

## Book review

**Ding, Xueliang. (2017). 丁學良. *Zhengzhi yu zhongguo tese youmo* 政治與中國特色幽默 [*Politics and Humour with Chinese Characteristics*]. Hong Kong: Oxford University Press.**

This is not a book about humour, but rather a book which deals with China and its recent history in a somehow humorous way. This fact makes the *inside joke* which is present in the title a bit more consistent. The joke, which may have flown under the radar for many specialists who do not deal with China on a daily basis, is based upon the notion of *Socialism with Chinese Characteristics* (*zhongguo tese shehuizhuyi* 中国特色社会主义), the buzzword which rose to popularity during the Deng Xiaoping era, and which is often used as a placeholder for *Capitalism*, or at least *Socialism with an open-market economy*. Being both these concepts somehow antonyms of socialism, adding to any noun the attribute “with Chinese characteristics” is tantamount to turning it into its contrary. Therefore, if the author states clearly that his book deals with Humour with Chinese characteristics, one can well expect that the very notion of humour be denied throughout the book.

In his powerful and rather promising introduction, Professor Ding Xueliang first introduces the practice called *gaojihei* 高級黑 (literally *High-level blackening*), a practice that in recent years seemed on the rise in the Chinese official media, and that spurned a variety of precautionary articles in the years 2015-2016, wherein the official cadres addressed the audience to “be on guard more than ever, in order to avoid its [*gaojihei*] misleading and imperceptible bad influences” (p. X). What is *gaojihei*? The same preface exemplifies four possible configurations:

- I. Describing bad things as if they were good things
- II. Praising with exaggerated vehemence
- III. Praising on the basis of fake information
- IV. Creating an enemy (p. XI)

The author, however, wants to inform us that his work (more a collection of single essays, vaguely tied together by a recurring theme that is not as present as one may expect) does not belong to *gaojihei*, but intends to be a work which analyses the intersections between politics and political humour (p. XIV). Very promising, indeed. However, I shall point out some incoherence between the author’s stated method and its practice, because, as we will see in a moment, *gaojihei* is precisely the preferred lens through which Ding filters Chinese history. For this reason, I believe that the book does not quite match its premise and introduction: the only section in which “humour” appears as a clear and visible topic is on the first chapter “On political freedom and political humour” (pp. 1-10). In this preliminary chapter, Ding addresses the problem of how the humour rate of a country is directly proportioned to the freedom rate the same country enjoys. He proceeds with examples with the former USSR during Stalin’s rule and North Korea today. Ding states that China is now in

the perfect time to produce political humour, and that the all-inclusive “Chinese characteristics” can now enjoy a new dimension of meaning (p. 10).

What follows, rather than being an analysis of the many configurations of political humour which we can find in China, is a description of different situations, facts, incidents, *that could be considered as humorous if seen from the outside*, narrated in a somehow humorous tone, sometimes bordering on the absurd. The remaining chapters follow the recent history of China, from the Cultural Revolution to the recent anti-corruption purge. As mentioned before, the style of the book is rather humorous and informal, it makes use of some unusual expressions to describe the Chinese party, such as *Dangbagu* 黨八股 ‘stereotypical party writing style or jargon’, but the themes dealt with do not get close to humour most of the times. Instead, in the second chapter, titled “A brief talk on people: the high risks of putting people first”, we read an interesting discussion on what *people* are (ideology versus reality), with an almost moving and well-documented piece on Hu Yaobang, a Party cadre especially close to the people, whose death spurred a small-scale spontaneous demonstration that would lead to the Tian’anmen Square massacre. Subsequently, we read two paragraphs on the 2008 Sichuan earthquake, the unsuitable conditions of the elementary school buildings which collapsed, and the recent anti-corruption crackdown (with special reference to the 2015 imprisonment of “Big Tiger” Zhou Yongkang and his clique).

The third and fourth chapters, named respectively “Five reasons why we should thank the Cultural Revolution” and “Only in this regard we should not forget that the Republic of China is in Taiwan” offer a new history of the Cultural Revolution from the author’s personal perspective and memory. Especially considering the third chapter, Ding seems to deliberately play the *gaojihei* card, as it appears that the Cultural Revolution is not praised, but criticised; such five reasons are, in fact, five reasons why we should remember the Cultural Revolution in order not to repeat its mistakes.

The fifth and sixth chapters, titled “In the Chinese political circles, the third knife is the most resistant to wear and tear” and “Terrorism, Extremism, Bureaucracy and ‘Slapdashism’” respectively, attempt to put the recent Chinese political situation into a more international framework. In the current Chinese political circles, the author tells us, three knives are being waved simultaneously; the first one is for ‘killing the flies’ (i.e. low-level corrupt cadres); the second one is for ‘killing the tigers’ (i.e. highly influential corrupt officials, such as the aforementioned Zhou Yongkang, imprisoned in 2015), and the third one is for ‘catching the crows’ (i.e. liberal intellectuals). Ding proceeds to tell us that, no matter how important it is for the Party to tackle ‘flies’ and ‘tigers’, they never stop hunting ‘crows’. The only two people who tried to put down this ‘knife’, namely Hu Yaobang, and Zhao Ziyang, “paid a high price for this” (p. 69). In the sixth chapter, Ding tells us that already the twentieth Century was a Century which opened with terrorism (in reference to the Bolshevik October Revolution). He then bravely tricks us into comparing Stalin’s famous sentence “Only on the bones of the oppressors can the people's freedom be erected, only with the blood of the oppressors can the soil be fertilised for the sovereignty of the people” with the recent declarations penned down by the Muslim extremists. The chapter’s perspective shifts to China, and to how Mao Zedong was inspired by Stalin when he decided to endorse and adopt terrorist activities; Mao is quoted as saying “Without terrorism, revolution has no hope to succeed”, and the terrorist measures that he adopted in the years prior to 1949 are sometimes even more ruthless than what “His big brother” Stalin had done. The chapter concludes with a thought-provoking statement: we have just witnessed a change in the great narrative, and the reason why we have seen an increase in terrorism activities, is because revolutionary activities have diminished.

Analogously to what was done before, the seventh chapter titled “One should raise his son to be like Kim Jong-Un” states the reasons for which Mao Zedong himself would have chosen the Korean dictator as his heir apparent. Drawing from a parallel story from the classic book *Romance of the Three Kingdoms*, in which general Cao Cao 曹操 praises future king Sun Quan 孫權 as his heir and pronounces the sentence “Anyone should raise their sons to be like Sun Quan”<sup>1</sup>, it becomes evident that all the reasons for which Mao would choose Kim as successor are, in fact, not praiseworthy at all. Kim engages in the same malpractice that characterised Mao’s rule: arbitrarily demoting high-level officials and party members, instilling fear into the people, attaching more importance to ideology and propaganda than to his people’s hunger, promoting research on nuclear weapons, and so forth.

The book’s conclusion “On the national and international face of Chinese political equality” (pp. 145-168) is, surprisingly, not really a conclusion. Instead of summarising and addressing the main themes in a more cohesive way, Ding begins by borrowing the words of three generations of Chinese leaders, Jiang Zemin, Hu Jintao, and Xi Jinping, on integration and multiculturalism. The words of the three leaders seem to follow a coherent line by showing the four main principles according to which China would like to promote its integration: diversity, inclusivity, freedom of choice, and equal participation. Current leader Xi Jinping added two “new-old” concepts to the discourse on the internationalisation of China, namely *ren* 仁 (benevolence) and *yi* 義 (justice). Ding identifies these two concepts as coming from the classical philosophical teachings of Confucius, thus speaking directly to the hearts of the Chinese. I would like to argue that this chapter is the one which detaches itself the most from the themes of political humour and/or humour in politics, but at least it gives us a chance to view the discourse on multiculturalism from another perspective and how the latest three Chinese leaders use similar terminology.

The author is generous in footnotes and legitimate quotes from generally recognised scholarly literature. In some instances, nonetheless, he reveals his penchant for anecdotes and unofficial history; an example is the paragraph on Hu Yaobang in the second chapter, where he justifies the scarcity of official documents quoted, by admitting that there is simply no room in official literature for Hu Yaobang, and his true nature is better found through anecdotes and memories coming from his friends and colleagues. Another example is in the fourth chapter, where the Cultural Revolution is filtered through the author’s memories in the fields of the Anhui province, where he and his friends would stealthily listen to Taiwanese radio. Some *bonafide* jokes appear throughout the text, such as “If Mao rose from his grave in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, he would undoubtedly say, oh, Hong Kong has become so hard to manage, let’s just cut it away from us!” (p. 70).

I would first and foremost suggest a change in title, since there is little to no actual analysis of humour or political jokes, but some of the events narrated would easily pass as surrealist and/or absurdist fiction if they were not true; the humour in the book manifests itself primarily in this form. Therefore, I am very much in favour of a title which highlights this contrast. Second, I would suggest that the author revisit and elaborate on some topics that here are simply touched upon. For example, it would be appropriate to have a whole chapter on Trump (who is briefly dealt with throughout the book) in light of the recent trade war. Alternatively, I see fit to have a whole chapter on the Chinese calling for multiculturalism and integration in the world, when the Chinese government itself has problems accepting the integration of their own minorities, namely Tibetans and Uyghurs: is it not funny?

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<sup>1</sup> Quote from Chapter 61. The entire *Romance of the Three Kingdoms* is freely available on <https://ctext.org/sanguo-yanyi/ch61> (consulted 04.04.2019). For the English translation, see Guanzhong, (2014: 531). However, please note that in this version, Cao Cao’s sentence is slightly paraphrased: “That is the sort of son to have,” said Cao Cao in admiration”.

As concluding remarks, I believe this book to be a useful resource for humour scholars, especially the ones dealing with modern and contemporary China. It provides a solid historical background, with sociological undertones, for a deeper analysis of political “clandestine” humour which is thriving in the underground, away from the official media.

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## **Reference**

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