

## Pandemic Humor during the COVID-19 Lockdown: A Comparative Study of Chinese and English Social Media Humor

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**Abstract:** Amidst the COVID-19 pandemic, humor has been oozing out from all corners of social media. As an effective coping mechanism against social discomfort and personal anxiety triggered by the lockdown, humor takes different forms and expresses different mentalities in different cultures. This study, a combination of quantitative and qualitative studies, selects 300 popular humor posts on social media, half written in Chinese and half in English, that circulated on social media platforms during the COVID-19 lockdown. We categorize these humor posts by theme to explore how similar and different cultural values and social circumstances play a role in the creation of humor among Chinese and in the Western world. Ultimately, this study aims to improve understanding of the functions of humor and shed light on cultural differences and the reasons behind them.

**Keywords:** COVID-19, humor, content characteristics, cultural similarities, cultural differences, social media

### 1. Introduction

The COVID -19 pandemic has led to hilarious humor, sweeping the social media all over the world. In China, COVID -19 caused two large-scale, momentous lockdowns: one in Wuhan when it broke out in January 2020, the other in Shanghai that began in mid-March 2022 and is still ongoing as of June 2022. Because of the central role the two megacities play in China's economy<sup>1</sup>, their closures have triggered avalanches of impacts on the economy, social management, and personal lives. To combat the enormous pressures created by these massive changes, people resort to humor as an important coping mechanism. When a situation is ugly, humor is more likely to ensue. A similar scenario played out in Western countries during the lockdown season.

Since the breakout of the COVID-19 pandemic in the early part of 2020, there have been a series of investigations on pandemic humor. Mada and Gomoescu (2020) compares quarantine humor during the Spanish Flu (1918-1919) and the Transilvanian quarantine humor in 2020, finding out the multiple functions of humor in coping with fear and mundane issues. Hadžić and Baralić (2020) combined qualitative and quantitative methods to find out the different interviewees' responses to different humor at the very beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic in Croatia. Amici (2020) conducted a quantitative and qualitative research study on humor's positive effect on human emotions based on a survey conducted in Italy. Sebba-Elran (2021) examined the meme cycles of the Israeli COVID-19 pandemic and explored the functions of the humorous meme in reflecting reality, venting anxiety, and fostering connection. Bischetti et al. (2021) conducted linguistic and psychological research on the emotional impact of COVID-19 humor on Italians (1903 participants) focusing on humor appreciation in terms of funniness and aversiveness, and found that memes triggered more amusement in readers. Saji et al. (2021) focused on (self-) published comics and investigated the nature, function, and choice of conceptual metaphors in these pandemic comics with the backdrop of the medical industry. In the book *Digital Humor in the COVID-19 Pandemic: Perspectives from the Global*

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<sup>1</sup> Wuhan, located at the center of mainland China, is the transportation and logistics hub. Shanghai, the largest eastern port, is also the financial, manufacturing, import and export center.

*South* (Mpofu, 2021), 14 articles display from various perspectives on how digital media were used in the socio-political life of such countries as Brazil, India, Kenya, Nigeria, South Africa and Zimbabwe. This book analyses citizens' use of social media and humor to mediate the pandemic in a diverse range of ways. However, there has been no research done that compares and contrasts the pandemic humor in China with that of English-speaking Western countries.

The ingenuity of the current research lies in not only the unique research subjects but the comparative perspective as well. As the editor-in-chief of the academic journal *Humor* remarked, the current research studies on pandemic humor rarely have “an interesting comparative perspective” (Hempelmann, 2021, p. 3). The aim of this study is to first explore the most popular themes in Chinese and Western humor, and then compare and contrast the similarities and differences to discover the cultural peculiarities and the reasons behind them.

## 2. Research Methodology

The authors of this study collected humor in digital form in the form of short texts, cartoons and memes, jokes, pictures, etc., from Chinese sources and English websites. The Chinese humor posts, 150 in total, examined in this study were collected through websites and popular social media platforms such as WeChat. Since the authors of this paper only understand English as a foreign language, the Western humor samples, 150 in total, were mostly selected online by Googling English-language websites, and some were quoted from journal articles on pandemic humor (e.g., Hadžić & Marina Baralić, 2021; Sebba-Elran, 2021).

All of these humor samples were examined and then thematically categorized according to their content (see the table of thematic categorization of Chinese and Western pandemic humours in Appendix 1). A closer look at these humor posts identified 21 themes for Chinese pandemic humor and 22 for English pandemic humor. Some themes occur in both cultures, but with different frequency or even with opposite attitudes and sentiments. Some themes are unique to one culture while unmentioned in the other. These humor themes were then scrutinized from the following 5 aspects: the top 5 Chinese pandemic humor themes, the top 5 English humor themes, pandemic humor themes unique to China and those peculiar to English, and the pandemic humor themes common to the two cultures.

The comparison and contrast of these humor items aim to show the different genres and functions of these humor themes and the many layers of cultural characteristics underlying these pandemic humor samples, which are reflected in people's attitudes and behaviors toward COVID-19, governments' social policies, and so on. Whenever necessary, various cultural theories and philosophies are drawn upon to explain the characteristics of humor and the different attitudes and behaviors of people.

## 3. The Top 5 Humor Themes: Comparison and Contrast

Among the 150 Chinese humor samples, these are the top five topics in Chinese pandemic humor:

| Rank | Subjects                                      | Number |
|------|---|--------|
| 1    | Social management during lockdowns            | 35     |
| 2    | Stocking up food                              | 22     |
| 3    | Social distancing                             | 20     |
| 4    | The perfect life during quarantine            | 9      |
| 5    | Fashion shows while queuing for nucleic tests | 8      |

Figure 1. The Top 5 Chinese Pandemic Humor Topics

The top 5 English pandemic humor subjects are:

| Rank | Subjects                                 | Number |
|------|--|--------|
| 1    | Wearing masks                            | 24     |
| 2    | Social distancing                        | 20     |
| 3    | Meta jokes on COVID itself               | 14     |
| 4    | Parent-child relations during quarantine | 13     |
| 5    | Toilet rolls                             | 12     |

Figure 2. The Top 5 English Pandemic Humor Topics

The subjects of the top 5 humor in each camp are mostly different, having only 1 in common: social distancing, which results directly from containment of the virus.

### 3.1 The Top 5 Chinese Pandemic Humor Themes

Shultz (1977) assumed that humor is prevalent in all cultures, but “different cultures joke about different things” (p. 178). When it comes to pandemic humor, what are the unique points among the top 5 Chinese humor subjects?

Social management tops the list of Chinese pandemic humor. In densely populated cities such as Wuhan (more than 12 million in 2020) and Shanghai (nearly 25 million in 2022), ensuring so many people in each city stay indoors without coming out during the long curfews was a major challenge. In addition, unlike in the Chinese countryside or Western countries, people in Wuhan and Shanghai live together in close quarters, so the virus can spread easily and quickly, especially if it is the highly contagious variant Omicron. Strict lockdown measures were enacted during the quarantine period. As most logistics were cut off to contain the spread of the virus, household supplies became a major problem. Therefore, it is not surprising that most jokes in Chinese revolve around the issue of social management, which has affected people’s lives the most.

A close examination of jokes about social management shows that most of these Chinese jokes about social management tend to use military metaphors. Fighting viruses is like fighting battles. Take the following as an example:

We were not born early enough to participate in the Battle of Shanghai <sup>2</sup>, but we were caught up in the lockdown of Shanghai;  
 I did not witness the anti-Japanese war, but I did witness the anti-epidemic war;  
 I was never a volunteer soldier on the Korean battlefield<sup>3</sup>, but I became a volunteer in the fight against COVID;  
 I have not participated in nuclear testing, but I have participated in nucleic acid testing many times;  
 I did not protect the password code, but I swear to defend the health code!

Example 1 (Tmtony, 2020)

Various war images are used to describe the battles against COVID -19, creating a sense of urgency and mobilizing all people into a unified response against this pandemic (Ren-Xing Chen, 2021). The war metaphor is particularly appropriate for Chinese culture, which emphasizes a top-down strategy in decision making (Meyer, 2015, p. 150). “Such a metaphor

<sup>2</sup> In the Second Sino-Japanese War (1937), the Battle of Shanghai, known in Chinese as the Battle of Songhu, was the first of twenty-two major engagements fought between Kuomintang-led China and the Empire of Japan.

<sup>3</sup> The Korean War in 1950-1953.

constructs a top-down national anti-epidemic strategy system” and “shapes the image of national unity to win the battle against COVID -19” (Ren-Xing Chen, 2021).

In the pandemic humor structured with war metaphors for social coping, a big difference can be seen between the jokes during the Wuhan lockdown in 2020 and those during the Shanghai lockdown in 2022. The morale reflected in the pandemic humor in Wuhan is more positive and shows a greater willingness to follow government orders and directives. However, the corresponding humor in Shanghai is more satirical and critical of the local government’s orders. This contrast arises from the following facts:

The supply situation in the Wuhan lockdown was better because it started just before Chinese New Year; people had done a lot of shopping to celebrate the biggest traditional festival, and had been informed about the lockdown in advance. Therefore, people in Wuhan were mentally and materially prepared for the lockdown. However, during the lockdown in Shanghai, citizens were first informed by the local government to stay home for four days, which turned out to be 75 days, much longer than expected, due to the increasing number of infection cases. It was only natural that people in some areas suffered from food shortages. As a result, the pandemic humor posts on social management during the Wuhan lockdown are more positive than the Shanghai lockdown ones. The posts during the Wuhan lockdown also show more positive morale about people’s close cooperation and trust in pandemic control experts like Zhong Nanshan, because the pandemic in Wuhan was effectively contained and the whole country later achieved a zero-case situation for a long time, which created national pride among all Chinese people. Here is an example of humor created during Wuhan lockdown:

At the beginning of the epidemic,  
This year’s Spring Festival plan:  
On the First Day of the Lunar New Year, stay home;  
On the Second Day of the Lunar New Year, remain at home;  
On the Third Day of the Lunar New Year, be at home;  
On the Fourth Day of the Lunar New Year, stay in the house;  
On the Fifth Day of the Lunar New Year, still be in the house;  
On the Sixth Day of the Lunar New Year, do not go anywhere;  
On the Seventh Day of the Lunar New Year, continue to be at home;  
When can you go out?  
Only when Zhong Nanshan says: “Move!”, can you go out! (Tmtony, 2020)

Example 2

This kind of humor shows Chinese people’s respect for authoritative medical experts like Zhong Nanshan and people’s willingness to accept lockdown requirements in the face of the highly infectious and pernicious virus. The function of this kind of joke is to encourage.

Omicron’s high transmissibility and stealth led to a rapid increase in infection cases in Shanghai. To protect the health of the majority of the population and achieve zero-case situation, the government’s strategies to cope with the unexpected situation changed constantly as the situation altered, which caused the public to lose trust and patience. Therefore, the humor about the volatile policy of Shanghai government is full of sarcasm and ridicule. For example:

Mother: “You lie every day, what are you going to do when you grow up, huh?”  
Child: “I am going to be a politician.” (Brouwer, 2022)

Example 3

Citizens were not mentally and materially prepared for the constantly extended lockdown. Their reaction to the government's shifting announcements turns out to be dry humor. Here is a joke that pokes fun at people's impatience in the face of frequent nucleic acid tests and do-it-at-home COVID -19 antigen tests:

Test result: negative, test again.  
 Negative, test again.  
 Negative, test again.  
 Negative, test again.  
 Positive, OK, I can finally breathe a sigh of relief.  
 (Brouwer, 2022)

Example 4



Example 5

In Example 5 (Tisheng, 2022), people even turn Shanghai's landmarks into the components of an antigen testing kit, which is spread through short videos and memes, causing many laughs. This group of pandemic humor is satire, criticizing the Shanghai government's inefficiency in handling Omicron and fickle social management policies.

In contrast to the top position occupied by social management humor among the Chinese samples, there are few jokes of this kind in English pandemic humor. Among the 150 English jokes collected in this study, there is only one that refers to social management and expresses distrust of the pandemic control expert:

What did the virologist tell the public? Probably the opposite of what he will tell them next week. (Kelleher, 2022)

Example 6

This joke expresses people's distrust of pandemic experts. The scanty social management humor reveals the fact that the government intervened less in changing people's lifestyle in English-speaking countries during the pandemic. Compared to China's zero-tolerance policy, social management in English-speaking countries such as the U.S. and the U.K. is loose, resorting to short-term full lockdowns or social distancing without full lockdowns during the peak period of COVID -19 and later to herd immunity without any control. The different approaches to the COVID strikes can be explained by the high collectivism in China and the high individualism in Western countries; a contrast between China and the United States in cultural value dimensions is shown in Figure 3.



Figure 3

Food stockpiling humor ranks second in Chinese pandemic humor. In the first half of April 2022, many households in Shanghai ran short of fresh vegetable supplies due to unpreparedness for the prolonged full lockdowns.

Vegetables suddenly became valuable hot commodities. Some memes about vegetables and people delivering fresh vegetables and fruits were spread through social media. Example 7 is a case in point (Nuoya, 2022). The purpose of this kind of humor is to agitate people's emotions about the unexpected situation they are in.



Example 7

Due to limited logistics and closed outlets, group buying became the only way to get food, apart from the free food distributed by the government. The group-buying leaders, called Tuanzhang, led the digital efforts to procure food through bulk purchases and immediately became heroes in each community. They had to be empathetic, smart, brave and demonstrate strong determination, so they are portrayed as military captains in the meme. Collective action is the lifeline that people in Shanghai can rely on to survive. The meme in Example 8 is to appreciate the efforts put in by Tuanzhang during the pandemic lockdown (Fleet, 2022).

In contrast, there are only 2 English jokes about stocking food in supermarkets. One is about the situation in German supermarkets:

What do they call panic buying of sausage  
and cheese in Germany?  
The wurst-kase scenario.

Example 9 (Kelleher, 2022)

Here the humor is created by the play on words “wurst-kase”, which literally means “sausage and cheese” in German. Phonologically they sound like “worst case” in English.

The other is about the situation in a French supermarket:

Grocery stores in France look like they have been hit by a tornado. All that's left is de brie.

Example 10 (Kelleher, 2022)

“De brie” is the famous French brand cheese Brie, which sounds like debris in English. The function of the two jokes is to create laughter through ridicule.

Chinese people prefer vegetables so much that there are various memes, manifested in Examples 11-14 (Da, 2022), showing the importance and beauty of vegetables:

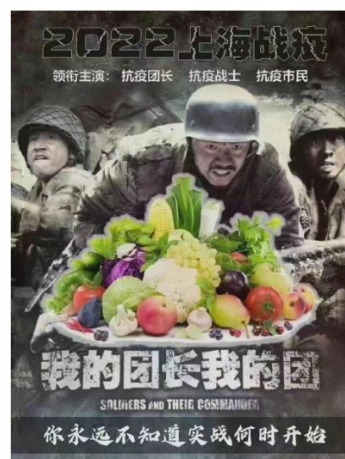


Image 3: One of the tsunami of social media memes, a movie poster takeoff showing a tuan Zhang and his squad fighting for fresh produce. The movie title plays on “Oh Captain, My Captain!”, and the bottom caption says, “You never know when the real war will start.” The poster would be even more on point if the soldiers brandished smartphones and were female. Image from Chinese social media.

Example 8





Example 11



Example 12



Example 13



Example 14

The last picture means “Shanghai, go, go, go!” The vegetables and other foods in these four pictures were arranged so artistically because they are the foods distributed for free by the local government. The artistic design is to show people’s gratitude. The technique of humor creation is parody, a comical imitation of another work. The created images are familiar icons or luxury brands in Chinese people’s perception. Now all of them are replaced with vegetables, whose significance and rarity are magnified.

Keeping social distance is one of the most popular topics in both China (Top 3) and the West (Top 2) because it is the most important means of containing the spread of the virus. Chinese jokes about social distance tend to focus on encouraging people not to visit each other, especially relatives, because when the pandemic broke out in Wuhan, it was just before Chinese New Year 2020, the most important traditional festival for Chinese people. A family reunion is the most important ritual during the Spring Festival season and relatives visiting each other is a must to Chinese people. The other Chinese humor in this category includes topics such as keeping your distance while cutting your hair, arguing with each other inside one’s own car via WeChat after a car accident, and drinking alcohol together over a long distance. Puns are used to ridicule social mobility and communication, such as

Less mobility (punning China Mobile in sound), no face-to-face interaction (Punning China Unicom in sound). --- China Telecom.

Example 15 (Tmtony, 2020)

This humor relates Chinese people’s mobility as China Mobile, and face to face interaction to China Unicom. During lockdowns, mobility and face to face interaction are discouraged. As a result, it turns out to be a fit advertisement for China Telecommunications Corporation.

English humor about social distancing is more hilarious and versatile. As with its Chinese counterparts, there are those that oppose social contact and visits to friends and relatives. There is also humor about rejecting Santa's entry into the house through the chimney, some proposed methods of social distancing within a home, such as eating raw garlic (causing foul mouth) and high fiber diets (producing farts). There are also jokes created by puns, such as asking NASA to give people space.

Example 16 (Mada and GOMOESCU, 2020, p. 60) depicts the 5 rings of the Tokyo Olympics remaining separated, so as to maintain safety distance. The rings themselves won't be infected no matter how. However, the separation of the originally crossed rings creates a striking image which breaks the conventional impression and increase people's awareness of social distancing. The technique used here is defamiliarization.



Example 16

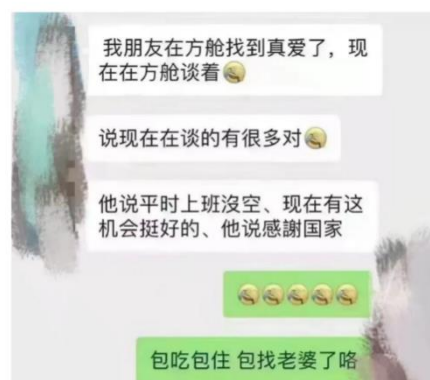
Finland just closed its borders. You know what that means.  
No one will be crossing the finish line. (Kelleher, 2022)

Example 17

When Finland closed its borders, a humor like “No one will be crossing the finish line” is created based on a pun, for “Finnish line” sounds like “finish line”. This kind of humor is created to produce alarm through exaggeration so as to remind people of the significance of social distancing.

The last but one place on the Chinese Top 5 list of pandemic humor is taken by humor about the perfect life during quarantine, which ranks the fourth. The Chinese try to see the positive side of pandemic lockdowns. Family togetherness, not going to work, not going to school, sleeping longer, life seems perfect. Even at Fangcang, the field hospital set up especially for COVID patients, the young people are having a great time, some are having dates, and some even find their true love as shown by Example 18 (Jiang, 2022). The time is much better than on normal days when they are too busy to have time for dating. According to the study on the thinking styles of Chinese people, “Chinese people would be more optimistic than North Americans when faced with a negative situation and more pessimistic than North Americans in a positive situation”, which results from the doctrine of the mean (zhong yong) (Ji et al., 2010, p. 162). Also, the Yin-yang philosophy advocated by Taoism contributes to Chinese people's thinking positive in crisis and thinking negative in stability. Example 19 (War, 2021) is a meme about the Western prediction of COVID development, which shows a never-ending circular figure, a rather pessimistic prediction. This humor is to warn people of the danger ahead and ask them to be careful.

Staging fashion shows while queuing for nucleic tests was another wonder during the 2022 Shanghai lockdown.



“My friend found true love in central quarantine. He's dating someone in the field hospital.

Example 18



Example 19



Young people dressed up to demonstrate their taste and character and to please the public's eyes, as the following pictures (Yangqide, 2022) show:



Example 20



Example 21

In China, Shanghai has always been the fashion capital. Shanghainese are always considered to be the most stylish and sophisticated in China. Face is a fundamental concept in Chinese culture. Traditional Chinese spend their whole lives trying to save their own face in the eyes of others. The lockdown of Shanghai was an unprecedented loss of face for Shanghai. Nurses and doctors from all over the country raced to Shanghai to assist in containing the spread of COVID-19. To maintain the last face of Shanghainese, people prepared overnight to present the hilarious fashion show while awaiting the nucleic test. This type of humor again reflects Chinese people's optimism in times of crisis.

### 3.2 The Top 5 Western Pandemic Humor Themes

Mask-related humor ranks 7th in Chinese humor samples collected by this study; however, it ranks 1st in the English-language samples (24 in total). Chinese people do not think it's abnormal to wear masks, which are popular in China in spring to ward off pollen, in summer to screen the sunshine and in winter to avoid smog. Jokes about masks in Chinese revolve around the difficulty of buying masks in the early stage of the pandemic in 2020 and the importance of wearing masks to protect life. However, hating to be restricted in speaking and breathing, Westerners find it difficult to accept wearing masks in public. Because of this, many English jokes have been created about mask-wearing. The humor about masks falls into three categories:

First, they focus only on wearing masks and deliberately ignore trousers and clothes to achieve a funny effect. For example,

They said you had to wear a mask at the grocery store. They should have mentioned clothes, too.

Example 22 (Kelleher, 2022)

In this situation, the speaker focuses only on "wearing masks", ignoring the must-to-be-worn clothes. The humor technique is overgeneralization.

Second, the jokes show various naughty ways of wearing masks and some well-known cultural icons wearing masks, for example, mask-wearing pandas, Santa Claus, turkeys and trees. There are also various goofy facial expressions printed on the masks, as shown by examples 25-26 (Weatherby, 2020). All these images create a sense of strangeness on the most familiar so as to invoke people's re-recognition of the unfamiliar mask. Humor is produced while people start to gain new perspectives and accept masks gradually. The technique used

here is defamiliarization.

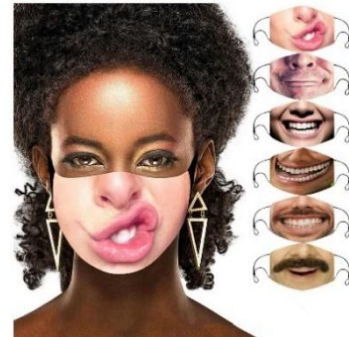
Third, there are two jokes about a “coughing” filter mask that sounds like a “coffee” filter mask. Coffee and cough are homophones, which is a common way of humor creation. and the function is to elicit laughter out of being goofy.



Example 23



Example 24



Example 25

In the West, there was a lot of resistance to wearing masks, especially in the early stages of the COVID -19 pandemic. Therefore, it is only natural that most pandemic jokes in the West are about masks. The eagerness to stock up on masks in China and the resistance to wearing masks in the Western countries form a sharp contrast reflecting the research findings of Inglehart-Welzel's Cultural Map (Figure 4).

As the map shows, compared to China, English-speaking countries are freer in self-expression. Wearing a mask that covers the mouth—the major organ for speaking and breathing is unfamiliar and uncomfortable. It can even be seen as a political metaphor that hinders speech in some ways. Therefore, humor is used to relieve the pressure. Consequently, there are far more jokes in English in this category.

After jokes about wearing masks and social distancing, humor about the Corona virus itself is third on the top 5 list in the West. These jokes touch upon the different characteristics of the virus:



Figure 4

Why do they call it the novel coronavirus? It's a long story.... (Kelleher, 2022)

Example 26

The meme Example 27 (Hadžić & Baralić, 2021) shows the similar bizarre hair style shared between an animal and human beings to explain why the virus is named after “novel corona”.

Puns are employed to make fun of the complicated nature of the virus. Its taste, mobility, ease of recognition, difficult names of its variants, incomprehensible nature, comprehensive symptoms, and 2-week quarantine period are all ridiculed in jokes, mostly in the form of puns. Even puns are made fun of through the use of “pundemic” (Kelleher, 2022).

There are also meta jokes about the pandemic humorous jokes themselves. For example:



(they discovered that virus transfers from animals to humans)

Example 27

What do all virus jokes have in common?

They're catchy. (Kelleher, 2022)

Example 28

Moreover, because of the lockdown, these pandemic jokes are meant to be “inside jokes”, and people’s rejection of them results from their refusal to spread the virus (Kelleher, 2022).

In Chinese humor, there are no such meta jokes about COVID -19; while one-tenth of the collected English humor deals with the virus itself, which shows the difference in thinking between Chinese and Western cultures. Chinese thinking is more holistic, while English thinking is more analytical (Ji et al., 2012, pp.155-p.156). Holistic thinking sees the whole picture and pays attention to the context of the pandemic, the relationships with people and animals, and its overall impact on the world. Analytical thinking, on the other hand, dissects each part of the virus and pays closer attention to the details. That’s why there are a lot of jokes about the Novel Corona virus itself in English.

The fourth most important English pandemic humor is about parent-child relationships. Parents, healthy or sick, have to cook, teach, and chaperone the naughty kids all the time, even when they are busy with their online work. The parent-teacher conference is also a favorite topic for humor. In addition, children cannot change classes even if the parents are not qualified teachers. In China, there are only three jokes on this topic, showing how parents help their children with homework, discipline their children, and care for their children wholeheartedly. In Western countries, where children are treated with more equality and respect, there can be many jokes in this category. However, Chinese parents have much more power over and demand more respect from the children, which is something serious, so such jokes are much less common in China. Such disparity regarding parent-child relationships between Chinese humor and Western humor echoes the higher power distance in Chinese culture (80) according to the data shown by Hofstede Insight (Hofstede, 2022) and China being a more hierarchical culture than western countries according to Meyer’s Cultural Map (2015, p.125).

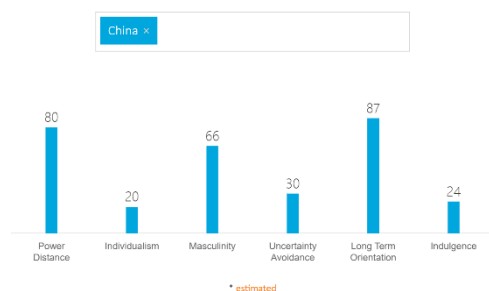


Figure 5

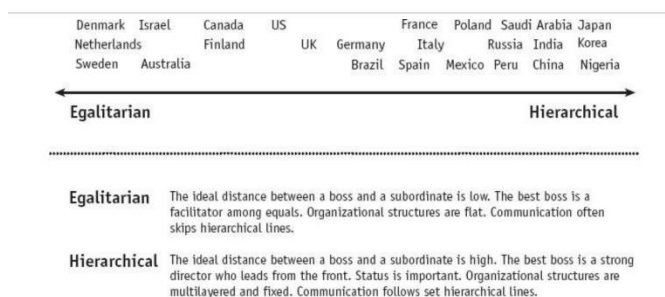


Figure 6

Just as Chinese hoard vegetables, Westerners stockpile toilet paper, which remains at number 5 on the top 5 list. There are jokes about the frustration of not getting toilet paper, about mocking those who hoard toilet paper rolls, and about the alternatives to toilet paper such as lettuce leaves and newspapers (Kelleher, 2022). Still, many puns are used to reflect the humor. There are only two Chinese jokes that show the scarcity of toilet paper during closures. Why is there such a gap between Westerners and Chinese in stocking toilet paper?

According to Hofstede's Cultural Dimension Data, China's uncertainty avoidance index is 30, lower than that of all English-speaking countries: Australia (54), Canada (48), the United States (46), the United Kingdom (35), and most other Western countries. So Chinese are more willing to embrace change. As long as there is food to eat, the other things are all right. There is a most familiar saying in China: "Food is the paramount necessity of the people." Therefore, Chinese people tend to hoard food first. Toilet paper is neither a food nor a cure for viruses, but as an indispensable daily necessity with low cost and durability, it helps people gain a sense of control in the face of such an unpredictable, pandemic-ridden world. Therefore, toilet paper becomes a top priority to buy in bulk to Westerners.

#### 4. Humor Themes Exclusive to China

| Subjects   |
|--|
| 1. Desire to go out                                  |
| 2. Correction of illegal deeds                       |
| 3. The virus as an enemy                             |
| 4. Fashion shows while queuing up for nucleic tests  |
| 5. Artistic displays of vegetables and testing tools |

Figure 7. Humor Themes Exclusive to China

These 5 categories of pandemic humor exist only in China. Due to zero tolerance for Coronavirus cases, China has a strict lockdown policy. Unlike many Western countries, in which the lockdowns are not absolute, people can still walk their dogs, go for a stroll in the park, and go to the supermarket, the people in the locked-down areas in China are not even allowed to step out of their doors or the gates of their residential compounds. Consequently,



the desire of Chinese people to go out is very strong, and humor is therefore created to appease people's discontent and fear. Example 29 (Da, 2022) is based on the prototype of the outlaw Liangshan heroes in *All Men Are Brothers*, who swear allegiance to each other and pray to die together though they were not born together. *All Men Are Brothers* is a 2011 Chinese television series adapted from Shi Nai'an's 14th century novel *Water Margin*, one of the Four Great Classical Novels of Chinese literature. Now the heroes are representing different districts of Shanghai. Though they were not born together, they ask to be released from the lockdown together. The use of this Chinese classic to pray for the lifting of the blockade causes much hilarity among the Chinese.



Example 29

Thanks to positive thinking, some of the humor is created out of the natural correction of some minor offences by the pandemic. For example, the braised duck neck of Wuhan is a specialty of Wuhan and some chain stores selling the duck neck are spread all over the country. After the outbreak of the pandemic in Wuhan, local vendors immediately admit that the sources of their Wuhan Braised Duck Neck are not from Wuhan but from the local area (Tmtony, 2020). There are also jokes about thieves finding it impossible to steal because there is no one on the street and everyone is at home (Tmtony, 2020).

As the previous analysis has shown, containing the pandemic is seen as a war in China; thus, the virus is seen as the enemy that harms people stealthily. In Western countries, the coronavirus is rarely seen as an enemy, but occasionally as a monster. The Chinese tend to regard viruses as enemies of human beings, while Westerners regard viruses as monsters. Take Example 30 (Louise, 2022) for instance. As shown in the study by Zhen-Dong Wang et al. (2021), Western thought tends to view the world objectively, which includes interactions between people and things; Confucian culture, on the other hand, focuses more on the social world and treats all conflicts as people's problems, as is shown by the chart below:



Example 30

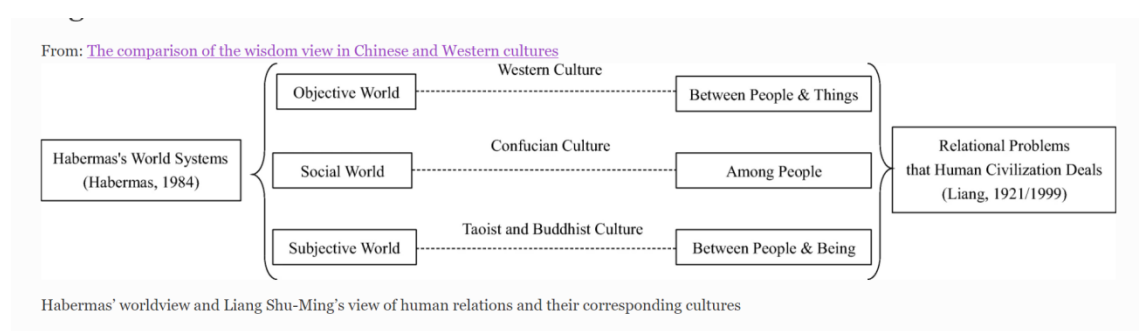


Figure 8

The 4<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> themes exclusive to China, fashion shows while queuing up for nucleic tests



and artistic displays of vegetables and testing tools, have been explained as the top-ranking humor themes in the previous section with illustrations.

## 5. Humor Themes Exclusive to Western Countries

| Subjects                        |
|---------------------------------|
| 1. Meta jokes on COVID itself   |
| 2. Brother-Sister Relationships |
| 3. Humanity                     |
| 4. Alcoholic beverage           |
| 5. Hand washing                 |
| 6. Travel abroad                |

Figure 9. Humor Exclusive to Western Countries

The meta jokes, which are jokes concerning COVID-19 itself, have been discussed in Section 3.2.

Due to the former one-child policy, most Chinese families have only one child, so joking about brother-sister relationships is not relevant in Chinese culture; therefore, such jokes are rare in Chinese pandemic humor. In English there are some jokes showing the complicated love-hate relationship between siblings, like Example 31 (Sebba-Elran, 2021, p. 236)

In English, there are also pandemic jokes about human faults such as laziness and introversion. For example:



Every sister has two moods

Example 31

After years of wanting to thoroughly clean my house but lacking the time, this week I discovered that wasn't the reason.

Example 32 (Kelleher, 2022)

You never realized how anti-social you were until there was a pandemic and your life didn't change that much.

Example 33 (Kelleher, 2022)

These jokes are self-deprecating dark humor. Such self-belittling jokes are not popular in Chinese humor. The deep reason is when Westerners, influenced by Christianity, confess some human weakness, they present it honestly, sometimes humorously, because human weakness is a matter of fact. Traditional Chinese thinking believes man is born good. Chinese people, taking great care in maintaining face, only show humility in things which they are actually proud of so as not to arouse others' jealousy and elicit praise and encouragement from others. Pandemic lockdown is never something worth feeling proud of; therefore, in China, this kind of jokes is rarely seen.

Some English pandemic jokes revolve around alcohol. For example:

"What's the best way to avoid touching your face? A glass of wine in each hand."

Example 34 (Kelleher, 2022)

“If coronavirus has nothing to do with beer, why do I keep seeing cases of it?”

Example 35 (Kelleher, 2022)

In the latter joke, cases of Corona refer to the beer Corona brand. The following jokes show the cases of Corona (Louise, 2022).

The classic Dad joke of 2020, 2021, AND 2022



Example 36

**MEANWHILE, INSIDE THE FRIDGE**



Example 37

There are no similar cases in China because the Chinese tend to drink together at dinner parties where people get together. During lockdowns, people are isolated from each other. In China, drinking alone is considered boring and dangerous because it is seen as a sign of depression. Even at the table, when a Chinese person drinks, he or she must propose to the others to show courtesy and consideration. Western alcohol consumption, however, is more individualistic and personal. Therefore, Westerners tend to drink on their own at a dinner party and during curfew hours. The Chinese, during lockdown, do not find an opportunity to drink together; therefore, seldom are there alcohol-related drinks during pandemic.

There are some jokes about washing hands during Western lockdowns, while there are no such jokes among Chinese. In the initial stage of the pandemic, Western experts believed that “washing hands is much more important than wearing masks” to prevent the virus (KHN, 2020), so people were encouraged to wash their hands for an excessive amount of time, such as singing a Happy Birthday song. Here is a joke about it:

Who came up with the idea of singing “Happy Birthday” while washing hands? Now every time I go to the bathroom, my kids expect me to come out with a cake.

Example 38 (Kelleher, 2022)

However, hand washing is always important in Chinese cities as a regular hygiene practice, which has not caused much concern. Wearing masks seems to be more important because the difficulty of buying masks was a challenge when the pandemic first broke out in China. Therefore, people in China paid more attention to masks than to hand washing, and there are no jokes about hand washing in Chinese pandemic humor.

Due to the easy and fast transmissibility of COVID -19 around the world, Example 39 (Hadžić & Baralić, 2021) shows a joke about the global journey of the virus, which is also unique in English jokes, which might be due to the fact that, though the outbound travel in the west has been hindered somehow, it has not remained a long-time problem; however, there have been a lot of restrictions on going abroad for Chinese since the breakout of the pandemic till now. Traveling abroad is unthinkable for ordinary people in China.

**Normal people with fever:**



**People with coronavirus:**



Example 39

## 6. Humor Themes Common in Both Chinese and Western Cultures

There are also some humor themes common in both Chinese and Western cultures that express similar attitudes.

| Subjects                         |
|----------------------------------|
| Home travel                      |
| Expectation of a high birth rate |
| Dating                           |
| Beauty and personal care         |
| Staying at home as contribution  |
|                                  |
| Animals                          |
| Gaining weight                   |

Figure 10. Humor Themes Common in Both Chinese and Western Lockdowns

One category is travelling at home. People from both cultures jokingly arrange itineraries within their own homes to amuse themselves. Different parts of the house or apartment become resorts and scenic spots for people at home to visit.



Example 40 (Louise, 2022)

During the special period, the best travel itinerary for the Spring Festival in 2020 is grandly launched: living room → kitchen → bedroom → bathroom circulation tour.

Example 41 (Tmtony, 2020)

The other is the expectation of a high birth rate after lockdown. However, in China, ironically, the birth rate has been declining steadily in recent years, 10.4‰ in 2019, 8.5‰ in 2020 and 7.5‰ in 2021 (Peng, 2022). In Western countries, the birth rate has not seen a sharp rise. Take the data in US for example, the birthrate was 11.98‰ in 2019, 11.99‰ in 2020, and 12‰ in 2021 (Macrotrends, 2022). People's fear of the virus's impact on birth quality and a worry about an uncertain future might play a hand in reducing the birthrate.

Another similar theme of pandemic humor reveals cultural differences. Both China and English-speaking countries have humor related to dating, with loneliness as the common theme. However, Chinese humor in this category shows that women strongly refuse dating invitations from men because they believe that protecting life is more important than finding love. Take the following joke as an example:

Just now, a guy asked me out for Valentine's Day on February 14. I decisively rejected his invitation and kicked him out of my WeChat contacts. It's okay to fool around with my feelings, but to play with my life — No way!

Example 42 (Tmtony, 2020)

However, a saying in a similar situation becomes so irresistible to Western women that it remains a powerful pick-up line and hot pandemic humor cited by various sources:

If coronavirus cannot take you out, can I?

Example 43 (Donato, 2020; Kelleher, 2022)

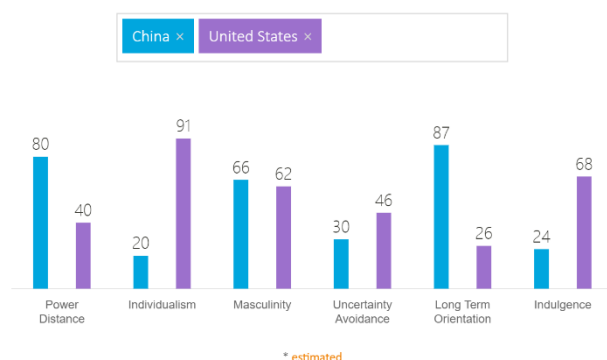


Figure 11

The dismissive reaction of Chinese women to a man's invitation to go out during the pandemic period contrasts sharply with the welcoming attitude of Western women who tend to accept a man's invitation despite the high rate of coronavirus infection. When it comes to love and dating, Chinese women tend to be passive and even repressive, while Western women are more passionate about love, even at the risk of being infected. Influenced by Confucianism, Chinese people's rate of indulgence is far lower than that of most countries in the world. Moreover, Chinese are accustomed to view things in the long term, instead of pursuing immediate pleasures. Take the contrast between China and America for example. According to Hofstede's data (Hofstede, 2022) shown in Figure 3, China's long-term orientation is far more than that of US; while China's indulgence date is far lower than that of US. This may explain the different attitudes towards dating between Chinese women and American women.

When it comes to beauty and personal care humor, women on both sides cannot get the usual beauty care such as having their hair, nails and eyebrows done. Chinese women think beauty care is unnecessary because people cannot meet during curfew. In isolation, there is no reason for women to dress up because they cannot be seen by others outside. However, Western humor on this topic focuses on women becoming uglier because of a lack of beauty care. The function of beauty differs between Chinese and Western women. The former is to please those who love and admire them, while the latter focuses on women themselves (Louise, 2022).

How many women have their hair permed, dyed or  
eyelashes plucked before the Spring Festival?  
Nails done, grooming done,  
I also bought a lot of new clothes...  
Never thought the investment in beauty failed. It was  
the pajamas that lasted the whole Spring Festival  
[laughs] [laughs].

Example 44 (Tmtony, 2020)



Example 45

This Chinese example is about the situation during the lockdown for the 2020 Spring Festival. Since ancient times, women in China have dressed up to please those who appreciate and like them. Since Chinese people attach great importance to their faces, it is only natural that they spend money to beautify themselves for the Spring Festival when relatives and friends ritually gather. However, the sudden attack of COVID-19 upset everything. During the lockdown, there was no opportunity to meet with others, and all previous investments in beauty were in vain. Western women, driven by individualism, strive for beauty for a variety of reasons. Western humor only shows that women without beauty services become uglier and uglier because of the lockdown.

As discussed previously, face is a very important concept in Chinese culture. Traditional Chinese spend their whole lives trying to save their own face in the eyes of others. When others are not present, they can be quite relaxed in private, so taking care of one's appearance is not so important in personal space. Westerners are more self-centered, the lack of beauty care makes one ugly, and the main concern is one's own appearance in one's own eye.

Both Chinese and Western humor shows a theme that has something to do with making contributions by staying at home. The Chinese show the aim to contribute to their country, while Westerners attempt to contribute to the world. The Chinese have strong patriotism and consider their country as the mother. Western countries are closely connected and have similar cultural roots. International travel between these countries is frequent and common. Therefore,



when lockdowns occur, by staying at home, Westerners help saving the world. Take the following joke as an example:

My mom always told me I wouldn't accomplish anything by lying in bed all day. But look at me now, ma! I'm saving the world! (Kelleher, 2022)

Example 46

Also, the following memes (Hadžić & Baralić, 2021, p.238):



Example 47

Western countries have complicated interconnections through political, economic and military coalitions, such as NATO, EU and the English Commonwealth. In the case of COVID-19, the whole world has been deeply affected. Therefore, it's natural for Westerners to say they are saving the world by staying at home.

On both sides, there is pandemic humor about animals. In China, pigs are the most common meat source and China remains the world's largest pork consumer (Yu, 2021). People's living styles during the lockdown at home are compared to pigs' lifestyle of eating and sleeping all the time. While in Western humor, dogs and cats play a bigger role as man's best friends because of their proximity to humans. In some Chinese humor, people are warned to stop eating wild animals. For example:

Humans have always kept animals in cages. During the Spring Festival this year, animals managed to cage more than one billion people. Respect the law of nature. Be kind to living beings. (Tmtony, 2020)

Example 48

In Western humor, animals peer into the windows of people's homes as if the people were caged animals and the wild animals were visitors to a zoo, as shown by Example 49 (Hadžić & Baralić, 2021, p.248).

In general, the animals appear in Chinese pandemic humor are more food-related while westerners treat animals more as companions or living beings sharing the planet earth.

Weight gain is another common theme in pandemic humor. Western humor takes an objective stance toward weight gain due to inactivity during confinement. Weight gain means being less sexy. Chinese humor shows a more positive and even patriotic attitude towards weight gain. For example:



Example 49

I would rather get fat than go outside. Becoming fat is

a

state of prosperity, and going outside is a scourge. I advise you to stick to the rules and remember to love yourself.

Example 50 (Tmtony, 2020)

The positive attitude of the Chinese towards weight gain results from the traditional Chinese aesthetics, which considers plumpness as a symbol of wealth and beauty. In addition, Chinese people are generally slim due to the dietary habits, so being fat is not a big concern in China.

## 7. Conclusion

The above study examines the top-ranked humor themes in China and English-speaking countries, highlighting the types of humor unique to China and English-speaking Western countries. Cultural differences in values, thought patterns, history, stage of development, aesthetics, etc., contribute to the different landscapes of pandemic humor. Even with similar themes of humor between China and Western cultures, different associations, characteristics and value differences can be found. Mechanisms of humor production include wordplay, metaphor, overgeneralization, exaggeration, satire, parody, and defamiliarization.

In times of global pandemics, people around the world turn to humor to relieve stress, elicit positive emotions, and maintain health. The examples collected in this study show that humor is more than laughter and frivolity; it is also social criticism, a commentary on social issues, an encouragement to take a particular action, a warning, a mockery, an agitation, an appreciation, a revelation of human nature, and a review of human-nature relations. In times of crisis, humor quickly appears and disappears as the intensity of the crisis increases or decreases. Basically, it is an emotional expression disguised in a funny, inappropriate appearance with multiple purposes.

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