

A Feminist Discourse Analysis of Chinese Female Stand-Up Comedians'

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Abstract: The rapid development of internet technology has provided a platform for marginalized groups to voice dissent and reshape cultural narratives (Liao, 2019), particularly offering new opportunities for women to achieve self-expression in public discourse. The advent of stand-up comedy in China has led to the emergence of stand-up comedians as a prominent force within the Chinese comedy landscape. Online media has become the primary channel for the dissemination, viewing, and discussion of stand-up comedy in China (Li and Guo, 2024), especially among millennials, where the online stand-up comedy competition program *Rock & Roast* has garnered widespread attention (Xu and Liu, 2024). Female stand-up comedians participating in the program have garnered significant attention for addressing issues of gender inequality and discrimination in a humorous yet incisive manner (Meng and Literat, 2023). While their performances have ignited a new wave of feminist discourse on social media, they also face pressure from the general public, who are accustomed to traditional gender norms, and from censorship systems (Li and Guo, 2024; Meng and Literat, 2023; Meng, 2024; Zhang and Zhou, 2023). This reflects the tension between progressive feminist expression and deeply entrenched patriarchal structures. This study will utilize feminist critical discourse analysis (Lazar, 2007, 2014) to explore how Chinese female stand-up comedians respond to and negotiate traditional gender norms in their performances. Through a thorough examination of their comedic narratives, this study aims to uncover the specific discursive strategies these performers employ to challenge stereotypes while navigating social expectations. By analyzing the linguistic mechanisms within their scripts, the research seeks to reveal how they deconstruct patriarchal ideologies. This research will be conducted within a broader social and power framework, with the objective of examining how Chinese female stand-up comedians engage in a subtle negotiation.

Keywords: Feminist critical Discourse analysis, Stand-up comedy, Female stand-up comedians, Feminist humor, China

1. Introduction

As the rapid development of new media technologies has decentralized discourse, the internet has evolved into a space where diverse ideas coexist (Smith and Chen, 2019), providing women with a platform for self-expression. Chinese online stand-up comedy programs play a pivotal role in this process, of which the most influential is *Rock & Roast*. Female comedians' performances sparked heated discussions on Chinese social media, resonating with female audiences who experience gender inequality in daily life (Meng and Literat, 2023). However, the rise of female voices frequently faces criticism and skepticism (Meng, 2024). Consequently, some female stand-up comedians have had to adjust their content to align with the expressive boundaries tolerated by the mainstream patriarchal system (Zhang and Zhou, 2023).

Although international research on stand-up comedy and gender has accumulated some findings (Ross, 1998), such studies are rooted in Western cultural values and thus difficult to apply to the Chinese context. Moreover, as a relatively new and evolving performance form in recent years, the academic research on Chinese stand-up comedy remains in its infancy.

This research serves as a pilot study, selecting part of the data for preliminary analysis to explore how Chinese female stand-up comedians negotiate female humor within multiple power matrices.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Humor and Gender

Humor is a pleasurable social signal, yet its precise nature remains a subject of considerable debate. Among the prevailing theories, Arthur Koestler's (1964) incongruity theory holds the most mainstream position. This theory posits that the structure of a joke comprises a setup and a punchline. The content of the joke must guide the audience to perceive a certain discrepancy or incongruity between the setup and the punchline. In other words, the punchline arises from the disassociation between the audience's expectation and the actual outcome.

Feminists argue that gender is socially constructed (Kessler and McKenna, 1978; Butler, 1988). Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity further supports this view. She contends that gender is not a fixed identity or natural inherent trait, but rather emerges through the repeated performance of gendered behaviors

constructed by discourse. Each instance of gendered behavior constitutes an 'invocation' and 'reenactment' of existing gender norms (Butler, 1990; 1993). Through such repetition, established gender norms are continually reshaped and reproduced within society. However, humor's intervention offers potential to disrupt this repetition. Research indicates that humor can function as a tool for performing gender (Chiaro and Baccolini, 2014). It can reinforce norms and stereotypes while also facilitating the performance of non-conventional gender identities. By creating semantic and logical 'incongruities,' it allows women to challenge taken-for-granted notions of masculinity and femininity through laughter.

2.2 Feminist Humor in the Chinese Context

Humor serves as both a subversive and an empowering tool for women and feminists (Case and Lippard, 2009). Recent years have witnessed a flourishing of research on female stand-up comedians (Cooper, 2019), further validating Merrill's (1988) perspective that emphasizes their use of feminist humor as a potent tool for challenging patriarchal norms and promoting self-affirmation.

Within the Chinese context, Confucian cultural norms exert significant influence on humor (Zhao, 2021). Confucian ethics demand women adhere to the 'Three Obediences and Four Virtues,' that is, submission to father, husband, and son, while exhibiting gentle, reserved, and compliant character. This is incompatible with the aggression, vulgarity, and self-assurance contained within comedic forms (Caliskan, 1995). This places Chinese women in a double bind when venturing into comedy: they seek to break their silence while simultaneously avoiding social punishment for 'crossing boundaries.' Furthermore, Western values significantly influence female stand-up comedy performances in China. Western female standards are viewed as a symbol of 'progress', while the traditional female image within Chinese families is deemed backward and conservative. Consequently, even when stand-up comedians portray 'intellectual' housewives to critique rigid gender roles, such characters are perceived as opposites to the modern 'model woman' (Cao, 2023).

From the historical perspective of Chinese comedy's development, Chinese women have undergone a challenging journey from 'exclusion' to 'subjectification.' During the early crosstalk era, performers were almost exclusively male, and their content often featured degrading and objectifying sexual humor targeting women (Tian and Wang, 2025). The rise of sketch comedy in the 1980s increased female visibility, yet female roles remained confined to stereotypical 'good wife and mother' archetypes or as supporting characters to male protagonists (Zhang, 2022; Zhang and Zhou, 2023), failing to fundamentally challenge male dominance. The recent rise of stand-up comedy marks a turning point. It has granted women unprecedented expressive space (Meng and Literat, 2023), enabling them to become the primary subjects of comedic narratives for the first time. However, to gain acceptance within the mainstream patriarchal system, Chinese female stand-up comedians have not pursued radical confrontation. Instead, their work exhibits characteristics of 'negotiated feminism.' They have devised a set of soft, safe expression strategies that both avoid direct confrontation with gender stereotypes and the patriarchal gaze, while courageously advocating for further women's rights and gender equality in China (Zhang and Zhou, 2023).

3. Theoretical Framework

Approaching stand-up comedians' discourse as practices related to power and ideology aligns with the tradition of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA). CDA focuses on the dialectical relationship between language, power, and ideology (Fairclough, 1992). It examines not only the surface content of discourse but also delves into the underlying social structures shaping it. Fairclough (1989, 2001, 2015) divides discourse analysis into three dimensions: text, discourse practice, and social practice, thereby providing a three-dimensional approach to discourse analysis. This model comprises three dimensions: Description, Interpretation, and Explanation. Description involves analyzing the text itself, focusing on formal characteristics such as vocabulary, grammar, and rhetoric. Interpretation examines the relationship between text and interaction, treating discourse as a practice. It analyzes how discourse is produced, circulated, and ultimately consumed by audiences. Intertextuality is a core concept within this dimension. Fairclough (1992, 2003) notes that texts do not exist in isolation but are always built upon the ideas and meanings of prior texts. These connections, whether explicit or implicit, construct a network of meaning. Explanation connects language practices to broader social structures. This dimension aims to reveal how discourse is shaped by ideologies and power relations, and how it in turn reinforces or challenges these structures.

Feminist Critical Discourse Analysis (FCDA) is essentially a feminist perspective within CDA. It integrates feminist theory with CDA's core methodology to analyze how power and ideology within discourse operate to maintain hierarchical gendered social orders (Lazar, 2007). The central concern of feminist critical discourse analysts is to

critique discourses that uphold patriarchal social order. FCDA provides a valuable lens for examining how hegemonic and asymmetrical power relations systematically empower men while disempowering women as a social group. It particularly focuses on how gender assumptions, often taken for granted, are presented in discourse through explicit or implicit means. More importantly, FCDA transcends mere academic deconstruction of texts; it emphasizes social justice and transformation, exploring how discourse shapes the identities and positions of women and men within specific communities (Lazar, 2007). FCDA is considered an excellent analytical framework for this research. Its 'theoretical interdisciplinarity' enables it to 'analyze the formulation of structurally dominant discourses' and examine discursive strategies of 'negotiation, resistance, solidarity, and social empowerment' among disenfranchised women (Lazar, 2014).

To conduct a more scientific and meticulous analysis at the text level, this study will also incorporate Appraisal Theory (Martin and White, 2005) from Systemic Functional Linguistics as a specific textual analysis tool. This theory focuses on the linguistic resources employed by texts to express, negotiate, and naturalize specific intersubjective and ultimately ideological positions. Appraisal itself is divided into three interacting domains—'attitude', 'engagement', and 'graduation'. Attitude pertains to our emotional experiences, encompassing 'Judgment' of actions, 'Appreciation' of things, and 'Affect' (emotional response). Engagement involves the process of attitude formation and the discursive negotiations surrounding viewpoints within discourse. Graduation focuses on the phenomenon of gradation, where meaning is adjusted through the modulation of force (intensity) and the clarity of focus (scope). This study primarily examines the dimensions of attitude and graduation.

4. Methodology

This study will adopt a qualitative research design, employing feminist critical discourse analysis (FCDA) (Lazar, 2007, 2014) to examine the performances of Chinese female stand-up comedians, revealing how they construct gender roles and negotiate power relations through humorous discourse.

To build a representative corpus, this study will employ purposive sampling (Palinkas et al., 2015). The research sample will be drawn from the main episodes of Seasons 1 to 5 of the variety show *Rock & Roast*. The researcher will collect data on the female stand-up comedians who participated in the program and the number of episodes they appeared in, excluding those who performed in only one episode and those whose performances did not involve gender-related topics.

Research questions guiding data analysis include:

RQ1: How do Chinese female stand-up comedians use discourse to construct gender roles?:

RQ2: How do Chinese female stand-up comedians negotiate with gender norms through discourse practices?

RQ3: How do Chinese female stand-up comedians' discourse strategically adapt and breakthrough within the social construction of gender ideology?

To address the research questions, this study will also employ Fairclough's (2015) three-dimensional model as a specific analytical framework for conducting a multi-level analysis of selected female stand-up comedy performance samples. Following a logical progression from micro-linguistic to macro-social levels, this study will focus on three dimensions: a) at the text level, employing the resources of 'Attitude' and 'Gradation' from Appraisal Theory (Martin and White, 2005), combined with rhetorical analysis, to precisely capture the micro-linguistic mechanisms through which female performers construct gender identities and reinforce humorous irony; b) at the discourse practice level, examining how intertextuality (Fairclough, 1992, 2003) and FCDA discourse strategies (Lazar, 2014) interact to challenge established gender norms by creating semantic 'incongruity'; c) at the socio-practical level, situate discourse within multiple context of the social, institutional, and situational levels (Fairclough, 2015) to reveal how these humorous practices map onto and respond to contemporary gender power structures in Chinese society. This study aims to systematically reveal how female stand-up comedians navigate the dialectical tension between 'adaptation' and 'breakthrough', utilizing discourse strategies to carve out gendered spaces.

It should be noted that this research is currently in the data collection phase. This article serves as a pilot study to test the feasibility of the research framework and analytical methods. The current sample analysis draws on selected performance excerpts from one female comedian, Yang Li. Yang Li is highly representative due to her frequent engagement with gender-controversial topics in her shows, which have sparked widespread social discussions (Zhang and Zhou, 2023).

5. Sample Analysis Findings

Data Excerpt: 'The Confident but Ordinary Men' (Selected from Yang Li's performance in Season 3 of *Rock & Roast*)

Original (Chinese): '男人不光美好, 还特别神秘... 他明明看起来那么普通, 但是为什么他却可以那么自信? 你在台上看到那些奇形怪状的男演员... 他们其中没有任何一个想过说, 我这个长相... 是不得稍微整整容啊? 我从小就很困惑... 那个考 85 分的女生... 她就是不开心。但是有些男同学, 他就能考 40 分。但是他可开心了... 他能拿着那张卷子在班里来回穿梭。好像在说, 你看我就考 40 分, 你看, 我是个傻子。'

*English Translation: Men aren't just charming but also very mysterious... He looks **so** ordinary, yet why is he **so** confident? You see those oddly shaped male performers on stage... **none** of them ever thought, 'With my looks... shouldn't I get **a little** plastic surgery?' I've been puzzled since childhood... That girl who scored 85... she was just unhappy. But some male classmates, they scored 40. Yet they were so happy... They'd wave that test paper around the classroom, as if saying, 'Look, I only got 40. See? I'm a fool.'*

Yang Li first constructs gender roles through precise lexical choices. In her signature rhetorical question, 'He looks so ordinary, yet why is he so confident?', she employs the high-force graduation marker 'so' twice, amplifying the semantic tension between the ordinary 'reality' and the unfounded 'attitude' of confidence, thereby heightening the satirical effect. Her use of the highly negative-polarity descriptive term 'oddly shaped' creates deeply ironic humor, challenging patriarchal objectification of women and aesthetic privilege (Fredrickson and Roberts, 1997). Typically applied to inanimate objects, the term 'oddly shaped' is appropriated here for a man, actually mimicking the traditional objectifying gaze directed at women. By positioning the man in a scrutinized, rejected 'objectified' status, a reversal of power is achieved. The satire's potency lies in the universality of this evaluation. She again employs the high-force graduation markers 'none' and 'a little' to erase individual variation, and through irony downplays the advisory tone, thereby instead intensifying the evaluative appreciation that the other person's appearance is 'in urgent need of correction'. In this way, under the guise of 'humor,' she not only captures and satirizes men's appearance-based confidence and the appearance tolerance granted by a patriarchal society, but also prompts the audience to reflect on gendered double standards.

Meanwhile, Yang Li demonstrates a high level of skill in intertextuality. She appropriates the shared cultural script of 'school exams,' deftly employing the context of 'academic pressure' to expose the double standards embedded in gender expectations. She establishes a setup based on the joy derived from high exam scores, then introduces the 'girl who scored 85 but isn't happy' to embody the trap of female 'perfectionism.' This forms a stark contrast with the 'boy who scored 40 but is happy,' creating the punchline by subverting audience expectations. Notably, to mitigate direct confrontation risks, she positions herself as an 'observer' and 'confused party.' This negotiation strategy allows her to deliver sharp commentary with relative safety. By sharing her observations of pervasive female anxiety, she forges an emotional connection with female audiences. Through this observational lens, she invites viewers into a shared complicity of observation and deconstruction, transforming personal insight into solidarity-building discourse. By satirizing male appearance and competence while empowering women as subjects, laughter becomes a form of collective social empowerment, granting marginalized women the right to define and critique male behavior.

However, the broader social impact of this discourse reveals the intensity of contemporary gender ideological conflicts in China. When the term 'average-yet-confident man (Pu Xin Nan)' is detached from its comedic context, it rapidly transforms into a controversial and divisive social label. Its viral spread triggered significant institutional and commercial backlash, ranging from media calls to establish 'boundaries' (Beijing News, 2020) to the cancellation of brand endorsements due to male resistance (Sohu, 2023). These reactions indicate that, although this discourse helps prompt the media and the public to re-examine or engage with gender norms, deeply entrenched patriarchal ideology tends to reassert and consolidate itself when challenged.

6. Discussion and Conclusion

This pilot study employs a multidimensional analysis of Yang Li's performance excerpts to validate the effectiveness of the FCDA theoretical framework in interpreting the discourse strategies of Chinese female stand-up comedians. Sample analysis findings reveal that Yang Li's performances transcend mere humorous expressions of personal experience, constituting instead complex discourse practices that enact dynamic gender power dynamics.

First, the study demonstrates how Yang Li employs appraisal resources and rhetoric to deconstruct hegemonic masculinity, while utilizing intertextuality and discursive strategies to create 'incongruity,' thereby skillfully enacting a negotiated 'resistance' against male privilege under the guise of humor. She transforms normalized gender double standards in daily life, in which men easily gain 'confidence privilege' while women face constant 'excellence discipline,' into visible public texts. This strategy not only successfully builds an emotional community among female audiences but also secures valuable 'safe discourse spaces' for marginalized women.

However, when discourse spills over into broader social and institutional levels, analysis reveals the structural boundaries confronting challenges to established gender orders. Mainstream media attempts to reframe this structural gender critique as mere entertainment or personal 'offense' to dilute its political sharpness (Beijing News, 2020); while the revocation of commercial endorsements and intense public backlash constitute institutional punishment for women entering the public discourse sphere. This phenomenon inversely validates the defensive anxieties and reconsolidation mechanisms of patriarchal ideology when challenged.

In summary, this pilot study demonstrates that Chinese female stand-up comedians are navigating a 'negotiation' process: while employing discourse strategies to secure their right to speak, they remain subject to constant scrutiny and discipline by social power structures. This preliminary finding validates the explanatory power of our analytical framework, laying a solid theoretical foundation for subsequent comprehensive investigations with larger samples.

Ethics Declaration: This study uses publicly available data. Therefore, ethical approval was not required for this research.

AI Declaration: This paper used AI tools to search for media reports referenced in the pilot study. Based on the AI-generated search results, relevant reports were selected and retrieved from official websites.

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