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Opinion

# A Chinese comedian's Xi joke and the lucrative market for patriotism

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Fewer things guarantee higher ratings and clicks than headlines that have these keywords: China, Xi, and ban. If you can manage to have all three in a story, you have a winner. That's why Li Haoshi, a Chinese stand-up comedian whose joke went horribly wrong, was such a gift to major Western media outlets, from CNN to the BBC, *The New York Times* and *The Guardian*.

Li, whose stage name is House, was telling a joke to a Beijing audience about how he had adopted two dogs that had wandered down from the countryside mountains. Compared with the small, cute dogs people see on the streets, these two, which he had brought back to Shanghai, were formidable in size and demeanour. Walking the city streets, he felt proud as a dog owner, except these dogs were so energetic that he was having a hard time keeping pace. So far, so good. House was getting lots of laughs.

But then he stepped on a mine. Describing how fast the dogs were chasing down a squirrel, he said they reminded him of the phrase 'Have a good work style, be able to fight and win battles' — the eight-word slogan President Xi Jinping had announced as a goal for the People's Liberation Army in 2013.

This remark raised a laugh but proved costly. Authorities fined the comedian's company, Xiaoguo Culture, more than 14.7 million yuan (A$3.1 million) for having 'tampered with the content of the show during the performance declaration procedures'. In other words, Li apparently departed from the script they had submitted for approval prior to the performance. Li has since been arrested, pending a police investigation.

Little observed in media coverage, however, is what pushed Li towards the gallows in the first place. As with the many incidents of 'cancel culture' we see in the West, the role of social media was indispensable. The video of Li telling the joke went viral before he came under the radar of the authorities. Courtesy of social media and the internet, initial favourable reactions were quickly trumped by negative ones.

A few media reports told us that a nationalist tipped off the local authorities, but failed to acknowledge that the individual represented a collective political identity commonly referred to as 'Xiao Fen Hong' (Little Pinks). According to one commentator, the Little Pinks are 'splenetic, sarcastic and easily offended', and 'young, hypersensitive, hyper-nationalist keyboard commandos of the People's Republic of China'. These patriotic vigilantes are on standby to defend their motherland, and their feelings are easily hurt. On this occasion, they didn't miss.

Once tipped off, and cognisant of the massive grassroots anger being fomented by the Little Pinks, the authorities had to respond. And respond they did, with considerable force, and without much concern about a possible community backlash.

What has been even less observed in Western media is that the Little Pinks movement is a child with many foster parents, none of whom can claim sole credit for its vibrant growth. To be sure, the government actively promotes loyalty to China, and the existence of the Little Pinks is a testimony to the effectiveness of such official patriotic education. But like everywhere else, a more effective incubator of patriotism is the market bottom line.

After all, there is ample research telling us that patriotism is one of the most profitable emotions in advertising — cue our own Qantas' signature tune, 'I still call Australia home'. Similarly, patriotism has been shown to ensure better ratings, sell more papers and ensure cinematic box office success.

In Chinese internet culture, as elsewhere, strong emotions, provocative words and visceral reactions go viral more easily than calm, rational debates. Stories about the 'hurt feelings' of a nation attract more clicks, leading to higher opportunities for monetisation. Since promoting patriotism is one of the few politically safe and financially lucrative business strategies for bloggers, micro-bloggers and video streamers in China, it is a no-brainer for the streaming sector to exploit it.

Comedians in Western-style democracies are much luckier than Li and his colleagues. After all, comedians in Australia often make jokes that offend the powers that be — politicians, the monarchy, the church. But although there have been a few cases where comedy has fallen victim to the law, by and large we have not seen people thrown into detention, given a hefty fine or investigated by the police, unless defamation is involved.

But the stark and fundamental differences between democracy and authoritarianism aside, it is nevertheless still possible — some may say even useful — to look at this incident as an example of cancel culture with 'Chinese characteristics', to repurpose Deng Xiaoping's famous saying.

As with the many cancel culture incidents we see in Australia — a comedian being trolled, a show being literally cancelled, a comedy award having its name changed — the Chinese public was highly polarised as to whether Li was guilty and deserved his punishment. Just as the public here is divided over whether certain topics (our soldiers, the RSL, the ANZAC tradition) should be off-limits for comedians, the public in China is also torn over whether the People's Liberation Army should be fair game.

Humour scholars have reminded us that censorship is only one of the possible external constraints. Professor Jocelyn Chey, an expert on Chinese humour, believes that sensitivity goes hand in hand with telling jokes elsewhere as well as in China.

'While joke censorship is often aligned with authoritarianism, there are matters of public taste that change according to time and circumstance,' she writes. 'We must not joke about the disabled, for instance.'

Either way, framing Li's experience exclusively as a ban by Chinese state censorship means our readers are again kept in the dark about many aspects of the political culture in China, some of which are fundamentally different from ours, some of which are remarkably similar.

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