Book Section:
Ma, H (2016) Survival through Laughter: A Fun Gongfu: The Story of the Deer and the Cauldron. In: Ruru, L, (ed.) Staging China: New Theatres in the Twenty-First Century. Chinese Literature and Culture in the World . Palgrave Macmillan , Basingstoke, Hampshire, UK , pp. 141-158. ISBN 978-1-137-56747-5

https://doi.org/10.1057/9781137529442

Chapter 7

Survival through Laughter--

A Fun *Gongfu*: *The Story of the Deer and the Cauldron*

Ma Haili

The Story of the Deer and the Cauldron (*Lu ding ji*, 2009; *Deer and Cauldron* hereafter), set in the early Qing dynasty, is a theatrical adaptation of a *gongfu* (or "Kung Fu") story. It focuses on a simple concept: fun (*haowanr*). We will illustrate the point through an example from scene 3. The teenage Kangxi Emperor believes he is already an effective ruler and has decided secretly to eliminate Oboi, one of the four regents nominated by Kangxi's father, because this most powerful commander and courtier has ignored imperial authority and challenged the emperor's decisions. The protagonist of the story, Wei Xiaobao, is helping the Kangxi Emperor to fulfill the task and, in scene 3, Xiaobao and Kangxi fight against Oboi. Throughout the fighting there are no real *gongfu* movements but, instead, highly choreographed mime and puppetry. The three actors--Xiaobao, Kangxi, and Oboi--wear brightly-colored tops to their costumes, with black trousers to hide their legs against the black backdrop. Standing behind each actor is a puppeteer, covered in black, who manipulates a fake brightly-colored lower torso to correspond with the actor's ostensible actions: kicking; jumping; or flying.

The critical moment comes when Oboi throws a knife at the Kangxi Emperor, each standing at opposite sides of the stage. The knife, spinning in midair, is managed by a puppeteer who is dressed in black so as not to be visible. The puppeteer spins the knife on the end of a bamboo stick, moving slowly across the

stage from Oboi towards Kangxi. Meanwhile, Xiaobao "flies" through the air, "throws" himself in front of the Emperor to protect him; Xiaobao's "flying" motion is performed by the actor walking whilst a puppeteer maneuvers his "legs" in the air. The knife hits Xiaobao's heart and Xiaobao collapses. The Kangxi Emperor grieves. Suddenly Xiaobao rises up, fumbles within his left chest inner pocket and takes out a flat piece of stone, which his *gongfu* master Chen Jinnan has given to him as a "life protector." The audience laughs. *Deer and Cauldron* is a well-made *gongfu* farce.

Laughing *Gongfu*

Gongfu stories have long been a popular genre in China and throughout the world. Today, very few people have not heard of Bruce Lee or Jackie Chan, or have not watched *Enter the Dragon*; *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*; or *House of Flying Daggers*. Audiences are mesmerized by the skills displayed in the fighting scenes, produced using modern technology with wires and computer-generated imagery. The highly choreographed movements within the scenes present the effects of "flying in the sky" and "skimming across the water." The world of *gongfu* has long served as an alternative folk tradition promising justice for the masses. The essence of *gongfu* delivers high discipline, both physical and moral: the *gongfu* masters obtain artistic perfection through strict physical discipline and arduous training; heroes and heroines are recipients of spiritual enlightenment with preeminent moral integrity and humanity. This is the general rule of the conventional *gongfu* stories. In this paper, however, we will explore a different kind of *gongfu* story, but one with no less popularity.

Deer and Cauldron was originally a novel by Jin Yong, one of the most popular contemporary Hong Kong *gongfu* story writers in the late 1960s, and was his last

piece of work. The story is set against the historical background of the early Qing Dynasty (1644-1911), when secret societies were rife and eager to overthrow the newly-established Manchu government in order to revive the Han Chinese ruler of the Ming Dynasty (1368-1644). The protagonist Wei Xiaobao is portrayed as an illiterate gambler, hooligan and womanizer, with no *gongfu* skills, who survives through wit, cunning and sheer good luck. Yet he gains status, financial fortune, and love.

The storyline of the novel is as follows. Born in a Yangzhou brothel, Xiaobao accidentally saves the life of Chen Jinnan, the *gongfu* master and leader of one of the anti-Qing secret organizations: The Heaven and Earth Society. Xiaobao is subsequently made the branch head and sent to the Forbidden City by Chen on a mission to assassinate the Emperor. Disguised as a eunuch, Xiaobao bumps into the teenage Kangxi Emperor without knowing his true identity. The two develop an unlikely brotherly friendship. By chance, Xiaobao discovers and subsequently resolves the Kangxi Emperor's secrets, which have been deeply hidden and are intertwined with the underground *gongfu* societies. Through cunning and luck, Xiaobao fulfills a series of critical tasks, including killing the bullying regent Oboi; capturing the rebellious general Wu Sangui; arranging border peace treaties with the Russian court; and winning back Taiwan Island. He also stumbles upon and obtains for himself the hidden Qing-dynasty treasure. Further adding to his extraordinary luck, Xiaobao woos eight beautiful young women as wives--including the Princess of the Qing dynasty--nearly all of whom possess the highest *gongfu* skills. At the end of the story, Xiaobao gives up his royal titles and high positions, as well as the secret treasure; instead, taking the eight wives, he returns to his birthplace, the Bright

Spring Brothel at Yangzhou, with the clear intention of opening a new business utilizing the beauty of his wives (Jin 2002).

When the novel was first published it was widely criticized by Chinese scholars as displaying "moral decline" (Hamm 2005, Xu 2009); yet this low-moral *gongfu* tale has somehow gained undiminished popularity throughout the Chinese-speaking world, with various TV-series adaptations over the years. However, it was not until 2009 that the Shanghai Dramatic Arts Center (SDAC) staged this popular story.

The SDAC's decision to put on *Deer and Cauldron* at that time was bold because *gongfu* had disappeared from plays after 1949 when the People's Republic was established, although it had played an important role in the early *huaju* repertoire. *Gongfu* had been utilized within performances to attract audiences. Combining modern technology and emphasizing the strength and skills of *gongfu* movements, many actors were wired to fly above the audience, or to emerge from fire. The combination of stylistic and traditional *gongfu* performances heightened the sensation but also the danger. On quite a few occasions the wire-strung actors crashed into the pillars of theatres receiving injuries, sometimes fatal (Hunt 2003). In addition to the safety issues, aesthetics was an important concern. Modern drama practitioners became more interested in the style of realism and from the early 1950s, when Soviet experts were invited to teach at the two theatre academies, spoken drama had been dominated by the theories and methods of the Stanislavski System. *Deer and Cauldron* in 2009 was the very first play about *gongfu* on the stage since the founding of the PRC.

He Nian, director of the production, nicknamed "Honey of the Box Office" (*piaofang mitang*) for his popularity among audiences, was well aware of the dangers of *gongfu* scenes when he started the work. The ingenious aspect of this production

is the removal of the "realism" within the *gongfu* scenes; in fact, apart from a very brief *gongfu* demonstration from the Kangxi Emperor, no one in this theatre production performs any *gongfu* movements. Instead, all *gongfu* actions are replaced with puppetry and mime. Direct He successfully presents a *gongfu* farce for the twenty-first century's audiences.

Caption: This *gongfu* fighting scene toward the end of the performance. Wei Xiaobao and the Princess are kidnapped by a pirate but the boat sinks. In the deep sea, the kidnapper is trying to re-capture the Princess. Xiaobao, far left, is pulling him back by his leg. The actors imitate swimming and fighting movements. Each is wearing black trousers to disguise their real legs from view whilst puppeteers, dressed in black costumes and hiding behind the actors, are manipulating their fake lower torsos to show swimming and acrobatics. Courtesy of SDAC.

When interviewed about his inspiration behind the production, He Nian commented: "I am not interested in winning awards. I want to attract an audience. I want everything to be fun (*haowanr*) so that the audience can have a hearty laugh (*xiao*)" (personal communication, 10 April 2013). This attitude, in an era when

awards decide legitimacy, displays not only He Nian's confidence in the production, but also his spirit of freedom, which seems to suit the essence of this story.

In fact, the original story has been largely rewritten to encompass the spirit of fun, fully incorporating theatre techniques, in particular visual imagery, verbal dialogue, and collective audience involvement. Since it was first staged in 2009, *Deer and Cauldron* has enjoyed the highest-ever box-office returns for the SDAC. A night of fun and laughter is what has been attracting audiences, who swarm to the theatre.

Power of Laughter

Bakhtin

According to Aristotle, a child does not begin to laugh before the fortieth day after his birth, only from that moment does it become a human being; and Rabelais confirms Aristotle's formula as "of all living creatures only man is endowed with laughter" (quoted in Bakhtin 1984, p. 68). Laughter embodies the ultimate world wisdom, and Bakhtin demonstrates the power of laughter in his book *Rabelais and His World, the History of Laughter* which draws comparisons between the Medieval times referred to by Rabelais and the modern times--in particular the Stalinist regime--that Bakhtin lived through. He commented that laughter was much more powerful during Medieval times because within the binary culture of the Middle Ages, organized around a serious official stratum and a laughing unofficial stratum, it was licensed beyond the realm of officialdom. In modern times, however, with the merger of upper and lower classes through the formation of the bourgeois class, the power of laughter is not as powerful as it once was. Still, Bakhtin emphasizes that the essence of carnival spirit and the power of laughter remain the same: the town fool is

crowned; the higher classes are mocked; to laugh truth and degrade power is the way to cross boundaries where people are allowed to be reborn (Bakhtin 1984, Jenkins 1994, Jacobson 1997).

Bakhtin's critical concept of power is relevant in interpreting contemporary Chinese social phenomena not only because modern Chinese political and social systems are modeled on the Soviet structure but also because the main body of the drama audience in contemporary China is the newly emergent middle-class, respecting which Bakhtin asserted "the essence of carnival spirit and the power of laughter remain the same." This paper explores the popularity of the show through the power of laughter; instead of stressing political power struggles, as during the era of Bakhtin's writing, it focuses on the contemporary Chinese urban people's struggle over the power of monetary dominance: capitalism.

White-collar Audience

Plays and productions flourished in the post-Mao era of the 1980s, when different styles and themes emerged in searching for critical cultural discourse and dialogue. In the post-1992 market era, however, the radical economic reform had a great impact on theatre companies since practitioners needed to find new ways to compete with the increasing growth of varieties of entertainment. The SDAC made its strategy clear: the modern Chinese urban youth and the newly emerged middle-class were its target. Among over fifty productions annually, a large number were made to attract the so-called "little-white-collar" professionals and to represent their lives and their anxieties in the post-modern world.

Although these little-white-collar professionals may be the envy of the larger part of the Chinese population--for their high educational, cultural, and economic capital--their life is no less of a struggle. Under the stresses of vigorous urbanization

and commercialization within contemporary China, most of the little-white-collar professionals risk losing their financial competitiveness and live under constant economic pressure. A Chinese market analyst described such professionals' economic predicament:

> Why have people felt that our money is no longer worth a penny any more? Home ownership expenses keep shooting up [. . .] last year, the salary rise for individual residents of Zhejiang Province was an average 10.4 percent, yet the private housing market went up as high as 21.7 percent. [. . .] The increase over spending on food, clothing and medical services, cultural consumption and entertainment was reduced to a slim 9.5 percent (quoted in Wang Jing 2008, p. 11).

With expensive urban housing, especially in cities such as Shanghai where prices per square meter range from US$150 to US$2,650, most of these professionals lose their competitiveness. They are widely known in China as "the house slaves" and "credit card slaves." It is normal for many to take more than one job to supplement incomes. The little-white-collar professionals live under tremendous pressures of obeying the hierarchy of authorities and retaining their jobs, with the constant goal of earning higher economic capitals for both material satisfaction and survival. It is this capitalist hierarchical monetary power that the theatre production aims to challenge through comedy; it is the power of laughter that draws the audiences into the theatre.

Laughing Truth, Degrade Power

According to Bakhtin, the reversal power of the carnival world is built mainly on three aspects: (1) grotesque imagery; (2) comic verbal compositions and various genres of billingsgate--curses, oaths, and popular blazons; and (3) ritual spectacles--carnival pageants, comic shows of the marketplace (Bakhtin 1984, p. 5). We will examine each aspect, through specific scenes within the production, to illustrate how theatrical techniques have been worked upon to adapt the original story. This adaptation is to allow the little-white-collar professionals to identify themselves within the historical reference to maximize the challenge and mockery toward the contemporary authority structure, status and monetary power.

Collapse of the Folk Hero

Imagery provides the most direct impact to a theatre production and Bakhtin highlights the importance of the grotesque image in a carnival and describes it not in the narrow sense of "grotesque" but as "exaggeration, hyperbolism [. . .] and excessiveness" (1984, p. 303). This exaggerated and excessive carnival image is further explained by Bakhtin as the ambivalent pastiche image, the becoming-platypus has no self-image and ultimately permits the possibility of a free license to become, which functions as key to the reversal of power, as it is often associated with earth and rebirth (Bakhtin 1984, Aschkenasy 2007, Stevens 2007).

In the novel, Chen Jinnan, the *gongfu* master, has perfected *gongfu* powers that can "kill one with a flip of the hand" and has a stable image with a well-built physique. In this theatre production, however, Chen is a comical figure with no sense of direction and never displays his *gongfu* skills. In scene 1, when Master Chen first demonstrates *gongfu* to Xiaobao, he rolls on his back with his legs in the air, a typical *gongfu* movement for preparing to jump upright; however, instead of arching his back and leaping upright, the actor rolls over to the side and uses one hand to

raise himself up--the easy movement inappropriate for the famous *gongfu* master produces the grotesque for the audience.

In addition, Chen Jinnan in the play is constantly changing his appearance and identity giving ambivalent pastiche images unsuitable for his grand status of a *gongfu* master. In scene 3, there are four screens lined up on stage representing the Palace walls. Each time Chen emerges from one of the screens, he evolves into a different form and identity. First, he walks behind the first screen on the far left-hand side, re-emerging as a eunuch with a completely different appearance as well as voice; the eunuch then disappears behind the second screen and re-emerges as a female palace servant; the female palace servant reappears briefly as Chen himself and finally disappears behind the last screen and the audience hear the sound of a chicken clucking and flapping away.

At the end of Chen's transformations, Xiaobao, who has been watching with high spirits, states excitedly: "if my master can be a chicken, I can be a duck." Both the chicken and duck have specific references in Chinese culture: the "chicken" refers to a female prostitute whilst the "duck" is a male of the same occupation. It is important to remember that Xiaobao was born within such a professional field, but for Chen Jinnan, a *gongfu* master with a supposedly stable image and high moral principles, such reference bears a clear illustration of teasing and challenging the conventional folk hero identity. The ambivalent pastiche image reverses power; through this we see an unstable and chaotic folk world in which order and discipline are reversed and mocked and the "town fool" of the masses, in this case the audience, is empowered or "crowned."

Profanity towards Official Power

Whilst the folk world of the hero collapses and is laughed at, the official orthodoxy is

further teased and confronted. Verbal challenge, for Bakhtin, is a site of free and frank communication, combining “abuses, curses, profanities, and improprieties” (1984, p. 187). In particular, misidentification produces the most frank dialogue, which renders true power (Hiebert 2003). New dialogues, with contemporary reference, were written for this theatre production to allow the audience to identify the power relationships.

In scene 2, for example, after Xiaobao in disguise as a eunuch accidentally bumps into the Princess and the Kangxi Emperor for the first time, without knowing their true identities, we hear the following conversation between Xiaobao and the Princess:[1]

> PRINCESS: Open your dog eyes and have a look at who I am, who I am, who I am!
>
> XIAOBAO: You have a look, who *I* am, who *I* am, who *I* am! [*Shouting with emphasis placed on “I”*.]
>
> PRINCESS: How could I know who you are?
>
> XIAOBAO: You don’t know who I am; why should I know who you are?
>
> PRINCESS: You rotten eunuch.
>
> XIAOBAO: You rotten palace female servant.
>
> PRINCESS: You call me a palace female servant? [*The Princess turns to look at the audience in disbelief*.]
>
> XIAOBAO: So? [*They sit opposite to each other, far apart. Xiaobao crawls towards the Princess slowly whilst speaking in a teasing way.*] Rotten palace female servant, stinky palace female servant, despicable palace female servant.

PRINCESS: Even if you do not know my face, you should recognize me from my extravagant dress.

XIAOBAO: Beautiful dress, flat chest.

PRINCESS: You! [*Pointing at Xiaobao*.]

XIAOBAO: You what? [*Pushes her fingers away hard*.] I hate people pointing at me.

PRINCESS: You dare to push me!

XIAOBAO: Push you, so what? I will kick you! [*Kicks the Princess's bottom*.]

PRINCESS: You dare to kick me! [*Thinks for a while*.] Do you dare to slap me? Do you dare? Do you dare? If you are a man, slap me here. [*Pointing at her own face*.]

XIAOBAO: This is terribly contemptible！ Here is the slap! [*Hard slap on the Princess's face.*]

PRINCESS: [*In disbelief, but shouting in excitement*.] This is extraordinarily satisfactory! Someone has slapped me! This feels extraordinarily good!

In the official world, the individual is constantly judged by their social and economic status; the concept of "who are you" constructs order and power. Such a bullying official figure is nothing new to the contemporary little-white-collar professionals. The demand to obey authority comes with not only authoritative position but also material representation: "even if you do not know my face, you should recognize me from my extravagant dress." From the video, audience laughter shows that the reference to the reality was well received. On the stage, Xiaobao acted what these people wanted

to say or to do. Instead of being willing to recognize authority through material brand, he continues to defy the power verbally. “Extravagant dress” prompts the reply of “beautiful dress, flat chest” allowing the audience to further identify the bullying figure from the distant past with the present, but also to divert material advantage into modern physical aesthetic attractiveness. The audience laughs throughout this scene. Xiaobao’s verbal abuses, curses, profanities, and improprieties toward the Princess generate laughter, which challenges and reverses the power of status and material.

The challenge to the official world does not stop here, but is rather pushed towards the height of the pivotal power representation: the Emperor. Misrepresented identity lasts for a short while between Xiaobao and the Emperor. Once the true identity of the Emperor has been revealed, utter respect and obedience are immediately restored--with the one exception of when Xiaobao swears in his local dialect. After the restoration of normal power relations, Xiaobao constantly curses with his favorite phrase of “f*** your mother” in the Yangzhou dialect, which the Kangxi Emperor does not comprehend. Xiaobao certainly takes advantage and uses this to his own ends. In scene 5, when the Emperor curiously enquires about the meaning of this phrase, Xiaobao “ingeniously” replies that it means “I like you” which leads to the Emperor imitating this phrase to Xiaobao, and Xiaobao replying with the same vigor. This exchange continues back and forth quite a few times until Xiaobao insists “let’s not over-flatter ourselves.” The audience laughs at these verbal exchanges, laughing at Xiaobao’s ingenuity in mocking and freeing himself from the most rigid hierarchical power and order of the official world, generating revival and release through laughter.

Collective Defiance

The most important aspect of carnival according to Bakhtin is the market, where the participants could experience their collectivity:

> The carnivalesque crowd in the marketplace or in the streets is not merely a crowd. It is the people as a whole, but organized in their own way, the way of the people. It is outside of and contrary to all existing forms of the coercive socioeconomic and political organization, which is suspended for the time of the festivity (1984, p. 154).

Although theatre differs from an open space market, the two share the similarity of collectivity and community space, through which a high level of interaction between the actors and their audiences in the production make the carnivalesque market sphere possible. Throughout the performance, Xiaobao discusses his inner thoughts with the audience to "confess" his motivations and desires. In a few scenes, the actors walk and perform amongst the audience, having simultaneous dialogue with individuals, thus breaking down the conventional stage sphere (as a higher platform in distance) and turning the theatre into a market space. In scene 6, for example, Chen Jinnan has once again lost his way and appears within the auditorium. The following dialogue transcribed from the video also shows the interactions between audiences and the actor in parentheses:

> CHEN: Greetings everyone. May anyone tell me how to get to the Western Gate?
>
> [*Laughs can be heard. The actor points at one audience member as if he has given Chen the direction*.]

CHEN: Going forward? Many thanks!

[*Bows, walks in front of the front row, looks very tired. Stops by an audience member*.]

CHEN: Grand *gongfu* master, do you happen to be carrying a few plums, pomegranates, pears, or any kind of fruit, which you might give to me as a present so I may fill my hungry belly. I am so hungry! Do you have any?

AUDIENCE: There is one steamed dumpling.

CHEN: Great! Give it to me!

[*Reaches out with both hands. The audience member puts his bag in Chen's hands but swiftly takes it back*.]

CHEN: [*Appearing upset, steps back, looks at the audience*.] Grand *gongfu* master is teasing me.

[*Audience laughs*.]

CHEN: [*Continues to walk forward, and stops in front of another audience member*.] Grand *gongfu* fighter, you have a great physique. You are exceptional material for *gongfu* training. Do you desire to join our Heaven and Earth Society?

[*The audience member stands up, shakes hands with the actor, bows and laughs without saying anything. Whilst he is sitting down, a female audience member sitting next to him says loudly*: "He is already married." *Audience laughs. Actor takes one step back, looks at the female audience member sideways, trying to hide his own smile*.]

CHEN: [He] can still join the Society even being married!

[*Audience laughs more loudly*.]

CHEN: [*Continues talking*.] OK, you are willing to …

[*The same female interrupts by shouting*: "No, *I* am not willing!" *Laughter from the audience as well as the actor*.]

In this "market" sphere, Chen Jinnan had difficulties in recruiting anyone to join his martial art society; the wife of the candidate openly challenged him with "*I* am not willing" and Chen was laughed at collectively. Such powerful defiance could only exist in such carnivalesque market spheres. In reality, due to financial pressure, the little-white-collars have very few options but are keen to be recruited into a large company. It is certainly not possible for a family member to say "*I* am not willing" to the face of the company director, although many would have desired to express such defiance. "Laughing truth, degrade power," the individuals gain revival and rebirth.

Only Laughing

Deer and Cauldron

It is interesting that even the most fervent fans of *Deer and Cauldron* struggle to understand the meaning of the title. There is no obvious link between the title and the content of the story. However, at the beginning of Jin Yong's novel series there is a brief yet specific reference to the meaning of the title and the story. A young boy, witnessing a group of arrestees on their way to be executed, asks his father the reasons for their execution, and the father and son have the following conversation. "It" in the following passage refers to "the mighty power".

"It is the knife and I am the meat; it is the cauldron[2] and I am the deer," the father speaks. "Father, you taught me the other day, this means we are to be slaughtered by it," the young boy said. "That is correct!" The father

> replies. “Deer, though big, is a peaceful beast. When it wants to eat the deer, all the deer could do is to run away, or be eaten. Deer symbolizes the mass people in the world. All mass people are kind, they are powerless in front of it, they are inevitably bullied by it” (Jin Yong 2002, pp. 5-6).

In order to obtain power, there is the inevitable requirement to kill--physically and metaphorically. The mass population are the ultimate victims. The concept of power is open for interpretation hence difficult to articulate. Whilst many have referred to it as political constraint, in this production staged in new millennium China I interpret it as monetary power: capitalism. It is this power that has become the most constraining system that is dominating contemporary China and the world. The gentle deer may defy such system through laughter; is it able to survive the metaphorical killing of the power of capitalism?

Friedrich Nietzsche famously announced “God is dead” in the nineteenth century West, and it is no exaggeration to pronounce the “death of morality” in contemporary China. Since the launch of market reform in 1979, individual desire of obtaining the power of monetary capital has been encouraged to its maximum and has been granted the political correctness. Everyone remembers the paramount leader Deng Xiaoping’s famous slogan “Let some people get rich first.” China may have left behind the fervent Maoist political era, but has also abandoned the socialist value of collective power and monetary equality. Niall Ferguson wrote in *Civilization,* challenging the decline of contemporary Chinese morality, that “People are struggling to cope with a startlingly fast social transition from communism to capitalism; trust is in short supply; government corruption is rife, business

counterparties cheat; workers steal from their employers; young women marry and then vanish with hard-earned dowries; baby food is knowingly produced with toxic ingredients, school buildings are constructed with defective materials" (2012, p. 285). China is developing with an unquenchable desire of obtaining capital power and experiencing increasingly declining morality (Dirlik and Zhang 2000, Kleinman *et al*. 2011).

This struggle for morality is exactly how Marx has described capitalism as having "drowned the most heavenly ecstasies of religious fervor, of chivalrous enthusiasms, of philistine sentimentalism, in the icy water of egotistical calculation. It has resolved personal worth into exchange value, and in place of the numberless indefeasible chartered freedoms, has set up that single, unconscionable freedom--Free Trade" (Marx and Engels 1848/2010, p. 11). Stuart Hall states that "the market" is the very life-blood of capitalism (1996, p. 36), which accelerated at full speed in contemporary China since 1992.

If morality is the human soul, is it possible to say that the death of morality signifies entrapment of the deer under the capitalist system introduced into China since 1992? If so, what role does laughter play here? I suggest that the power of laughter is most powerful when it aims at, not the power structure, but the mockery of the individuals themselves.

Laughing at Oneself

This production has in fact probed the fun of each individual, to allow audiences to relate themselves within the story, to laugh at the power of material, but ultimately to laugh at themselves--the imprisoned slaves of such power. In scene 1, after Chen Jinnan discovers his own members of the Heaven and Earth Society have betrayed him by joining a different group, Chen wants to "clear the clan." We have the

following conversation between Chen and the traitors who are reasoning why they have betrayed the society, along with Xiaobao eagerly inserting his opinion. Once again, the theatrical script is written with the contemporary little-white-collar professionals in mind.

CHEN: [*To the traitors*] So you have all joined the Magic Dragon *Gongfu* Society?!

XIAOBAO: [*To Chen*] I heard Magic Dragon was recruiting a few days ago; anyone who knows *gongfu* can join and will be given two ounces of silver--it's a shame that I don't know *gongfu*.

CHEN: [*To the traitors*] So you betrayed me and joined them just for a little more money?

TRAITOR ONE: Not a little more, but a lot more.

TRAITOR TWO: There is even holiday pay and travel allowance.

TRAITOR THREE: Every month there is a bonus.

TRAITOR FOUR: So long as a receipt is produced, the fee is reimbursed. Such generous pay, how could anyone resist!

TRAITOR ONE: Master, we have followed you for so many years, fighting for the revival of the Ming Dynasty, but nothing has been achieved!

TRAITORS TWO AND THREE: Master, we know you have high morals, and we would very much hope to have the same high morals as yourself.

TRAITORS [*Together*]: But we just can't!

CHEN: [*Turning his back to the traitors*] All right, don't then. From now on, witnessed by heaven and earth [*All the traitors begin to exit*] these people will have nothing to do with the Heaven and Earth Society. Don't beg me,

even if you beg me, I will not have you again. Go away, you all go away, go, go!

XIAOBAO: They have already gone.

CHEN: [*Turning around sharply*] What!

In the above scene, Xiaobao speaks directly to the audience: instead of criticizing the traitors for low morality, he laments his own inability to join such a lucrative profession. The little-white-collar professionals, making up the majority of the SDAC's audience, could no doubt associate themselves with the traitors. In conventional Chinese Confucian society, loyalty from the employees and benevolence and care from the employers are mutual moral ties; under Mao, loyalty to the party meant that lifelong social welfare was provided to employees within urban cities; in contemporary China, however, to jump between different jobs is the norm and money has become the only standard of value. Most of the audience would have shared the experience of surrendering loyalty and faith for financial opportunities. The roars of collective laughter on this occasion are directed not only at the reversed order and authority, represented here by powerless Chen, but more so at the powerless self who has been relentlessly drawn into such a maelstrom of capitalism. To laugh at the helpless self has become the only means, and yet a most powerful method, of gaining temporary self-revival and rebirth.

The Alternative?

Bakhtin states that the world of carnival "builds its own world versus the official world, its own church versus the official church, its own state versus the official state" (1984, p. 88). After hearty laughter through *Deer and Cauldron* towards the conventional folk hero and the official power, the question is: What alternative world is this carnival

sphere trying to create? The answer seems to lie in traditional Chinese Confucian morality based on righteousness, loyalty and love, namely *yi*.

Yi is a difficult concept to explain and translate. *Yi* has many different meanings all of which are linked with the concept of *xia*; one often hears the collective referral *xiayi*. The concept of *xia* is traced back to the late Warring States period (475-211 BC), associated with values of Confucianism. During that chaotic era scholars were urged to protect and uphold justice for the people, both through civil and martial approaches, referred to as *xia*. The normal translation of *xia* is knight-errant, however, in Chinese *xia* does not have the connotation of romance as the word in the Medieval literature. *Xia* refers to both physical and spiritual bravery, and at the spiritual level *xia* joins *yi*, and xiayi became one word meaning warm-hearted, protecting social justice and moral standards. Meanwhile *yi* has two basic levels: the grand *yi*, which is justice for the nation, often referred to as being patriotic; while the other level is devotion to friends. Both levels of *yi* emphasize loyalty. Despite the complexity, the basic value of *yi* is based on love, loyalty and humanity (Xu 2009, Wang Li 2011, Song 2012).

The reasons for Xiaobao's extreme popularity, since his first creation, lie in his practice of the conventional social morality, namely *yi*. In scene 1, when Xiaobao is invited persistently by Chen Jinnan to join the Heaven and Earth Society, Xiaobao rejects such requests, reasoning that he did not know *gongfu*. To this, Chen replies: "In this world, you conquer not through *gongfu* but *yi*", and emphasizes that Xiaobao has *yi*. When the Kangxi Emperor laughs at Xiaobao's low *gongfu* skills, Xiaobao challenges such comment with the same confidence: "In this world, it is not *gongfu* skill but *yi* that conquers."

Xiaobao's extreme popularity and extraordinary "luck" derive from his *yi*. Although Xiaobao pursues money with enthusiasm, once he has money he shares it generously with his friends and staff. At the end of the theatrical storyline, even though he had located a secret treasure, Xiaobao abandons the plan for excavation and instead disappears to the "far corner of the world." He keeps his word and is loyal to his friends even when facing ultimate death. It is *yi* that gives him allies, not money; and it is *yi* that saves Xiaobao's life at critical moments. In scene 5, both Chen Jinnan and the Kangxi Emperor order Wei Xiaobao to kill the other party, Xiaobao refuses such requests and we hear the following conversation--switching spotlights make clear that they are talking in separate time and space, although the three actors appear on the stage at the same time.

CHEN: I order you to kill the Kangxi Emperor. He is an alien Tartar. We need to revive China.

XIAOBAO: I cannot. He is my brother!

KANGXI: I order you to kill Chen Jinnan, the leader of the *gongfu* branch Heaven and Earth Society and eliminate the entire society. They are the terrorists of our nation.

XIAOBAO: I cannot. Chen Jinnan is my master!

CHEN: Are you not afraid I will kill you with a flip of my palm?

KANGXI: Are you not afraid I will give an order to have you killed?

XIAOBAO: Please do kill me.

CHEN: All right then, I will satisfy you.

[*Xiaobao screams; stage lighting to black-out*.]

Of course, Xiaobao is not killed, as Chen Jinnan is touched by his *yi* and spares his life. It is *yi*, in particular the ability to abandon money for *yi*, which touches the hearts of the audience and gives the character undiminished popularity.

In both the novel and the play, Xiaobao is portrayed as a person who acquired *yi* through many hours of listening to traditional stories such as *The Three Kingdoms* and *The Water Margin* when he was growing up; he has fully been ingrained with the essence of traditional Chinese value and morality, *yi* (Jin 2002, Jia 2004, Kong 2005). It is this traditional value and morality that are lacking in contemporary China and are turned toward by this theatre production as the alternative--the value and morality people need but at the same time, paradoxically, cannot possess.

In this theatre production, the values of *yi*, those of love, loyalty and righteousness, are further emphasized and maximized. In the novel, the Emperor purposely marries his younger sister--the Princess--off to his enemy, after discovering that the Princess was not born by his mother. However, in the theatre production the Emperor fights in person to rescue his sister from the secret *gongfu* society and never stops searching for her because of sibling love. In the novel, the most famous aspect of the story is that Wei Xiaobao takes his eight wives to his birthplace in Yangzhou, with the clear intention of utilizing their beauty to open a new brothel business. In the theatre production, however, Xiaobao is the loyal lover, with eyes and heart only for the Princess. Such a strong emphasis on *yi* serves as the alternative rule, which challenges the strong grip over the individual by the capitalist system in contemporary China and the world.

Utopia

Despite such an alternative, Bakhtin continuously pointed out the limitation of laughter as “utopia” (1984, pp.185, 264, 454). In this theatre production, after a night

of hearty laughter mocking the folk and the official power, the capitalist system and oneself, the show ends with ultimate contentment received from total social withdrawal. In the final scene, palace officials report to the Kangxi Emperor that they have found evidence of Xiaobao and the Princess being together, wandering at the far corner of the world. The show ends with the audience seeing Xiaobao and the Princess standing side by side in a small boat; Xiaobao is pushing the boat with a long bamboo pole, and the Princess is heavily pregnant.

PRINCESS: Father of the child, have we found the corner of the world?

XIAOBAO: We are nearly there.

PRINCESS: Once we are there, what are we going to do?

XIAOBAO: Well, I will tell you stories everyday, and tell you how beautiful you are everyday. We will stay there together forever.

The world that the audience has laughed at remains the same; the ultimate way for Xiaobao to maintain *yi*--love, loyalty and humanity--is at the "corner of the world" with one wife and no monetary source mentioned. This ending seems to convey a sense of helplessness and questions the fate of the "deer": Is it inevitable for the deer to be captured and placed within the power of the capitalist cauldron? Could there be an alternative other than a utopian dream?

Jacobson summarizes Bakhtin's utopian concept of laughter succinctly, although with a trace of pessimism: "Hostility and aggression is our beginning. Comedy cannot hope to change that. But by making a play of our incorrigible combativeness, it propitiates it, harmonizes us with it. And more than that, reminds

us of our inexhaustible capacity to evade the burden of sympathy and the compulsion to suffer" (1997, p. 137).

Conclusion

This paper examines the extreme popularity of *The Story of the Deer and the Cauldron* by the SDAC. It has argued that this popularity lies in the ingenious ability of the Director He Nian to adapt the original story--with new dialogue and visual feats--to maximize the power of laughter. Based on Bakhtin's critique on the power of laughter, but moving beyond the era of political repression referred to in Bakhtin's writing, this paper places the contemporary background of capitalism as the focus of power struggle, arguing the necessity and limitation of laughter.

One night of laughter provides little-white-collar professionals with a moment of laughing truth and degrading power. Such defiance is not only directed at the power structure, but at the individuals' relentless and helpless selves caught within the cauldron of capitalist power. Laughter has become the most powerful--but also the only--mechanism to serve the individual as a crucial device to defy and self-renew, even though such revival occurs only temporarily within the dark space of theatre. It is such power that generates the popularity of the production amongst the urban "little-white-collar" professionals.

It was therefore no surprise that the next production by He Nian and the SDAC, debuted in April 2013, was Marx's *Das Kapital* by Yu Rongjun, the playwright and also the Deputy Manager of the SDAC. Using satire and laughter, *Das Kapital* explores the questions of materialism and morality further, causing another sensation amongst the urban little-white-collar professionals, and becoming yet another groundbreaking theatrical production.

References

Aschkenasy, Nehama, 2007. Reading Ruth through a Bakhtinian lens: the carnivalesque in a Biblical tale. *Journal of Biblical literature*, 126 (3), 437-453.

Bakhtin, Mikhail, 1984. *Rabelais and his world*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.

Dirlik, Arif and Zhang, Xudong, 2000. *Postmodernism and China*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

Ferguson, Niall, 2012. *Civilization*. London: Penguin Books.

Hall, Stuart, 1996. The problem with ideology, Marxism without guarantees. In: David Morley and Kuan-Hsing Chen, ed. *Stuart Hall: critical dialogues in cultural studies.* London: Routledge.

Hamm, John Christopher, 2005. *Paper swordsmen, Jin Yong and the modern Chinese martial arts novel.* Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press.

Hiebert, Ted, 2003. Becoming carnival: performing a postmodern identity. *Performance research*, 8 (3), 113-125.

Hunt, Leon, 2003. *Kung Fu cult masters: from Bruce Lee to Crouching Tiger*. New York: Columbia University Press.

Jacobson, Howard, 1997. *Seriously funny: from the ridiculous to the sublime*. London: Viking.

Jenkins, Ron, 1994. *Subversive laughter*. New York: The Free Press.

Jia Gentian, 2004. *Poyi Jin Yong* (Decode Jin Yong). Beijing: Nongcun Duwu Chubanshe.

Jin Yong, 2002. *Lu ding ji* (The story of the deer and the cauldron). Guangzhou: Guangzhou Chubanshe.

Kleinman, Arthur, *et al*., 2011. *Deep China: the moral life of the person*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Kong Qingdong, 2005. *Jin Yong pingzhuan* (Discussions on Jin Yong). Zhengzhou: Zhengzhou Daxue Chubanshe.

Marx, Karl and Engels, Friedrich, 2010. *The communist manifesto*. London: Arcturus.

Song Yifu, ed., 2012. *Yi.* Beijing: Xiandai Jiaoyu Chubanshe.

Stevens, Adrian, 2007. *Carnival and comedy: on Bakhtin's misreading of Boccaccio*. London: Ubiquity Press.

Wang Jing, 2008. *Brand new China, advertising media, and commercial culture*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.

Wang Li, 2011. *Wuxia wenhua tonglun xubian* (Sequel, Culture of martial arts). Beijing: Renmin Chubanshe.

Xu Dai, 2009. *Xiashi dao* (The way of chivalry). Beijing: Beijing Daxue Chubanshe.

[1] The transcription of the dialogues in this chapter was taken from the video kindly offered by the Shanghai Dramatic Arts Center. I include the live interaction between audiences and actors in the passages.

[2] Cauldron in Chinese culture symbolizes the imperial power, and to obtain power one must kill (the deer).