese Studies* 4 (2011): 123–43.
- ¹⁰ Nancy Abelmann and Jung-ah Choi, “‘Just Because’: Comedy, Melodrama, and Youth Violence in Attack the Gas Station,” in *New Korean Cinema*, ed. Chi-Yun Shin and Julian Stringer (New York: New York University Press, 2005), 132–43; Hye Seung Chung and David Scott Diffrient, *Movie Migrations: Transnational Genre Flows and South Korean Cinema* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2015); Jinying Li, “Clowns, Crimes, and Capital: Popular Crime-Comedies in Post-Crisis Korea,” *Film International* 38 (2009): 20–34; Evelyn Shih, “Doubled Over 007: ‘Aryu Pondu’ and Genre-Mixing Comedy in Korea,” *The Journal of Korean Studies* 22, no. 2 (2017): 365–88; Hee Jeong Sohn, “Feminism Reboot: Korean Cinema under Neoliberalism in the 21st Century,” *Journal of Japanese and Korean Cinema* 12, no. 2 (2020): 98–109.
- ¹¹ Leo T. S. Ching, “Neo-Regionalism and Neoliberal Asia,” in *Routledge Handbook of New Media in Asia*, ed. Larissa Hjorth and Olivia Khoo (London, England and New York, United States: Routledge, 2016), 47–8; Chung and Diffrient, “Reinventing,” 125–37.

that there have been constant flows of popular media in East Asia—from Hong Kong cinema, J-pop, and Taiwan Mandopop to K-dramas—this issue seeks to shed light on the cross-pollination of comedic media in the region. Wayne Wong’s essay on the Japanese director Tanigaki Kenji’s 谷垣 健治 kung fu comedy co-produced with Hong Kong filmmakers and mainland Chinese capitals, and Elaine Chung’s study on the memories of Stephen Chow’s stardom in South Korea are cases in point. On the other hand, the age of media convergence requires us to see how humorous narratives travel across old and new media platforms. In this issue, readers can find discussions about the proliferation of the subgenre *shūru-na warai* (シチュールな笑い loosely translated as “surreal comedy”) in Japanese live comedy, television sketches, commercials, and internet shows. They can also learn more about the legacy of Mandarin films and television shows in Hong Kong Cantonese cinema in the 1970s, the fictitious role-play experience in Feng Xiaogang’s comedies that resembles interactive and immersive theatre, and the remixing of Stephen Chow’s comedies in YouTube videos.

COMEDIES AMID SOCIOPOLITICAL CHANGES IN EAST ASIA

Many researchers of comedy have asked the same question: how can comedy be a form of resistance or an agent that enables resistance? The answer is never stable and straightforward. As James Brassett argues in the case of British comedy, the genre can shore up and legitimize existing structures but, in certain moments, can work towards revision and re-imagination.¹² The research articles in this special issue precisely exemplify the “complex intersection of comedic practices and practices of resistance in different contexts,”¹³ specifically in the case of East Asian media. Some existing research has demonstrated that, from modern to contemporary times, East Asian filmmakers have resorted to laughter, satire, and parody to maneuver the limits of (self-)censorship and express resistance, insurgence, and refusal to conform to imperfect realities.¹⁴ Following this

¹² Krista Bonello, Rutter Giappone, Fred Francis, and Iain MacKenzie, eds. *Comedy and Critical Thought: Laughter as Resistance* (London and New York: Rowman & Littlefield, 2018), 4.

¹³ James Brassett, “British Comedy, Global Resistance: Russell Brand, Charlie Brooker and Stewart Lee,” *European Journal of International Relations* 22, no. 1 (2016): 170.

¹⁴ Kenneth Masaki Shima, “The Laughing Masses: Comedy and Visual Media in Imperial Japan,” PhD Diss., University of California, Los Angeles, 2020; King-Fai Tam, and Sharon R. Wesoky, eds. *Not Just a Laughing Matter: Interdisciplinary Approaches to Political Humor in China* (Singapore: Springer Verlag, 2017); Sueyoung Park-Primiano, “Censorship and the Unfinished Past: Political Satire in Contemporary South Korean Cinema,” in *Popular Culture in Asia: Memory, City, Celebrity*, ed. Lorna Fitzsimmons and John A. Lent (Hampshire and New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 65–87; and Rui Zhang, *The Cinema of Feng Xiaogang: Commercialization and Censor-*

line of inquiry, our contributors adopt a culturalist approach to investigate how comedic subgenres, styles, and tropes have been reinvented and reinterpreted within and across localities in East Asia. Moreover, they examine these comedies' correlation to sociopolitical changes in the region, including the collapse of the Japanese asset bubble in 1992, contested mainland-Hong Kong integration after 1997, and neoliberalism with Chinese characteristics, among others. Employing critical frameworks ranging from carnivalesque, pastiche, and cultural memory to participatory culture, their analyses examine the ways producers and consumers take on comedy to claim agencies, construct identities, and engage with the hegemonies they seek to criticize, subvert, or vanquish.

Research articles in this issue are generally arranged in chronological order to allow readers to read them in juxtaposition with the corresponding historical backgrounds. Jessica Siu-yin Yeung discusses in her article the historical significance of the Hui brothers to the (trans)formation of Hong Kong identity. Following an analysis of *daa gung zai* (打工仔 “humble wage earners”) in their mid-1970s films which bespeak the hardship and aspiration of the underclass workers at that time, Yeung studies the remake and pastiche of this trope in the mid-2000s, when the SARS pandemic and other vicissitudes overshadowed the city. She argues that the everyman heroism in the Hui brothers' comedies, being appropriated with a forward-looking nostalgia, is pivotal to the construction of the Hong Konger identity that Hong Kongers embody to persevere through difficult times. In her article, Yeung mentions that the Hui brothers' comedies were well received in Japan, possibly because of the similar experiences of the post-war economic boom in Hong Kong and Japan, although the Japanese boom started at least two decades earlier in the 1950s. Salaryman comedies, nonetheless, were cast in a different light by the Japanese audiences after the asset bubble burst in 1992. Amid the prolonged recession that caused mass layoffs and discontinuation of the formerly secure middle-class lifetime employment, *shūru-na warai* emerged as a cult favorite comedic subgenre. In his article, “Laughter Suspended: Japanese Surreal Comedy and the Ends of Progress,” David Humphrey surveys various media texts, including television sketch shows, advertisements, and internet programs, to elucidate this elusive style of humor. Having characterized *shūru na warai* by the lack of resolution in its nar-

ship in Chinese Cinema after 1989 (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2008). See also Roger Garcia, “Asia: The Comedy,” in *Asia Laughs! A Survey of Asian Comedy Films*, ed. Garcia (Udine, Italy: Centro Espressioni Cinematografiche, 2011), 14: “What distinguishes Asian comedy, especially in the post-war era, is the continuing narrative that underlies much of Asian cinema of the time. The struggle of an emerging nation, its search for identity and roots, the transition from rural to industrial economy, are reflected in films that try and create the comfort of a tradition in a time of unprecedented change.”

rative structure, Humphrey attributes its proliferation in the 1990s and 2000s to its hanging aesthetic, which mimics the post-bubble blues: the reality is as precarious and uncertain as the comedic irresolution. Yeung's and Humphrey's studies demonstrate the effect the compressed experiences of modernization had on East Asians'—both media producers' and consumers'—changing preferences for comedic styles.

In the same vein, mainland Chinese media comedies since the late 1990s also reflect the sociopolitical changes brought about by the rise of China. As Yung-Hang Bruce Lai argues with reference to Slavoj Žižek's theory in his article, "Neoliberal Subjectivities and Cynicism in China: Feng Xiaogang's Dream-Play Comedies," Feng Xiaogang's cynical humor should be read as a product of the intersection between the market economy, neoliberalism, and authoritarian politics in China today. Lai observes that although Feng seems to address in his films the adverse effects of neoliberal developments, using the devices of "dream-play," he always swings between illusion and reality to mitigate the social criticisms with humor, a sentimental touch, and a conservative coda. In other words, as concluded in the article, Feng's cynical representations of social problems tend to encourage viewers to laugh them away instead of promoting genuine change. This political ambiguity can also be identified in other subgenres of Chinese film comedy. Wayne Wong's article, "A Tale of Two Dragons: Politics of the Comedic Kung Fu Body in Chinese Cinema," manifests the capacity of kung fu comedy to disseminate political values. Engaging Mikhail Bakhtin's theory of the carnivalesque, Wong comparatively analyzes two Hong Kong films made in 2020 and identifies two contrasting modes of kung fu comedy. It is revealed that while *Enter the Fat Dragon* (*Fei lung gwo gong* 肥龍過江, 2020), a Hong Kong-China co-production made by a Japanese filmmaker, follows the Chinese government's line to promote a positive culture and nationalism with kung fu, *The Grand Grandmaster* (*Mat doi zung si* 七代宗師, 2020), having no access to the mainland market, celebrates the "lying flat (*tang ping* 躺平)" attitude and vulgarity to challenge the propagandist narrative. Lai's and Wong's articles shed light on the strategies used by comedy filmmakers to position themselves in relation to the Chinese government's official ideologies, as well as to strike a balance between entering the highly politicized mainland Chinese market and censored creative expression.

While the articles above decipher how producers and performers make comedies to address and respond to social changes and political ideologies, Elaine Chung's article, "YouTube Vidding and Participatory Memories of Stephen Chow's Stardom in South Korea," turns the focus to the realm of audience reception. She explores Chow's stardom in South Korea by studying a YouTube channel where amateur videos ("vids") remixing and reviewing Chow's 1990s comedies are pub-

lished and discussed. It is found that while culturally translating Chow's style of humor and subverting Korean media narratives that define it as low-brow culture, the digital discourses have contributed to a participatory cultural memory. This cultural memory commemorates Chow's past popularity in South Korea and celebrates the audience's cultural identity as members of the same hermeneutic group. They belong to the same generation who lived through the best times of Chow's comedies and, therefore, can appreciate and understand his humor.

The research articles in this special issue illustrate how we can critically evaluate the meanings of media comedies by examining the texts and user-generated materials that contextualize the texts. It is equally important to investigate how the producers make sense of their intended message and creation process. Jessica Siu-yin Yeung's interview with Michael Hui, therefore, should be read in juxtaposition with her research article on the salaryman comedies he made with his brothers and their remake in the 2000s. In the interview, Michael Hui not only recalls his coevals in Hong Kong Cantonese cinema but also names several Japanese filmmakers that had influenced his works in the 1970s and 1980s and some recent East Asian films he admires. This shows that different generations of producers and performers within and across East Asian media industries have inspired and will continue to inspire each other in making comedies.

The special issue is concluded by two review essays. Reviewing key scholarship on Hong Kong comedy films in her essay, "City of Laughter: On the Traditions and Trends of Hong Kong Comedy Films," Fiona Yuk-wa Law highlights the genre's development since the 1950s and its connection to sociopolitical changes in the city. We hope it will facilitate readers' understanding of the discussions on Hong Kong media products and the producers and performers analyzed in some of our research articles. While this issue could not include a research article on Taiwanese media, George Chun Han Wang's essay, "A Brief History of Taiwanese Comedy," offers a succinct review of the history of and recent scholarship on Taiwan's comedy films. Chronicling the progression of Taiwan's comedy filmmaking from the turn of the 20th century to the present day, Wang's essay provides much-needed insights for novices and seasoned researchers into the island's political, social, and cultural transformations.

As Nick Marx and Matt Sienkiewicz argue, while it is impossible to find one comprehensive explanation for comedy, there are many insightful theories that can "help explain the different ways in which viewers understand humor and producers reap financial rewards from it."¹⁵ We believe that the research articles, the interview, and the review essays in this special issue can enhance

¹⁵ Nick Marx and Matt Sienkiewicz, eds. *The Comedy Studies Reader* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2018), 1.

our understanding of comedic media in East Asia. In particular, our readers can deepen their knowledge about how comedies are (re)produced, consumed, and remembered over time and across localities and media platforms in response to their respective changing production conditions and sociopolitical circumstances. As a testament to the global pandemic of Covid-19, this special issue is expected to inspire future research on other areas of comedy studies and commemorate the importance of bracing ourselves in the face of big and small challenges on a daily basis.

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