

Criticising Local Politics, Rejecting Western Cultural Intrusion: A Study of Sanlu Dairy Online Jokes

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Abstract

In this article I analyze online jokes that developed in response to the tainted milk powder scandal in China. Sanlu Dairy milk jokes were widespread on the Internet, especially on Chinese websites, from mid-September to early November 2008. I explore why the jokes became popular during the tragedy. Within the context of Chinese culture, I examine the reasons for their emergence and the internal mechanism of their humor.

Prestigious Past and Tarnished Present

In addition to the Beijing Olympic Games, another event shook China in the summer of 2008—tainted milk. This event, which became known as “the 2008 Chinese milk scandal,” originated in early May, although it did not initially attract much attention. On July 16, 2008, sixteen infants in Gansu Province who had been diagnosed with kidney stones were all found to have been fed milk powder produced by the Shijiazhuang-based Sanlu Group. Although the Chinese central government’s Administration of Food Safety became involved, in order to maintain China’s reputation during

the Olympics, no investigation was initiated and sales were never stopped. The news broke on August 2, when the Sanlu Group’s New Zealand partner Fonterra became aware of Sanlu milk’s contamination. By Sept 5, 2008, Frontera had notified the New Zealand government of its discovery and, three days later, on September 8, New Zealand Prime Minister Helen Clark alerted Beijing officials directly. The World Health Organization was informed about the contaminated milk powder on September 11. With the contamination exposed, the Sanlu Group admitted that its milk powder was tainted by melamine, and recalled all its products which had been used before August 8. Meanwhile, both the Chinese central government and the local government in Shijiazhuang, initiated an investigation into the matter. By September 13 they had arrested 19 persons. According to the Chinese Ministry of Health, from September until December 10, 2008, 22 million children were examined for kidney problems.

Soon afterwards more Chinese food products were found to contain melamine and many countries temporarily stopped all imports of mainland Chinese dairy and other food products. In late October 2008, food safety officials established that the problem had spread to eggs and possibly other food categories as melamine is commonly added to animal feed, despite a ban imposed in the wake of a 2007 scandal over melamine-contaminated pet food exported from China to the United States. Given China’s wide range of exported food products, the scandal soon affected countries on every continent. It left Sanlu labeled as a tarnished brand and significantly degraded the reputation of “Made in China” products.

Cultural Analysis 8 (2009): 25-44

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While the timeline of events may be straightforward, the Sanlu scandal is a complex event. To understand it we must consider the reputation of the formerly “prestigious” Sanlu brand. According to official reports, Sanlu Infant Formula milk had been the top-selling infant formula in mainland China for the last nine years. In one Sanlu advertisement potential formula consumers were told that sales over the past 15 years were large enough to cover the whole of the Sahara Desert! Moreover, just as the scandal was revealed, a government-authorized program on product quality, *Weekly Quality Report*, boasted on September 2, 2008 that there are more than a thousand rigid scientific procedures involved in Sanlu milk production. In comparing Sanlu milk’s prestigious past with its tarnished present, the Chinese people realized that the problem was not just the deteriorating quality of Sanlu milk but that fraudulent businessmen, in collusion with a corrupt government, had fabricated the company’s stellar reputation. Ultimately, the scandal raised both issues of food safety and political corruption in mainland China.

This summary of the Sanlu scandal provides a background for the subsequent online jokes. While the origin of these jokes is still unknown, they spread quickly on the Internet from mid-September to early November, making the Sanlu scandal a hot topic throughout China and in parts of the rest of the world. But what triggered these jokes? What prompted people to transmit them?

Different Types of the Sanlu Joke Cycle

Before interpreting Sanlu jokes the first step is to identify their form and content

in order to classify them into different subsets. Actually, definitions of “form” and “content” are often confused in the history of folklore research since, in many cases, it is hard to clearly separate one from the other. To clarify these two terms Christopher Wilson’s definitions seem helpful. He states that

content refers to the specific perceptions and meanings evoked by joke stimuli. In the case of a verbal joke, for example, the content consists of its sounds and of the meanings that these evoke [while] form refers to the interrelation or pattern of these stimuli. (Wilson 1979, 2)

Thus, according to Wilson, the core of a joke is the joke stimulus, which is the trigger in the joke that alerts one. It may be a word, a phrase, or something else prompted by the joke itself, and it determines both content and form. In this essay, I classify Sanlu jokes according to their internal joke stimuli.

By scrutinizing the Sanlu joke cycle, it is possible to divide the jokes into five main categories: A. nation-identity jokes, B. sexual jokes, C. political jokes, D. familial jokes and E. anti-media jokes.

A. The nation-identity joke contains a comparison between China and foreign countries (often Western, developed countries). In these jokes China, which seeks to catch up with developed countries by drinking milk to make the bodies of “her” citizens strong, is depicted as fossilizing their kidneys with poisoned milk, for example:

A1

鹿2008年流行广告词:

每天一斤奶, 强壮中国肾.
[“Sanlu 2008 advertisement: ‘Half a kilo of Sanlu milk daily will give you a Strong Chinese kidney’.”]

A2
外国人喝牛奶结实了, 中国人喝牛奶结石了。
[“Milk makes foreigners strong and Chinese people stones.”]¹

A3
日本人口号: 一天一杯牛奶 振兴一个民族; 中国人口号: 一天一杯牛奶 震惊一个民族。

[“The Japanese slogan is ‘A cup of milk daily makes a nation strong’ while the Chinese is ‘A cup of milk daily shakes a nation strongly’.”]

B. The sexual joke usually contains sexual images, words popularly termed “dirty,” or an explicit indication of sexual relations, for example:

B1
蚊子进城! 饿极· 见一小姐双乳高挺· 遂一头扎入猛咬· 发现嘴里全是硅胶· 于是仰天长叹: 唉! 食品安全太成问题了· 上哪能吃到放心奶啊.....
[“A mosquito, looking for fun, went downtown. When it felt hungry, it noticed a woman with large breasts. When it bit into them, it sucked silicone. The mosquito was so disappointed it sighed: ‘My god! Food safety really is a problem if I can’t even get safe milk from a woman’s breast!’”]

B2
男: “老婆, 跟你商量个事!”
女: “什么事?”
男: “老婆, 你看三鹿奶粉事件查出来这么多三聚氰胺· 看来娃儿吃什么奶粉都不放心· 你看这样行不· 咱家养

个二奶吧, 这样奶源就有了保障, 亏了我无所谓, 别亏了孩子啊。”

[Male: “Darling! Can we have a talk?”
Female: “Yes?”]

Male: ‘Darling, melamine was found in many dairy products, they are no longer safe. We have to consider our child’s health. I have an idea. Why don’t we look for an *ernai*.² Then we’ll be guaranteed safe and fresh milk! Don’t worry about my *cost*,³ consider the kid first!’”]

B3 “Dirty” words:

三鹿说: 奶农干的!

奶农说: 奶牛干的!

奶牛说: 草干的!

草说: 我妈干的!

草他妈抬头看看天: 日!

[Sanlu said: “The dairy farmer did the crime.”]

The dairy farmer said: “the dairy cow did.”

The dairy cow said: “Grass did.”

The grass said: “My mom did.”

The mother of grass (motherfucker) said: “Sun (Fuck).”]

C. The political joke overtly expresses anger towards an untrustworthy Chinese government that disguises the truth and speaks up for the criminals, disregarding the public’s safety and the health of victims. One joke, for example, reveals that the Chinese government is responsible for concealing the scandal:

C1

你们俩被抓了, 好可怜啊! 但为了救三鹿, 你们俩就只能忍辱负重了, 三鹿是获过国家科技奖的, 你知道花了多少钱那, 要是三鹿被处理, 那只母狗得咬出多少人那! 你们俩是代人受过, 就忍一忍吧! 要是害怕想尿尿, 你们俩就喝三鹿!

[It’s a pity you guys are arrested but, to save Sanlu, you have to keep your mouth shut and take the blame for

the crime. Sanlu was awarded the Nation's Technique Prize, which involved a lot of money being spent for that honour. If Sanlu were sentenced, imagine how many people would be implicated, how many scandals would be opened up by that bitch? So, keep quiet and be the fall guy! If you're afraid of pissing too much in prison...just drink Sanlu milk!]

Another joke, satirizes both Sanlu and the "One family one child" policy proposed by the Chinese government:

C2

三驴子好啊·多负责任的“民族企业”啊,为了实现计划生育这项基本国策·在前面的没有完成计划指标的情况下·开发了这种可以在短期内减少婴幼儿数量(死亡)·长期可以控制下一代生育(肾脏都伤了)·他们的生育能力都下降了)的特效药:“奶粉+三聚氰胺”,而且还给财政带来了可观的税收·我们的有关部门一定要保护好这样的民族企业·并把它发扬光大·占领全球·为实现50年内将地球人口减少到10亿做出卓越的成绩。

[“*Sanlvzi*⁴ is great! It remembers its responsibilities. Because the ‘one family, one kid’ policy was not very successful in the past, *Sanlvzi* invented a plan to reduce the infant population quickly, and control the birth rate for the long term: milk + melamine. This great new product could make a big financial profit, so we should support this kind of national enterprise, introduce it to the whole country and the whole world, promote it, and then we’ll reach the goal of decreasing the population in this planet to 1 billion in the next 50 years!”]

Although some jokes and parodies do not directly criticize the Chinese govern-

ment, they employ the Sanlu event to satirize Chinese athletes, such as Liu Xiang and the Chinese Male Football Team sponsored by the Chinese government, or the 29th Olympic Games held in China. In doing so, they express resentment toward the Chinese government. These jokes are also categorized under the rubric of “political joke,” for example:

C'1

喝三鹿牌奶粉,当残奥会冠军

[“Drink Sanlu milk: you’ll be a hero in the Paralympics.”]

C'2

鹿说是奶站的责任
奶站说是奶农的责任
奶农说是奶牛的责任
奶牛说是草的责任
草说自己喝了河里的水
小河说中国男足来洗过脚
中国男足说 我们喝三鹿长大的

[Sanlu said that the dairy station did the crime.

The dairy station said it was the responsibility of dairy farmer.

The dairy farmer said it was the responsibility of dairy cow.

The dairy cow said it was the responsibility of grass.

The grass said it was because it drinks the water in the river.

The river said the Chinese male football team had washed their feet in the river.

The Chinese male football team said they are raised by the Sanlu milk.]

Besides the above jokes, there is also a parody of the theme song of the 29th Olympic Games—“You and Me” sung by Sarah Brightman and Huan Liu—which criticizes Sanlu Milk for causing infant kidney stones.

D. The familial joke mainly focuses on the relationship between a stepmother and her stepchildren, in which the stepmother is portrayed as wickedly abusing her stepchildren by feeding them Sanlu milk. This subset also refers to the relationship between a mother-in-law and daughter-in-law, for example:

D1

三鹿奶粉, 后妈的选择.

["Sanlu milk: the choice for stepmothers."]

D2

甲: 张嫂· 三鹿奶粉不能喝阿· 有毒! 你家还有吗?

乙: 我也刚知道了啊· 还剩三袋· 不敢给孩子喝了· 给婆婆当早餐了!

["A: 'Aunt Zhang! Did you hear that Sanlu milk is not safe, but contaminated? Do you still have some?'

B: 'I just realized this. I have three more cartons! I won't feed my children with this milk anymore. I'll feed it as breakfast to my mother-in law instead!'"

In addition to these four main subsets of Sanlu jokes, there are others that do not fall into the above categories. Most of them are parodies of famous television advertisements, for example: E1 今年过节不送礼· 送礼就送三鹿奶 ["No other gifts this year, Sanlu milk only."]. This slogan imitates the well-known nutrient Melatonin, used to treat insomnia. The parody implies: if you drink Sanlu milk, you will sleep forever. E2 鹿奶粉, 奶粉中的战斗机 ["Sanlu milk, fighter of the milk powders."]. This slogan imitates a China-based cell phone company, "Bird." It attempts to assert its dominance over the Chinese market and to "kill" foreign products, thus its name as "fighter." Sanlu milk now tries to kill its consumers and

so is regarded as the fighter milk powder. E3 三鹿, 一切皆有可能! ["Sanlu, anything is possible!"]. It indicates that if you drink Sanlu milk, you shouldn't be surprised if you find something unusual, abnormal or poisoned. E4 我们的目标是: 结石! ["Our goal is: Stone!"] This slogan imitates a Crest toothpaste advertising campaign. Crest's advertisement promises to make consumers' teeth strong, claiming, "Our goal is strong!" Sanlu milk fossilizes consumers' kidneys, thus their goal should be "stone." E5 三鹿明天见! 三鹿呀· 天天见! ["Sanlu, see you next day! Sanlu, with you everyday!"]. This slogan imitates an advertisement for a China-based cosmetic called "Dabao." In the original Dabao version it (Dabao) is both the name of a person and the product. The slogan indicates that the product is the very thing you need in your everyday life, rather than a person. By replacing "Dabao" with "Sanlu" (milk), the slogan's meaning becomes: "Sanlu milk is a product for consuming every morning so, after drinking, you may say 'see you,' but the kidney stone it produces will follow you everyday after. E6 三鹿广告做得好, 不如三鹿结石好! ger!"]. This slogan imitates a China-based fridge manufacturer, "Fretech." E7 不喝寻常奶! ["A totally different milk!"] This slogan imitates a China-based apparel company "Meters Bonwe." This parody means it actually is not milk, but poison.

As I have mentioned above, the jokes of this subset are all parodies of well-known advertisements which appeared in mass media sources like television and also newspapers and the Internet. These parodies thus express great resentment toward the mass media, portraying it as unreliable. Accordingly, I feel that it is

reasonable to categorize them as a subset—the “anti-media joke.”

Why Do People Tell Sanlu Jokes?

In folklore, the telling, performing and transmitting of items are meaningful, rather than aimless. Therefore, the question to be asked is: Why do people tell Sanlu jokes?

Before seeking the answer to this question, perhaps what should be first addressed is why people tell jokes? Many disciplines, including folklore, psychology, sociology and anthropology, provide clues. Steve Linstead claims:

Humour is a complex and paradoxical phenomenon which reflects many of the difficulties which are experienced by investigations in other areas of social life. Is it, for example, a device utilized by individuals for coping with uncertainty, exploring ambiguous situations, releasing tension or distancing unpleasantness? Or does it owe its genesis to social structures, and the contradictions and paradoxes within them? If so, does it subvert these social forms, support them or accommodate them? Does it depend on a social group for its definition as humour? (Linstead 1988, 123).

According to Linstead, humour is a framework for “non-real” or “play” activity, an aside from normal discourse which not only allows for the exploration of new ideas in situations of uncertainty or unfamiliarity, but also performs a boundary function of both internal and external lines, identifying groups in terms of membership and acceptable and competence behaviors. Moreover, humour can function as a coping device

to release tension, allay fear, forestall threat, defuse aggression or distance the unpleasant. Finally, humour may represent an implicit contradiction, paradox or “joke in the social structure” in an explicit way (Linstead 1988, 142).

Applying these ideas to the Sanlu joke cycle is illuminating. The nation-identity jokes can be explained as establishing a border between the Chinese and the people of Western countries, as well as between the Chinese and the Japanese. In marking a boundary, this kind of joke draws attention to differences between Chinese and foreigners in terms of their foodways. Although the Chinese originally dreamed of “catching up” with those in developed countries by diet assimilation, the gap between Chinese and foreigners is actually widened by drinking Sanlu milk. The most extreme example of this irony is in joke A3, which refers to the Chinese and the Japanese. In the minds of many Chinese people, the progress of Japan is associated with milk, where the government advocates: “A cup of milk makes a nation strong” and forcefully pushed a “milk plan” beginning in the 1950s, with the aim of encouraging a taller and stronger population. It seems that the increased energy of the Japanese has resulted in a more prosperous Japan. To catch up with developed countries, Chinese parents followed in the footsteps of the Japanese and fed their children milk. When the top Chinese milk powder was discovered to contain poisonous chemicals, the event greatly affected the Chinese public. Underlying this great disappointment is the Chinese desire to make China strong by challenging the “dominance” of developed countries, and to express their opinions

in their own voice. These goals were undermined by Sanlu, which devalued the Chinese dream of being stronger and more independent. Thus the joke plays the role not only of scorning Sanlu, but also of re-emphasizing the distinction between Chinese people and foreigners, a gap that should have been transcended by milk consumption. In this sense, compared with the strong and healthy image of foreigners, especially Westerns, the image of damaged Chinese people actually serves to reconstruct Chinese nationality. Although the approach may seem somewhat enigmatic to foreigners, non-Chinese prefer to accept a weak and damaged Chinese identity than a prosperous nation with great energy.

As for sexual and political jokes, their function is different from that of nation-identity jokes. In the social environments of ancient and modern China, sex and politics were and are taboo topics within public discourse. Joking is a means to discuss these taboos because it is not considered to be serious and is therefore free from repercussions. Tragedy can also provide opportunities for joke-making. As Dundes and Hauschild note, "nothing is so sacred, so taboo, or so disguising that it cannot be the subject of humor. Quite the contrary, it is precisely those topics culturally defined as sacred, taboo or disguising which more often than not provide the principal grist for humorous mills" (Dundes and Hauschild 1988, 56). That is why many jokes are spontaneously created when tragedies occur, like the events of Challenger III or Chernobyl. According to researchers, these jokes allow for the release of public grief; joking transfers tears into laughter (Simons 1986; Smyth 1986; and Kürti 1988). Although a

joke can relax people's tensions, as will be discussed later, it is also noteworthy that in different cultural and social contexts, jokes are told and function in different ways in varied communities, even if they are all thought to serve as a social alleviation.

What are the underlying meanings of the familial joke? In general, jokes as a genre not only subvert the social structure, but also support it by transmitting social norms and concepts through everyday tellings. The familial jokes here focus on two negatively portrayed familial relationships: the relationship between stepmother and stepchild (D1), and the relationship between mother-in-law and daughter-in-law (D2). In Chinese culture, the stepmother is always depicted as a wicked woman who treats her stepchild badly. An example is the portrayal of the stepmother in the Chinese Cinderella story "Yeh-shen." Although the nature of the mother-in-law and daughter-in-law relationship is not as fixed as the former, it is also frequently represented negatively in much Chinese folklore. Sometimes the mother-in-law is described as a wicked woman who torments her daughter-in-law, while sometimes the role of antagonist is reversed. While these negative depictions are not unique to China, and to a large extent may be considered universal, some characteristics distinguish the Chinese representations. The uniqueness actually lies in the form chosen by the Chinese to represent these relationships: milk scandal jokes. Thus, the unresolved question is: why are these social issues and familial relationships expressed by the Sanlu milk jokes?

Finally, how do the anti-media jokes work? Superficially, this kind of parody

is common in our everyday life and, most of time, it is just for fun. But if all the objects of parody were well-known China-based enterprises, the parodies must have been intentional. As mentioned above, parodies in this subset focus on famous China-based brands. The question here is, why was the Sanlu scandal the target for dissatisfaction with the mass media? Is the belief that the mass media hid the truth of the scandal the only reason for the jokes' popularity?

Published studies provide many perspectives on the meanings of jokes that might help elucidate this discussion. Though many of these studies offer insights into Sanlu jokes, however, they fall short of explaining the whole story.

Milk: Food as a Cultural Metaphor

According to Simoons, food plays a central role in Chinese life, which leads:

many to characterize the Chinese as having a food-centered culture. Not only are they wide-ranging in their choice of foods, but concern with the excellence of food is found in all segments of society and is reflected in the common greeting "Have you eaten already?" Indeed some have noted that food is not only a common topic of conversation, but often the dominant one" (Simoons 1991, 14).

Thus, to a large extent, to understand the Chinese, China or Chinese culture, food is key. As a well-developed food system, Chinese foodways are not static but variable and willing to adopt cuisines from other cultures and traditions, in which process exotic food always conveys particular social meanings about Chinese culture and society.

In most parts of China milk was not a traditional Chinese food. In historic periods, some minority groups living in remote Northwest China consumed milk, but in many ways, these people were not historically considered "Chinese." To differentiate their foodways from those minorities, many Han Chinese believed milk was inedible or food for the lower classes. In modern times, especially the late 20th century, however, milk has been popularly accepted by most Chinese people, having been influenced by Westerners' heavy consumption of dairy products. For many Chinese, milk and other dairy products are symbolic of Western culture or, at least, of non-Chinese culture, while soy juice and other soy products are regarded as indigenous Chinese food symbols (Simoons 1991, 458-462). Because milk is a "Western" thing, it is easier for the Chinese public to accept Sanlu-related jokes and transmit them freely. People may think that milk is something that belongs to "others," and this allows them enough distance to be comfortable in telling jokes they may otherwise find offensive. As a result, the Sanlu jokes become an acceptable vehicle for the discussion of several taboo topics, such as sex and politics, as well as sensitive issues like the relationships between stepmothers and stepchildren, or mother-in-laws and daughter-in-laws. Thus, unlike many scholars who propose that new technologies like cyberspace create online democracy and freedom for Chinese people to discuss sensitive topics (Day and Schuler 2004; Tai 2006; Zhou 2006), I would argue that it is the topic of Sanlu milk itself which enables such discussions. The topic has actually transformed the criticism of a Chinese prod-

uct into a protest about Western culture or, at least, a criticism that is disguised as a gesture of protest and intended to be ironic. Accordingly, the nature of these jokes releases tensions by reducing the capability of the Chinese government to regulate the Internet.

Although it is not deeply rooted in Chinese culture milk is, nevertheless, an important part of the contemporary Chinese food system. In addition, the Sanlu group that produced the tainted milk is a top China-based company, and it was the Chinese local government that attempted to keep the public in the dark. In this sense, to identify milk as a symbol of Western culture was not to deny the damage done to the reputation of the Chinese government as a result of its mismanagement of the Sanlu scandal. Confronted by all this shameful behavior, a disappointed Chinese public sought to channel its anger. Joking about the Sanlu group and both Chinese central and local governments became an effective release. And yet, while many Chinese people are critical of politics in China, in accordance with Chinese tradition, the public does not usually portray its government as totally untrustworthy. To most Chinese people the government, and the central government in particular, is their system of support. If they criticize the government too intensely, they will lose their sense of nationalistic hope. At this point the dilemma the Chinese public face is how to express their rage and keep their hope, and avoid irritating the government.

In this sense milk, as a Western food, provides people with a convenient scapegoat which shifts blame away from the Chinese government which some feel

bears most of the responsibility for the crime. The Sanlu Group's contaminated "milk" and the attempt made by Chinese local government to keep this contaminated milk contained (by concealing the truth), can be transformed into a critique of "contamination" by the West and an argument for "containing" the invasion of Western culture. In this transfer, the Chinese local and central governments become the protector of the nation whose aim is not to injure "her" citizens, but to fight for them and for their culture and traditions. That is to say, because milk is seen as the signal representative of the Western foodway and a representative of Western culture, the contaminated milk symbolizes the rejection of Western culture in contemporary China. Based on the above interpretation, the jokes are much more easily accepted by the Chinese public who are willing to see their government as innocuous. Beezley presents a similar interpretation in his research of Mexican political humor in which, he claims that those political jokes:

gives one the strength beneath the yoke of being Mexican, not the rage to throw it aside. Laughter renews the courage to live with reality, rather than the bravery to dream of new worlds" (Beezley 1985, 223).

As a symbol of Western culture, milk offers many Chinese the freedom to talk about sex. In the minds of many Chinese people, the West represents a place where open and free sex takes place, even between strangers. Because in the Chinese language, "milk" is pronounced as /nai/, which means not only "milk," but "breast," it is easy and natural to connect milk to sex, especially premarital or

extramarital sexual relationships.

In both ancient and modern China, breast milk is normally fed to infants; it is thought to be healthier and more nourishing. Moreover, feeding infants with breast milk is regarded as reflective of the intimate relationship between mother and child. In the case of Sanlu milk, infants were fed formula by their parents rather than the recommended breast milk; these “mean” mothers are easily equated with stepmothers who abuse their stepchildren. Additionally, in China the Western family is not thought to be as intimate as the Chinese family. Western families are thought to be united by money and benefits rather than by love and friendship, characteristics that bond Chinese families. These associations help explain why tainted milk can be linked to negative familial relationships.

Lastly, it is the role of milk as a symbol of Western culture that makes Sanlu jokes a means by which to criticize the mass media. According to Willie Smyth, “the Challenger jokes serve as vehicles for expressing public sentiment about the media’s treatment of the disaster, and about the media’s expectations of the public as mourners” (Smyth 1986, 256). Following their Western peers, the Chinese public employed Sanlu milk jokes to criticize the Chinese mass media, which disregarded its obligation to speak for the public and its responsibility to be the “fourth estate”, as its Western counterpart is.

Conclusion

After the Sanlu tainted milk scandal, the Chinese public used Sanlu jokes as a means of expressing its resentment towards Chinese domestic corruption in some parts of their governmental sys-

tem. These jokes dramatically and superficially emerged as a rejection of Western culture. The jokes, however, also provided a forum in which to settle or ease the political pressures of the Chinese government on its people. According to my observations, although the Sanlu jokes were transmitted online, which greatly broadened the range of receivers and accelerated the speed of transmission, they actually functioned in the same ways as traditional jokes. A thorough understanding of Chinese social and cultural contexts is essential for understanding the implications of these widespread jokes.

Notes

1. In Chinese the pronunciation of “strong” is the same as that of “stone”.
2. In Chinese, *ernnai* / ɛrɲai/ is a lover of a man who has a wife already, but his wife doesn’t know about her. The term literally means “two breasts”. Additionally, in Chinese, the written word for “breast” and the pronunciation of “breast” is the same as “milk”.
3. The *cost* here refers to male ejection since only a woman, who has just given birth to a child, is able to produce milk. The fresh milk here indicates the sexual desire of the man.
4. In Chinese, *Sanlvzi* means “three donkeys,” which it is a derogatory nickname used by countrymen of Northern China to scorn stupid people.
5. The Chinese Male Football Team performed very poorly in all of their matches in recent years and behaved rudely in the Beijing Olympic Games. For the past two decades, the team has been a target of public ridicule.

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Responses

The Finest Menu for a Mother-in-Law — Sanlu Milk and Chornobyl¹ Apples

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Mr. Mu Li's paper on online Sanlu dairy jokes is an interesting case-study of the contemporary Chinese humor that spread on the Internet as a reaction to the scandal caused by tainted milk powder in China in 2008. It is yet another example of a wider phenomenon, which traditionally has been called "black" or "gallows humor" (Obrdlik 1941-1942). The publication of this paper is especially important as it provides readers with an insider view of the tragedy in its specific cultural context; also, through translation and explanation, it helps those who, like me, do not speak Chinese to appreciate the witicism and word-play of these jokes, and to compare them with other instances of black humor.

Yet, as usually happens, the weak sides of the paper are an extension of its strong sides. Although Mr. Mu Li alludes to some previous research on the humor of various disasters (for example, *Challenger*, Three Mile Island and Chornobyl) he does so only superficially to say the least. Thus Yvonne Milspaw's interesting paper is not addressed at all in his discussion, although it figures in the works cited (Milspaw 1981). The same can be said about the studies of other cultural traditions in general. As a result, the author mistakenly attributes some international themes solely to Chinese culture,

such as the centrality of food, the feeling of the particularly intimate climate of family relations in this specific culture versus the cultures of the Other, and even the problematic relationship between daughters-in-law and mothers-in-law. All these motifs can easily be identified with many other cultures as well. In fact, according to Tangherlini's study of Danish legend tradition, interaction with the Other encompasses three main categories: 1) sexual contact which poses threats to the fertility of the group; 2) attempts to spoil the food of the group; 3) attempts to kill, to maim, or to hurt the members of the group, and to pose threats to the existence of the group as a whole (Tangherlini 1995, 36). All of these categories are also relevant to gallows humor, especially when the disaster can be seen as being produced by the Other, whether he, she, or it is a monster, an enemy in war, an evil elite, a minority group, a colonizer, or so on.

Furthermore, while reading Mr. Mu Li's paper, I lacked information on the tradition of joking in Chinese culture, especially the factors that affect transmission. The fact that Sanlu jokes spread only on the Internet is surprising to a person like me who grew up in the Soviet Union, where oral jokes were extremely popular among friends (although the parents, who had witnessed Stalin's purges, were always on the alert and taught children not to repeat at school what they heard at home). Whereas jokes about the Three Mile Island disaster occurred in both in oral form and printed on T-shirts, cups, and ashtrays for commercial purposes (Milspaw 1981, 62), Chornobyl jokes were mostly transmitted orally, even in cases where they imitated commercials.

The reason for this is quite understandable: there was no Internet in 1986, at least not for the Soviet lay public, and the use of jokes as actual commercials was unthinkable in the USSR because of censorship and the lack of private business (Fialkova 2001; Fialkova 2007, 94-95). But, in the post-Soviet countries and the English-speaking world, folklore on the Internet functions as either an extension of oral tradition or as a new subcategory that developed within the Internet. In the latter case, the jokes have special characteristics that derive from the focus on reading and typing, visual perception, and being forwarded (Alekseevskii 2010; Fialkova and Yelenevskaya 2001; Weissman-Dvir and Mendelson-Maoz 2007). However, the Sanlu jokes quoted in the paper do not possess any such characteristics which would make them inappropriate for oral transmission, and yet, according to the author, they spread only on the Internet. But why they were unpopular in oral discourse remains unclear.

Another interesting problem surrounding disaster jokes is that some disasters produce a large number of jokes while others do not. Here I would like to address the case of the scandal about the non-dairy Remedia powder that occurred in Israel in September 2003 and which, in some ways, mirrors the Sanlu scandal in China. This soy-based baby formula was produced by a German company—Milchwerke Westfalen EG (Humana GmbH)—and supplied to the Israeli firm Remedia. The formula powder was developed especially for Israel according to strict kosher food regulations because some ultra-religious Israelis prefer soya-based powder in order not to

interfere with meat meals². In 2003, Humana changed the formula and stopped adding vitamin B1 (thiamine). Although senior officials in Remedia were aware of this change, not only did they do nothing about it, they did not even change the tins' labels. Large quantities of the new formula arrived in Israel between April and June 2003. The shipments were released by the inspectors of the Ministry of Health without being properly checked. As a result, by September three children had died from beriberi, a kind of malnutrition which is typical of Third World countries and which has not been seen in Israel for a long time. More than twenty other infants were seriously impaired (Editorial *The Jerusalem Post* May 6, 2008). Senior officials from the Ministry of Health tried to avoid any responsibility for the disaster and placed blame solely on the private company Humana (Zarchin and Azoulay 2008).

Although the Remedia scandal had clear potential for producing jokes similar to that of the Sanlu scandal,—German-made food of the Other, infant-death as a result of manufactured food instead of breast-feeding—they appeared only sporadically. They were not recorded by the Israeli Folktales Archives (IFA) and only two of them were found on the Internet. I have highlighted the word 'Remedia' in the Hebrew originals:

מה יותר גרוע מערימה של תינוקות מתים? שיש.
אחד חי למטה מה יותר גרוע מזה? שהתינוק החי
צריך לאכול לעצמו את הדרך החוצה מה יותר
גרוע מזה? שכולם רקובים מה יותר גרוע מזה?
שהתינוק כבר אכל **רמדיה** אז הוא לא רעב

What can be worse than a pile of dead babies? What can be worse than the fact that

the one beneath the pile is alive? What can be worse than the situation that the living baby must eat his way out for himself? Maybe the fact that all of them are already rotten? No, it's the fact that the child has already eaten Remedia and is not hungry...³

סבתא בשלה רמדיה, נתנה לקוצי נתנה לפוצי נתנה למוצי
ואף אחד לא נשאר

A granny cooked Remedia. She gave it to Kutsi, to Putsi and to Mutsi⁴ and no one remained.⁵

The scarcity of material makes definite conclusions difficult, yet I would like to mention that my daughter, Lilia Dashinsky, remembers the former joke from her early school years, when it was transmitted orally. At that time, which preceded the scandal, the joke lacked the last line concerning Remedia. To my mind, the scarcity of Remedia jokes results from the fact that the tragedy affected a relatively small number of babies, the tins were removed from the shops, and the press actively informed the public about the events. Jokes are more often produced in a situation of uncertainty when fear and the lack of reliable information make the stress unbearable for a large group of people. This was the case with the Chornobyl disaster, which in many ways more closely resembled the Sanlu disaster than the Remedia scandal did. For instance, accounts of the Chornobyl disaster described it as the result of negligence over the “peaceful atom” which was meant to improve the life of the people. The Soviet authorities tried to silence the catastrophe. They forced people with children to participate in May Day demonstrations in Kyiv [Kiev], where all of them were

exposed to radiation. Information leaked out because of Western radio stations, and only then was it partially released by the Soviets. The press was unreliable and nobody knew for certain what to do. Radiation was known to affect food safety, sexual functions (possibly causing impotence), and to cause mutation and death. However, unlike the Sanlu case, all food, including traditional dishes, became contaminated. This difference notwithstanding, there is amazing resemblance between some jokes about the two disasters. Compare, for example, Chinese joke D2 about feeding a mother-in-law with Sanlu milk with the following joke from my Chornobyl collection:

“Граждане, граждане! Покупайте яблочки! Яблочки спелые, наливные, чернобыльские...”

“Бабка, а бабка! Ты зачем продаешь радиоактивные яблоки, да еще и говоришь, откуда. Никто ведь не купит.”

“Покупают, милый, покупают. Кто для тещи, кто для начальства...У каждого свой резон” (IFA 18676, Fialkova 2007, 103)

[“Grazhdane, grazhdane (Citizens)! Buy apples! Ripe apples, juicy...from Chernobyl.

“Babka, babka (Old woman)—why are you selling radioactive apples and, what’s more, saying where they’re from? Nobody will buy them.”

“Many people are buying, dear, they certainly are buying. Some for their mother-in-law, others for the boss...everyone has a reason”] (Fialkova 2001, 191).

The mother-in-law in this joke is *теща*, that is, the wife’s mother, and the conflict is between her and a son-in-law. Yet it

does not mean that the relationship between a daughter-in-law and her mother-in-law is any better. The distinction is genre-based. The wife's mother is a comic figure in jokes, while the husband's mother—*свекровь*—is either a wicked character or a victim in ballads.

Concluding my brief response, I would like to stress again the importance of cross-cultural comparisons in particular case-studies. It will help us to see the borderlines between the specific and the universal, and to not confuse the two.

Notes

1. Chornobyl is the Ukrainian name of the town known in Russian and other languages as "Chernobyl". In my own text I use the Ukrainian name of the town and, when quoting others, its Russian name.
2. An interesting aside is that the absence of milk and the use of soya in Chinese cuisine has not only attracted many New York Jews to Chinese restaurants but has even contributed to the creation of the new identity of modern New York Jews (Tuchman 1992).
3. <http://www.elsf.net/showthread.php%3Fp%3D8903300+%D7%91%D7%93%D7%99%D7%97%D7%95%D7%AA+%D7%A8%D7%9E%D7%93%D7%99%D7%94&cd=9&hl=iw&ct=clnk&gl=il> joke 6, Accessed 24.05.2010)
4. *Kutsi*, *Putsi* and *Mutsi* are common terms of endearment for babies.
5. http://www.facebook.com/permalink.php%3Fstory_fbid%3D405084835072%26id%3D201414700072+%D7%91%D7%93%D7%99%D7%97%D7%95%D7%AA+%D7%A8%D7%9E%D7%93%D7%99%D7%94&cd=15&hl=iw&ct=clnk&gl=il Accessed 24.05.2010).

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When the top-selling infant formula milk in China was found to be tainted in such a way as to cause kidney stones in infants, it soon became obvious that behind the company's seemingly stellar reputation lay the greed of "fraudulent businessmen" and "corrupt government". Subsequently a considerable array of jokes and mocking Photoshopped images appeared online, developing into the material upon which Mu Li has based his study.

Li's comprehensive overview of the jokes surrounding the Sanlu tainted formula milk scandal is a very welcome addition to the dearth of folklore studies available in Western languages on East Asian jokes. This study also provides valuable insight into occasion-focused joke cycles (on which there has been somewhat more research) such as those following the Challenger explosion (Goodwin 1989; Ellis 1991), Chernobyl (Kurti 1988), Harrisburg (Milspaw 1981) and September 11th (Kuipers 2005; Ellis 2003).

Inherent in the material, however, is the difficulty implicit in translating something as culture-specific as jokes, as the actual incongruities, so necessary for the jokes to function, do not quite hit the right spot. The connotations and allusions, unless explained, fall flat. As Oring puts it "A joke will be successful only if the listener can identify and access the background knowledge relevant to the conceptualization of an appropriate incongruity. At root is the basic linguistic knowledge without which verbal humor

cannot proceed" (Oring 1992, 6). The author has, however, done a good job in bringing to the reader, as clearly as possible, the cultural context from whence the jokes sprang. Although, at times, the multiple layers of meaning in the jokes make them slightly difficult to follow.

Li examines the forms of the jokes he retrieved, and arranges them into subsets: national identity jokes, sex jokes, political jokes, familial jokes, and anti-media jokes. From an outsider's perspective, it is of great interest to see heretofore foreign joke patterns emerging, being repeated, and turning around to poke fun at different elements of these patterns.

The national identity jokes focus on, as Li explains it, the Chinese experience of dreaming to catch up with its Western and Japanese counterparts yet, in the process of doing so, having Sanlu devaluing it and finding that the gap is actually widened. He argues that "Although the approach may seem somewhat enigmatic to foreigners, non-Chinese prefer to accept a weak and damaged Chinese identity than a prosperous nation with great energy." (31)

Milk imagery is also strongly connected to the idea of the West because, as Li explains, the word for "milk" also stands for "breasts," leading to thoughts of sex and promiscuity that are frequently associated with Western culture. However, in the familial jokes category, another interesting trend emerges. Most of the familial jokes seem to focus on the stepmother-stepchildren relationship, a trend he later explains by informing us that feeding formula milk instead of breastfeeding is equated to bad mothering, calling up the imagery of the evil stepmother and giving rise to stepmother jokes. Thus, since

Western families are also perceived as not being as close or as loving as Chinese families, those who seek out compatibility by formula milk drinking are also seen as moving towards more impersonal familial relations. By assigning formula milk the representative power of the West, this connection draws the blame away from the Chinese government.

In the jokes, Li also encounters considerable parodies of the mass media, which is a strong correlation to the jokes collected in the wake of September 11th, presumably to a large extent due to the media's part in covering up the tainted formula milk scandal. In his analogous discussion of the jokes following the demise of Princess Diana, Christie Davies argues: "The flourishing of jokes about specific shocking events, in the last thirty years or so, is a product of the rise of the mass media, and in particular of television and of the direct, dogmatic and yet ambiguous and paradoxical way in which accidents and disasters are presented to the public by the media" (Davies 1999, 254).

Li illustrates a thought-provoking point and provides a good insight for future research, by explaining formula milk as a cultural metaphor; he argues that in order to understand Chinese culture, one must be aware of food as the key. He convincingly argues that formula milk is a foreign product inundated with cultural significance, as a symbol of the Western other. Being a foreign, Western thing, makes formula milk an all the more acceptable target for joke traditions as it belongs to the other, a status which gives it distance and safety and makes it an "acceptable vehicle for the discussion of several taboo topics". (32) This argument

is significant because of the implication that, rather than the internet being a free zone of sorts and hence allowing for the distancing necessary for transmitting dubious jokes, it is the subject itself that allows for the anonymity needed to transmit the jokes.

My only reservation about this piece would be that there is not a comprehensive discussion of the contexts from which the jokes were retrieved. Frequent mention is made in the article of the jokes being "online" or "widespread on the internet, especially on Chinese websites" but, in the absence of any discussion of the websites cited in the bibliography, it is difficult to picture the precise social surroundings of these postings. Hence, when the question "Why do people tell Sanlu Jokes?" is posed by the author, the reader can not help but also wonder *what* people tell them, and *when* and *where*?

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