



## Guo Degang

### A *Xiangsheng* (Cross Talk) Performer Bridging the Gap Between *Su* (Vulgarity) and *Ya* (Elegance)

*Xiangsheng* 相声 (cross talk), which has been one of the most popular folk art performance genres with the Chinese people since its emergence during the Qing Dynasty, began to lose its popularity at the turn of the 1990s. However, this downward trajectory changed from about 2005, and it once again began to enthuse the public. The catalyst for this change in fortune has been attributed to Guo Degang and his Deyun Club 德云社. The general audience acclaim for Guo Degang's *xiangsheng* performance not only turned him into a *xiangsheng* master and a grassroots cultural hero, it also, somewhat absurdly, evoked criticism from a few critics. The main causes of the negative critiques are the mundane themes and the ubiquitous vulgar *baofu* 包袱 (comical elements) and rude jokes enlisted in Guo's *xiangsheng* performance that revolve around the subjects of ethics, pornography, and prostitution, and which turn Guo into a signifier of vulgarity. However, with the media platform provided via the Weibo 微博 microblog, Guo Degang demonstrates his penchant for refined taste and his talent as an elegant literati. Through an in-depth analysis of both Guo Degang's *xiangsheng* performance and his microblog entries, this paper will examine the contrasting features between Guo Degang's artistic creations and his "private" life. Also, through the opposing contents and reflections of Guo Degang's *xiangsheng* works and his microblog writings, an opaque and sometimes diametrically opposed insight into his worldviews is provided, and a glimpse of the dualistic nature of engagement and withdrawal from the world is revealed.

KEYWORDS: Guo Degang—*xiangsheng*—microblog—vulgarity—elegance—comic performing arts

GUO DEGANG has recently emerged as the new master of *xiangsheng* (cross talk), folk performance which combines stand-up comedy with pun and poetry. This has led to a resurgence of *xiangsheng* and to an increase in its popularity. Guo is widely regarded as a contemporary reviver of this ancient Chinese art, and his contribution to saving and recovering *xiangsheng* is a cultural breakthrough. It is of particular importance and relevance, as *xiangsheng*, as a representative form of traditional performing arts and a part of the intangible cultural heritage of China, was in danger of being lost in the barrage of new entertainment mediums and the loss of interest in traditional entertainment (MOU, TAN and LIU 2010, 1). In the extremely competitive entertainment market of contemporary China, particularly with the increasing popularity of talk shows and other stand-out comic performers such as Shanghai's Zhou Libo 周立波, Guo Degang helps make *xiangsheng* (viewed in China as a distinct performing art) stand out from among the other comic performing genres. Focusing more on current affairs, social debates, and foibles of present-day China, Zhou Libo's talk show lacks vulgarity in comparison to Guo Degang's *xiangsheng* performance, which retrieves the merits of traditional *xiangsheng* works with its abundance of smutty, banal jokes.

Born in 1973 in Tianjin 天津, a historical center of performing arts in China, Guo Degang began his career at the age of nine by learning *xiangsheng*. After years of practice he was able to perform hundreds of traditional and modern *xiangsheng* pieces and he became an expert in a broad range of folk art forms, such as *ping-shu* 评书 (storytelling), *jingju* 京剧 (Peking Opera), *pingju* 评剧 (a local opera of north and northeast China), *dagu* 大鼓 (drum song), *taiping geci* 太平歌词 (an old Chinese folk art similar to drum song), and *Hebei bangzi* 河北梆子 (Hebei clapper) (QIAN 2006, 51). All of these forms are also components of traditional *xiangsheng*.

Imitating other folk art forms is one of the four basic skills of a *xiangsheng* performer. The other three are *shuo* 说 (speaking), *dou* 逗 (teasing), and *chang* 唱 (singing). There exists an aesthetic tradition in the *quyi* 曲艺 (folk art) performance, called *yasugongshang* 雅俗共赏, which means the performance must suit both refined and popular tastes. This tradition explains how the *quyi* genres as a whole fascinate an extensive diversity of audience members—those who are enticed by the *ya* of the lyrics of a *dagu* piece as well as those who are interested in the *su* of a *xiangsheng* or *kuaibar* 快板儿 (rhythmic comic talk or monologue to the accompaniment of bamboo clappers) piece. Therefore, the *ya-su* dichotomy is already

implied within the totality of the genres as a whole and there is a mixture of *ya* and *su* genres in a singular *quyi* performance. For example, in a traditional *xiangsheng* work, there are often mini performances of some of the other *ya* genres, such as *dagu* and *taiping geci*, embedded within it. Thus, juxtaposing *ya* and *su* is already part of the *quyi* aesthetics, in particular for the *xiangsheng* performers.

At the age of 22, without any affiliations with formal performing arts groups, Guo made a risky decision to try his luck in China's cultural center, Beijing. In order to make a living, he performed in teahouses and ran errands for film crews, because at that time he was unable to obtain admission into the formal performing arts organizations due to having no "connections" in Beijing. In 1996, Guo Degang founded his own *xiangsheng* club, originally called Beijing *Xiangsheng* Meeting 北京相声大会 (*Beijing xiangsheng dahui*), which in 2003 was renamed the Deyun Club (*deyunshe* 德云社).<sup>1</sup> According to Guo, his purpose in establishing the club was to bring *xiangsheng* fans back to the theatre (ZHANG 2006; XIANG 2008, 156). After almost ten years of persistent striving, Guo Degang eventually made his name a popular *xiangsheng* brand (XIANG 2008, 157; FAN 2006, 85; QIAN 2006, 52), and his popularity began to grow in earnest, especially from the end of 2005 up until the present.<sup>2</sup>

One reason above all others that led to Guo's great success was the social and political critique embedded in his works, which could only be voiced in live club shows and not on radio or TV. According to Moser (cited in LINK 2013, 346), the presentation of real life is an "impossibility" in the CCTV Spring Festival TV Gala as a performer could not step out of line and crack a joke about current affairs, or satirize a leader, which is very much the case of Guo Degang's *xiangsheng* performance. Clearly the authorities only allowed Guo Degang's belated appearance in the 2013 CCTV Spring Festival TV Gala because his *xiangsheng* pieces could be largely circumscribed, whereas his regular routines could not.

There are several other distinguishing features that have contributed to Guo Degang's success. For example, the rich employment of folk art forms in his *xiangsheng* works have become a distinctive trait. A good example of Guo's talent may be found in *Leining zai 1918* 列宁在1918 [Lenin in 1918] (GUO n.d.2), as it exposes the depth of skills of Guo's training in folk art forms and his talent in vividly imitating different genres, such as *jingyun dagu* 京韵大鼓 (Beijing drum song), *pingju*, and *Hebei bangzi*. In *Lenin in 1918*, Guo cleverly inserts *pingju* ballads into the plot of a classic movie from the former Soviet Union, also titled *Leining zai 1918* [Lenin in 1918] (MILAIL 1939), and achieves a farcical effect. Lenin also appears as a hilarious subject in Jiang Wen's film (WEN 1995), which proposes that Guo's caricature is part of a generational reconfiguration of the revolutionary era in an ironical, reflective mode.

Besides resurrecting folk art forms practiced in traditional *xiangsheng* pieces into his own performance, the topics and contents of Guo Degang's works also reflect the social realities of contemporary China. Guo's works focus on the concerns of the Chinese commoners and topical social problems, such as brutal competition in the employment market, unspoken rules in the entertainment industry, mistresses of the wealthy people, prostitution, and pornography. These themes of

Guo's *xiangsheng* pieces are in sharp contrast to the subject matter of the official *xiangsheng* performances. Guo calls himself an "obscure" *xiangsheng* performer, and describes characters in his works as, for example, the "non-official scientist," the "non-official professor," and the "non-official scholar." In this way, he demarcates his work from those official *xiangsheng* performers who are capable only of singing praises of the government. "Official *xiangsheng* performers" are those *xiangsheng* performers who mainly perform through the mainstream and official arts and culture channel, such as the CCTV Spring Festival TV Gala. As noted by China's famous writer and blogger HAN HAN (2010), the Spring Festival Gala, as the biggest stage, painfully presents only poor-quality *xiangsheng* works that are full of flattering, eulogizing the government, and nauseating lines. In other words, these *xiangsheng* performers have been assimilated, politicized, and ideologized by official cultural policies. Besides "official *xiangsheng* works," there are plenty other insipid *xiangsheng* works on Chinese TV. Some of these *xiangsheng* works are just boring due to the poor quality of performance or are bland, even though they are not necessarily presenting propagandistic subject matter.

Another prominent feature that contributes much to the popularity of Guo Degang's *xiangsheng* performance is its secular focus on the daily routines of the commoners and its rich employment of vulgar *baofu* and dirty jokes, which has evoked criticism and condemnation from mainstream art critics and the official media. Of particular concern to the critics are loutish *baofu* and rude jokes enlisted in Guo's *xiangsheng* performance that concern ethics, pornography, and prostitution, which turn Guo into a signifier of vulgarity and a foul-mouthed and controversial figure. Although Guo's sarcastic and vulgar sketches received scorn from government censors in 2010, they were also exalted by millions of Chinese people. Guo's vulgarization of *xiangsheng* performance restored its intrinsic nature, catered to the aesthetic pursuit of the ordinary people, and challenged the prudish tradition of the CCP government. Further, through embodying and discussing the polar virtues of the vulgar vs. the refined in his routines, Guo created more interest in these issues with the Chinese public, and this increases Guo's standing as both a comic performer of a folk art and an influential writer in the public domain. Because of his audience impact, Guo has become a target for a central government anti-vulgarity campaign (as discussed in the following sections). It seems that this campaign has backfired though, because Guo was able to turn the tables by exalting *su*—a term that implies not just vulgar (a loaded term), but also simply "popular"/"populist," which turns Guo into a revolutionary figure in the contemporary Chinese culture sphere. The Guo Degang cause verifies Geremie BARME's observation on the 1980s Chinese cultural scene that government prohibitions no longer marked the end of one's career but, when appropriately managed, could often add to the public profile of a provocative artist (1999, xviii).

However, to conclude that Guo Degang is a vulgar person based on his *xiangsheng* performance would be superficial and a misunderstanding. Guo started writing microblog posts from the end of 2010 for Sina Web, which is one of the biggest commercial online media portals in mainland China, and whose microblogging section attracted numerous celebrity bloggers.<sup>3</sup> In many of his microblog

posts, Guo Degang demonstrates his talent as a writer with the refined taste of a traditional Chinese scholar. Guo is capable of writing traditional poetry with a half-classical and half-vernacular language style, which is identical to the Yuan Dynasty (1271–1368) *qu* verse. In addition, his microblogs show his inclination for elegant taste that is reflected in imitating the leisure activities of the traditional Chinese scholars, such as calligraphy, painting, and reading. Therefore, the interest and aesthetic appetite of Guo Degang’s pastimes exposed in his microblog entries contrast sharply with that of his *xiangsheng* works and provide a completely different and alternate image of him.

Through an in-depth textual analysis of both Guo Degang’s *xiangsheng* pieces and his microblog entries, this article endeavors to examine the polarizing characteristics of Guo Degang’s artistic creations and his other pastimes. Furthermore, through the antithetical contents and aesthetic proclivities of the seemingly oppositional dualism of Guo’s life, his worldviews and outlook on life are revealed; although, it seems puzzling and at times absurd as he oscillates between engaging with the world by criticizing the social evils of present-day China, and being transcendental and living the idyllic life of a recluse.

#### GUO DEGANG’S SU DEMONSTRATED IN HIS XIANGSHENG PERFORMANCE

*Xiangsheng*, as a traditional folk art performing genre, has historically featured profane topics and vulgar elements that poke fun at deteriorating ethics and pornography. In particular, before the founding of the People’s Republic of China (PRC), “non-vegetarian” performances, which refers to *xiangsheng* works that contain pornographic jokes, were exceptionally popular, actually mainstream (LINK 1992, 9). Of course, not all early *xiangsheng* routines were uncultured, as many routines focus on wordplay, puns, and songs with cultured themes. In traditional China, *xiangsheng* emerged from and was designed to entertain the ordinary working person of the lower social strata. The founding of the PRC in 1949 marked the beginning of a new social system, and in 1950, with Chairman Mao Zedong as the prime mover, a group of *xiangsheng* performers, headed by Lao She 老舍, Luo Changpei 罗常培, and Hou Baolin 侯宝林, organized the Small Group for the Improvement of *Xiangsheng* (*Beijing xiangsheng gaijin xiaozu* 北京相声改进小组, hereafter referred to as “the Group”). The Group modified many old *xiangsheng* pieces and removed pornographic or risqué jokes, references to inappropriate class attitudes, and other ideological flaws that were originally part of these works (LINK 1984, 97; XUE 1985, 124; XIANG 2008, 155). The Group eradicated the “unhealthy” content of *xiangsheng* and simultaneously conserved its form, so that it could be recycled as a conduit for reaching the Chinese masses with politically and socially acceptable messages (LINK 1992, 1), and also as a propaganda tool for the government (DUTTON 1998, 49). During the Mao era and even in the immediate post-socialist era, the CCP government believed itself obliged to regulate culture in all its aspects, such as form, content, production, distribution, and canonization (HOCKX 2015, 2). Generally speaking, the cultural censoring scheme in the PRC used a narrow attitude to humor, vigorously disheartening writers, filmmakers, and performers

from crafting entertainment that was not “eulogistic” (REA and VOLLAND 2008, viii). Even after the 1980s, humor, be it in slogans and officially disseminated jokes, was swiftly recognized as a practical sugar-coating for government propaganda (CHEY 2011, 19). Here, I argue the reformation of *xiangsheng* led by the Group built up a “velvet prison,” the phrase employed by Perry Link when he discusses the Hungarian writers’ situation in the 1950s (LINK 2013, 13), for the *xiangsheng* performers, within which the official ideology dulled their creative work.

Seen more as a political propaganda tool in the newly founded socialist state, beginning in the 1950s *xiangsheng* pieces came to be divided into *gesong* 歌颂 (praising) vs. *fengci* 讽刺 (satirical). Eulogistic *xiangsheng* works were also an important development after the founding of the PRC (XUE 1985, 145–46), and the work of Ma Ji 马季 is the best example of this development, with works such as *Lao zhanzhang* 老站长 [The old station master] and *Youji xiaoyingxiong* 游击小英雄 [Little guerrilla hero]. In rationalizing his work, Ma Ji said that he was influenced by Chairman Mao’s 1942 talks at the Yan’an Forum on Literature and Art. Mao’s instructions to the performers were to praise the people, praise the army, and praise the party (ANON. 2009). However, this new laudatory form of *xiangsheng* failed due to its poor quality (KAIKKONEN 1990, 143), as correct revolutionary passion only was not enough for a good piece of art. While often the eulogistic variety maps on the “official” *xiangsheng*, at certain political junctures the state has welcomed *fengci xiangsheng* to repudiate previous political regimes or policies.

At the end of the Cultural Revolution *xiangsheng*’s popularity increased, particularly when it was enlisted to mock the Gang of Four (MOSER 1990, 61) such as in *Ruci zhaoxiang* 如此照相 [Taking photos], and *Maozi gongchang* 帽子工厂 [Hat factory]. Sarcastic material, which had accrued during the Cultural Revolution, and political humor thrived among the people, which together make the post-1976 period a golden age for *xiangsheng* (KAIKKONEN 1990, 101). During the 1980s, the current representatives of the official *xiangsheng* establishment, such as Jiang Kun 姜昆, rose to fame. As time went on, more and more challenging pieces surfaced that were not just anti-Gang of Four, but also taunted the very underpinnings of official rhetoric. Jiang’s *Dianti Qiyu* 电梯奇遇 [Tempest in an elevator], which lampooned contemporary social ailments, such as excessive bureaucracy, is a good example of this newly found artistic risk-taking. Writers and artists competed for the honor of being the first to lampoon a particular “socialist” factory, a Party secretary, or any other taboo. *Xiangsheng* pieces during this post-Cultural Revolution period were nonconformist by nature and “particularly relieving and invigorating and therefore extra stimulating” (KAIKKONEN 1990, 156).

Just as the members of the Group shifted the social function of *xiangsheng* from entertainment to the political tool of “serving the party,” Guo Degang completed the paradigm shift by turning its focus back to “serving the people” as a means of entertainment and social criticism. Guo resurrected the essence of *xiangsheng*, successfully commercialized it in a market economy, and simultaneously deconstructed the official discourse through grassroots means. For Guo Degang, the “de-vulgarizing” of the art form by the Group at an early stage of socialist China destroyed its original essence as a source of entertainment. Guo’s return to the core

values of traditional *xiangsheng* revives its intended purpose, which is to entertain the common people by inserting boorish *baofu* and jokes of a primitive nature in his *xiangsheng* performance. Most importantly, Guo Degang's *xiangsheng* pieces regenerate a style of one-upmanship humor between the two comedians of the *xiangsheng* that was essentially expunged from *xiangsheng* in the first decade following the founding of the PRC.

The jokes used by the two comedians empowered the *dougen* 逗哏 (joke-cracker) to offend the *penggen* 捧哏 (joke-setter) by, for instance, deriding the generation of the *penggen*, or imputations about the fidelity/chastity of the *penggen*'s mother or wife, etc. In some of Guo Degang's famous pieces, as seen in YouTube recordings, there exist an extremely high percentage of jokes that revolve around the "old-style" rivalry between the *dougen* and the *penggen* characters. Guo Degang's *su*, I contend, stems from his retrieval of the "unethical" jokes and humor that are embedded in traditional *xiangsheng* performance, which was necessitated by the state's crackdown on humor. These restrictions by the state unintentionally forced popular *xiangsheng* performers such as Guo Degang to find mileage for jokes in "filthy" material. For example, mentioning pornography and prostitution, particularly in the social context of present-day China, is a regular routine in Guo's *xiangsheng* pieces, which is also criticized and censured by the mainstream cultural critics as *su*, as they offended the Party censors for their overt earthy and bawdy content. This timely social satire, together with its political potential serves as a reason why Guo Degang is labeled as *su* by representatives of the state, although it may also be that the state is using this criticism as a subterfuge for suppressing political and social criticism. In the case of Guo Degang, although humor could not be used when censorship and social control were most stiffly enforced in China, however, when some freedom was sanctioned, humor seemed to realize a need for self-expression and acknowledgment of unspoken truths (CHEY 2011, 26). However, despite the official "crackdown," Guo Degang's renovation of *xiangsheng* caters to the demands and tastes of the contemporary Chinese who are tired of didactic lecturing found in the prudish traditions of the predominant government ideological rhetoric, and have already seen through the truth of the "manufactured" and self-endorsed harmonious society of present-day China.

The "old-style" rivalry between the *dougen* and the *penggen* characters is best exemplified in Guo Degang's performance through a traditional *xiangsheng* means of derision, *xiangua* 现挂 (improvised lines). During a performance, a performer may change or simply add a few lines to the pieces according to the particular occasion, place, and time, in order to catch the public's attention more effectively (KAIKKONEN 1990, 243). *Xiangua* is widely used by Guo Degang in his performances as he playfully mocks a performing partner or other performers and their wives, children, and other family members. The teasing usually focuses on names, age, appearance, or the subject's abnormal or immoral behavior. For instance, giving the performing partner's father a different surname than the partner indicates the partner's illegitimate birth, and hinting at affairs concerning the partner's wife puts the partner in an awkward situation. In almost all of the *xiangsheng* pieces performed by Guo and his performing partner Yu Qian 于谦, Guo routinely teases

Yu. For example, he always addresses Yu's son as Guo Xiaobao 郭小宝, thus hinting that he, Guo, has had an adulterous relationship with Yu's wife; or, Guo often calls Yu's father "brother," which automatically makes him Yu's elder. In other cases, Guo labels Yu's father as Uncle Wang, which implies that Yu is an illegitimate son. In his recent works such as *Haobao xuexi* 好好学习 (GUO n.d.I), Guo Degang improvised the name of his performing partner, Yu Qian:

Guo: This is the famous *xiangsheng* performer *LuBian* [donkey penis].

Yu: I must stop you here. Please say my name clearly. The way you pronounce it makes it sounds like an aphrodisiac.

Guo: His surname is Yu, so that his full name is Yu Bian [a male fish's sexual organ].

Yu: So it is getting smaller.

Guo: It is a whale actually.

In the above improvised lines, Guo Degang substitutes "Yu Qian" with "Lu Bian," which factually means the penis of a donkey, as "bian" by itself refers to the male organ of an animal. Further, in Chinese medical customs and culture, an animal's penis can be used as an aphrodisiac to boost a man's sexuality. As Yu is Yu Qian's surname, Guo Degang thus changes it to "Yu Bian," which refers to a male fish's sexual organ. To overtly mention the sexual organs, whether it is veiled or not, is still very much a taboo within Chinese cultural and media domains.

Also in *Haobao xuexi* (GUO n.d.I), Guo Degang employs Japanese adult video actors as *baofu*. In his *xiangua* of his performing partner's year of birth, he says:

Guo: In the year you were born there was a bad famine, and both the granary and the well were empty.

Yu: You mean *cangjingkong*.

*Cangjingkong* is the Chinese pronunciation of the name of a well-known Japanese pornographic video actress. Japanese names are generally written in Chinese characters, and coincidentally, *cang*, *jing*, and *kong* not only rhyme but they also have the same denotation as the Chinese characters "granary," "well," and "empty." Thus, the smart use of the name of a Japanese pornographic video actor in his *xiangsheng* works not only recovers the "vulgar essence" of the old-fashioned *xiangsheng* pieces but also enhances the entertainment value of the work. In the same work, Guo Degang and his performing partner Yu Qian converse:

Guo: Let's do a role play. We are two Japanese youths now. You are the girl and I am the boy.

Yu: Do we have names?

Guo: Your name is "Cangjing Maliya."

Yu: I have to complete two people's workload.

Guo: I am your boyfriend, and my name is "without an end."

Yu: Your physical condition fits really well.

In this conversation, Guo Degang presumes himself and Yu Qian as actors in Japanese adult videos. Cangjing Maliya is a mixture of the names of Cangjingkong and Xiaoze Maliya (Ozawa Maria), another very trendy Japanese adult movie



actress who is equally famous in China. Moreover, the name “without an end” hints that the man Guo is performing as has sexual prowess.

Overt puns and innuendo focusing on pornography and prostitution are ubiquitous in Guo Degang’s *xiangsheng* pieces, which, as discussed above, are also considered and denounced by the official ideology as *su*, since they go against the prudish tradition of the CCP cultural discourse. Further, these smutty and vulgar themes and topics expose too much of the dark side and corrupt nature of the current Chinese society, which the audience can immediately relate to as they are fed up with the social malaise and moral deterioration of their society. In *Haohao xuexi* (Guo n.d.1), Guo depicts a man’s experience in a nightclub:

Guo: I went in the nightclub and said to the waiter: “Give me two and they must be under eighteen.”

Yu: You should not say such things so clearly [to be overheard].

Guo: What do you think I am ordering? Girls? You are too lewd. I am ordering mixed fruit dishes. I want them no more than eighteen yuan.

Yu: I also think you are ordering mixed fruit dishes.

Here, in this skit, Guo and his partner fire not-so-subtle barbs at the pornography and sex industry in contemporary China, which, although banned by law, operates broadly in KTVs (karaoke bars), nightclubs, and public baths. This pointed social satire wins applause for Guo from his fans for his deep understanding of the social reality of modern-day China, although there is little doubt that propaganda officials will see it as exposing the dark side of contemporary China.

In another work, *Niyao gaoya* 你要高雅 (GUO n.d.4), puns and witty remarks are employed to signify prostitution. Guo also makes good use of the Chinese language and words with similar pronunciations:

Guo: I have looked at your *whoremonger* (*piaoke* 嫖客).

Yu: Wait a moment, I think you mean *weblog* (*boke* 博客)?

Guo: There are a lot of people who have *hired you* (*dianni* 点你).

Yu: I do not provide a service. You should say *click* (*dianji* 点击).

Guo: What? To *click on your weblog* (*dianni*) means to *hire a prostitute* (*dianji* 点鸡)?

Here, *piaoke* (meaning *whoremonger*) is a clever substitute for *boke* (meaning *blog*), as their Chinese pronunciation rhymes, and *dianni* has two semantic meanings in a Chinese cultural context: first, it can be understood as a computer mouse “click,” as on a webpage or blog; second, in Chinese slang it means “hiring a prostitute” in the context of prostitution, as a prostitute is nicknamed *chicken* (*ji* 鸡) in Chinese slang. And *dianji* also means a mouse “click,” and has an explicit connotation of “hiring a prostitute.”

In *Woyao fansansu* 我要反三俗 (GUO n.d.5), Guo entwines official discourse into his plots, which most likely is the cause of the tension between himself and officialdom. It also reveals his uncooperative and antagonistic attitude toward the criticism of the official performers and critics. The “three vulgarities” refers to coarseness 低俗 (*disu*), profanity 庸俗 (*yongsu*), and obscenity 媚俗 (*meisu*), and Guo invents an Association to Counter the Three Vulgarities 反三俗协会 (*fansansu*

*xiehu*). In this work, “counter the three vulgarities” is a slogan projected to mirror political campaigns such as Three Anti, Five Anti, the Anti-Rightist Movement, and the Cultural Revolution. For example, the fictional members of the Association of Counter the Three Vulgarities are described by Guo in his work as “people with integrity, people who have given up vulgar tastes,” which were popular movement slogans in the CCP’s (Chinese Communist Party) lexicon of political discourse. Besides vulgar tastes, Guo adds “people who do not eat meals that human beings eat,” which is a line used to counterweight the loftiness and idealism of the official ideological propaganda and to add an element of humor.

When mimicking a character that has a wide waist, his performing partner asks what is wrong with his waist, and Guo replies: “It was wounded during the Counter the Three Vulgarities years,” which again juxtaposes the fictional campaign with other factual political movements. Parallels between the Counter the Three Vulgarities campaign and historical political movements are also shown when the members of the Association go to a public bathhouse, where prostitutes are known to frequent, to complete their “mission” and to achieve “allocated quotas” of vulgar people they must catch. Here “allocated quota” is a clichéd signifier of existing political movements in the history of socialist China as there were “quotas” of the rightists and counter-revolutionaries to be caught that were allocated from the central government, and each work unit must complete them. Furthermore, when the characters are invited by the prostitutes to buy their service, they accept and say, “I will just go and fulfil the missions of the Counter the Three Vulgarities Campaign,” which reveals the hypocritical nature of the CCP cadres. These innuendoes, hinting at the political movements of the previous decades under Mao’s reign, are skillfully woven into Guo’s *xiangsheng* performance, and these features distance and differentiate him from official entertainment.

Although there are signs designating a political thawing in the cultural and artistic spheres, Guo Degang’s *xiangsheng* performances outwardly went too far for the official censor. In July 2010, the then-Chairman Hu Jintao 胡锦涛 explicitly rejected the Three Vulgarities from the cultural realm of contemporary China (ANON. 2010). In August, the CCP’s Propaganda Department propelled a new cultural campaign, the Counter the Three Vulgarities campaign (this campaign was used in Guo’s performance as a made-up event), at which time Guo Degang and his *xiangsheng* productions were labelled as vulgar.

On 4 August 2010, CCTV aired a program on their News Studio section condemning the representatives who were ferreted out during the state’s official Counter the Three Vulgarities Campaign. Although Guo’s name was not mentioned outright, the criticism below was undoubtedly directed at him: “Between the merits and trash of the profession, he chose the latter. Between healthy trends and unhealthy trends, he chose the latter....This public figure’s secular and vulgar behavior is so ugly” (PENG 2010, 68). As a result of the official denunciation, two of Guo’s most favorite disciples publicized their withdrawal from the Deyunshe, and many major Beijing video stores were ordered to remove videos of Guo from their shelves. All programs on local television stations in which Guo took part were replaced by alternatives. Consequently, the Deyunshe announced that it would

temporarily cease performing and conduct a rectification within the club (PENG 2010, 68).

Apart from the government vilification, Jiang Kun, the celebrated *xiangsheng* performer and the current Chairman of the Association of China's Folk Art Performers, asked the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference to pay attention to the budding vulgar tendency within little theatre performances and other cultural activities. Without mentioning Guo Degang's name, Jiang Kun covertly critiqued Guo's *xiangsheng* performance as vulgar and immodest, which caused a series of verbal skirmishes between the two. In his response to Jiang Kun's criticism, Guo Degang claims that his *xiangsheng* works contribute much in assisting to build a harmonious socialist society. Here, Guo's self-praising is in line with the Confucian humor traditions, as Confucius proposed balancing physical (or psychological) tension with entertainment and in conducting emotion toward decency through the *Rites*, a historical book he compiled. Continuous withholding of emotion was perceived as detrimental to health and perilous to society, as stifled emotions can explode and disturb personal or social life (XU 2011, 52), and this Confucian understanding of humor stems from a weighty concern for social morality, order, and harmony (XU 2011, 70). Based on my observations, Jiang Kun's caution and condemnation of Guo Degang's performance is because he, Jiang, is the so-called "*xiangsheng* master" in the post-Cultural Revolution era, during which he emerged as a hero in performing politically oriented *xiangsheng* pieces, such as those that criticize the Gang of Four. These politically informative *xiangsheng* works set themselves apart from the traditional *xiangsheng* pieces that have been reformed by the Group. However, Guo has been able to successfully retrieve the inherent characteristics of old *xiangsheng* works and consequently remove the "political function" of *xiangsheng* as a folklore and cultural propaganda tool of the Party. Jiang Kun therefore feels that it is his responsibility to monitor the development of *xiangsheng* performance in regards to guiding it down a correct political and ideological route. Moreover, Jiang Kun's public identity as a government official lends him superiority as a mainstream power that supervises and regulates the "non-official" performers, such as Guo Degang.

#### GUO DEGANG'S 7A REFLECTED IN HIS MICROBLOG ENTRIES

Microblogging, which is a mutation of blogging, is an indisputably important grassroots intermediary (JENKINS 2006, 179), a new form of personal and sub-cultural manifestation which encompasses summarizing and linking to other sites (JENKINS 2006, 151), and it has become a popular platform for social networking in present-day China. Not only is it popular among ordinary Chinese, but also it is widely utilized by celebrities as a medium to help them keep in touch with their fans. For example, some celebrities write regular microblog entries to inform fans about selected parts of their private lives. This may include events, such as announcements of their engagement and marriage, their travels, photos, and encounters with others, all of which may be used to promote their works. Some celebrity microbloggers use this medium to exhibit their talent in writing

or to promote their views on certain topics. Guo Degang's microblog functions in all the above mentioned categories, and reveals an utterly different side to the public Guo Degang. There are two noticeable aspects in Guo Degang's microblog writing that highlight his aesthetic penchant for *ya*, which is in sharp contrast with his *su* as demonstrated in his *xiangsheng* works. One of them is his gift in writing traditional poetry, which appears quite often in his microblog posts, where he uses both vernacular and classical languages and shows an artistic conception of elegance and refined taste. The other is his obsession with a lifestyle that is enjoyed by traditional Chinese literati and scholars.

Although it seems that the theatrical persona is obviously staged and the private persona is the "real" Guo, it may also be argued that the glimpses afforded to us via his blog postings are also just staged as a counter to his risqué stage performances. Whatever psycho-philosophical position we take on what is the "real" Guo, there is no doubt that both available personas are talented and complimentary. Although it is arguable that Guo's Weibo postings are not comparable in a creative sense to his performance output, they have attracted millions of fans for Guo on the virtual social networking platform. Many of Guo's Weibo postings, in particular those poems written in classical inflected verse, gained hundreds and thousands of retransmissions and likes, which gives his Weibo posts lots of influence with his *xiangsheng* fans. Through extending his creative force into online social network conduits such as Weibo, Guo Degang has revived the tradition of *quyi*, which calls for *yasugongshang*. By including a considerable part of the *ya* elements in his *xiangsheng* performance, Guo risks losing some *su* fans in the highly competitive cultural marketplace of present-day China. Conversely, if he only did performance advertising in his Weibo posts, Guo would risk losing the opportunity to display his literary talents to his fans. Therefore, Guo's clever construction and combination of the so-called public and private personas of himself reciprocate rather than clash with each other.

Following this sense, I argue that through his microblog posts, Guo Degang provides a more balanced public image to his fans. In countering the "vulgar" nature and impression he leaves on the public stage audience, Guo has used his microblog entries to counterbalance the excesses of *su* in his *xiangsheng* performer persona. Guo has a savvy understanding of social media culture and it permits every fan to feel an instant association with the celebrity they "follow." Guo's clever use of social media exemplifies a larger trend among Chinese celebrities to use the internet to "talk back" to their audience, industry, and government. They do this to eschew being categorized in certain roles, or to elude the constrictions they face when acting in film, on television, and through other broadcast media. In today's China, celebrity's blogs and microblogs have millions of followers, which has turned social media into the most effective and wide-reaching means for celebrities to communicate with their fans. Some celebrities display talents which otherwise may go unnoticed in their on-screen roles. Others use social media to quell rumors regarding their private life and to provide information about their close friends and relationships. Social media, especially microblogging, has proved

itself a functional and efficient venue for celebrities to keep in touch and promote themselves among their existing or potential fans.

Through his blog posts Guo Degang is widely recognized as a talented writer by the Chinese netizens who are playing an important role in the contemporary Chinese cultural and media spheres.<sup>4</sup> Guo's unique talent rests on his gift of constructing traditional poetry utilizing both classical and vernacular lexicons, a talent that may have been acquired from his years of reciting and studying the traditional folk-art texts and performances. Guo Degang endeavors to write in classically inflected verse, and that situates his writing as *ya* or elegant. Compared to the Tang 唐诗 poems, the Song *ci* 宋词 poetry, and the Yuan *qu* 元曲 verse, Guo Degang's writing is more casual in both thematic topics and versification traditions. I think that Guo Degang is trying to imitate Yuan *qu* verse in style, however that does not mean that his writing is comparable with Yuan *qu* verse. The Yuan *qu* verse is read more like the popular literature of today, however, its combination of elegance and subtlety of poetry and classical Chinese along with popular and mundane expression and theme, forms a literary genre that is humorous, unaffected, and forthright. Similar to the Tang poems and the Song *ci* poetry, the Yuan *qu* verse also follows fixed forms of versification conventions that have different combinations and choices of word numbers and lines, tonal patterns, and rhyme schemes. However, the Yuan *qu* verse enjoys more freedom than other types of classical Chinese poetry composition in regard to abiding by established patterns and versification rules.

In the case of Guo Degang, his poetry writing is similar in genre to the Yuan *qu* verse but even more casual in setting word numbers, tonal patterns, and rhyme schemes. However, it is still read, to a certain extent, like traditional verse in terms of its use of words and phrases of classical language. In particular, when compared to the popular literature written in pure vernacular language nowadays, such as modern poems and novels, Guo Degang's writing in classically inflected verse demonstrates the elegance and charm of the classical Chinese language and verse. One of his recent microblog posts (7 February 2014, MB11) is an example:

大年初八，德云社一队开箱！雷轰天地，风扫雾霾。帝里繁华巷满莺花添锦路，仙家静寂云穿虬树锁丹崖。

[On this eighth day of the new lunar year, the Deyun Club premieres its new season! Rolls of thunder fill heaven and earth;

Wind sweeps the smog away.

In the capital, bursting blossoms adorn bustling alleyways.

In the silent heavens, cloud wends its way through bending trees and envelops gorgeous cliffs.]

In this microblog entry, which was used to commemorate the opening performance of the Deyun Club in 2014, it is easy to discern the rhyme scheme and the lingering charm of the classically inflected verse. It shows Guo Degang's capacity to handle classical Chinese language and artistic conception. For example, the classical phrases *qiushu* 虬树 (bending tree) and *danya* 丹崖 (gorgeous cliff) are used by Guo in this small verse to describe the spectacular scenery of ancient China,

which is full of lingering charm and magnificence. In traditional Chinese poetry and verse, depiction of scenery was frequently used to connote the emotional and artistic conception haunting the poet, and is full of subtlety and elegance that leaves room for the reader to muse and imagine. Therefore, the scenery and artistic imagery of the traditional poetry are replicated by Guo in this verse. In addition, Guo's choice of words like *qiu* 虬 (bending) and *dan* 丹 (gorgeous), which belong to the classical lexicon and are no longer used in vernacular Chinese, show his familiarity with classical language and verse.

In another entry (3 November 2013, MB7), Guo Degang wrote:

一声飞鸿叫，撕破了碧天皱，秋来才知愁时候。金井锁梧桐，人比黄花瘦。疏雨点滴，池荷添锈。几株衰柳，欲解凄凉何能够。

[The call of the flying goose tears through the blue folds of the sky.

Only when autumn arrives do we realize the time.

The phoenix tree is bound up in gold, and the people are more slender still than chrysanthemums.

Rain drips; lotus rusts.

Withered willows hope for an end to the chill.]

Similarly, in this verse Guo Degang employs typical and popular scenery and imagery of traditional Chinese poetry such as *feihong* 飞鸿 (flying goose), *wutong* 梧桐 (phoenix tree), *huanghua* 黄花 (chrysanthemum), and *shuailiu* 衰柳 (withered willow), to depict the sorrowful connotation of autumn. Flying geese migrate from the north to the south of China at the beginning of autumn, therefore in traditional Chinese it represents the change of season; the phoenix tree has a classic implication of grief in traditional Chinese writing; a withered willow acts as a metaphor of farewell; and chrysanthemum symbolizes the noble character of the ancient Chinese literati, who are indifferent to fame and wealth. Through this verse, Guo Degang shows his knowledge of traditional Chinese literature and culture, and imitates the ancient poets to express sentiment and thought via observing and appreciating the natural scenery, which is full of sophistication and delicacy. Guo expresses in this verse his identification with the noble characters of the ancient man of letters through the connotation of the chrysanthemum.

In an entry written on 27 January 2014 (MB12), Guo Degang writes:

朔风凛冽，雾霭霾霾。颠狂衰草，难分辨野店楼台。梅花片似剪裁，凄凉尽在墙儿外。冰天如玉砌，银枝似粉埋。推锦被踏雪白，开眼界少卖乖，游遍江川策蹇归来，诗成酒后天地犹嫌窄。

[The north wind is piercingly cold; fog makes haze. Ailing grass withers, and it is hard to make out any landmarks. Plum blossoms have been pruned, and the sadness is outside the wall. The icy sky is layered like jade; silver branches appear coated in powder. Emerging from an embroidered quilt, I tread on the snow outside. I must look where I am going and show off less; I roamed mountains and rivers but came back lame. When poetry is done and wine drunk, even the world seems small and narrow.]

In this post, written in the midwinter of Beijing, Guo Degang first describes the beautiful scenery of the city after a strong wind and heavy snow. He then

moves on to describe his thoughts and feelings, and reveals an image of himself as an unruly literati whose profligate and unrestrained nature is exaggerated when composing poems, while drinking alcohol after travelling across the country. Here, drinking alcohol, travel for pleasure, and composing poems, are distinguished life routines of the traditional Chinese literati with natural and unrestrained temperaments, such as Li Bai 李白 (Tang Dynasty poet) and Bai Juyi 白居易 (Tang Dynasty poet), who are famous for their contempt of dignitaries and for pursuing freedom and lofty ideals. Similarly, in this verse Guo Degang demonstrates an elegant and unruly personality that mirrors the traditional Chinese man of letters. In the post above, 蹇 (pronounced *jian*) is a very rare word in classical Chinese language that means lame. Here, Guo's employment of this particular character in his verse indicates not only his level of proficiency in classical Chinese but also his unruly spirit that mirrors that of ancient Chinese literati.

Besides imitating the writing of traditional Chinese literati, Guo Degang's microblog entries also reveal his other pastimes and hobbies, which are also highly identifiable with the leisure activities of the traditional Chinese poet. When he does not perform, Guo Degang spends his time reading, practicing traditional calligraphy, painting, writing poems, and collecting antiques. He is also a collector of fan painting and calligraphy. In ancient China, fan painting and calligraphy was popular among scholars and literati, and a fan with one's own painting and calligraphy was used as a gift to friends to symbolize friendship. Fans with drawings and calligraphy of famous people are highly desirable, and in one of his 28 January 2014 (MB13) posts, Guo Degang attached a photo of a fan that he painted for his performing partner, Yu Qian, on that day. In his 16 November 2013 entry, Guo attached a photo of a fan that was offered to him by Yu Qian as a present. This fan is an antique as it was painted by the Peking Opera master Mei Laifang 梅兰芳 and was inscribed by the Kunqu Opera master Yu Zhenfei 余振飞. In another post written on 5 October 2013 (MB6), Guo showed photos of a recently purchased antique fan painted by another Peking Opera master, Zhou Xinfang 周信芳.

In one of his 22 November 2013 (MB10) microblog posts, Guo Degang wrote:

秋意甚浓。沏花茶，烫黄酒。沐手焚香，盘竹根润手串...

[The sense of autumn is strong,  
I brew jasmine tea and heat yellow rice wine.  
I light incense and wash hands,  
Wetting my bracelet of bamboo beads...]

In his 9 January 2013 (MB4) entry, Guo said:

闻香品茗习字听曲，观窗外积雪，闻室内虫鸣，人生之快无过于此...

[There is no greater happiness in life than smelling flowers, sipping tea, practicing calligraphy, listening to folk music, gazing at the piles of snow outside, or hearing birdsong inside...]

Drinking tea and alcohol; burning incense; observing flowers, rain, or snow; listening to ancient music; and appreciating bamboo carving are common pastimes of traditional Chinese literati, and show their aesthetic sensitivity and cul-

tured taste. For a star who is admired and supported by millions of fans and has long immersed himself in an extremely colorful and materialistic world of entertainment, Guo Degang's leisure pursuits, to certain degree, suggest a person with refined taste, which seems antithetical to the vulgarity embedded in his *xiangsheng* performance. In another entry posted on 26 May 2011 (MB2), Guo wrote:

闷坐不如品茶，品茶不如饮酒，饮酒不如吃面，吃面不如吃肉，吃肉不如吃鸟，吃鸟不如养鸟，养鸟不如放生，放生不如观棋，观棋不如弹琴，弹琴不如写字，写字不如画画，画画不如登山...

[Sipping tea is more enjoyable than sitting still, drinking wine is more enjoyable than sipping tea, eating noodles is more enjoyable than drinking wine, eating meat is more enjoyable than eating noodles, eating a bird is more enjoyable than eating meat, keeping a bird is more enjoyable than eating a bird, freeing a bird is more enjoyable than keeping a bird, watching a game of chess is more enjoyable than freeing a bird, playing music is more enjoyable than watching a game of chess, writing calligraphy is more enjoyable than playing music, drawing is more enjoyable than writing calligraphy, climbing a mountain is more enjoyable than drawing...]

In this entry, Guo uses pure vernacular language written in repeated sentence structure to explain his pursuit of the elegant enjoyments that are popular among traditional Chinese scholars. This post does not follow any versification rules of conventional poetry, however, through repeating the same syntax pattern in every sentence it becomes carefree, humorous, unpretentious, and frank. In a relaxed atmosphere created by this simple way of expression, Guo Degang voices the happiness he obtains from the cultured recreational activities of the ancient intellectuals, such as playing chess and music, and practicing calligraphy and painting.

Guo Degang also tells of his love for bamboo in his 7 November 2013 (MB8) post, with a group of photos of the bamboo handicrafts he has collected:

喜爱竹子。竹者重节，节者为信。

[I love bamboo. Bamboo is a traditional symbol of integrity, and that which has integrity is trustworthy.]

Bamboo is frequently used in traditional Chinese poetry as a symbol of the exemplary conduct and noble character of a person, and it is admired and appreciated by traditional Chinese literati. Guo Degang uses bamboo as a medium to reveal his viewpoint on the behavior of a "perfect gentleman."

#### GUO DEGANG'S WORLDVIEWS REFLECTED IN HIS *YA* AND *SU*

Guo Degang's *su* embedded in his *xiangsheng* performance and his *ya* reflected by his microblog entries, reveal different and sometimes even contradictory worldviews. A comparison between his *xiangsheng* shows and his microblog posts indicates that his outlook on life is ambiguous and wavers between engaging with the world through critiquing social problems and being transcendental and living like a hermit. In many of Guo Degang's *xiangsheng* works, although many of them contain *su* elements, he courageously uses satire of topical social problems and injustices that are rampant across contemporary China to reveal his cynicism and to win



admiration from his fans. An example of his satire may be found in *Woyao shangchunwan* 我要上春晚 (n.d.7), which depicts a young man wanting to use “unspoken rules” to get an acting opportunity by using the “casting couch” with the female director. However, when the director opens her bedroom door, the young man finds that the male producer is in her bed. The plot cleverly lampoons the “unspoken rules”—the dirty tricks that are rampant in the entertainment industry, as well as within Chinese society. In *Woyao naofeiwen* 我要闹绯闻 (Guo n.d.6), a girl offers herself to the male director in order to get a role in his film. Soon after they finish making love, the girl slaps the director and says, “You bastard, how come you didn’t let me know in advance that you are actually a cartoon director?” Also in *Woyao naofeiwen*, Guo Degang mocks the mistress problem in contemporary China. In China today, it is a common belief that rich businessmen and government officials have mistresses, and this reflects the moral degradation of Chinese society. In one scene, Guo depicts a traffic jam on the road near a film academy. There are an unusual number of vehicles there because all the entrepreneurs of Beijing city have gathered there to pick their mistresses up when they finish school (they are pretty, young, female acting students). This plot mirrors the social reality of today’s China and pokes fun at a morally declining society.

In *Lun wushi nian xiangsheng zhi xianzhuang* 论五十年相声之现状 (GUO n.d.3), Guo focuses on social paradox and injustice:

People who have enormous knowledge may not produce books  
 The knowledge in books may not be good  
 Those leaders in work units may not be qualified  
 Those dismissed (from work) may not be all bad  
 Bookstores may not sell books  
 Pharmacies may not sell drugs  
 Nutritious drinks may not have nutrition  
 People who go to public baths may not get a shower  
 People who go to KTV may not go for the singing  
*Xiangsheng* stars may not know how to perform *xiangsheng*  
 Singers may not know music  
 People who love each other may not be husband and wife  
 Husband and wife may not love each other.

The remarks above appear casual, but they contain candid logic and reflect the reality of contemporary Chinese society. For example, the relationship between knowledge and power reflects the inequitable competition within academic circles; the qualified and dismissed leaders reveal the unspoken rules—the under-the-table deals and games in Chinese officialdom; the services provided by the public baths and KTV disclose the growth of prostitution and the sex industry; and legal and illegal partners hints at corrupt social morals. In a certain number of his *xiangsheng* pieces, Guo specifically ferrets out the malaise and injustice in Chinese society, which reflects to some degree his outlook on life, which is to engage with the world and to combat social injustice.

However, Guo Degang’s microblog entries show an utterly diverse temperament and worldview where he wants to stay away from mundaneness and social

concerns and to live a pleasant life. Guo's relaxed and tranquil mood reflected in his microblog posts may be the result of his success after years of painful struggles in the *xiangsheng* circle. As he has revealed in many interviews, before he found fame and wealth he could barely support himself in Beijing and was pushed aside by the Beijing *xiangsheng* circle, until he became a disciple of Hou Yuewen 侯跃文 and the Hou School.<sup>5</sup> Even after his success, Guo Degang has been criticized and condemned by critics and official propaganda organs because of the vulgar elements of his *xiangsheng* performance, which has resulted in numerous verbal skirmishes and disputes between Guo and his antagonists. Media reports frequently distort the facts and smear Guo's image, and it is a combination of all these experiences that contribute to Guo's understanding of the fickleness of the world and the evolution of his outlook on life.

In a post written on 16 June 2011 (MB3), Guo said:

... 看破人生梦一度，也只好携琴揽酒观山望水纸扇长衫笑天涯！

[Seeing that life is but a dream, what can I do but don a long gown, take up a fan, zither, and wineglass, gaze into the distance, and chuckle to the ends of the earth!]

Another entry composed on 27 April 2011 (MB1) reads,

遇好晴天，好山水，好书，好字画，好花，好酒，好心情，须受用领略，方不虚度...

[When you happen upon fine weather, scenery, books, painting and calligraphy, flowers, wine, or mood, savor the experience; do not let it pass in vain.]

Also in his post written on 22 July 2013 (MB5),

书房内荷莲绽放，心情大悦。三千年读史，不外功名利禄；九万里悟道，终归诗酒田园<sup>6</sup>

[The lotus [flowers] in my study are in full bloom, bringing me great delight. For three thousand years, Chinese history has recorded only matters of position and wealth. Having travelled the world and attained enlightenment, I have come to favor the simple things in life.]

In the above microblog posts, Guo Degang depicts the idyllic lifestyle of the traditional Chinese scholar, which is to read history and write poems, appreciate painting and calligraphy, play music, drink alcohol, observe flowers and natural scenery, and travel for pleasure. It seems that Guo had penetrated the mysteries of life that burden those chasing and experiencing fame, wealth, and achievement, which is despised by him as he now prefers a pastoral life where he can pursue his refined hobbies and live like a traditional Chinese intellectual. However, Guo Degang is still unable to give up his *xiangsheng* performances, as it was he who revived *xiangsheng*, and he wishes to carry on this trend.

## CONCLUSION

By juxtaposing and examining Guo Degang's *xiangsheng* performance and his microblog entries, this paper sheds light on the *su* nature of his artistic creation and the *yu* trait in his microblog writings. Guo Degang's intentional restoration

of the “immoral” jokes of *xiangsheng* serves as a journey of seeking the roots of this traditional folk art performance genre, which led to its regaining of popularity today among the contemporary Chinese audience. In doing so, Guo Degang was targeted by the government in its counter-vulgarity campaign, despite his huge contribution to retrieving this folk art form. Guo Degang himself has become a signifier of vulgarity for those people who do not like his *xiangsheng* shows. Together with the “old-style” rivalry between the *dougen* and *penggen* characters, which serves as the main source of the debauched jests, the wide engagement of themes and topics about pornography and prostitution constitute the *su* features of Guo’s performance. Through the *su* characteristics of his *xiangsheng* routines, Guo Degang issues his sharp criticism of the social malaises and stigmas of today’s China, but this also leads to the labeling of him as a figurehead of vulgarity and the consequent crackdown on his performances. In other words, the labeling of Guo Degang’s *xiangsheng* as *su* by representatives of the state is just a subterfuge for suppressing political and social criticism.

On the other hand, Guo Degang’s microblog entries on Sina Web reveal his *ya* temperament, which is reflected in his poetry (his writing style is similar to classically inflected verse) and in his refined hobbies, which are similar to those of the ancient Chinese literati. By extolling these polar virtues Guo has heightened their significance to the Chinese public, as they attest the power of a comic performer of a folk art who has also succeeded in seizing public space and influencing public discourse. Further, Guo Degang’s clever enlistment of social media to work against the perception of his *su xiangsheng* performer persona suggests his savvy understanding of social media culture, which reveals a broader inclination among Chinese celebrities to employ the internet to “talk back” to their audience, industry, and government—so as to avoid being typecast in certain characters, or to escape the restrictions they face performing in film, on television, and through other broadcast media.

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#### NOTES

1. At the outset, the Deyun Club had only three performers including Guo himself, but by 1998 there were a dozen performers, and today it has more than a hundred signed performers. From 2003, the main venue of the *deyunshu* performance was the Tianqiao Happiness Tea House (*tianqiaole chayuan* 天桥乐茶园), located at Tianqiao neighborhood in the Chongwen district of Beijing. The Tianqiao neighborhood was originally a gathering place for laborers and poor street performers of Old Beijing, however now the neighborhood represents the grassroots culture that has long been popular in Old Beijing and which is embodied in the modern *xiangsheng* revived by Guo Degang. Since the beginning of the 2000s, the Deyun Club has had tremendous success and publicity, and its audiences are broad, including not only fans of Guo from the lower social stratas, but also white-collar workers, college students, private entrepreneurs, and popular stars and celebrities.

2. From October 2005 to March 2006, he was invited to appear, or was reported on, in almost all of China’s influential television shows, newspapers, and magazines. The internationally recognized director Zhang Yimou invited Guo to host the launch of his 2006 film (ZHANG 2006), *Mancheng jindai huangjinjia* 满城尽带黄金甲 (cited in ZHOU 2006, 78). In 2009, to celebrate the twentieth anniversary of his *xiangsheng* career, Guo held a successful series of special *xiangsheng* performances at The Great Hall of the People and other famous

theatres and stadiums across China. Guo appeared on the 2007 Forbes Wealth Chart, with an annual income of more than 10 million yuan (PENG 2010, 67).

3. Compared to blogging, microblogging has a word limit of 140 Chinese characters. While microblogging, Guo Degang also wrote frequent blog posts for the blogging platforms Sina Web, Netease Web, and Blog China Web from 2007 to 2012. However, he seemed to quit blogging when microblogging became the dominant online social networking platform, which enjoys more popularity among Chinese bloggers and is utilized by celebrities as a medium to update information and keep in touch with their fans.

4. Guo does not claim to be the author of all of his routines, however, he is assumed to be the author of all of his “official” microblog posts as there is no evidence suggesting that an assistant or employee in the Deyun marketing team writes them for him.

5. Hou Yuewen is the youngest son of the *xiangsheng* master Hou Baolin 侯宝林. Because of the unsurpassed reputation of his father in the industry, Hou Yuewen enjoyed great popularity and admiration among his fellow performers and audiences alike. Within the *xiangsheng* circle in Beijing, there is a deep-rooted belief that one’s master is crucial for career development, and intense connections exist among different *xiangsheng* performing groups and individuals. Therefore, although Guo Degang did not learn many performing skills from Hou Yuewen, their relationship as master and disciple lent Guo authenticity as a *xiangsheng* performer. Since then, he started receiving more opportunities to perform his art and display his talents.

6. The second sentence in this posting is not Guo’s original creation, however, he intelligently borrowed it from the ancient Chinese literati to express his emotions and outlook on life.

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