The Chinese ambivalence to humor: Views from undergraduates in Hong Kong and China

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Abstract

This paper proposes that Chinese people have traditionally been ambivalent about humor in the following three manners: (1) they tend to value humor but consider themselves to lack humor; (2) being humorous is not associated with being an orthodox Chinese; (3) humor is important but not for everyone. The paper also proposes that the Chinese ambivalence toward humor is largely due to an appreciation-despising complex about humor that is deep-rooted in Chinese culture. To verify this, this author conducted a survey study among a sample of 337 undergraduates in Hong Kong and Huhehot. Results show that (1) participants all rated highly on importance of humor but low on perception of self humor; (2) male students considered themselves to be more humorous than female students; (3) the top ten important characteristics for humor are fundamentally different from the top ten characteristics important for Chinese personality; (4) perception of humor is more positive than that of the Chinese personality. The paper concludes with a discussion of the psycho-social implications of the present findings on studies and enhancement of humor in Chinese society as well on some thoughts on further directions of research.

Keywords: Chinese ambivalence to humor; Chinese culture; Chinese personality; Chinese undergraduates; Confucianism; humor.

1. Introduction

Humor is a universal activity that is typically elicited in social contexts involving the perception of playful, non-serious incongruity (Martin 2007). The perception and appreciation of humor may be circumstantial and are culturally
embedded (Martin 2007; Ruch and Hehl 1998). For example, Chinese people tend to despise and appreciate humor at the same time (Liao 1998, 2003; Yue 2010). The Chinese appreciation of humor comes from the Taoist tradition by which humor is considered as an attempt of having witty, peaceful and harmonious interaction with the nature (Bond 1996). The Chinese despising of humor comes from the Confucian Puritanism by which humor is considered a sign of intellectual shallowness and social informality that might undermine the five cardinal relations in human interactions (Bond 1996). As Confucianism has been the dominating philosophy for Chinese people for thousands of years, Chinese culture has given so much emphasis on the morality of literary writings such that moral didacticism has become overwhelming and suffocating in serious literature (Qian 2007). Confucius himself once remarked that “man has to be serious to be respected” (Liao 2007). As a result, for thousands of years, Chinese people have never been comfortable with humor as they had to constantly ensure that they would laugh at the right time, in the right matter, and with right person. Judge Wu once remarked “Whereas Westerners are seriously humorous, Chinese people are humorously serious” (quoted in Kao 1974: xviii). For being humorously serious, Chinese people would often become serious and mysterious in use of humor (Shi 1996). This discomfort with humor has been so deep-rooted in Chinese culture that people could be very ambivalent about what humor would stand for. It is argued that this Chinese ambivalence toward humor is commonly shown in the following three manners.

1.1. Ambivalence one: Valuing humor but devaluing self humor

For thousands of years, Chinese intellectuals did not even want to admit that entertainment was the major function of humor (Liao 2001). Humor and satire, following the Confucian Puritanism and conservatism, were regarded as inferior forms of aesthetic expression and were thus devalued for centuries (Yue 2010). Humorous writings were considered as unorthodox and could only be found in unorthodox writings (Kao 1974). Jokes would only appear in popular writings in which laughter tends to be associated with low-bred vulgarity and moral indecency (Qian 2007). Lin Yu-tang, the humor master in modern China, once remarked that it is not so much that humor did not exist in Chinese literature, rather humor has been marginalized in Chinese culture such that “the serious becomes too serious and the non-serious too vulgar” (Lin 1924: 1). As such, Lin Yu-tang proposed to educate people to be humorous in writing but
serious in behavior (Liao 2001). It is therefore argued that Chinese people tend to be reluctant to admit to or become humorous so as to avoid jeopardizing their social status.

Liao (1998) found that jokes were intended to substitute unpleasant direct reprimand in the society and as such, loud laughter would make people feel nervous and uncomfortable. Liao (1998) also reported that self-deprecation was not for survival, but to avoid offending the listener. Liao (2007) concluded that Taiwanese undergraduates generally considered themselves to be non-humorous and envied Americans for their willingness to be humorous. Chen and Martin (2005) also found that Chinese students were less humorous than their Canadian counterparts and used less humor to cope with stress. Recently, Yue (Yue, Hao, Lan and Yan 2006) found that undergraduates in Huhehot did not consider themselves to be humorous even though they all considered humor to be highly important in everyday life.

1.2. Ambivalence two: Being humorous is different from being an orthodox Chinese

By Confucianism, humor has been equated with intellectual shallowness and social informality (Yue 2010). Hence, Chinese people have to be very careful of various social or cultural taboos about humor and try to demonstrate wit within it (Lin 1974; Qian 2007). Castell and Goldstein (1976) reported that Hong Kong university students preferred jokes with wise and conservative content whereas American university students preferred jokes with sexual and aggressive content. Similarly, Nevo, Nevo and Yin (2001) found that American students rated sexual and aggressive jokes as funnier while Singaporean Chinese students preferred harmless humor. Lin Yu Tang (Kao 1974) proposed that Chinese people ought to have “thoughtful smile” (smile of the meeting of the hearts) rather than “hilarious laughter” (belly laughter) as the “thoughtful smile” would enable one to laugh carefully and insightfully. Alternatively, to appreciate Chinese humor, one needs to require a great deal of wit, intelligence, and knowledge (Chen 1985; Qian 2007; Yue 2010). Chen (1985) argued that Chinese jokes, from its very beginning, tried to express both “denial humor” (critical of reality) and “complimentary humor” (complimentary of reality), which is different from the “pure humor” expressed by Western jokes (just making people laugh). Thus, it may be argued that Chinese people tend to consider humor a desirable but unattainable personality trait to obtain, and that being humorous is fundamentally different from being an orthodox Chinese.
For instance, Fudano (2000) reported that “when a new teacher tells an un-
funny joke, Chinese students do not laugh and Japanese students laugh to be 
polite. Among close friends, Chinese students laugh at unfunny jokes, Japa-
nese do not”. Yue reported that though Chinese students did not rank humor as 
an important factor for creativity and ideal Chinese personality, they listed all 
positive descriptors for what humor stood for (Yue et al 2006).

1.3. **Ambivalence three: Humor is important but not for everyone**

For thousands of years, humor has been despised by Confucian Puritanism and 
humorists have been taken as performers of low taste and cheap laughter in 
Chinese culture (Yue 2010). As such, actualization of humor potential is con-
tradictory to Confucian ideals of social conformity and humility. Rudowicz 
and Yue (2000, 2003) found that Chinese undergraduates in Mainland China, 
Hong Kong and Taiwan did not consider humor to be an important factor of 
creativity. In contrast, scholars in the West would consider humor to be an 
essential attribute of creativity (e.g., Cropley 1992; Hocevar and Bachelor 
1989; Runco and Bahleda 1985; Sternberg 1985; Wu 1992) as well as a core 
element of American personality (Allport 1937: 224). In addition, Rudowicz 
and Yue (2003) found that “humor” was missing in the ideal characteristics of 
a Chinese person. Recently, Yue reported that Chinese undergraduates in 
Huhehot mostly nominated comedians to be humorists while people in other 
occupations were rarely mentioned (Yue et al 2006). It may be argued that 
Chinese people tend to believe that humor is an exclusive expertise or special 
talent of comedians and the like.

1.4. **Objectives and hypotheses of the present study**

Plausible as the above arguments appear to be, there are no direct empirical 
findings to support them. In fact, studies of humor, particularly psychometric 
one, have been extremely rare and sporadic in Chinese society (Chen and 
Martin 2007; Yue 2010). Thus conceived, this author conducted the present 
study to examine to what extent the above three kinds of ambivalent attitudes 
toward humor would exist in Chinese society. More specifically, there are two 
general objectives to this study: (1) to verify the existence of the above three 
kinds of ambivalent attitudes in Chinese society; (2) to examine the compati-
bility of humor and Chinese personality. Thus conceived, two general hypoth-
eses were proposed based on the above discussion:
Hypothesis One: Chinese people would consider humor to be a highly important trait or quality in life but would consider themselves to lack humor.

Hypothesis Two: Being humorous is not associated with being an orthodox Chinese. The dispositional or motivational traits for the two are virtually non-overlapping.

Hypothesis Three: Chinese people would nominate more comedians and the like as humorists than other occupations, and consider humor as a special talent from them.

2. Research method

2.1. Participants

159 undergraduates (80 males, 79 females) in Hong Kong and 178 undergraduates (59 males, 119 females) in Huhehot in Inner Mongolia were sampled to participate in the present study. Hong Kong students were sampled from the City University of Hong Kong and their mean age is 21.05. The Chinese students were sampled from the Inner Mongolia Normal University and their mean age is 20.18. Participants were selected from different faculties within both universities so as to avoid a possible subject bias as well as to provide a representative sample of the whole student population. It is worth pointing out that as 96% of the sampled Inner Mongolian Normal University students are ethnic Chinese (Han nationality) and came mostly from Northern China, so they can be taken as the Chinese. Hong Kong students were enrolled in the author’s general psychology course while the Inner Mongolian students were sampled when the author went to give them a talk. Two graduate students assisted with the data collection.

2.2. Questionnaire

A specially designed questionnaire was used for the present study, consisting of four parts. In part one, respondents were required to (1) nominate up to three humorists they know of, and (2) rate on a 10-point Likert scale (1 = lowest, 10 = highest) the importance of having humor in everyday life and assessment of one’s own humor. The present comparative method has been used by the author to study the importance of creativity to university students in China as
well (Yue 2000, 2003). In part two, respondents were required to rate twice on 1-5 Likert scale (1 = least important, 5 = most important) a 60-adjective checklist the importance of these words to humor and to Chinese personality respectively. In part three, the 60-word checklist comprised of 24 personality attributes of a creative person and three other groups of personality attributes, namely Chinese personality (17 items), Western personality (11 items) and 8 fillers (Rudowicz and Hui 1997). It has been used to measure perception of creativity in Chinese society (Rudowicz and Hui 1997; Rudowicz and Yue 2000) and the compatibility of creativity and Chinese personality (Rudowicz and Yue 2000). In part four, demographic information about participants are collected, such as gender, age, nationality and so on.

2.3. Procedure

All participants were invited to complete the specially designed questionnaire for this study following a class, which took about 15 minutes to complete. The participants were free to ask for clarification if they had questions. After they had completed all the questionnaires, they were debriefed about the purposes of the study. The questionnaires were printed in classic Chinese characters for Hong Kong students and in simplified Chinese characters for Mainland Chinese students. One-way ANOVA was run to examine the mean differences.

3. Results

3.1. Rating of importance of humor and of self humor

Table 1(a) and (b) show how respondents in Hong Kong and Huhehot rated on importance of humor as well as on self humor. Respondents in both samples rated almost equally highly on importance of humor (8.25, 8.26 for the HK males and females, 8.17, 8.27 for the Chinese males and females) and there is no significant gender difference. Respondents in both samples rated themselves significantly lower on self humor (6.47, 5.93 for the HK males and females, 5.93, 5.72 for the Chinese males and females) than on importance of humor. Male respondents in both samples rated higher on self humor than females but the mean difference is only significant for the Hong Kong sample. Taken together, the present findings indicate that the Chinese students in Hong Kong and Huhehot considered humor as being highly important but
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...did not consider themselves as being highly humorous, thus offering good support to Hypothesis One of the present study. They also suggest that male students generally considered themselves as being more humorous than female students.

Table 1(a). Region and gender differences in perceiving humor by Hong Kong and Chinese undergraduates

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Hong Kong Students (n = 159)</th>
<th>Chinese students (n = 178)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Males (n = 80)</td>
<td>Females (n = 79)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Mean (S.D.)</td>
<td>Mean (S.D.)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Importance of Humor</td>
<td>8.25 (1.51)</td>
<td>8.26 (1.20)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rating of Self Humor</td>
<td>6.47 (1.80)</td>
<td>5.93 (1.64)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>t-value</td>
<td>0.044</td>
<td>1.990*</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*p < .05; **p < .01; ***p < .001.

Table 1(b). Region and gender differences in perceiving humor by Hong Kong and Chinese undergraduates

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Hong Kong Students (n = 159)</th>
<th>Chinese students (n = 178)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Males (n = 79)</td>
<td>Females (n = 80)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Importance of Humor</td>
<td>Mean (S.D.)</td>
<td>Mean (S.D.)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>8.25 (1.51)</td>
<td>6.47 (1.80)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rating of Self Humor</td>
<td>8.26 (1.20)</td>
<td>5.93 (1.64)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>t-value</td>
<td>10.02***</td>
<td>12.15***</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*p < .05; **p < .01; ***p < .001.
3.2. Comparison of important characteristics for humor and Chinese personality

Table 2 (a) and (b) display the ranking and the mean scores of the top ten most important characteristics for humor as compared with their corresponding ranking and mean scores for Chinese personality and vice versa. The method of choosing and comparing the top characteristics for issues under study is called the “top factor approach” and has been previously used to project a distinctive view of the total description (Cheung and Yue 2003, 2004; Yue 2003, 2004). For instance, Rudowicz and Yue (2000) identified and compared the 14 top characteristics from the 60-word checklist used for the present study to examine the compatibility of creativity and Chinese personality. In the present study, the top ten characteristics were identified for comparing humor and Chinese personality as this composition is believed to present a characteristic view of the total composition.

As can be seen in Table 2(a), the top ten important characteristics for humor include the following: quick to react, imaginative, creative, joyful, flexible, observant, confident, articulate, talkative, and wise. None of the mean scores for the top ten characteristics are lower than 4.00 while none of their corresponding mean scores for Chinese personality are higher than 4.00. In addition, the ten characteristics for Chinese personality are all lowly ranked for their corresponding importance for the Chinese personality except for wise (4), observant (8), and confident (11). All the mean differences are significant. It is intriguing to note that the top ten important characteristics for humor are all overwhelmingly positive.

As can be seen in Table 2 (b), the top ten important characteristics for Chinese personality include the following: caring for face, conservative, desiring for face, wise, serious, ambitious, humble, observant, tolerant, and intelligent. None of their mean scores are higher than 4.00 except for caring for face (4.18) and they are mostly lowly ranked for their corresponding importance for humor except for observant (6), and wise (12). All the mean differences are significant as well. It is intriguing to note that some of the ten important characteristics for Chinese personality are not so positive, such as caring for face, conservative, and serious.

Of the two tables, observant and wise are the only overlapping characteristics. But their mean scores are higher for importance to humor (4.22, 4.10) than for importance to Chinese personality (3.45, 3.79). Taken together, the present findings offer good support to Hypothesis Two, implying that that “being humorous is fundamentally different from being Chinese.” In fact, as shown in Figures 1 (a) & (b), the trends of the top ten characteristics that are important
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It is intriguing to note that in Figure 1 (a) the top five characteristics for humor (quick to react, imaginative, creative, joyful, flexible) are ranked the bottom five for Chinese personality while in Figure 2(b) the top three characteristics for Chinese personality (caring for face, conservative, desiring for success) are ranked the bottom three for humor!

### Table 2(a). Comparison of top 10 important characteristics for humor and Chinese personality

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Characteristics</th>
<th>Ranking</th>
<th>Important for humor</th>
<th>Ranking</th>
<th>Important for Chinese personality</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Quick to react</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>4.42*</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>3.23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Imaginative</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>4.41*</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>3.16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Creative</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4.34*</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>3.09</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Joyful</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>4.29*</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>2.97</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Flexible</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>4.24*</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>3.18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Observant</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>4.22*</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>3.45</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Confident</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>4.19*</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>3.41</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Articulate</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>4.18*</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>3.25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Talkative</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>4.13*</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>3.26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wise</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>4.10*</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3.79</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* mean difference is significant $p < .05$

### Table 2(b). Comparison of 10 important characteristics for Chinese personality and humor

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Characteristics</th>
<th>Ranking</th>
<th>Important for Chinese personality</th>
<th>Ranking</th>
<th>Important for humor</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Caring for face</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>4.18*</td>
<td>54</td>
<td>2.01</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conservative</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3.91*</td>
<td>58</td>
<td>1.69</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Desiring for success</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3.89*</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>2.93</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wise</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3.79</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>4.10*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Serious</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>3.61*</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>2.66</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ambitious</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>3.52*</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>2.80</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Humble</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>3.51*</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>2.79</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Observant</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>3.45</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>4.22*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tolerant</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>3.42</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>2.89</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intelligent</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>3.42</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>3.98*</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* mean difference is significant $p < .05$

for humor and Chinese personality are at quite opposite flows. It is intriguing to note that in Figure 1 (a) the top five characteristics for humor (quick to react, imaginative, creative, joyful, flexible) are ranked the bottom five for Chinese personality while in Figure 2(b) the top three characteristics for Chinese personality (caring for face, conservative, desiring for success) are ranked the bottom three for humor!

#### 3.3. Nomination of best humorists

Table 3 displays the categorization and percentages of nomination of humorists by the Hong Kong and Chinese students. The humorists nominated by both
samples are mostly comedians, TV hosts/DJs, and talk-show hosts. The percentages for these three groups of people account for 65.34% of the total nominees for the Hong Kong sample and 70.91% of the total nominees for the Chinese sample. Next most identified are actors for the Hong Kong sample (11.03%) and politicians for the Chinese sample (9.18%). Nominations for the rest groups are all less than 5% for both samples. Finally, 3.10% of the Hong Kong sample and 2.15% of the Chinese sample nominated themselves to be true humorists.

Table 4(a) and (b) display nominations of the 10 most frequently nominated humorists by the Hong Kong and Chinese samples respectively. The Hong Kong humorists nominated are all comedians and take 64.2% of the total nominations; the Chinese humorists nominated include six comedians, two talk-show hosts, one TV host, one politician, and one writer, and take about 62.49% of the total nominations. Alternatively, the Hong Kong sample was much more homogeneous in its nomination of humorists than the Chinese sample even though their percentages of nomination of top ten humorists are highly similar. In addition, the top ten humorists nominated by the Hong Kong sample are all

Figure 1(a). Comparison of important characteristics for humor VS important characteristics for Chinese personality: Compounded means and ranks
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local comedians except for Mr. Bean while the top ten humorists nominated by the Chinese sample included six Chinese (Zhao Ben-shan, Feng Gong/Niu

Table 3. Nomination of humorists by Hong Kong and Chinese undergraduates

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Humorists</th>
<th>Hong Kong Sample (n = 159)</th>
<th>Chinese Sample (n = 178)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Ranking</td>
<td>%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Comedians</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>62.71</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Actors</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>11.03</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Politicians</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4.73</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Writers</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3.95</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teachers</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>3.92</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Artists</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>2.15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TV hosts/DJ</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>1.32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Talk-show hosts</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>1.31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Others</td>
<td>8.10</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Others include unknown family members, friends, and unidentifiable people.
Qun, Li Yong, Ge You, Zhou En-lai, and Fan Wei), three foreigners (Charlie Chaplin, Mark Twain, Mr. Bean), and one Hong Kong comedian (Stephen Chow). Taken together, Hypothesis Three is well supported with the present findings, suggesting that in the minds of the Chinese undergraduates, humorists are mostly comprised of comedians, and the like.

4. Discussion

4.1. Significance of the present study

The present study illustrates that the Chinese undergraduates in Hong Kong and Huhehot all considered humor as being highly important for everyday life but mostly considered themselves to be non-humorous, particularly for
females. This echoes the previous findings that Chinese people generally consider themselves as being non-humorous even though they may be highly appreciative of humor (Chen 2006; Chen and Martin 2005, 2007; Liao 1998, 2001; Yue et al 2006). It confirms the proposed cultural ambivalence toward humor in Chinese society, as on one hand, Chinese people could be highly appreciative and envious of humor; on the other hand, they could all despise or fear humor (Liao 2007). This appreciation-despising complex is what Chinese people need to be keenly aware of and to overcome; after all, to laugh is a gifted need of all humans. Humor makes people feel relaxed regardless of age, gender, race, and language (Freud 1963; Ho and Lin 2000; Martin and Lefcourt 1983; Martin, Puhlik-Doris, Larsen, Gary and Weir 2003). Chinese people need to enjoy humor after thousands of years of discrimination against it (Liao 2003, 2007; Yue 2010). More attempts, academic or otherwise, should be made to promote humor as a way of better self-functioning, mental health, creative expression, personality refinement, and self actualization (Chen and Martin 2007) and as early as in elementary school (Liao 2007: 318).

The present study shows that humor is largely incompatible to Chinese personality as the core characteristics of the former are not associated with those for the latter. The undergraduates in Hong Kong and Huhehot shared more than they differed in their perception of the importance, make-up, and representatives of humor. This may be attributed to the fact that the traditional Chinese social system is rather rigid, defensive, and discouraging of independence; it stresses that importance of social harmony can be achieved through compromises and conformity (Bond 1996; Dunn, Zhang and Ripple 1988). Hence, in tune with Plato’s assertion that “What is honored in one’s country is what will be cultivated”, conformity, humility, and social formality are what has been valued in Chinese culture for thousands of years (Bond 1996). Humor, being informal and impersonal in nature, is everything that is consistent with the above prized virtues in Chinese society (Chen 1985) such that Chinese people sometimes even try to avoid humorous people (Liao 1998). So, to become truly humorous, Chinese people need to be genuinely appreciative of humor and to overcome their biases and fears against it. Liao, Chang, and Chou (2006) reported that 95% of a sample of 103 American undergraduates considered themselves to be humorous on average or above, but less than 3% of the 159 undergraduates in Hong Kong and of the 178 undergraduates in Huhehot nominated themselves to be humorists in the present study. It makes a big difference if one considers oneself humorous in the first place.

The present study also discovers that being humorous is perceived to be a lot more positive than being an orthodox Chinese. This needs to be interpreted
with caution as the present study singled out only the top ten most important characteristics for humor and the Chinese personality, studies using more sophisticated research designs and statistical analyses are needed before the claim could be solidly made. Nonetheless, it is highly important to examine the differences and similarities of the dispositional compositions of humor and Chinese personality in Chinese society. Chinese people need to be aware of their dispositional or motivational biases against humor in order to become truly humorous.

What is particularly striking of the present findings is that while humor is found to be closely associated with creativity in the West (e.g., Cropley 1992; Hocevar and Bachelor 1989; Runco and Bahleda 1986; Sternberg 1985; Wu 1992) and had a constructive impact on the quantity of ideas and the quality of creative thinking in groups (e.g., Robinson 1998), it is considered relatively unimportant for such high creativity demanding occupations as scientists, inventors, and musicians. This greatly explains why humor is consistently missing for being a typical and creative Chinese (Rudowicz 2003; Rudowicz and Yue 2000, 2003) and is lowly regarded in the Chinese conception of creativity (Rudowicz and Yue 2000; Yue et al 2006).

In short, humor is a natural behavior given to all humans and can be used for all purposes (Apte 1985; Lefcourt 2001; Martin 2007). It should not be mystified as much as it should not be stigmatized. Hoffding divided humor into great humor and small humor (Vejleskov 2001: 323), by which the former represents a philosophy of life whereas the latter is simply laughing and joking. Chinese people need to develop more confidence to become humorous (Chen 2006; Liao 2003: 156; Yue et al 2006).

4.2. Thoughts for further directions of studies

Humor has been rarely studied in Chinese society using empirical approaches (Chen and Martin 2007; Yue 2010). The present study scored as a pioneering attempt to empirically examine the Chinese ambivalence towards humor. Though quite a number of striking findings have been made and discussed in the proceeding paragraphs, this study would need to be improved in the following areas.

Firstly, a bigger and more diverse sample is needed to warrant the present claims. The samples should include not only college students from different parts of China, but also people from different walks of life. It would be particularly important to recruit people in rural areas of China so as to examine
how the lack of economic prosperity might affect the Chinese ambivalence to humor. It would equally be interesting to examine what differences ethnicity (different nationalities), education, and social-economic status (SES) would make in everyday use of humor.

Secondly, more complicated methods of data collection and statistical analyses should be used for further studies. The present study employed the “top factor approach” by identifying and comparing the top ten important characteristics for humor and Chinese personality respectively. Impressive as the differences are, this could only serve as an initial analysis. To further reveal the differences, factor analysis or multi-level scaling could be used to establish the compositions of humor and Chinese personality respectively and to examine their compatibility accordingly.

Thirdly, more standardized scales of humor should be used to examine how the Chinese ambivalence to humor is reflected. In fact, humor could be classified into four styles: affinitive, self-enhancing, aggressive, and self-defeating humor (Martin et al 2003). It would be interesting to examine of the four styles, which styles are most vulnerable to the Chinese ambivalence. It would also be interesting to examine cross-culturally how the Chinese humor ambivalence is similarly reflected in other Confucian-influencing zones in East Asia, such as in Japan, Korea, Singapore, and Vietnam. Thus conceived, the present study could serve as a pilot study of a large cross-cultural study that seeks to examine the existence and influence of the Chinese ambivalence to humor in Oriental societies. In addition, this study would also pave the ways for further studies on incompatibility of humor and Chinese personality in Chinese society.

Fourthly, Chinese undergraduates found to use humor as a self-enhancing strategy rather than a self-defeating one (Chen and Martin 2007). It would be necessary to explore further how Chinese people use humor to cope with stress in everyday life. For instance, Chinese undergraduates are found to use less aggressive humor to deal with life stress than their Canadian counterparts (Chen and Martin 2007). It would be interesting to examine how Chinese undergraduates avoided using aggressive humor to maintain interpersonal harmony. It would be also interesting to examine to what extent this is a function of the Chinese tolerance, politeness and concern for face in social interactions (Liao 2003). It would be particularly fascinating to examine the effect of face work and attitudes on use of humor styles in Chinese society (Chen and Martin 2007).

Lastly but not least, this study shows that Chinese people tend to be ambivalent about humor, but questions remain such as “what cognitive, dispositional, and motivational characteristics constitute such an appreciation-despising
complex towards humor?”, how it is embedded in the Chinese cultural values and interpersonal interactions, and how it affects Chinese people’s perception of humor remain largely unanswered. Further studies should try to examine what social, political, and educational values are attached to such an ambivalent view of humor and explore their implications for Chinese personality development, stress coping, and interpersonal relating practices in Chinese societies.

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Notes

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2. Huhehot is the capital city of Inner Mongolia Autonomous Region.

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