



Genre en séries

Cinéma, télévision, médias

12-13 | 2022

Genre et comédie : stars, performances, personnages

Wang Baoqiang: the Man-Child Bumpkin in Chinese Comedy Films

Yung-Hang Lai



Electronic version

URL: <https://journals.openedition.org/ges/3209>

DOI: 10.4000/ges.3209

ISSN: 2431-6563

Publisher

Presses universitaires de Bordeaux

Printed version

Date of publication: 1 October 2022

Electronic reference

Yung-Hang Lai, "Wang Baoqiang: the Man-Child Bumpkin in Chinese Comedy Films", *Genre en séries* [Online], 12-13 | 2022, Online since 26 October 2022, connection on 13 November 2022. URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/ges/3209> ; DOI: <https://doi.org/10.4000/ges.3209>

This text was automatically generated on 13 November 2022.



Creative Commons - Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 International - CC BY-NC-ND 4.0
<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>

Wang Baoqiang: the Man-Child Bumpkin in Chinese Comedy Films

Yung-Hang Lai

EDITOR'S NOTE

This article is a revision of part of my PhD thesis, working in progress, with Prof. Chris Berry. My PhD thesis is financially supported by the Great Britain-China Educational Trust with the Chinese Student Awards.

AUTHOR'S NOTE

I will briefly discuss the career trajectory of Wang regarding his man-child image. Then I will analyse the functions of these man-child roles in the selected films, as both the target of laughter and as a social critique. I will argue that Wang's comedic persona as a bumpkin man-child is depicted as a "holy fool," invoking the Confucian tradition, to both challenge and complement neoliberal male subjectivity in China.

Je retracerai d'abord brièvement la carrière de Wang, en soulignant la place qu'y occupe son image d'homme-enfant, puis j'analyserai la double fonction de ses rôles d'homme-enfant dans les deux films en question : à la fois objet du rire et vecteurs de critique sociale. Je soutiendrai que cette persona comique de Wang s'apparente à la figure du « fol-en-Christ » et invoque la tradition confucéenne pour remettre en question, mais aussi compléter, la subjectivité masculine chinoise néolibérale.

- ¹ The man-child is an ever-popular trope in Western comedy films from the silent era to the early 21st century. Man-child refers to a grown-up who is immature in terms of conduct and mentality (Balducci, 2015: 12; Schager, 2014). Therefore, a man-child lacks maturity and proper masculinity as defined by specific social and cultural contexts. In the West, since 2000, cultural critics such as Michael Arbeiter have displayed anxiety about the negative cultural influence of the celebration of the man-child in film

comedies (2014). Taking *Knocked Up* (Judd Apatow, 2007), which casts Seth Rogen¹ as the man-child hero, as an example, Emma Ellis describes it as “escapism” (2015), Jamie Loftus finds it offensive to some women, quoting female lead Katherine Heigl’s remark that it is “a little sexist” (2016).

- 2 An essential behavioural trait of a 21st century man-child is that he always wants to play but not work. He enjoys not only video games and toys but also alcohol and marijuana. These entertainments enable escapist enjoyment for the man-child and avoidance of responsibility. When critics talk about immaturity as a problem of the man-child, they often talk about irresponsibility (Balducci, 2015: 2-3; Schager, 2014). Arbeiter, for example, remarks that contemporary man-child comedies celebrate “the charms of the idiotic male—the sort who decries responsibility, who neglects consideration, whose values rarely exceed his own immediate interests” (2014). In this essay, by contrast, I argue that in the Chinese context, the man-child serves as a reminder of how a man should fulfil his obligations to the people around him, as the comedian Wang Baoqiang exemplifies in his childish roles onscreen.
- 3 In this essay, I focus on the man-child character type in two Mainland Chinese comedies from the 2010s, in which Wang was cast as the lead: *Lost on Journey* (Yip Wai-man, 2010) and *Lost in Thailand* (Xu Zheng, 2012)². First, I argue that Wang’s bumpkin man-child roles function as laughingstocks, especially in how they interact with the anxious middle-class buddies played by Xu Zheng. These films use comedy to posit a socio-cultural critique of neoliberalisation in China, particularly problematising the entrepreneurial subjectivity of Chinese men preoccupied with the pursuit of personal success. The man-children are depicted as holy fools³ who reassert altruism and traditional Confucian values. I also argue, nonetheless, that this man-child trope complements the dominant neoliberal masculinity in China, helping to produce social harmony.
- 4 Given the similarity of the names between the actors and characters in *Thailand*, I will call the actor Wang Baoqiang, “Wang,” and his character Wang Bao, “Bao,” while I call the actor-director Xu Zheng, “Xu,” and his character Xu Lang, “Lang.” In *Journey*, Wang’s role is Niu Geng and Xu’s role is Li Chenggong.
- 5 Comedy has become such a popular genre in Mainland China in the past two decades that nine out of the 20 highest-grossing Chinese productions (up to summer 2020) are comedies. The *Lost...* series is exceptionally successful, with *Thailand* becoming the national box office champion in 2012, grossing more than 1.2 billion RMB. Subsequently, Xu has produced *Lost in Hong Kong* (2015) and *Lost in Russia* (2020), as both filmmaker and lead actor, with the former grossing more than 1.6 billion RMB (“Neidi zongpiaofang paiming” [Mainland China Box Office Ranking]). Thanks to the man-child roles in the first two *Lost...* films and other comedies, Wang has become one of the top comedians in Mainland China nowadays. Before Wang, successful comedians in Chinese cinema mostly portrayed sophisticated or streetwise men, such as Ge You in Feng Xiaogang’s films. Since Wang, more comedians perform various man-child roles, such as Bao Bei'er (who replaced Wang in *Lost in Hong Kong* as the man-child), and Shen Teng who played a smart man-child in *Goodbye Mr. Loser* (Yan Fei and Peng Damo, 2015).
- 6 I begin by discussing the man-child as a trope in Hollywood comedy films. I will map out different kinds of cinematic man-children and locate Wang’s man-child roles accordingly. Then I discuss Wang’s man-child image and analyse his performances in the two *Lost...* films. I examine how he at first appears to be a laughingstock according

to neoliberal norms but ends up interrogating entrepreneurial subjectivity as a vital aspect of Chinese manhood. Finally, I will examine how those man-child roles, by invoking selflessness and social harmony, in turn complement rather than attack Chinese neoliberal masculinity.

The Man-Child in Comedy Films

- 7 The man-child as a comedic image has been discussed by critics regarding particular comedians and sub-genres, and Anthony Balducci's monograph *I Won't Grow Up* is a rare systematic approach to the topic. While these discussions focus on Hollywood films, I propose that the man-child as a role-type is also helpful in analysing Mainland Chinese comedies in the market era since the late 1990s, as the Chinese film industry has learnt a lot from Hollywood in making commercial genre films. Balducci discusses the varieties of and changes in the image of the man-child on screen, suggesting that immaturity is more essential than stupidity to comedy and more welcome than it was decades ago. The man-child failed to grow up in the past, but now he refuses to do so (2015: 5, 190). This contemporary image of the man-child is celebrated in Hollywood, for example in the role of Seth Rogen in *Knocked Up*, who are not innocent but remarked by Balducci as "insensitive, selfish and cocky" (2015: 157).
- 8 Balducci agrees with David D. Gilmore that the mature men generally carry out the roles of protector, procreator and provider. In other words, the standard family man (the proper husband and father) (2015: 20). By contrast, the man-child sticks to the role of a son, a spoiled kid. When he is still single, his mother looks after him so that he can indulge in his addictions; when he is married, his wife would take over the mother's role: "When a mature person marries an immature person, a parent-child relationship is bound to develop." (Balducci, 2015: 152). A man-child shirks his family duties and leaves them to the people around him. He prefers a lover to a wife as entering marriage means commitment. If he cannot avoid marriage, he avoids fatherhood. Although Balducci understands that nowadays people may avoid marriage and parenthood out of economic considerations and put career development first, he maintains that an adult should at least work and feed themselves (2015: 157-9, 183).
- 9 Balducci has not provided a well-structured typology for man-child characters in comedy films. However, the evolution of the man-child image in film history is not one-directional, as the same subtype of man-child can appear in different historical periods. For the convenience of analysis, I will summarise these varieties of man-children in relation to different life stages, complemented with other references:

Table 1. Varieties of Man-child Characters in Hollywood Comedy Films

Types of man-child	Traits	Examples
1) Not grown up yet	a) Physically but not mentally grown-up: innocent, naive, inept, vulnerable, sexless or asexual, gluttonous (Balducci, 2015: 1, 2, 12, 14)	a) Characters in the silent era but also found in later comedies, e.g. Harry Langdon (Mast, 1979 [1973]: 165-7)

	b) Playful, mischievous and sometimes wild (Balducci, 2015: 9, 11)	b) Slapstick characters who create chaos, <i>e.g.</i> Laurel and Hardy (Mast, 1979 [1973]: 192) and Charlie Chaplin in <i>The Tramp</i> (Charlie Chaplin, 1915) and <i>The Count</i> (Charlie Chaplin, 1916)
2) Growing up	a) Childish but growing; more sophisticated than Type 1 in that his immaturity is less obvious (Balducci, 2015: 17-9, 47)	Characters of Harold Lloyd and Buster Keaton in feature-length films that have developed since the 1920s and require more sophisticated narratives
	b) Self-repressive, indifferent or confused about sex (Balducci, 2015: 74-7)	Characters in some screwball comedies (of the 1930s-40s), such as Cary Grant in <i>Bringing Up Baby</i> (Howard Hawks, 1938), Gary Cooper in <i>Ball of Fire</i> (Howard Hawks, 1941) and Henry Fonda in <i>The Lady Eve</i> (Preston Sturges, 1941) (Rowe, 156-163)
3) Refusing to grow up	a) Not innocent but embracing childishness as natural and rejecting adulthood as grey (Balducci, 2015: 103-5, 109) b) Playful, hedonistic, self-centred, cocky, vulgar (Balducci, 2015: 1, 3, 157) c) Explicitly sexual (Balducci, 2015: 98, 154) d) Could be smart (Balducci, 2015: 140)	Man-children that have emerged since the 1970s and become the mainstream in the 2000s, <i>e.g.</i> Seth Rogen and Jim Carrey
4) Rejuvenation/Regression	Escaping from crisis or trauma in adulthood and seeking a haven in childhood or adolescence (Balducci, 2015: 119, 122, 131, 172)	Robin Williams in <i>Hook</i> (Steven Spielberg, 1991) and <i>Jack</i> (Francis Ford Coppola, 1996)

- 10 Types 1 and 2 are related to the ability to grow up, while Types 3 and 4 hinge on the will to be an adult. We should note that some features of immaturity cannot simply fit into one type, such as unsociability and playfulness, which may be found in characters of all four types but may also be absent in some man-child characters. These complexities leave room for comedians and filmmakers to create various specific man-child characters. Although these examples mainly come from Hollywood, I propose this typology still offers a framework for locating different man-child images in Chinese comedies in the reform period, as they share certain similar assumptions about masculinity with the West.
- 11 Although the image of the man-child is often met with disapproval, Balducci admits that man-child comedies can bring forth critical responses to the adult world because a man-child may keep his innocence, which might otherwise be corrupted when one

grows up. The comedic moments created by man-child roles usually come from the incongruities between their way of living and social conventions. The storylines of these comedies might be about the delayed growth of the man-children, but the gags may also problematise social and cultural norms. Likewise, a comic man-child can expose upper-class snobbery and pretension (Balducci, 2015: 39, 146). Thus, the critical potential of the comedic man-child is worth more exploration, which is my aim here with Wang's man-child comedies. As the meaning of maturity is culturally specific, I will explore his man-child image in Chinese comedies with reference to the norms of modern-day Chinese masculinity.

Wang Baoqiang as a Man-Child Star

- 12 Wang Baoqiang rose to fame by playing rustic and naïve teens in his early film career, in the non-comedies *Blind Shaft* (Li Yang, 2003) and *A World Without Thieves* (Feng Xiaogang, 2004). He then brings, as part of his star image, the personal traits of these early roles to his adult roles in the *Lost...* comedies. In *Journey*, his character is close to Type 1, whereas in *Thailand* it shifts towards Type 2, which is a bit more sophisticated. Wang Baoqiang's star image as an innocent and gullible bumpkin started to materialise on-screen after his teenage debut in *Blind Shaft*. This image became more established after he played the role of Sha Gen ("Sha" means silly) in *A World Without Thieves*, who is not only kind but also stubborn. In these films, Wang's characters easily trust strangers, the other protagonists who are criminals, exposing themselves to the risks of losing their savings or life. In *Blind Shaft*, Wang's character, Yuan Fengming, believes in the apparent kindness of the two criminals who help him to get a job in a coal mine, but their original plan is to kill him, faking that as an accident, and get the compensation from the mine owner. In *A World Without Thieves*, Sha Gen refuses to send his savings to his family via the national postal service, a more secure means, as he wants to save the postal fee. He is determined to carry his savings (a bunch of cash) himself and return home by train, and he insists that there are no thieves, despite the warning of his colleagues. In order to prove his belief, he even shouts in the train station, disclosing how much money he carries, and calls any thief there to come forward. This raises the attention of different thieves around, including the other two protagonists.
- 13 Wang's characters in these films function as holy fools who can make criminals repent, a feature that is carried on later in the buddy-road comedies *Journey* and *Thailand*. Although a man-child is not always a holy-fool, as the former could be selfish and smart (Type 3 in Table 1) while the latter could be mature, I argue that Wang has built up his star image in the first decade of his career by combining the holy-fool, bumpkin and man-child, which enable him to stand out from his contemporary comedians in China. In another less-than-successful comedy, *Jack of All Trades* (Pi Jianxin, 2012), Wang's role is still that of a bumpkin migrant worker, who not only turns a snobbish white-collar man into an altruistic friend but also donates his corneas to a blind girl who sells flowers, then returns to his village as a blind man. These man-child roles represent the opposite of the desirable Chinese man who is intelligent and competent, the subject of success with entrepreneurial *suzhi*. Schultz denotes *suzhi* as "a belief that one can improve one's 'quality' through education, hard work and determination" (2018: 99). I will further elaborate on this point in the next section as the usage of this term varies in context.

- 14 Wang's childish bumpkins move between the first and second type of man-child, according to the classification in Table 1, whose mentality and intelligence do not develop in tandem with the body, keeping them naive. On the other hand, such naivety challenges the sophisticated but morally corrupt adults. His role as Wang Bao in *Thailand* is a bit more sophisticated than that in *Journey*, Niu Geng. While Niu is an illiterate migrant worker who lacks the experience of travelling by plane, Bao is a food stall owner who knows the safety rules on a flight and has a fantasy of talking about one of China's biggest female stars, Fan Bingbing, as his "girlfriend," showing some sexuality, albeit immature. However, in the odd couple setting of these comedies, both are starkly childish in contrast to the other protagonists, the anxious middle-class roles played by Xu Zheng. In each of the *Lost...* films, Xu's character is that of an entrepreneurial subject, representative of neoliberalisation in China, who puts in considerable efforts to chase after his interests, especially for economic success and social status, but fails to fulfil his family obligation and sacrifices friendship. For example, he has broken his promise to bring his daughter to an aquarium; he embarrasses his daughter as an absent father, causing her to fight with another kid and she gets hurt. He passes the family duties to his wife because he is preoccupied with developing a new product that could make a huge profit. His redemption comes from the man-child who becomes an accidental road buddy. Wang appears as a troublemaker at the beginning but eventually becomes a "redeemer" to the entrepreneur, helping the latter to deal with his ethical crisis.
- 15 Wang's childishness is suggested by the characters' names. In *Journey*, the name Niu Geng refers to his obstinacy, as "Niu" means bull and "bull's temper" is a Chinese expression for stubbornness, and "Geng" means upright. In *Thailand*, the nickname "Baobao" means "baby" in Chinese, hinting at the infantile qualities of a mama's boy. Wang's bumpkin man-child characters in the two *Lost...* comedies, as well as other roles on the cinema and TV screens, are reminiscent of the socialist icon Lei Feng, "the apocryphal peasant-turned PLA model soldier, who was made famous due to his acts of altruism and patriotic loyalty" (Schultz, 2019: 290). Corey K. N. Schultz also discusses Wang's soldier character Xu Sanduo in the TV series *Soldiers Sortie* (Xi'an TV, 2006-07), arguing that Wang embodies the personalities of both the proletariat everyman and the soldier hero like Lei—industrious, selfless, loyal and innocent—that have won support among many audiences from the working class and the military (2019: 285, 288, 290). The similarity between Wang and Lei is also endorsed by Lei's former comrades, who made a statement in 2009 against the original casting of Tian Liang in a TV series based on Lei's biography; rather they recommend three other actors for the role, including Wang (Schultz, 2019: 291). However, Wang has not played in any biographical TV series or film of Lei, nor is Lei mentioned in the *Lost...* films, so their connection is indirect. Moreover, there seems to be a tension between the moral superiority of these well-known characters of Wang and their childishness, but these seemingly contradicting traits blend well and in turn contribute to the holy-fool quality of those characters. In the next section, I will analyse in detail how Wang's man-child roles in the *Lost...* films function as social critique because they are rendered as holy fools as the narratives unfold. Like the Western man-child, Wang's bumpkins in these comedies function as a criticism of the corrupt adult world. However, I will show that, unlike their Western counterparts, these Chinese childish men are not simply defiant of social conventions but also invoke the Confucian tradition employed by the state for its neoliberal governance.

- 16 Wang's comic image can also be seen as fitting the category of *chou* (clown丑) in traditional Chinese opera. In simplified Chinese, *chou* also means ugly. In the latter sense, Feng Lin argues "*chou* is deployed in Chinese cinema and the Chinese mass media as a constructive idea to normalize ordinariness in association with star charisma during the post-Mao era," challenging the Western notion of stardom which generally builds upon extraordinary beauty (2014: 129, 131). I argue that Wang is also a modern *chou* star coming after precursors like Ge You and Chen Peisi, comedians who excel in playing "ordinary men" in contrast to heroic figures. Ge and Chen don't have handsome faces or attractive body figures. Ge in *The Dream Factory* (Feng Xiaogang, 1997) and *Be There or Be Square* (Feng Xiaogang, 1998), and Chen in *Er Zi Has a Little Hotel* (Wang Binglin, 1987) and *Father, Son and the Old Car* (Liu Guoquan, 1990), are not heroic characters who achieve anything extraordinary. They are everyday men who try hard to make money for a better life. However, Ge and Chen's characters are more sophisticated and street-smart than Wang's childish bumpkins. He Liang suggests that the mainstream *chou* roles nowadays are those with personalities found exaggeratedly inferior by viewers, and Wang's *chou* image that is rustic, dumb, childish and stubborn has made him popular (2017: 14-5). Pan Ruojian explains that Wang's *chou* stardom is built on the dynamics between his on-screen and off-screen images: he comes from the rural area, and his performances in *Blind Shaft* and *A World without Thieves* are "natural" and "authentic," because he has not yet acquired the professional skills in acting. However, in the *Lost...* films, Wang adds the clownish performance to his existing innocent and childish persona, creating a comic type that preserves the positive spirit of kindness and self-enterprise. Therefore, in the *Lost...* comedies he embodies the laughable *chou* and adorable hero simultaneously. As a successful actor, Wang has returned to his home village and built houses for his parents, matching his role in *Thailand* as a filial son (2015: 125-6). Pan argues that these traits of Wang invite the mass audience to identify with him, as a role model for "the ordinary man" who has striven for success, while remaining the kind "boy next door" (2015: 128).
- 17 Furthermore, taking the *chou* as a role type in traditional Chinese theatre, Ashley Thorpe clarifies that "although the *chou* may have clownish elements, it is not simply a 'clown'" as the *chou* is more "a complex mixture of fool, villain, trickster and hero" (2007: 4, 7). Thorpe adds that the *chou*'s performance also delivers moral teachings and potentially political comments which are made more acceptable via gags (2007: 47, 141). I propose that Wang's man-child characters in the *Lost...* films share the *chou*'s critical function, which is mediated through comedy. Niu and Bao's innocence and kindness suggest that corrupt adults should learn from children. These roles blend kindness and childishness in one person, in contrast to Xu's characters who embody egoism and maturity.
- 18 The plot that a mature man learns from his childish buddy to become a better man can be read as a latent social critique via nostalgia: as Chinese society has become money-worshipping and snobbish during the reform period, it looks back to the past as a source of cultural solutions to present problems. When Chinese people experience the adverse effects of socio-political change, a range of nostalgia emerges as a counterbalance, being captured in popular culture (Lu, 2007: 131). Harry Kuoshu studies Wang's naive characters in his non-comedic films, suggesting that the "nostalgia for innocence" and "nostalgia for home" expressed in those roles help him gain popularity among the migrant workers in China, against the background of rapid

marketisation of society with the backlash against moral degradation (2014: 338, 342). The nostalgia associated with Wang's man-child characters can be moral utopianism. Adam Muller argues that the child characters in some European heritage films render nostalgia as utopian-cosmopolitan idealism. These innocent children embody universal virtues that form a moral critique of colonial thoughts and cultures (2006: 741-2). Their kindness and openness reveal a longing for the lost perfection of mankind. What is ideal is not the past but the figure of the child. Utopian nostalgia is not a longing for the historical past as the lost ideal, but it implicates a temporal ambiguity whereby we project our moral ideals onto childhood. As these ideals are regarded as humanity's lost virtues, the future expectation is projected onto the past. Childishness could be virtuous since children are thought to be clean from the less-than-ideal norms and customs of adults (Muller, 2006: 749-51, 753).

- 19 This is in sharp contrast to Balducci's assumption that immaturity means lack of virtue (2015: 5). In other words, although the nostalgia for childhood operates through manifestations of pastness, such pastness is more imagined than factual. Therefore, the childish characters played by Wang could also embody people's projection of "lost" moral ideals, as a result of disappointment with the status quo, even though these ideals which are "lost" and "redeemed" might not refer to historical reality. Thus, I propose that nostalgia is a less effective concept than the "holy fool" for understanding Wang's man-child roles, especially because they do not refer to any specific historical period. A holy fool either feigns or really is stupid or mad. This figure stems from Christianity and was developed in Russian history and culture, where it was secularised, dispensing ethical teachings and political comments (Thompson, 1973: 246, 249). The holy fool became a literary archetype in the works of Russian novelists such as Tolstoy and Dostoevsky (Thompson, 1973: 252). A similar image in China is found in the Buddhist figure Ji Gong or "Crazy Ji"; in his book on Ji Gong, Meir Shahar notes that "Holy fools [...] also figure prominently in Chinese Buddhism, where they are depicted in a wide variety of literary and artistic genres" (1998: 32). A holy fool's eccentricity often reveals certain truths by transgressing religious or social norms (Shahar, 1998: 26), while it also has humorous potential that has informed comedies such as *The Mad Monk* (Johnnie To, 1993), a Hong Kong film based on the legend of Ji Gong. Holy-fool figures are also found in Taoist and some literary traditions in China (Shahar, 1998: 43), so I borrow this concept as an artistic type in Chinese comedies to indicate a figure who embodies the apparently incongruous qualities of foolishness and moral goodness, leading to a special position for social and cultural critique. Wang's comedic man-children are grown-ups with childish minds and behaviours, so they are seen as foolish or sometimes transgressive, but they are also good-hearted and role models for others. In the following sections, I will examine how the man-children as holy fools work as a twofold narrative device: they appear as the target of jokes but in the end, they are valorised as the "holy fools" who redeem their "lost" road buddies played by Xu.

Synopses and Literature Review of the *Lost...* Comedies

- 20 Before further analysis, I would like to introduce the plots of the *Lost...* films and existing discussions about them. Although *Thailand* is not exactly a sequel of *Journey*, given that they have disparate stories and directors, the similar titles, main casts and

plots suggest that *Thailand* is a deluxe version of *Journey* as a part of a marketing strategy, which may attract audiences who like *Journey* to watch *Thailand*. In *Journey*, Li Chenggong (Xu Zheng) is a toy merchant, good at business, but a harsh boss and unfaithful husband. Niu Geng (Wang Baoqiang) is a dairy farm worker whose boss could not pay his salary due to cash flow problems, so he must fly to Changsha to get his unpaid wage directly from the boss's debtor. Li sits next to Niu on the plane. Unexpectedly, the plane is forced to turn back due to heavy snow at the destination airport, and from then on, Li sees Niu as a jinx. During the journey, Niu and Li keep switching vehicles repeatedly, because they keep being obstructed by various incidents. On the train, they hold tickets with the same seat number (because Li has bought a fake ticket), so they stay together, but the journey is interrupted by a landslide blocking the railway, so they have to change vehicle. Then they happen to travel by the same bus, which has a detour to a remote village, from where they take a ride on a tractor to the town Hankou for a bus transfer. After a quarrel, the two protagonists separate, and Li gets on a bus to Changsha, but the bus returns because of a damaged viaduct on the way. He reconciles with Wang, who still stays in the bus station, and they spend a night in a hotel. The next morning they take a ferry to Wuchang for another transfer. The film does not show how they then move to another town, Yongan, where they win a van in a lucky draw. However, they have a car accident during the drive to Changsha, so they finally hitchhike on a truck to reach their destination. As the journey continues, Li finds that Niu is not a jinx but his lucky star, and Li learns from Niu how to be generous and kind. Finally, the buddies arrive at Changsha. Li ends his extramarital affair and is forgiven by his wife. Niu collects the arrears he deserves.

- 21 In *Thailand*, Xu Lang (Xu Zheng) is a scientist and businessman who has invented Supergas, a gasoline performance enhancer that might make a huge profit, but he needs a mandate from the major shareholder Zhou for further development. Xu is challenged by Gao Bo (Huang Bo) who also wants the authorisation from Zhou to sell Supergas to another company. Xu receives hints that Zhou is in Thailand, but he is not certain of the exact location. Xu tries to find Zhou while Gao follows and tries to overtake him. Meanwhile, Xu's wife files for divorce. On the flight to Thailand, Xu meets the man-child Wang Bao (Wang Baoqiang). Xu invites Bao to be his travel buddy, promising to help the latter to complete his to-do list, in exchange for Wang's assistance in beating Gao. Bao is often a troublemaker but sometimes helpful. After a series of pratfalls and frenetic chase scenes, the three protagonists have a messy fight for Zhou's signed mandate. Xu gives up and helps Bao to complete his to-do list on a travel log as a gift to his ill mother. Finally, Xu reconciles with his wife.
- 22 The *Lost...* comedies have caused controversy among Chinese audiences. Some claim that *Journey* and *Thailand* have plagiarised the plots and characters of the American films *Planes, Trains and Automobiles* (John Hughes, 1987) and *Due Date* (Todd Phillips, 2010) respectively (Mei, 2015). Nicole Talmacs even calls *Journey* "an unofficial adaptation of Hollywood's *Planes, Trains and Automobiles*" (2017: 58). There are obvious similarities among these films, such as a comedic scene in which the middle-class protagonist is annoyed by the weirdo protagonist who sits next to him on the plane. However, I would suggest that the two *Lost...* films are generic productions that have adapted some conventions of the sub-genre, namely the "buddy-road comedy." According to Ina Rae Hark, the "buddies" in this sub-genre consist of "the high-flyer," an egocentric man preoccupied with personal goals, and "the neurotic," who lacks the

“capitalist/masculinist qualities” that are excessive in the “high-flyer” (1997: 204). This pattern more or less applies to all four films mentioned above; in the *Lost...* comedies, the “high flyer” corresponds to the anxious middle-class man (Xu’s roles) and the “neurotic” corresponds to the “bumpkin man-child” (Wang’s roles). Therefore, the *Lost...* films can be regarded as typical cases demonstrating how the Chinese film industry has learnt from Hollywood to establish a commercial entertainment market.

- 23 Nicole Talmacs compares *Journey* to *Planes, Trains and Automobiles*, arguing that the former does not uphold family values like the latter; rather, *Journey* draws on the audiences’ class prejudices for amusement and in turn consolidates those prejudices (2017: 64, 66). She has collected feedback through discussion groups of audiences from various social backgrounds, including peasants and college students in Lanzhou, as well as white-collar professionals and other residents with various education levels and occupations in Taiyuan (52-53). Talmacs argues that the prejudice mobilised by *Journey* is “affirmative” and naturalises social hierarchies as she observed that these audiences tended to identify with the class view of characters in the same “in-group,” while differentiating one’s identity from the “class other” (52, 54). Niu was perceived by the privileged urban audiences as representing migrant workers who are “faricically ignorant and lacking intellectual depth” (55, 70). Moreover, some of these audiences were unconvinced by the depiction of Niu as morally flawless, based on their original perception of migrant workers (58). Talmacs concludes that “If *Planes, Trains and Automobiles* was Hollywood’s critique of America’s neoliberal economics, *Lost on Journey* is the celebration of them in China” (70). However, I disagree with Talmacs’ assessment that *Journey* does not promote family values and simply celebrates neoliberalism. While the privileged viewers indicated family values as the theme, referencing Li’s family reunion at the end, the peasant viewers highlighted “work hard” and “respect others,” focusing on Niu’s social mobility (69). Thus, Talmacs admits that family values were recognised by some viewers as the “message.” These group discussions indeed show that a film like *Journey* can be interpreted in multiple ways, promoting both family values and social mobility. Moreover, *Journey* contains various elements that amuse audiences from different backgrounds and each group may enjoy some elements more than others. Thus, I maintain that *Journey* can be seen as a film critical of neoliberal values, in favour of family values, and I will discuss how such a critique is facilitated by Niu as a man-child “holy fool.”
- 24 Some scholarship on *Thailand* highlights its trope of tourism which signifies the rising economic power and extending global reach of China, which is related to the national ideology of “the Chinese dream” (Yang, 2015: 380). “The Chinese dream” was first suggested by President Xi Jinping when he came into power in 2012, which refers to the ambition of “a prosperous state/country, a rejuvenated nation, and a happy people” (Li and Luo, 2017: 39). Yang Wei indicates how *Thailand’s* critical side “strikes a sympathetic chord with millions of Chinese who, in search of their ‘Chinese dreams’, have come face-to-face with a disintegrating society infatuated with wealth, status and other outward signs of success. The film articulates a suspicion of this new economic order by revealing its human cost and reifying effects on society.” However, *Thailand* also signifies a mainstream cultural model in China that tends to provide apolitical moral solutions to social problems, as the film comes to a conservative closure with a family reunion (2015: 386-7). Likewise, Li Dian and Luo Shuang indicate the link between *Thailand* and the “Chinese Dream” of prosperity, with the film effecting “the introspection that questions the very meaning of this dream, the cost of monetary

excess and moral degradation in particular” (2017: 39). On one hand, the journey of the Chinese tourists in a less developed Thailand reveals the national confidence of China in a global setting; on the other, it is also an inward journey reflecting on one’s ethical crisis. In the film, the ethical crisis is manifested by Xu Lang’s preoccupation with economic success at the expense of family duties and marriage, and by his competitor Gao Bo who sacrifices friendship for business profits (Lu and Luo, 2017: 42-3, 45).

- 25 However, the published textual analyses of these works focus on the contribution of the actor-director Xu Zheng, while discussions of Wang Baoqiang’s character are limited. While Li and Luo describe the adventure in *Thailand* as “a journey of self-discovery and self-redemption” (2017: 40), they neglect Bao’s redemptive role. Yang mentions that Bao’s kindness “will reveal to Xu Lang life’s true priorities. His simple, earthy approach to life has set him up to ignore conventional thinking about happiness and success” (2015: 385). However, the analysis of the film’s social critique focuses on Lang’s fierce competition with the antagonist Gao, with a strategy of “over-identification” which exposes the excess of capitalism (2015: 383). Yet I argue that Wang’s characterisation and performance are central to both *Lost...* films in terms of narrative, comic effect and social critique, and that his contribution also merits attention.

The Man-Child as the Apparent Laughingstock

- 26 The *Lost...* films’ transition from showing the man-child as the apparent butt of the joke to revealing that he has some virtues to be learnt by the selfish middle-class buddy. In this section, I focus on how he is established as the laughingstock. Wang’s performance in the *Lost...* series fits into the “clownish tradition” of comedy films, according to Gerald Mast, that are “built around the physical, facial, and verbal assets of the central comic performer” (1979 [1973]: 280). The man-child’s foolish manner is a major source of laughter in these films, but I argue that the comic effect is strengthened by the chemistry between the man-child (Wang) and his middle-class buddy (Xu), as they use different styles of acting. In these films, Xu’s countenance mainly changes between a calm expression and an anxious or embarrassed face, while Wang often beams, squinting and speaking with a high-pitched voice with the cadence of a cartoon character. He also has a large variety of facial expressions and gestures.
- 27 When Wang performs the sullen moments in the *Lost...* films, for example, Bao’s body and face are more expressive than Niu’s, who often shows a long face out of frustration. In *Thailand*, there is a scene when Bao and Lang have a dispute on a train: Lang is mad at Bao because Bao has dropped the Wi-Fi dongle that Lang needs to download important business information, a photo of the temple where Zhou stays, so Lang tells him “Don’t talk to me from now on, OK?” Lang needs that photo to locate Zhou, so as to get his authorisation for developing Supergas. But Lang soon discovers that Bao may have a picture of that temple (on a flyer originally attached to Bao’s self-made guidebook) so he begins to talk to Bao again. Bao just looks away and puffs his cheeks. Lang coaxes him: “You can talk to me now.” Bao turns his head slowly to him, cross-eyed, keeping his cheeks puffed, but also puts a finger on his lips, signifying that he does not want to talk. He is not just unhappy but also expressing it puckishly to make this conflict scene farcical. The scene is like the interaction between a calculating adult and an impish kid. Wang’s performance as Bao is more elaborate at moments like this

than his performance as Niu, which differentiates the naughty Bao from the stubborn and naive Niu.

- 28 How do the childish bumpkins become the target of laughter? At first, they seem inferior to the middle-class entrepreneurial subject which exemplifies the norm of masculinity in contemporary China. In the market era, the self-interested pursuit of money has become the dominant drive of daily life, and being a good citizen means being an entrepreneurial subject whose “life is judged by ‘making it on one’s own’ and taking responsibility for one’s own life,” full of economic calculations (Ren, 2010: xvi). In other words, the entrepreneurial subject is not confined to a particular class; migrant workers can also develop such subjectivity, as long as they regard themselves as projects they are responsible for. Schultz explains that Chinese entrepreneurs are elevated as moral role models in the reform period, in place of the proletarians of Mao’s era; these new models “promote individual determination, independence and self-improvement, valorise market liberalisation and the expansion of capitalism, and emphasise the benefits that economic reforms have brought.” The state’s responsibility for the people’s well-being is transferred to the self-sufficient individuals who have to both take care of themselves and solve social problems (2018: 102-3). Schultz argues that the stories of entrepreneurs not only promote individual success based on “independence, hard work and sacrifice,” but also the national narratives of the “Chinese dream” and “harmonious society,” celebrating neoliberalism (2018: 92). Xu’s characters in the *Lost...* films are self-determining, profit-seeking and risk-taking entrepreneurs. Niu plans to make use of the reclaimed debt to start his own cake shop. In *Thailand*, Bao already has his pancake shop, being a successful individual shopkeeper. All protagonists in the *Lost...* comedies embrace the agenda of becoming entrepreneurial subjects.
- 29 Neoliberal subjectivity is also revealed in consumption behaviours. Ren points out that neoliberal middle-class subjectivity not only refers to economic status (income and ownership of means of production) but also entails being a proper consumer whose conduct registers social civility (2013: 43, 99). I argue that public conduct and demeanour express one’s maturity and, in this regard, Niu and Bao become man-child laughingstocks. Comparing the comic scenes related to flights in both *Lost...* films will show us how the neoliberal subject as a proper consumer is imagined by laughing at the man-child. Thorpe notes that a *chou*’s performance is prone to physical comedy, and a *chou*’s appearance is grotesque, implying moral degradation (2007: 5, 57). If an entrepreneurial subject is a moral model, this is expressed by good public conduct and demeanour.
- 30 In *Journey*, Niu’s behaviour before and during the flight is inappropriate and ignorant, in contrast to a smooth entrepreneur like Li. Niu, a migrant worker, has no experience of air travel, so he does not know the security procedure and passenger etiquette on board. For example, he includes a huge bottle of milk in his carry-on baggage and is thus stopped at the security counter. Niu’s reaction is regarded as inappropriate as he is uncooperative. Wang expresses Niu’s obstinacy with a high-pitched voice yelling, “These are allowed on the train. Why [not] the plane...”. While the officer keeps calm and explains that Niu can either check in the baggage or drink the milk immediately, Niu stares silently at the officer and feels aggrieved. In a fit of pique, he swiftly opens the huge bottle, then holds it with both hands and swallows all the milk in one gulp. Wang performs Niu’s awkward spectacle with a body part usually unseen but exposed

as he tilts up his head—the suprahyoid muscles undulate under his chin when he is drinking, but the other parts of his body are stiff. This ends messily when some milk leaks from a corner of his mouth, to which Li and the security staff respond with grimaces. Niu behaves like a kid throwing a tantrum in public, and his messy drinking manner also makes him like a milk-fed baby. The reactions of others goggling at Niu could prompt the audiences to react like them. His childish manner is a spectacular clownish performance that becomes a source of mirth.

- 31 Comic interaction unfolds in the aircraft cabin as Niu and Li sit beside each other. Niu’s conduct in the cabin further enhances his image as a weird man-child. Because of airsickness and excessive drinking of milk, Niu almost throws up, but he swallows back the regurgitated milk in his mouth. This sequence largely intercuts between the single close-ups of Niu and the two-shots of him with Li without dialogue, and the comic effect escalates, switching between the two actors’ physical expressions. When Niu feels sick and the milk is regurgitated, he puffs his cheeks. Li winced as he is aware of coming trouble, glancing sideways to Niu. Niu glances back and tries hard to hold the milk in, making his cheeks less puffed. Li seems to relax but still keeps squinting at Niu, who holds his body stiff to feign normality. Li slightly turns his head towards him to watch. But the milk keeps coming up into Niu’s mouth, which is shown by several jump cuts where Niu puffs his cheeks like a bubble-eyed goldfish breathing. When he cannot hold it anymore and searches his bag (for something to hold the vomit), he catches Li’s attention, who turns his head again, in concern. Niu bends to the aisle with milk spouting from his mouth, but he forcefully holds it back and swallows. Li grimaces. Niu returns to his original pose, looking back to Li as if nothing had happened, leaving Li stunned.
- 32 The two actors’ mimed interaction registers two distinctive ways of behaving. Niu’s behaviour, out of place in the cabin and disturbing to others, is performed by Wang with exaggerated, rhythmic facial expressions and the movement of his upper body while other passengers sit still. Niu’s obstinacy is marked by swallowing back the regurgitated milk. Xu mainly acts with his face, with fewer movements than Wang. He expresses Li’s reactions as more like those of a normal person with his wince gradually turning to a grimace and then a stunned face as he witnesses such a spectacle. This invites the viewers to share his distaste for Niu’s gross-out behaviour. This spectacle related to milk makes the man-child Niu like a baby who vomits. Niu further shows his ignorance—a childlike trait—as he asks the flight attendant to open the window for fresh air and then requests to alight immediately. This sequence shows that being a proper consumer as an airline passenger requires knowledge about flight safety and the observance of the standard procedures throughout a flight. Niu’s lack of good conduct stems from his ignorance about how to be an appropriate consumer, and this renders him a laughingstock and unqualified as a proper neoliberal subject.
- 33 Middle-class entrepreneurial subjects’ consumption habits and public behaviour are consolidated in the *suzhi* discourse in the context of neoliberalisation in China. Since the early 1990s, *suzhi* has applied positively to desirable qualities particularly related to the middle-class identity (Anagnost, 2004: 190). These qualities are expressed as one’s *pinwei* (elite taste), which is “ultimately the choices that one makes about how one looks and acts that indicate one’s educational background and aesthetic disposition,” separating the middle class from those upstarts who are rich but without refinement (Song and Hird, 2013: 13, 61). Migrant workers are denigrated as having low

suzhi so that, on one hand, their labour is devalued and exploited; and, on the other hand, they are distinguished from the middle class who understand proper consumption (Anagnost, 2004: 193, 200). Moreover, the middle class are regarded as contributing to social stability, while migrant workers are treated as a potential social threat (Anagnost, 2004: 199). For example, Niu's laughable behaviour is related to flight safety: the migrant workers are regarded as a threat not simply in the sense that they are potential criminals, but also because they are ignorant and may cause trouble to other consumers who know how to behave themselves. *Suzhi* refers to qualities acquired through proper nurture, so the middle-class families invest in their children's education (Anagnost, 2004: 193-4). It follows that knowledgeable consumers must be distinct from ill-informed migrant workers like Niu. Niu's childlike traits and lack of *suzhi* indicate that maturity entails the acquisition of knowledge for functioning well in society. Being a migrant worker is associated with immaturity, which makes him the object of ridicule.

- 34 *Suzhi* as a neoliberal discourse is related to masculinity in China. The neoliberal man as an entrepreneurial subject engages in a self-enterprising process of making himself a proper customer with *suzhi*, so consumption and the production of appropriate subjectivity are inseparable (Song and Hird, 2013: 152). The audiences are invited to laugh at Wang's bumpkin roles because of his lack of refined qualities, in contrast to the neoliberal norms of the middle-class men as both desiring and desired subjects. Migrant workers like Niu, who might have been evaluated differently as "selfless, macho, working-class Maoist heroes" in the past, are no longer the role models of Chinese manhood as they were in the socialist era (Song and Hird, 2013: 121, 153). The refined neoliberal man should adopt various "neoliberal technologies of selfhood" to express his inner qualities through appearance and public conduct (Anagnost, 2008: 512-3).
- 35 Comparing consumer behaviours in the two *Lost...* films reveals different stages of constructing neoliberal subjectivity for Chinese men as a process of increasing sophistication and complication. Wang's roles "grow" from the first type of man-child to the second type. In *Thailand*, although Bao is still a childish and simple-minded troublemaker for Xu, he knows the regulations that a flight passenger should observe: one should switch off one's mobile phone on board. In *Journey*, when Niu needs help in the cabin, he just shouts "Attendant!" from his seat, whereas Bao knows to press an overhead button to call the flight attendant. This implies that Bao may have flight experience, so he knows how to be a proper passenger. The flight plots in the *Lost...* films show that growth from Type 1 man-child (Niu) to Type 2 (Bao) in the context of neoliberal China involves the acquisition of *suzhi* expressed publicly.

Man-Child as a Social Critique

- 36 In this section, I argue that the man-child characters in the *Lost...* films are also depicted as the holy-fool redeemers of the middle-class protagonists, which is a narrative strategy to critique the neoliberal culture, while also appealing to Confucian tradition. Wang's comedic roles assume the innate kindness of children: if we compare his roles in different comedies, the more rustic and childish he is, the greater kindness he manifests. In *Thailand*, he is a small shop owner, an urbanised playful mama's boy who is sometimes naughty and troublemaking but usually kind. In *Journey*, he is a

sacked dairy farm worker who is ignorant but so generous that he is willing to help a woman to raise funds for her ill child, and he does not regret it even when it turns out to be a fraud. In *Jack of All Trades*, he is a rural boy who has just left the village. He trusts a city man right after they have met and sacrifices his eyesight for the blind girl he loves, then returns home alone. If gullibility and self-sacrifice without regret are prominent signs of selflessness, these traits embodied by Wang's man-children pose a challenge to those who are blinded by self-interest.

- 37 As noted above, Wang's altruism on screen, a quality absent in the entrepreneurial subjects, recalls the socialist icon Lei Feng. Schultz argues that Wang's popularity is related to his similarities with Lei and shows that the cultural symbols of Mao's era still have a certain influence in the reform period (2019: 292). Wang's man-children are characters of the present times in contemporary settings, but they embody lingering virtues from the past, especially the altruism that has been lost during the period of neoliberalisation when self-interest has been elevated. However, I argue such selflessness has a closer link to Confucianism than to socialism. The comical characterisation of Wang's man-children invokes interpersonal ethics, especially family values, that problematise the neoliberal discourses of self-entrepreneurship. The incongruity between the childish bumpkin and the entrepreneurial man, besides creating laughter, reminds the viewer of lost values and the costs of the rapid process of neoliberal economic development in China.
- 38 There is a link between Chinese comedies and homecoming. Since *The Dream Factory*, many comedy films have been shown in the new year period, when many migrant workers return to their hometowns. In this comedy film cycle, the family often plays an essential role in the well-being of the people, while the shared anxiety of the entrepreneurial subjects is revealed concerning family and other interpersonal issues. Conventionally, a responsible Chinese man should work hard to make his family live well, which may also be a constitutive part of the Chinese entrepreneurial subject. Song and Hird's ethnographic research finds that middle-class men show a higher tendency to keep their spouses as housewives than those earning less. To be industrious breadwinners is essential to the construction of the masculinity of these entrepreneurial subjects (2013: 156, 158-60). This seems to be diminishing the female agency in China. Although many women have their career ambitions and more of them have become middle-class professionals in the reform period, Yang Fan explains that "As the glass ceiling of a career is foreseeable and quickly reached, female professionals tend to direct their energy to a more rewarding arena, that is, building a family" and become housewives (2020: 5). Since a mature man is expected to be a responsible father who feeds his family (Balducci, 2015: 119), the man-child appears emasculated. While Talmacs remarks that "Niugeng's family ties in comparison to Li Chenggong are never disclosed and his lack of a wife or love interest serves to emasculate him" (2017: 59), Niu and Bao are also seen as less masculine than Li and Lang because they earn less money. While Bao feeds his family as a son, Lang is a husband and father. This also suggests the motivation behind Niu's journey to collect the debt instead of going home on New Year's Eve, as most migrant workers like him have toiled for a year for the wages to support their families. Therefore, this plot is a subtle critique of the unjust treatment endured by many exploited workers in the course of economic reform.
- 39 In the Confucian tradition, family and political authority are placed in a coherent hierarchy, as Kipnis indicates how the Chinese government uses nationalism to gain

legitimacy and the Confucian norm of filial piety is merged with national loyalty (2007: 394). Li Quan also points out that the Chinese state has selectively employed Confucian ideas concerning social harmony as a self-legitimizing discourse along with the process of neoliberalisation. Confucian values provide ideological resources to motivate the neoliberal project of the development of the market economy by constructing consent among the public (2017: 89-90). However, Li and Lang in the *Lost...* comedies show the contradiction within the model of a hard-working breadwinner as a responsible husband and father: preoccupation with work can erode a man's care for his family. They are typical entrepreneurial subjects who are calculating, self-interested, and sometimes transgressive (Ren, 2010: xiv-xv). However, the pursuit of career success could in turn make one lost: in *Journey*, Li fails his family because he has an extramarital affair and passes the buck of looking after the family to his wife; in *Thailand*, Xu is a workaholic who ignores his family responsibilities and embarrasses his daughter as an absent father. Both are lonely men who have no friends—Xu and his rival Gao were confidants when they were students but have turned against each other due to career competition. These men pursuing personal success are indeed losers in terms of interpersonal relationships.

- 40 In the reform period, class struggle is replaced by the ideal of inter-class social harmony. The discourse of social harmony, addressing both social justice and stability, has been employed by the state since the 2000s in response to increasing instances of social unrest. These backlashes result from the ruthless process of market reform where the lower classes have been bearing the cost—lands are appropriated, workers are exploited (Li, 2017: 72). Anagnost observes that the discourse of class has been replaced by that of social stratification in the reform period. The discourse of social stratification aims at harmonious relations between workers and the bourgeoisie instead of the socialist class struggle. In theory, those in the lower stratum always have the chance to climb up the social ladder to join the middle class (2008: 501, 504). At the end of *Journey*, Niu wears a suit that makes him like a middle-class professional or businessman, hinting at the realisation of social mobility. I suggest that the happy endings of the *Lost...* comedies imagine inter-class reconciliation, turning the social inequalities as a result of neoliberalisation into harmonious bonding between different social strata. This is achieved in the narratives when the middle-class protagonists learn to appreciate the bumpkin man-child buddies.
- 41 I argue that Wang's characters are holy fools because they are both troublesome and helpful to Xu's. The two *Lost...* films share a similar plot structure: each of the road buddies has his own agenda, and throughout the journey their incongruities create laughter, but they become harmonious towards the end. As the anxious middle-class man makes the childish bumpkin a travel buddy, the former's plan turns into a comic "crazy machine" in Tom Gunning's terms: "complex devices that appear rationally designed to achieve a purpose, but suddenly and comically assert a counter-will of their own, thwarting the purpose of the protagonist" (2010: 138). In the *Lost...* films, the man-child characters create detours and obstacles for his buddies again and again. Li and Xu's journeys with concrete aims and resourceful means are the crazy machines that turn against themselves and become a series of gags (Gunning, 2010: 140). Li calls Niu a jinx that brings bad luck to him and derails his homecoming. He thinks that whenever Niu mentions something bad, it will happen. Gunning refers to Kant's "burst bubble" theory of humour that people burst out laughing when a tense situation is suddenly relieved, even explosively, for example, when a plan or apparatus is suddenly destroyed

(2010: 139). In *Thailand*, a repeated gag is that whenever Lang is downloading the picture of his destination (a temple), Bao ruins it. The cinematic humour consists of a close-up showing the picture of the temple which looms on the screens of Lang's devices, and the viewers share the expectation with him of the whole picture. But in the middle, Wang suddenly cuts off the Internet connection (as he loses his temper) or pours a bucket of water over Xu's computer (as Wang is enjoying a water fight). This gag is structured as a "crazy machine" that subverts itself. The bumpkin man-children are the destructive elements on the journey of their anxious middle-class buddies, and the comedic moments are often those when the expectations of the latter are surprisingly thwarted by the former.

- 42 But the *Lost...* films are not simply crazy machines as such; instead of replacing a plan with an exhilarating collapse, we see a shift of agenda for the middle-class protagonists. Their original plans are negotiated or incorporated by those of the man-child buddies, through which they realise what they really need in life and reset their goals. In *Thailand*, at first Lang's aim is selfish, but in the end, he gives way to Bao's needs. Lang gives up his competition with Gao to help Bao win a Muay Thai boxing battle, which is on Bao's "must do" for the travelogue gift for his sick mother. The crazy machine is dismantled because it is indeed ill-designed, and the destruction wrought by the bumpkin man-child is eventually the tool for constructing a better machine. Therefore, a detour can be a moment of reflection. In the middle of *Thailand*, Xu splits up with Bao because he finds Bao unhelpful to his search for the major shareholder. Xu sends a message to his wife: "I am lost," which does not make sense if he means "lost" literally in terms of geography, because his wife is in China and could not help him. Rather, it is a metaphorical statement, revealing that he is beginning to be confused about his goals. The word "lost" in the English titles of the two films is also ambiguous in this way: it both denotes the middle-class protagonists' detours in their journeys and connotes their ethical crises.
- 43 Li and Xu's loss results from their interpersonal failings. They disappoint their families and friends due to negligence and rivalry. This raises the question of what they should do to have a good life. For them, their relationship failings are the price of neoliberal subjectivity, which overemphasises self-interest and economic success. Their experience may strike a chord among the viewers in China who also find themselves living in the tension between the aspiration to success and the stress of failure, with guilt and anxiety (Anagnost, 2004: 195, 201). We may then see the ambiguous feature of the *Lost...* series as comedies: serious issues often stay hidden behind exhilarating gags, which can function at least momentarily as relief for those who cannot get rid of neoliberal anxiety. The man-children are holy fools that appear as trouble-making laughingstocks, but turn out to be helping their anxious entrepreneurial buddies cope with their ethical failings.
- 44 The man-children are also "holy" as the redeemers of the *lost* entrepreneurs as the former help the latter realise how to be better men. Li and Lang learn to be responsible for their families (not only providing financial support but also commitment and care) and grateful to others who have contributed to their success. Li and Lang finally enjoy the family reunion as the biggest prize, and they are thankful for the man-child buddies' contribution to that. In *Journey*, Niu's journey is for getting the arrear from a debtor of his ex-employer, and this provides an indirect social commentary implying that the wealth earned by the businessmen and middle class comes from the working

class, whose contribution has not been properly recognised. Finally, Niu is paid secretly by Li as Li says Niu is his “creditor.” This achieves an imaginary justice whereby Li’s payment to Niu symbolises the payback of the upper class to the lower.

- 45 In the end, inter-class social harmony is portrayed as having replaced class struggle in the reform era. The resolution rests on family and harmony with a traditional root in Confucianism. In the *Lost...* films, Wang’s man-child characters complement but do not subvert entrepreneurial subjectivity by acting as holy fools who help the neoliberal entrepreneurial man to redeem what has been lost and strike a balance between economic success and home sweet home.

Conclusion

- 46 In this article, I have examined Wang Baoqiang’s comedic image as a bumpkin man-child and I have argued it presents a different kind of man-child from the recent Hollywood model. Examining *Lost on Journey* and *Lost in Thailand*, I have shown that Wang’s image functions as a social-cultural critique of neoliberal culture in China in the early 21st century. This image challenges the neoliberal norms of masculinity, namely, the calculating, self-interested, entrepreneurial man pursuing economic success and appropriate *suzhi*. However, the Chinese man-child, unlike many Western counterparts, can be both the target of the joke and a virtuous role model. The humour of the Chinese man-child comedies often comes from the man-child’s ignorance and his conflicts with his entrepreneurial buddy. I have also examined how the bumpkin man-child critique works through the “holy fool” characterisation. The man-child’s altruism refers more to the Confucian tradition of family values and social harmony than to the socialist model of self-sacrifice, leading it to complement instead of denying neoliberal subjectivity.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

ANAGNOST Ann (2008), “From ‘Class’ to ‘Social Strata’: Grasping the Social Totality in Reform-Era China”, *Third World Quarterly*, vol. 29, n° 3, 497–519.

ANAGNOST Ann (2004), “The Corporeal Politics of Quality (Suzhi)”, *Public Culture*, vol. 16, n° 2, 189–208.

ARBEITER Michael (2014), “Steve Carell’s New Movie & Why the Era of the Manchild Comedy Needs to End”, *Bustle*, 23/10/2014, (Online), accessed at <https://www.bustle.com/articles/45688-steve-carells-new-movie-why-the-era-of-the-manchild-comedy-needs-to-end> (09.08.2020)

BALDUCCI Anthony (2015), *I Won’t Grow Up!: The Comic Man-Child in Film from 1901 to the Present*, Jefferson NC, US, McFarland.

- ELLIS Emma (2015), "Seth Rogen, Screwball Comedy, and the Death of the Man-Child", *Vulture*, 18/11/2015, (Online), accessed at <https://www.vulture.com/2015/11/seth-rogen-screwball-comedy-and-the-death-of-the-man-child.html> (09.08.2020)
- FENG Lin (2014), "'I'm Ugly, But Gentle': Performing 'Little Character' in Post-Mao Chinese Comedies", *Transnational Cinemas*, vol. 5, n° 2, 127–140.
- GEHRING Wes D. and Steve BELL (2002), *Romantic vs. Screwball Comedy: Charting the Difference*, Lanham, Scarecrow Press.
- GUNNING Tom (2010), "Mechanisms of Laughter: the devices of slapstick", in Tom Paulus and Rob King (eds.), *Slapstick Comedy*, New York, Routledge, 137–51.
- HARK Ina Rae (1997), "Fear of Flying: Yuppie critique and the buddy-road movie in the 1980s", in Steven Cohen and Ina Rae Hark, *The Road Movie Book*, London, Routledge, 204–99.
- HE Liang (2017), "Choujiao Yu Jiongjing: Xiju Xushi De Yishu Tedian Jianshu" [The Clown and the Awkward Situation: The Artistic Features of Comedy Narrative], *Dianying Yishu*, vol. 373, n° 2, 13–18.
- KIPNIS Andrew (2007), "Neoliberalism Reified: Suzhi Discourse and Tropes of Neoliberalism in the People's Republic of China", *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute*, vol. 13, n° 2, 383–400.
- KUOSHU Harry (2014), "Configuring Innocence: China and Italy, Wang and Masina Personas." *Journal of Italian Cinema & Media Studies*, vol. 2, n° 3, 335–50.
- LI Dian and Shuang LUO (2017), "The Selfie of the Other: The Chinese Dream in Films and Tourism", *Asian Cinema*, vol. 28, n° 1, 39–53.
- LI Quan (2017), *The Idea of Governance and the Spirit of Chinese Neoliberalism*. Singapore, Palgrave Macmillan, 2017.
- LOFTUS Jamie (2016), "Seth Rogen and the Death of the Manchild", *Pastemagazine*, 12/08/2016, (Online), accessed at <https://www.pastemagazine.com/articles/2016/08/seth-rogen-and-the-death-of-the-manchild.html> (09.08.2020)
- LU Sheldon H. (2007), *Chinese Modernity and Global Biopolitics: Studies in Literature and Visual Culture*, Honolulu, University of Hawai'i Press.
- MAST Gerald (1979 [1973]), *The Comic Mind: Comedy and the Movies*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press.
- MEI Xinfei (2015), "Jiongtu Sanbuqu She chaoxi ? Bianju: Bentuhua Yeshi Yuanchuang" [Alleged Plagiarism by the Journey trilogy? Screenwriter Says Localization is Creative Work], *Sina.com*, 02/10/2015 (Online), accessed at <http://ent.sina.com.cn/m/c/2015-10-02/doc-iximeyv2712479.shtml> (30.11.2020)
- MULLER Adam (2006), "Notes toward a Theory of Nostalgia: Childhood and the Evocation of the Past in Two European 'Heritage' Films", *New Literary History*, vol. 37, n° 4, 739–60.
- "Neidi zongpiaofang paiming" [Mainland China Box Office Ranking], *Endata*, (Online), accessed at <http://www.endata.com.cn/BoxOffice/BO/History/Movie/Alltimedomestic.html> (17.08.2020)
- PAN Ruojian (2015), *Tong Xiang Kuang Huan Zhi Lu: 2000 Nian Hou De Zhongguo Xiju Dianying* [Way towards Carnival: Chinese Comedy Films after 2000], Beijing, Dong Fang Chubanshe.
- REN Hai (2013), *The Middle Class in Neoliberal China: Governing Risk, Life-Building, and Themed Spaces*, London, Routledge.

- REN Hai (2010), *Neoliberalism and Culture in China and Hong Kong: The Countdown of Time*, London, Routledge.
- ROWE Kathleen (1995), *The Unruly Woman: Gender and the Genres of Laughter*, Austin, University of Texas Press.
- SCHAGER Nick (2014), “Man Child Comedy”, *Esquire*, 14/11/2014, (Online), accessed at https://www.esquire.com/entertainment/movies/reviews/a31512/man-child-comedies/#_09.08.2020
- SCHULTZ Corey Kai Nelson (2019), “Wang Baoqiang: China’s Peasant-Soldier Celebrity”, *Celebrity Studies*, vol. 10, n° 2, 285–293.
- SCHULTZ Corey Kai Nelson (2018), “The Rise of the Entrepreneur in Jia Zhangke's Words of a Journey”, in Ewa Mazierska and Lars Kristensen (eds.), *Contemporary Cinema and Neoliberal Ideology: Neoliberal Capitalism and Its Alternatives in Filmmaking*, New York, Routledge, 91–104.
- SHAHAR Meir (1998), *Crazy Ji: Chinese Religion and Popular Literature*, Cambridge (Massachusetts), Harvard University Asia Center.
- SONG Geng and Derek HIRD (2013), *Men and Masculinities in Contemporary China*, Leiden, Brill Publishers.
- TALMACS Nicole (2017), *China’s Cinema of Class: Audiences and Narratives*, London, Routledge.
- THOMPSON Ewa M. (1973), “The Archetype of the Fool in Russian Literature”, *Canadian Slavonic Papers / Revue Canadienne Des Slavistes*, vol. 15, n° 3, 245–73.
- THORPE Ashley (2007), *The Role of the Chou ('clown') in Traditional Chinese Drama: Comedy, Criticism and Cosmology on the Chinese Stage*. Lewiston, Mellen.
- YANG Fan (2020), “Post-feminism and Chick Flicks in China: Subjects, Discursive Origin and New Gender Norms”, *Feminist Media Studies*, 1–16.
- YANG Wei (2015), “Lost in Thailand: Travel Metaphors in Contemporary Chinese Comedy”, *East Asian Journal of Popular Culture*, vol. 1, n° 3, 377–88.

NOTES

1. According to Balducci, Seth Rogen is a representative of Hollywood man-child after 2000 who is self-indulgent, “willfully childish, embracing his immaturity as if it were a badge of honor” and “playful, free-floating, free of responsibility” (2015: 2-3).
2. For brevity I will use *Journey* and *Thailand* to refer to *Lost on Journey* and *Lost in Thailand* respectively, and use “Lost...” to mention them together.
3. I use “holy fool” as a literary archetype that embodies the incongruous qualities of mental eccentricity and moral goodness (Thompson, 1973: 246, 252). I will explain the term in detail later.

ABSTRACTS

Wang Baoqiang is a Chinese comedian well known for his bumpkin man-child characters. Whereas critics worry that the return of the man-child in Hollywood comedy signals a retreat from responsibility, I will argue that Wang's man-child roles in the films *Lost on Journey* (2010) and *Lost in Thailand* (2012) not only bring about laughter but also challenge the neoliberal entrepreneurial subjectivity which informs the norms of masculinity in China. Such subjectivity is embodied by the contrasting anxious middle-class roles played by Xu Zheng in these films.

Wang Baoqiang est un comédien chinois bien connu pour ses personnages d'homme-enfant « plouc ». Alors que les critiques s'inquiètent du regain de la figure de l'homme-enfant dans les comédies hollywoodiennes, qu'ils perçoivent comme essentiellement régressive, je soutiens que les rôles d'homme-enfant de Wang dans *Lost on Journey* (2010) et *Lost in Thailand* (2012) ne visent pas seulement à provoquer le rire, mais servent également à remettre en question la subjectivité entrepreneuriale néolibérale qui informe les normes de la masculinité en Chine, incarnée dans ces films par les hommes anxieux de classe moyenne interprétés par Xu Zheng.

INDEX

Mots-clés: comédie chinoise, homme-enfant, subjectivité néolibérale, masculinité chinoise

Keywords: chinese comedy, man-child, neoliberal subjectivity, chinese masculinity

AUTHOR

YUNG-HANG LAI

Yung-Hang Lai is a PhD candidate in the Film Studies Department at King's College London.