

The Comic Image of City God in Contemporary China

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Three short performances from three regional operas present an eccentric comic image of Chenghuang 城隍 (City God). This serious and formidable god is performed by the role of *chou* 丑 (clown), and the role's physical art shatters the audience's perception of this god's traditional image. The role's exaggerated and awkward body also results in a performance-centered structure in which negative aspects of human nature are vividly portrayed. The eccentric representation brings laughter, but the laughter is also fully charged with Confucian concepts of goodness, righteousness, justice, and *tianli* 天理 (the way of heaven). Turning a divine image into a hilarious one is an unconventional manner and also a peculiar tactic of these performers. Through this tactic, these performers not only hide their subtle criticism of the reality and the authority to survive censorship but also disseminate successfully traditional values and folk religious beliefs. This tactic indicates the cultural function of the theater and demonstrates how traditions can remain valid and functional through a force that arises from the interaction between Confucianism, folk religious beliefs, and performance.

Keywords: Chenghuang (City God), comedy, exaggerated body, performance-centered structure, Confucianism

Unusual God Impersonation

Chenghuang 城隍 (City God) is a tutelary god of a city, a town, or a village. This is a serious and formidable god whose duties are to supervise the living and the dead in his administrative region, maintain local justice, and perform divine retribution (Rong, 2006, pp. 336-340). However, a unique comic image of this god is presented in three modern performances, and their video recordings are circulating online now for free viewing. They are Chenghuang *ye duanan* 城隍爺斷案 (Settling a lawsuit by City God) from Henan opera, *Da Chenghuang* 打城隍 (Striking City God) from Peking opera, and *Nao huanghui* 鬧隍會 (Bustling festival of City God) from Sichuan opera.¹ In *Settling a Lawsuit*, this god is given a drunken image, and he fails to do his duty. In the other two performances, this god's comic image comes from a man's absurd impersonation. In *Striking City God*, three dishonest men take turns impersonating this god to evade their duty to build the Great Wall. In *Bustling Festival*, a self-centered magistrate impersonates this god to find out why he loses the support and love of his villagers.

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¹ Video recordings are posted on Tencent Video. The following information is provided in the video recording or by the uploader. *Settling a Lawsuit by City God* is performed by Henan Fuhua Yujutuan 河南富華豫劇團 (Fuhua Troupe of Henan Opera) and posted on April 29, 2017, see <https://v.qq.com/x/page/b0395ynk3cb.html>. This performance's date and location are unknown. *Striking City God* is performed at the Xiju Shjingshan 戲聚石景山 (Assemblage of Performances in Shijingshan) event, and its video recording is uploaded on August 17, 2016, see <https://v.qq.com/x/page/u0321b5tv6m.html>. This event is held annually by the cultural center of Shijingshan, but the date of this performance is unknown. *Bustling Festival of City God* is performed by the Nanchong Chuanbei Dengxituan 南充川北燈戲團 (Northern Sichuan Lantern Show Troupe of Nanchong) and Nanchong Chuanjutuan 南充川劇團 (Suchuan Opera Troupe of Nanchong) of Sichuan province, and it is posted on December 10, 2019, see <https://v.qq.com/x/page/d3033cjb4pw.html>. Its date and location are unknown.

This god is absent in these two performances, but these men's impersonation of this god still reminds the audience of this god's traditional image.

The drunken god, the dishonest men, and the self-centered magistrate are all performed by the role of *chou* 丑 (clown). This role aims to elicit the audience's laughter by delivering foolish and illogical language and movements. Using this role means that this god is deliberately represented as a clown. The performers who impersonate this god share the same characteristic: the skillful and precise maneuver of an exaggerated and awkward body to imitate vividly the negative aspects of human nature. This body not only brings laughter but also foregrounds the issue of injustice. Moreover, the Confucian way of heaven (*tianli* 天理) is adopted to solve the issue, and this tactic gives the performance a pronounced moral theme. This comic image is never trivial. It is a profound symbol that is intended as an irony of the human world. These performers have something to say. They want the audience to recognize that the Confucian code of conduct is the only way to achieve righteousness and justice, and meanwhile, that achievement can only be maintained by the authority that is led by a good person who can acknowledge faults and relinquish excessive desires. A deeper look into this comic image is necessary because it will shed light on the cultural function of the theater. It will also account for how traditions remain valid and functional through a force that arises from the interaction between Confucianism, folk religious beliefs, and performance.

A Comic Image in a Simple Plot

These three performances are short, and their simple plot takes around half an hour to perform. The plot revolves around the comic image of City God, and his moving body takes the center of the performance. The performance does not unfold a full story. The story is only an outline. What happened in the story is quickly told by characters in the first-person narrative. Hence, the story becomes the background of what is happening on the stage. Storytelling is marginalized, and the comic image that is always in the present tense—meaning that it is always moving with a particular emotion and attitude in a particular manner—is the core of the performance. The story supports this image, and this image embodies a Confucian moral theme that is embedded in the story. This theme is the concept of the omnipresent way of heaven. It is the source of a person's goodness (*shan* 善), self-awareness, and self-discipline, and it is also the root of righteousness and justice. However, this theme is presented in an indirect and comic manner, and this unconventional manner results in an irony that turns this comic image into a symbol of multilayered meanings. Before we go deeper into what this image signifies and how it is formed, the simple plot that highlights this image must be detailed.

Settling a Lawsuit by City God tells a drunken City God's refusal to help a mistreated female ghost. This performance is set in the main hall of this god's temple in the nighttime. There are only three characters, and none of them has a name. This god is the lead character. Both this character and his servant are performed by the role of *chou*. The female ghost is performed by the role of *hundun* 魂旦 (female ghost), a term that derives from the role of *dan* 旦 (young female characters). With two roles of *chou*, this performance aims to elicit the audience's laughter. This tactic turns the spatial-temporal setting from somber and scary to open and inviting. It brings this fearsome god closer to the audience.

The drunken god is lazy and corrupt, and he declares that as a local ruler, it is necessary to attend banquets offered by the rich people and keep drinking. He is proud of his drinking ability and boasts that the more he drinks, the more lucid he is. When his servant tells him about Master Zhang's 張大戶 prayer and offerings, he scorns this man for bringing a useless melon. But his attitude changes immediately after hearing that the melon

is full of gold, jewelry, and money. This bribery pleases him, and he decides to award this man with his blessing. Before long, a female ghost comes to the temple to press charges against Master Zhang. She complains tearfully that this man beat her to death simply because she wanted to reclaim her corn that fell on his land. Her accusation is completely ignored, and she is even scolded. Frustrated and angry, she accuses this god of being unfair and negligent at the court of *Yan Wang* 閻王 (King of Hell). Soon, this god receives a message from the King that demands the retrial of this female ghost's case. This god is terrified and ashamed, and he sends off his ghost officials to capture Zhang. This performance ends here, and this god gives a stylized standing posture on the desk. This is an awe-inspiring posture that signifies his resumption of his divinity and the rectification of justice. However, both the ending and this god's quick change of attitude are abrupt, and this performance also lacks the expected satisfying ending that showcases the villain's punishment. Storytelling is incomplete. The story seems more like an outline in which this god is heavily ridiculed.

In *Striking City God*, the represented god is an impersonation conducted by three men. Set in this god's temple during the epoch of Qin Shi Huang 秦始皇 (259-210 BCE), Ga Qi 嘎七, Ma Ba 馬八, and Sun Jiu 孫九 take turns impersonating this god to evade their duty to build the Great Wall. Besides them, there are two unnamed officers. All five characters are performed by the role of *chou*. Their foolish but skillful movements match perfectly their funny and silly speech that is done in a unique form of *shuban* 數板 (rhymed rhythmic speech). Both movements and language underscore playfulness. *Striking City God* is a classic clown performance of Peking opera, and this performance is a textbook example.

Ga Qi believes that praying to City God should help him escape from his duty. When he arrives at this god's temple, he finds that the god's statue is taken out for an inspection tour. He looks around and finds this god's hat, clothes, and beard. He thinks that no one dares to capture a god, so he puts them on and sits on the table to be this god. Ma Ba comes to this temple for the same reason. During praying, he sees the god moving, and it scares him. In order to comfort Ma, Ga explains why he impersonates this god and convinces Ma to be the god's assistant. Ma thinks that this is a brilliant idea and goes along with it. Then comes Sun Jiu, and the same scenario happens again. Although Sun initially wants to report them to the authority, he eventually agrees to be the ghost official. Two annoyed officers come to the temple. They complain that this god is not as efficacious as people say, and they grab the ghost official's wooden stick to beat the god. Ga is beaten, and after they leave, he asks Ma to swap with him. The officers return again and complain that the assistant must fail to do his job. They beat the assistant and then leave. Poor Ga is beaten again, and he pleads with Sun for a swap. The officers return for the third time to beat the ghost official because they think he is lazy. Suddenly, one officer notices that the ghost official looks familiar. They stop beating and hide outside the temple. Ga moans and the other two comfort him. Hearing their voices, the officers run into the temple to capture them. These three panicky men start taking turns being the god, the assistant, and the ghost official. The performance becomes a farce, and it finally ends with the arrest of these three men. The arrest signifies that no one should ever violate the sacredness of gods and try to evade their official duty. This performance obviously lacks full storytelling. What the audience sees is an outline of a story that is constructed by a series of hilarious movements. These movements are intentionally given to make the audience laugh, and they simultaneously ridicule a sacred divine image.

The god in *Bustling Festival of City God* is also a man's impersonation. This performance is set in a village on the day of this god's birthday, which is also the birthday of the lead character Magistrate Shi 石知縣. The magistrate and his boy servant are both performed by the role of *chou*. Besides them, there are a female villager

named Yao Mei 么妹, two male attendants of the magistrate, and 16 unnamed villagers. Yao Mei unveils the magistrate's impersonation. The boy servant and two attendants help raise the comic effect that comes from the magistrate's acrobatic performance. Other villagers deliver group singing and dancing to construct a grand merry scene of the festival.

Magistrate Shi wonders why his villagers ignore his birthday completely. He decides to find out the reason by impersonating City God at the temple festival. Sitting in his sedan chair, he starts his wobbly journey that goes up and down hills and crosses a river. To cross this river, one needs to jump on stepping stones. He believes he can do it, but he fails. He goes back in the sedan chair, but the jumping almost tosses him into the river. This wobbly journey is this performance's highlight. It centers on the superb acrobatic skill of performers. The magistrate's performance is mainly done on a long bamboo pole that signifies the sedan chair, and he delivers a series of difficult balancing movements that imitate the condition of being carried to climb and jump. He finally reaches the temple, and villagers pray to him. The boy servant's sudden stumble reveals their impersonation, but all villagers play along with the magistrate. They complain that they are very frustrated with the repeated failed petition for a new bridge. A young boy suggests that they should capture the magistrate and beat him. Yao Mei stops him. She explains that shaming the magistrate by beating this god's statue is sufficient because this god is like a county magistrate. Then, four male villagers grab the magistrate's hands and legs to swing him back and forth. This amusing movement symbolizes the beating. Having been beaten, this magistrate gives a balancing posture on the chair to signify his open acknowledgement of his faults. He then sings that he will allocate money immediately to build the bridge. Although the performance ends with a satisfactory ending, the abrupt change of the magistrate's attitude is awkward. This flawed plot design is the same as the first performance. Meanwhile, the same as the second performance, this one also marginalizes storytelling, and the magistrate's hilarious acrobatic movements in fact ridicule the sacred image of City God.

These three performances all feature City God, and they turn him into a clown to construct an eccentric comic performance. These performers use an exaggerated comic body to embody vividly the cause of injustice. Moreover, logical and complete storytelling is unimportant, and the simple plot is only an outline of a ridiculous and unethical event. Why do they adopt this unique comic manner to talk about the issue of injustice? Their tactic needs further examination, and it will also account for the performance-centered structure that is shared by Chinese regional operas.

Enacting Justice Through Injustice

City God ensures divine retribution within his administrative region. As a local protector, he lives with his people and takes care of their wish and safety as long as they are good and have never transgressed the way of heaven. His closeness to his people and his specific power to ensure local justice make him a popular god. In the Tang dynasty, he had received official rituals, and it became a tradition in latter dynasties (Rong, 2006, pp. 192-201). Accredited noble titles had been conferred on him, such as Yousheng wang 佑聖王 (King of protection and sacredness) from the Yuan court and Fumingling wang 福明靈王 (King of fortune, brightness, and efficaciousness) from the founder of the Ming dynasty (Huang, 2006, pp. 10-14; Rong, 2006, pp. 201-202). The imperial court's recognition raises his visibility and cultural legitimacy. More importantly, it constructs a kinglike image. He is a serious law enforcer and the representation of justice.

This image is still shared by many Chinese today, and his temples are the medium that promotes this kinglike image, as seen in Taiwan Fu Chenghuang Miao 臺灣府城隍廟 (City God temple of Taiwan prefecture) in

Tainan, Taiwan. Built around 1669 (Taiwan Fu City God Temple, n.d.), it is the earliest City God temple in Taiwan. This solemn god is surrounded by scary-looking ghost officials. They warn people of the consequence of evildoing. A large abacus and a large plaque engraved with “*er laile*” 爾來了 (here you come) are hung in the main hall. The former symbolizes this god’s duty to calculate a person’s goodness and badness, and the latter tells whoever enters the temple that this god has known all. The dark ambience of the temple reminds people of unavoidable punitive justice. The same kinglike divine image is seen in the late Ming play *Xinbian Mulian jiumu quanshan xiwen* 新編目連救母勸善戲文 (Newly adapted goodness encouragement play of Mulian rescuing his mother). It features this god in two episodes, and the god is performed by the role of *mo* 末 (positive middle-aged male character). In the episode “Chenghuang *qijie*” 城隍起解 (Chenghuang’s escort), this god says that his divine duty is to “administer Yin and Yang, and also manage humans and ghosts” 統理陰陽, 兼司人鬼 (Zheng, 2005, p. 215), and he reproaches ghost criminals for their doubt about the divine law and their disrespect for gods (Zheng, 2005, p. 216). In this play, this formidable god ensures divine retribution and punitive justice.

However, the above-mentioned drunken, dishonest, and self-centered images shatter the audience’s perception of this god’s traditional image. Three images all point to the key problem of excessive desires. This is the main reason that causes injustice, chaos, and danger. These images in fact derive from the criticism of the authority, which is intentionally buried beneath the surface of laughter. The criticism needs a deeper look because it complicates the final representation of justice and the Confucian way of heaven.

Giving this god a drunken image is a brave act. This image is a false image of gods, and it embodies cruelty and corruption. Through this image, the performance portrays vividly the ugliness of human nature. This god is very human, and his humanness is reinforced by his fear of divine punishment from the higher power. The higher power is the King of Hell. He is absent in the performance, but he is always there supervising everything. His absence echoes with the way of heaven that cannot be seen but exists perpetually. No one can escape from it, and all beings are all bound to follow it. In the end, it guides this drunken god to come back to his senses and resume his divine duty. Reclaiming divinity means that he is no longer dwelling in excessive desires. Rectifying injustice signifies the manifestation of the way of heaven, and the latter is the core concept that this performance intends to deliver. The design of this image is weak because this god’s quick change of attitude is abrupt. The manifestation of the way of heaven is also insufficient to correct the false image. However, the abrupt change of attitude still leads the audience to recall their old perception of this god’s divinity. He must be a law enforcer and the representation of justice. This flawed design reveals a peculiar attitude towards artistic representation: human beings are the only focus, and the representation of divine beings and abstract concepts serve to foreground the actual condition of this human world. Nonhuman things and laughter are a surface. What these performers want to tell is the negative aspects of human nature. They are the reason that turns a worthy life upside down.

Life is full of problems that cannot be fixed directly and immediately, so gods are entrusted with people’s wish for a better life. No matter how impractical this wish is, it is a means for people to have hope. Transforming a formidable god into a clown is eccentric, but the comic image brings laughter to ease the unavoidable pain from the unjust and disappointing reality. This tactic can be blasphemy, and it will bring divine punishment. Hence, this god is used as an abstract concept to foreground the consequence of blasphemy and the wish for justice. This is the tactic seen in the other two performances.

The dishonest image points to the reality-escaping attitude, which is also a common negative human trait. This attitude enlarges desires and results in irrational attempt, but what brings this attitude is the political oppression. The three duty-evading men have a good reason to ask for this god’s help. However, they choose a

very wrong way to achieve their goal. Impersonating a god in his temple is blasphemy, and therefore, their arrest means the manifestation of divine power and also the restoration of honesty, righteousness, and justice. This ending confirms that gods are sacred and inviolable, and punitive justice is inevitable. The punishment inflicted on the self-centered image results from the same reason. The magistrate is so uncaring and stubborn that he fails to serve the interest of his people. Uncaringness and stubbornness go hand in hand with desires, and they lead this magistrate to seek vanity and conduct a blasphemous action. However, this image is an audacious creation because it vilifies a government official and presents people's discontent with the government. This creation is dangerous in an environment where the authority has absolute power. However, these performers deal with this topic smartly. They defamiliarize this magistrate by turning him into a clown, and then they use the way of heaven to neutralize the dangerous signal. The way of heaven rationalizes the beating of this magistrate because his action is vanity and blasphemy. It is also the reason that this magistrate would acknowledge openly his wrongdoing.

In these performances, the way of heaven is represented as the source of justice, goodness, inviolable divinity, and divine retribution. They promote folk religious beliefs by reaffirming and foregrounding Confucian values. Meanwhile, the rectification of injustice depends solely on the lead character's self-awareness and his relinquishment of excessive desires. Hence, the main concern to these performers is a Confucian moral appeal that revolves around a person's inner cultivation of self-awareness and self-discipline. This inner cultivation underlies a worthy human life. Folk religious beliefs are therefore made culturally legit because they are endorsed by the Confucian moral appeal, while the Confucian moral appeal remains valid and functional because it is embodied by the manifestation of folk religious beliefs.

But when the audience looks beneath the comic surface, they will see that the comic image drives from a political criticism and a democratic wish. This image is complicated by the social identity of the lead character and the cause of the performed event. Both the drunken god and the self-centered magistrate are the direct representation of the authority, and the cause of injustice is this authority's failure to perform its duty. The three dishonest men are an indirect representation of the authority, and injustice comes from the authority's unjustifiable decision to exploit its people. Hence, delivering these comic images is to accuse the authority of failing to maintain justice and ensure the people's safety and wellbeing. The final representation of the way of heaven hints a democratic wish for a caring, tolerant, and responsible authority that would communicate with its people. Delivering a democratic wish by ridiculing the authority aims to tell the audience to look at the dreadful reality. This design is dangerous. Hence, the criticism and wish are intentionally marginalized and obscure. The performers place them under the surface of comedy, and then they use the way of heaven to foreground the authority's legitimacy. The drunken god's resumption of his duty, the arrest of the three men, and the magistrate's open acknowledgement of his people's wish all confirm that only through the authority can righteousness and justice be restored. In this peculiar design, the authority and the way of heaven become one, and they endorse each other both culturally and politically. It is the authority that guarantees the final justice. The ending declares that the performance conforms to the authority.

With this ending, the irony in a comic play becomes law-abiding. The tactic of these performers seems puzzling, and it may also seem an unsuccessful endeavor to express sociopolitical criticism and the need for a change. But we must not forget that performances in China are always censored. These performers have no choice but to comply with the law of the authority. In China, censorship never stops. The modern Chinese government follows the steps of its imperial counterpart, and it forbids strictly any open criticism of the government and

monitors constantly publication, films, performances, the Internet, and also folk religious activities. For these performers, they must survive censorship. But how? They start from adopting the role of clown to defamiliarize any dangerous signals. Defamiliarization constructs a distance between the comic performance and the reality. This distance is well-maintained by the performer's exaggerated and awkward body that renders any attempts vain and foolish. This body brings laughter that hides and obscures the performance's true intent. Then the widely recognized and culturally legit way of heaven is adopted to rationalize and reaffirm the authority's legitimacy. Irony and ridicule become harmless. This is their way to survive censorship, and the exaggerated and awkward comic body is the key to achieve this tactic. Moreover, this body is also a superb physical art that needs a deeper look.

Physical Art in a Performance-Centered Structure

These three performances share the same characteristic: unique physical art of the role of clown. It entertains the audience and keeps danger away. It is embodied by an exaggerated and awkward body that performs highly stylized comic acting. It is unique in the adoption of acrobatics to enlarge and defamiliarize the intricate imitation of human attitudes, emotions, and actions. Adopting acrobatics means that a performer must maneuver his full body precisely to achieve perfect agility, balance, and coordination. Meanwhile, the performer must also be hilarious. Eliciting laughter is prerequisite for this role, and laughter is the highest compliment that this role expects.

However, showcasing how human beings speak and act is not the final goal. The role of clown in these three performances must foreground vividly the unquenchable private desire. The drunken god desires for excessive enjoyment, the three dishonest men desire for unlimited freedom, and the self-centered magistrate desires for good fame. Desire leads them to become cruel, indifferent, covetous, indolent, and vain. These traits are what the performer's skillful body must represent. How do they achieve it? Familiar and habitual daily actions, gestures, and movements that correspond to those human traits are chosen, imitated, enlarged, and then twisted to make unfamiliar. Twisting is to polish further, and it turns normality into exaggeration and unfamiliarity. Acrobatics is a way to twist, and it also results in a stiff and imbalanced body that wobbles constantly and rhythmically. This exaggerated and awkward body is intentionally made. It is in fact a very skillful body that underlies comic stylization. All well-crafted and highly precise gestures and movements come from this process of defamiliarization, and defamiliarization creates contrast that brings laughter. What the audience sees is both familiar and unfamiliar. This laughter is not empty because the exaggerated and awkward body is so skillful and full of strength, dynamics, and visceral power. They concretize the intended attitude and emotion and foreground certain values that these performers want to present. This body is the center of the performance and an object of aesthetic appreciation. It projects the value-charged comic image into the auditorium, and the audience is forced to see and receive the force from this body. They can immediately capture what the performer intends to say when they see this body in motion. It holds the whole performance together, makes the audience laugh, and covers dangerous criticism.

The whole performance is based on stylized acting that can only come into being from the performer's precise body maneuver. This body guides the audience to understand what is happening in their world and what deserves their attention in everyday life. All is in the present tense, and all is deliberately done in a comic manner. This does not mean that language loses its place; rather, it corresponds to that awkward moving body. Language is intentionally made foolish, irrational, and detached from the reality. Irrational language alienates the audience

from the story, and when a performer engages with the audience directly to make hilarious comments about what is ridiculed through his body, the ridiculed object becomes the focus. Obviously, language serves to enrich the comic image of this exaggerated body, and the story that is supposed to be told through language becomes the background to support the exaggerated body in motion. This explains why the story is greatly abridged and quickly told by characters in the first-person narrative. Crucial elements that constitute the logic of the story are omitted. What is left is just an outline of an event. The plot is so extremely reduced that it only serves to foreground the theme of goodness, righteousness, and justice.

Storytelling loses its central role and is replaced by the performer's voice, body, talent, and skills. This is a highly performance-centered structure. The whole performance revolves around the performer's vivid but awkward portrayal of a specific character. That is the reason that these performances all lack proper storytelling. Those performers simply want to showcase in a peculiar manner a unique type of person or diving being that is also the representation of certain important concepts or beliefs. The performing body is the focal point, and that is what they want the audience to see and know.

This performance-centered structure comes from the legacy of elegant and refined Kun opera that dominated Chinese theater from the Ming to the early Qing dynasties. Detailed character portrayal has already well-developed, and it serves to reveal a story completely. However, the performance of individual scenes (*zhezixi* 折子戲) emerged in the late Ming period when Kun opera started to decline. This new genre only performs selected scenes—normally the most famous ones—from a full play, and it focuses on the performer's singing and acting. The performer's body is the core of such performances. This is a new aesthetic taste, and it is inherited and further promoted by regional operas that flourished in the mid-Qing dynasty. This new aesthetic taste explains why the repertoire of regional operas mostly comes from old plays. The audience has known the story, and what they expect to see is the superb skills and beauty of performers. New plays are still created, as is the case with these three performances, but due to this taste, they tend to be short and lack a full dramatic text. This taste guides the further development of the physical art of roles. It pushes the physical art of roles to grow into perfection in the late Qing dynasty.

The stylized comic acting in these three performances does not foreground the story, nor does it push the story to go forward. The performer's exaggerated and awkward body endeavors to build up a fun and ironic ambience in which human conditions are portrayed vividly and ridiculed heavily. Language that supposes to detail a full story is used to foreground this body to entertain and enlighten the audience about what they are experiencing at that specific moment of seeing a performance and what they can possibly expect and do in the future. These performers offer an answer to the dilemma that they present, that is, a firm belief in the omnipresent and inevitable way of heaven. This way ensures that all will be on the right track as long as we—the participant of a game that we cannot quit playing—continue following that way to be a good person. This answer is delivered in a comic manner, and the audience discovers it actively through their genuine laughter.

Further Reflection on the Performance

The exaggerated and awkward body seems to echo to some extent with the Rabelaisian grotesque body. According to Bakhtin (1984), the grotesque body is a body of becoming and an unfinished body in contrast to the canonical body (Bakhtin, 1984, p. 317, 322). It is related to folk culture and belongs to all people, and it expresses the fear of the world and seeks to inspire by festive madness that is composed of the parody of official reason and truth (pp. 37-48). The fundamental attributes of the grotesque style are exaggeration, hyperbolism, and excessiveness

(p. 303), and it results in a new, concrete, and realistic historic awareness that is not an abstract thought about the future but the living sense of creating history (p. 367). Laughter is triumphant, mocking, and deriding (pp. 11-12). It purifies man's consciousness from false consciousness, dogmatism, and confusing emotions (p. 141). Folk culture, based on the indestructible confidence in the final victory of man, knows nothing of fear and overcomes it through lending a bodily substance to nature and the cosmos, and therefore, the laughter generated through the grotesque body overthrows the fear, humiliation, and oppression cultivated by official culture (p. 336).

The discussed three images of City God are exaggerated parody. They are the body of becoming, and they express the fear of loss, the unknown, oppression, and humiliation that are constructed by official culture. Their festive physical madness creates a concrete sense of something new and real at the moment of the performance. The audience witnesses this moment. It gives them a realistic awareness, and they feel that they participate in the creation of their own history. The mocking and deriding laughter is charged with what the people think, want, and believe in, and the laughter is their victory of conquering fear at the present tense. Bakhtin's argument helps us see the sociocultural function of comic representations. However, something is missing in this Bakhtinian interpretation.

Folk humor and literary and artistic representations are always culturally specific. They are interlocked with the "observable modes of thought" of those who produce these representations (Geertz, 1973, p. 408), and the aesthetic disposition is inseparable from the producer's specific cultural competence (Bourdieu, 1984, p. 4). Geertz argues:

The everyday world in which the members of any community move, their taken-for-granted field of social action, is populated not by anybodies, faceless men without qualities, but by somebodies, concrete classes of determinate persons positively characterized and appropriately labeled. And the symbol systems which define these classes are not given in the nature of things—they are historically constructed, socially maintained, and individually applied. (Geertz, 1973, pp. 363-364)

Reflecting on the Chinese exaggerated body and the eccentric manner to represent folk religious beliefs and Confucianism, the above view must be considered. That body and its eccentric representation arise from the Chinese conceptual structure—the specific cultural competence—that is constructed historically and shared socially. Confucianism is the root of traditional Chinese cultural mindset. It is the reason that the Chinese exaggerated body does not go into extreme filthiness, obscenity, and repulsiveness that are seen in the world of Rabelais. It also explains why stylized comic acting presents a double-layered ending in which the "triumphant laughter of folk culture" is cloaked in the reaffirmation of official culture. The people's victory is also the victory of the authority.

Confucius's words in *The Analects* have been the backbone of Confucianism and the Chinese cultural mindset. No matter how different the interpretation of Confucius's words is in the course of Chinese history, *The Analects* remains the source of all rules and the code of conduct. Although Confucianism was once rejected during the Cultural Revolution, it was revived soon after the end of this radical sociopolitical movement. The revival has grown vigorously in recent years with the full support of the Chinese government. On September 11, 2016, *People's Daily* 人民日報, the official voice of the Chinese government, dedicated a full page titled "Tuidong ruxue rongru xiandai shehui" 推動儒學融入現代社會 (Promoting the blending of Confucianism with the modern society) (Bai, 2016). From complete rejection to full acceptance, the quick change of attitude in contemporary China reveals the great influence of Confucianism on the Chinese cultural mindset. In this mindset, Confucius's words on "a man of complete virtue" (*junzi* 君子) are the golden rule, and the inner cultivation proposed by him is still believed to be the way to achieve a worthy life. Violating this rule is to become immoral,

and it is the cause of chaos and danger. The discussed three performances exemplify this Confucian golden rule, but this rule is intentionally done in an ironic manner. It is necessary here to account for this golden rule so as to elucidate more the force that drives these performers to present an eccentric comic image of a divine being to reaffirm the authority's legitimacy.

According to Confucius, a man of complete virtue must be righteous. This is a man who “in everything considers righteousness to be essential” 君子義以為質 (Legge, 1960, p. 299) and continues “practicing righteousness to carry out [his] principles” 行義以達其道 (p. 315).² He “takes office, and performs the righteous duties belonging to it” 君子之仕也，行其義也 (p. 336), and “in ordering the people, he [is] just” 其使民也義 (p. 178). This righteous man is also a benevolent man (*renren* 仁人). He has developed the habit to monitor and introspect his own desire according to the principle of goodness (*shan* 善). Confucius mentions twice in *The Analects* that a virtuous and benevolent man will never “do to others as [he] would not wish done to [himself]” 己所不欲，勿施於人 (p. 251). This effort to subdue one's self (*keji* 克己) is to subdue excessive desires. They make a person lose the self. Confucius does not reject the concept of desire, but he emphasizes that a good person must always “[pursue] what he desires without being covetous” 欲而不貪 (p. 352). This view proposes that a person must always try to reach the void of selfishness, and the goal is to influence others to walk the same path that leads to goodness. “Now the man of perfect virtue, wishing to be established himself, seeks also to establish others; wishing to be enlarged himself, he seeks also to enlarge others” 夫仁者，己欲立而立人，己欲達而達人 (p. 194). Putting oneself in the place of the other is a living principle to be virtuous. Because of benevolence and goodness, killing is never needed to govern a state, and as a ruler, you “let your evinced desires be for what is good, and the people will be good” 子欲善，而民善矣 (p. 258).

The image of such an acclaimed man is upright and bright, and it is full of the spirit of righteousness (*zhengqi* 正氣) that originates in his void of selfishness. In Confucius's view, only by subduing desire can a man be firm and unbending in his journey to become perfectly virtuous. This view brings a famous idiom *wuyu zegang* 無欲則剛 (one who desires nothing is principled and resolute). Legge's footnote to Confucius's view clarifies this idiom: “unbending virtue cannot coexist with indulgence of passions” (Legge, 1960, p. 177). The image of this selfless person is awe-inspiring. This is a superior person who is not only ideal but also sacred. Confucianism has long been the core of Chinese politics and everyday life. The folk imagination of gods—believed to be the representation of pure goodness, benevolence, selflessness, universal truth, and the eternal way of heaven—is based on this Confucian ideal human type. As is described in the popular Daoist morality book *Treatise of the Exalted One on Response and Retribution* (*Taishang ganying pian* 太上感應篇), a purely good person is blessed and protected by the way of heaven and gods, and this person is “expected to become a god” 神僊可冀 (Hui, 1983, p. 31). The *Treatise* was already circulating among the literati in the Song dynasty, and after the 16th century, it had become a popular reader. The wide circulation of morality books indicates “the gradual appropriation of the system phased originally on ‘heterodox’ Daoist and Buddhist beliefs into the Confucian tradition” (Brokaw, 1991, p. 240). Confucianism interweaves with folk religious beliefs. It is internalized in the folk imagination of gods, and the imagined gods represent its golden rule. It legitimizes the latter, while the latter ensures its cultural legitimacy and prevalence.

² Instead of giving my own translation of Confucius's words, James Legge's widely-accepted translation of *The Analects* is used. Some words are adjusted due to syntactic and semantic needs, and the altered words are enclosed in square brackets.

Borrowing the words of Geertz (1973, p. 216), Confucianism is the core of the Chinese cultural pattern, and it organizes social, psychological, and organic mechanism for perception, understanding, judgment, and maneuver of the world. On a traditional Chinese stage, a performer can represent a certain god's divinity in a comic and even irrational manner, but this eccentric representation is a unique way to reaffirm the importance of goodness. This comic manner is deeply rooted in Confucianism. When those performers criticize the authority, the criticism is still rooted in official reason and truth. The embedded Confucian values in these three performances explain why they can survive censorship. In contemporary China where Confucianism is revived vigorously and traditional art forms are deemed as cultural heritages that must be protected, the online circulation of these three performances is naturally tolerated and promoted. Although they represent the politically rejected superstition, their cultural significance outweighs the political ideology. The eccentric comic image of City God is a complex symbol of Chinese cultural traditions. The laughter that this image generates is meaningful, and it guides the audience to reexperience how one should think and act so as to achieve a worthy life that is free of anxiety, chaos, and danger.

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