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The state of irony in China

Hans Steinmüller
Department of Anthropology, London School of Economics

Abstract
In everyday life, people in China as elsewhere have to confront large-scale incongruities between different representations of history and state. They do so frequently by way of indirection, that is, by taking ironic, cynical or embarrassed positions. Those who understand such indirect expressions based on a shared experiential horizon form what I call a 'community of complicity'. In examples drawn from everyday politics of memory, the representation of local development programmes and a dystopic novel, I distinguish cynicism and 'true' irony as two different ways to form such communities. This distinction proposes a renewed attempt at understanding social inclusion and exclusion. I also suggest that irony, so defined, might be more conducive to an anthropology that is ethnographic and dialogical.

Keywords
China, complicity, cynicism, dialogue, ethnography, irony

> *Tout est pour le mieux dans le meilleur des mondes possibles.*
>
> [All is for the best in the best of all possible worlds.]
>
> (Voltaire, *Candide*)

Among the people I met in Zhongba village, Lao Ma was certainly one of the poorest.[1] At a time when most of his neighbours were constructing new houses of bricks and concrete, he continued to live in his old house, which had crumbling mud walls and a tattered wooden roof. In his attire and style, Lao Ma personified the old 'peasant': wearing 'grass shoes' (E. *caohai*),[2] ragged trousers and a worn-out

Corresponding author:
Hans Steinmüller, Department of Anthropology, London School of Economics, Houghton Street, London WC2A 2AE, UK
Email: j.steinmuller@lse.ac.uk

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blue Mao suit, talking mostly local dialect and little standard Mandarin, and insisting on old-style formalities or fervent friendliness when dealing with me.

Like many other farmers in the village, Lao Ma often complained about the local officials, and was overtly cynical about the recent policies implemented under the slogan of the 'Construction of a Socialist New Countryside' in the village. According to Lao Ma, the cadres now were not in any sense comparable to cadres during the Maoist era, who shared their meals with peasants, who walked to the peasants' houses to enquire about the situation of ordinary families and who honestly worked for the ordinary people. No official has come to his house in recent years, and, while they pretend to do something for the collective good of the village, local officials are really more concerned about their own superiors in the hierarchy than they are about the people. What they call a 'model village' and a 'new countryside' is really just a 'face project', Lao Ma said with indignation. They just use some part of the resources they get from higher government levels to paint the facades of the houses next to the public road and then 'eat' the bigger part of public funds themselves.

While this was a general complaint of many other villagers, Lao Ma was also very outspoken about topics which others tended to avoid: He was proud to show his knowledge of geomancy and divination, and he was one of the few people in the village who was keen to talk to me about the Maoist era, and the Cultural Revolution in particular. Lao Ma could go on for hours about his and his family's suffering during the Maoist era. His father had been a relatively wealthy farmer in Zhongba at the time of the establishment of the People's Republic, and was classified a 'rich peasant' (*funong*) during land reform in 1951. All their wealth was taken away and their house in the valley, with its beautifully carved wooden windows, was given to other families from 'better' classes. Lao Ma, who was a child at the time, still remembers the horrific experience when his uncle was publicly executed the same year. During the next two decades, his family's destiny followed the ups and downs of the revolutionary tides. At every new revolutionary campaign, they invariably had to suffer. There weren't too many members of bad classes in Zhongba – only one old landlord and two rich peasants – and hence when mobilization started, all the members of these three families were dragged to class struggle sessions, and had to endure public criticism and humiliation. Because of the bad 'class background' of his family, Lao Ma was unable to find a wife and marry. Only after the end of the Maoist era, by then already in his 40 s, was he able to find a woman who was willing to marry him.

As if the bad past wasn't enough, Lao Ma had to endure another disgrace. The woman he had eventually married and who had borne him one son, started having an affair with one of the neighbours. When Lao Ma found out what was going on, he was furious at first, and then desperate. As a former local official and generally sociable person, this man had a much higher standing in the local community than Lao Ma, and when he complained to the neighbours about it, they just sneered at him. He finally decided to tell the village officials and ask them to intervene. Under Maoism, adultery had been illegal, and cases like this were denounced at the work unit or

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production brigade. But times have changed and the village officials just sent him away, laughing at him like the rest of the village. One neighbour took pity on Lao Ma and tried to help by asking his wife to return to her husband, but she swore at him and said she didn't care about Lao Ma. She continued living separately for a while with her son who was working in a neighbouring city, and eventually returned to Lao Ma.

Altogether, Lao Ma was the laughing stock of the village. Most people agreed that Lao Ma was not only 'incapable' because he couldn't control his wife, but also ridiculous, because he went to the village officials in order to resolve this private problem. One common greeting was to ask him whether he was still 'pulling his ox' (*qian niu*) or if he had 'lost his ox' (*diu niu le*)? Like most other farmers in this region, Lao Ma didn't have a water buffalo, and it was well understood that these greetings referred to him not having his wife under control.

*

Lao Chen is a writer and critic of Taiwanese origin, who has been living in Beijing for more than ten years. He has just turned 60, and now that he is fairly well-off and doesn't have to worry about selling books any longer, he would like to fulfil his last dream: to write a great novel, his *Ulysses* or his *À la recherche du temps perdu*, as he says. But somehow he cannot get started and he senses that his writer's block has something to do with the fact that he lives in a society that is completely harmonious and in which everyone is perfectly happy.

Lao Chen is, in fact, the first person narrator of the novel *The Fat Years – China, 2013*. The novel paints a picture of life in 2013, in a new Chinese age of prosperity. After the financial crisis of 2008, most of the world's economies didn't recover and when the next global economic crisis came, in 2011, only China was able to maintain a stable economy by doubling its internal consumption, and then by swamping the world with Chinese products. Now there are no more problems in the People's Republic, Chinese society has really become extremely harmonious, people are enjoying life and everyone is happy.

Living a writer's bohemian existence, Lao Chen's behaviour sometimes appears whimsical to others, his comments inappropriate, and his attitude slightly cynical, but he tries hard to give the right impression about his conscientious attitude towards state and society, since, after all, he himself is moved too by the greatness of this nation and its new age of prosperity. But then Lao Chen encounters two long-lost friends, Fang Caodi and Xiao Xi, and slowly begins to lose his delicate balance in safe mediocrity. Both of his friends are searching for lost memories. Fang Caodi explains that when the world entered the last economic crisis, the *People's Daily* announced the beginning of a new age of prosperity, and then one entire month disappeared. No one remembers what happened during this month, except for Fang Caodi himself:

> the uprisings all around China, the lootings and food shortages, the state of emergency and the martial law that was declared, the vaccinations against the bird flu

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> epidemic – and nobody remembers any of this. Everyone has forgotten about this entire month. (Chan, 2009: 60)

Fang Caodi wants to search for the truth, and prove that this month really exists. In order to collect evidence, he has travelled all over China for the past two years. The other friend, Xiao Xi, was part of the generation of 1989, and, before the age of prosperity, she actively took part in many political discussion groups. Now no one wants to discuss anything any more, and no one wants to remember 1989 or the Cultural Revolution either. Xiao Xi spends her time on the run, changing addresses, and debating in online forums, where she constantly changes her name.

Lao Chen, the bohemian writer, gets more and more entangled in the world of Fang Caodi and Xiao Xi, which is the underworld of the fat years, where a few people see the dark and bizarre side of this age. From the perspective of their marginal parallel existence, they find it strange that everyone is happy, and that brilliant young students would think of propaganda work as something 'romantic', for instance. Only from their outsider's perspective, they find contradictions in slogans such as 'a democratic one-party rule, a rule of law that puts stability first, a state-controlled market economy, scientific development with Chinese characteristics, a multi-ethnic republic ruled by one ethnicity' – that is, they cannot quite accept all the new slogans of the new age of prosperity of China in 2013.

*

These two stories take place in the same country, the People's Republic of China, between 2007 and 2013. The first I have recorded during my fieldwork in the Enshi region of Hubei Province in central China, and the second stems from the book *The Fat Years* by Chan Koonchung, published in December 2009. Both deal with the ironies of time, the first with ironies of the past, and the second with ironies of the future. My first claim would be that such ironies of past and future might tell us something about the present condition of China.

The large-scale incongruities of the past, present, and future of the Chinese state are dealt with differently by different people, and our two anti-heroes seem to find it particularly difficult to adapt their speech and action to their surroundings. These two men bear a resemblance going beyond the prefix 'old' – *lao* – by which everyone addresses them. Both are outsiders: Lao Ma in the village community of Zhongba, and Lao Chen in the intellectual community of Beijing. As misfits they are somehow caught in the contradictions of past and future, they are 'behind the time'. While everyone else is fully aware that 'times have changed', Lao Ma is stubbornly sticking to the Maoist mores of old. While everyone else lives happily in the new age of prosperity, Lao Chen is struggling to conceal his cynicism and growing disbelief. Both are mocked at by their environment: a cranky would-be poet who goes every afternoon to three different Starbucks and whose only service to society it is to make some graceful comments at meaningless cultural events; and

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an old peasant cuckolded by his wife who keeps complaining about past suffering and present corruption.

Their common problem is, perhaps, that they are particularly unable to accept the pervasive cynicism of their surroundings, the cynicism of those who pretend that society is 'harmonious' and really just do 'face projects'. But if others really believe in the necessity and truth of the current state of affairs, are then not Lao Ma and Lao Chen those who are really cynical?

Are these stories of irony or stories of cynicism? This is first of all a question of recognition and interpretation. To call some discourse, action or attitude ironic or cynical implies a recognition of the intentionality behind what is said or shown. Irony is dissimulation, that is, to say or do something, and to mean something else, and possibly the opposite. In this very general definition, irony is the characteristic of all tropes of indirection, such as satire, parody, mockery and sarcasm. If one was to situate these different forms of indirection along a continuum of more humble and more malicious, and more inclusive and more exclusive forms, I would put cynicism at the malicious and exclusive end of this spectrum: I take it that cynicism is an attitude and a form which, by outwardly claiming absolute belief, implies absolute denial. At the other end of the spectrum, there are more inclusive forms of irony, which acknowledge both what is said and what is implied.

In this article I deal with such different forms of irony in China. As tropes of indirection they reproduce the boundaries of what I call a 'community of complicity': those who understand what is meant based on their shared experiential horizon in an intimate local space and a shared knowledge of the contradictory outside representations of this space.[3] Such indirection can take many forms, but perhaps most commonly it is cynicism (implying denial), embarrassment (implying that dissimulation has become impossible) or 'true' irony.[4] I argue that distinguishing between them can help us to better understand how power works by inclusion and exclusion into 'communities of complicity'.[5] These are communities of those who share a common knowledge of conventions and platitudes, and hence an understanding of the ways in which certain attitudes refer to them in indirect ways. Such communities are grounded in a shared historical and local experience (take, for example, the village community of those who mock Lao Ma based on their shared understanding of just how times have changed, or the silent and happy majority of others who cannot understand why Lao Chen is not joyful and content). In these ways, particular 'communities of complicity' always relate to particular histories, times and contexts, which, in the cases I wish to discuss, cannot be separated from the history and presence of the Chinese state.

The heuristic potential of irony extends to the position of the anthropologist as ethnographer him or herself as well (Fernandez, 1993; Geertz, 1968; Krupat, 1990). Clifford Geertz (1968), for instance, has argued that an 'ironic rapport' in some way bridges the 'radical asymmetries' between anthropologist and informant. This does not have to imply that all anthropological inquiry is ironic, let alone endorse the postmodern proposition that everything is ironic (Clifford, 2001; Marcus, 2001). To restrict the definition of irony, I will attempt to distinguish 'true irony'

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(Boon, 2001; Burke, 1969 [1945]: 503–17; Fernandez and Huber, 2001: 21–2), from 'lesser' forms of indirection, cynicism in particular. Such an 'inclusive kind of irony' in James Fernandez' (1984, 1993) formulation, which maintains some kind of moral commitment (Fernandez, 2001; Krupat, 2001), stands in contrast to the 'exclusive' irony of cynicism. Towards the end of this article, I will compare 'true' and inclusive irony in this sense with some recent proposals to think about the state in terms of cynicism. But let me start with the particular history of the Chinese state.

Ironies of history

The most general periodization of recent Chinese history is to divide it into the Maoist era and the 'reform era'. The transition between the two meant not only marketization of a planned economy, liberalization of ideological control and general 'de-politicization', but also the replacement of the Maoist vision of a culture of the masses with new kinds of consumerist utopias. Whereas, under Maoism, the details of ordinary everyday life had to be continuously subordinated to the larger utopian vision, now everyday life is completely re-established as a normality. Cultural critics have described this transition as a movement from the 'heroic' to the 'quotidian' (Liu, 1997; Tang, 2000: in particular ch. 9). While the 'heroism' of Maoist mass culture had denied the heterogeneity of everyday life (including individual production, consumption and sentiment), the new culture of the everyday denies the Maoist drive towards homogeneity, or at least relativizes the Maoist utopia into something that is either denied or remembered nostalgically.

But the 'petty affluence' (*xiaokang*) which has become the official doctrine still stands in a problematic relationship with the 'grand unity' (*datong*) of Maoism:[6] the same one-party-state still claims to guarantee national unity, and Mao Zedong is still represented as the founding hero of the People's Republic. Whereas in the privacy of everyday life the Maoist past can be discussed relatively freely, in more public realms there is a strong attempt towards a sanitized history of the Maoist era, which emphasizes continuity rather than rupture. In this version of history, it is enough to blame the 'gang of four' around Mao's widow for the radicalism of the Cultural Revolution, and to acknowledge that Mao was '70 percent right and 30 percent wrong'. Such formulas are core elements of history textbooks in secondary schools, for instance. But, in general, public discussion of the Cultural Revolution, the Great Leap Forward and the other catastrophes of recent history are discouraged and partly prohibited.

Given these circumstances – an official discourse that is reluctant to address the contradictions of Maoism and a newly affirmed everyday culture characterized by a plurality of consumerist desires – irony has become one of the most common forms, if not the only possible one, in which the Maoist experience and the trauma of the Cultural Revolution are remembered.

Books with titles such as *Laughing Matter from the Cultural Revolution* (Cheng et al., 1988) and *Weird Things and Weird Words from the Cultural Revolution*

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(Jin et al., 1989), for instance, appeared in the late 1980s, and their circulation was only intermittently constrained by local governments. The stories recounted in these booklets generally mock the grotesque irrationalities of the Cultural Revolution. Narratives of this kind also belong to the corpus of oral memories in families in Bashan as elsewhere in China. Let me just quote two such anecdotes told to me by Yang Yuanbing, a farmer in Zhongba, who had been a child during the Cultural Revolution.

> You know, at the time, there was a boy from the Yang family who offered some rice to the Mao poster in the house. Like this, he took a lump of rice from his bowl and smeared it around his mouth. Others denounced what he had done, they said it was an offence against the dignity of the nation's chairman, and then the boy was 'class struggled' several times at meetings of the brigade.
>
> When old Mao (E. Mao *laohan'r*) died in 1976, one of my brothers said: 'We've shouted so often ''Long live Chairman Mao, 10,000 years'', and now he died so early.' For this as well he was class struggled severely.
>
> At the time these were really serious matters. Telling it now, it sounds like a joke.

Ridiculing and 'falsifying' the irrationality of Maoism and the Cultural Revolution is surely not the only way in which this past is remembered (others include nostalgia, and also the repression of memory). But pointing to the ironies of Maoism is indeed a very common way in which people relate to this history. These can be the absurdities of everyday life (as in Yang Yuanbing's anecdotes), as well as the fortuitousness and misfortunes of the revolution itself. Wen Yunfu, for instance, an old man who lived by the market of the township, told and retold me the life stories of his father and his uncle several times.

Wen's father had been a relatively wealthy tea merchant, but he spent most of his money on his habit of opium smoking. So when Old Wen started to go to school in the late 1930s, his father couldn't even pay for the fees. His uncle Wen Yaohua owned a rice and corn mill, and was much better off. The uncle happily sent him to school, and paid for all his tuition fees. Wen Yaohua was respected in the local community and was a leading member of a local brotherhood (at the time so-called *hanliu* brotherhoods controlled the tea and opium trade, and shaped public life as authoritative non-governmental organizations). Until 1949, he was one of the most powerful and wealthy men in Bashan. But the Communist revolution was disastrous for Wen Yaohua. All of a sudden he became a 'class enemy' and a 'landlord'. During the first confusion, he thought he could still mobilize powerful friends to protect him; but he was soon disappointed. When retaliation actions began in 1951 against 'rightists and landlords', Wen Yaohua went into hiding and ran towards Enshi city to seek refuge in the house of relatives. But on the road towards Enshi he met a battalion of soldiers. They didn't hesitate long, killed him on the road and left his corpse there. Old Wen's father however had spent most of his wealth on opium, so when the

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Communists arrived, he had already lost his fortune and was a poor man. This saved him from being classified as a 'class enemy', and his son could later even become a small official – which was impossible for his cousins, the children of Wen Yaohua, who were 'class enemies' and 'sons of a landlord'.[7]

Both Yang Yuanbing and Wen Yunfu told me these stories in private, after we had known each other for some time. The form and content of these stories is certainly quite different from the 'official' accounts of Maoism and the Cultural Revolution. Irony does several things here: first, it bridges the contradiction between the Maoist discourse of the past and the contemporary official discourse. Under Maoism, every detail of everyday life had to be understood as a representation of the master discourse in which 'the people' were the subject of history, and Mao Zedong the main representative of 'the people'. In such a 'heroic' age, even unconscious remarks or children's jokes had to be corrected. Against the coincidences and contingencies of particular individual and family histories, the larger History of 'the people' and their will had to prevail. Presenting these details and contingencies of everyday life in an ironic way now might serve to ridicule the Maoist 'storyline' and enforce a new 'story' of rationality, 'statistical reasoning' and external objectivity in its stead, as Liu Xin (2009: 117ff.) argues, quoting a similar story from the film *Blue Kite*. In this sense, irony buttresses passive acceptance and complaisance with the present master narrative.

As far as such an interpretation might go, it overlooks the situations and contexts in which these stories are told. Their form and content is bound to quite private and intimate surroundings. They are told in local dialect and to a face-to-face community. True, there are books and films with similar stories, but they are tacitly condoned or directly banned, and never officially promoted.[8] Ordinary people in Zhongba are certainly aware of the sensitivity of this past, and the tension between its official and vernacular representations. This correlates with the indirect ways in which the sensitive past is referred to. That is, such things are said in asides, with humorous or sarcastic overtones, and generally in un-plain speech.

The appropriateness of any form of indirection depends very much on the situation and the audience. Lao Ma – the elderly man with whom I started, whose wife was having an affair – never held back with his complaints about the past and his cynicism regarding local government. But several people found such comments rather inappropriate, in particular in my presence. One of his neighbours, a respected elder and head of a large family, sometimes scolded Lao Ma for his cynical attitude:

> Everyone had to suffer (*shouku*) during the old times, not just you. Is there any use in complaining all the time? Nowadays it's up to those who work hard and have capability; they will be successful.

Wen Yunfu's recounting of his family's fortuitous changes of fortune, on the other hand, could barely be accused of cynicism in this way. His story was not only more remote from the concerns of the present, but he also presented it more

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diplomatically between different frameworks and commonplaces (in his case, the national history of liberation on the one hand and the contingencies of family history on the other). Perhaps most importantly, his account of historical ironies was sensitively adapted to situation and audience, and therefore well understood by those who shared a common knowledge of the conventions in which history is told.

In this sense, cynicism and irony are two different ways of referring to a community of complicity: one is more radical and exclusive (and therefore susceptible to rejection), whereas the other is more gentle and inclusive. Yet the communities of complicity formed in these ways are far from stable. In everyday talk, in self-presentation and in social action, the boundaries of such communities are continuously redrawn, and the varying uses of tropes of indirection take a constitutional part in this redrawing. If irony and cynicism are in these ways crucial for the politics of memory, they are so too for other fields of everyday politics in Zhongba.

A kaleidoscope of face projects

Zhongba was the first village in the surrounding region where most paddy fields were changed into tea plantations in the 1990s; now it is a specialized 'tea village' with about 98 percent of its arable land planted with tea. It had been a showcase of local development already in the 1970s, when it was a 'red flag brigade' (*hongqi dadui*) and, in more recent years, it was given the titles of 'model village' (*shifan cun*) and 'civilized village' (*wenming cun*).

As a 'model village' Zhongba is certainly much more prosperous than most villages in the region. This was, in fact, part of the reason I was allowed to do fieldwork there. During the time of my fieldwork, various development programmes were implemented in Zhongba under the national policy of the 'Construction of a Socialist New Countryside'. These programmes included workshops, training sessions and subsidies for agricultural production. The most important aspect, however, was the renovation of houses and improvement of hygienic installations. This meant mainly that many houses that were visible from the principal asphalt road of Zhongba were painted on the outside, and given stylized gable ornaments, scrolls with calligraphy, and lamps. Some of the costs the government subsidized directly, some of it was given in materials (such as tiles, concrete, lamps, paint, etc.), and the rest the farmers had to procure themselves. In a few households, the government also supported farmers who were improving the hygienic installations of their kitchens, toilets and pigsties.

In Zhongba, many people talked about the development programmes very disparagingly, including many of those who had received government subsidies. People complained that others were getting more, that the material which the government was offering was of a bad quality and that the government officials were steering money into their own pockets. One comment I often heard was that 'they support the rich, and not the poor' (*tamen fu fu*, *bu shi fupin*), turning the expression for 'poverty alleviation' (*fupin*) on its head. People who had their farms higher up in the mountains, away from the asphalt road, sometimes invoked the

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village community, not using the word for village (*cun*), but that for 'brigade' (*dadui*):

> We are all from one brigade (*dadui*), how can it be that only those next to the road are getting money?

The 'brigade' was the administrative unit of the Maoist era, which was abolished in the 1980s. While even the villagers close to the public road, especially the older generation, often routinely used the notion of their 'brigade', the village cadres never used it. For them the development programmes were obviously focused on individual households, village groups (*xiaozu*), 'model districts' (*shifan qu*) and the administrative village (*cun*).

Over at the Yang family hamlet, Yang Yuanbing told me that several officials from the working group came over to his house (which is about 200 m from the public road, and can be seen from there), and offered to help him if he would plaster and paint the outside walls. He refused, and said, 'How would that help me if the house inside is still the same as before?' Yang Yuanbing went on to say that the 'Construction of a New Countryside' is just a pretext (*kouhao*) for the local cadres to get money from above (*shangtou*). They would use only parts of it, to do some superficial work, like painting the outside walls, and channel the bigger part into their own pockets:

> What they do here is just a face project (*mianzi gongcheng*), and most of the money they take for themselves. Look at them, what tobacco they are smoking, and what kind of houses they are constructing for their own families! Could they afford that if they would really just use their meagre official salary?[9]

In between extreme cases of favour and rejection, the general image was clear to most: that the development programmes in this year would be only implemented in the houses next to the public road; and that those that stood on good terms with government officials would have a better chance of receiving support. In particular, those local farmers who had not benefited from the development programmes, such as Lao Ma, criticized them and described them as 'face projects' (*mianzi gongcheng*).

But talking of 'face projects' might not only amount to a critique of the negative aspects of local development programmes. It is also a possible way for local officials to point out their own limitations in implementing them. Several cadres admitted themselves that this is a 'face project', building up 'face' and pride for the locals and for the local government. This was, as I realized slowly, in fact the best way of describing the flaws of the development programmes; for many cadres, when talking in private, it was the only possible way to relate to the problems in the rural construction programmes and to draw attention to their own limitations, whereas it would have been obviously unwise to speak openly about injustice or corruption. Let me cite one example.

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One evening in early summer 2007 I accompanied the secretary of Zhongba, Fang Bo, together with two other cadres to the funeral of one of their colleagues, the secretary of another village. We arrived very late, and then sat around the coffin waiting for the meal with which we would be served. Mr Lei, a relative of the family of the deceased, talked for a long time with Secretary Fang about his post in Zhongba, village politics and the possibilities of economic development. When talking about the 'Construction of a New Countryside' programmes in Zhongba, Lei first complimented Fang Bo on having got such an outstanding job as a young cadre, to be the secretary of the model village. Fang Bo said that it was rather difficult, because people had high expectations and visitors constantly came to see what these programmes had achieved. He came to admit that, given all the ongoing visits from higher government levels, it is rather difficult to build up any long-term projects there. In particular, capacity training and workshops in technology would be really difficult to organize. For, after all, 'it is still a face project' (*hai shi yi ge mianzi gongcheng*).

Now such complaints about the tiresome work of representation around face projects are not unique to this level of the bureaucracy. Among the visitors in the case I quoted above, for instance, had been one vice-chairman of the propaganda department of Enshi city. Later on, I met him several times in the city, and participated in one 'minority festival' which his department had organized. We had some meals together, and several times our conversation turned to his own work burden. Quite like Secretary Fang in the village, this higher official also complained about his duties of 'reception work' (*jiedai gongzuo*) and of representing the local state of affairs to higher government levels: just now, they had to arrange everything for a visit from the provincial government, and he was stressed and tired of the preparations. While he didn't use the expression, it was obvious that he was struggling with his own face project. 'You foreigners don't understand how things work in China,' he continued:

> Some time ago we had two American photographers here. We took them around and showed them all the beautiful spots of Enshi prefecture. It was quite difficult to communicate with them, and the strangest thing was that they only wanted to take pictures of what was ugly and bad.

Those were the propaganda official's words. While he complained to me about the burden of the 'face projects', he also stressed the necessity of representing what is beautiful. Assuming that similar dilemmas and (dis)illusions haunt various levels of the bureaucracy, one could compare this series of 'face projects' to a kaleidoscope: an arrangement of reflections to 'look at beautiful forms' (the original Greek meaning of 'kaleidoscope').

It shouldn't be too difficult to imagine that the foreigners, who do not want to 'look at beautiful forms', would be cynical about such 'face projects'. And so are some locals in Zhongba, in particular those who are disappointed by the 'face project' and perhaps feel they have been misled. But they make use of a much

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broader inventory of expressions. The officials who are involved in implementing those 'face projects', such as Secretary Fang and the propaganda official, are equally trying to position and present themselves appropriately, and surely they are not only cynical.

While there are certain occasions where it might be appropriate to refer cynically to the kaleidoscope of 'face projects', it is clear to officials and villagers alike that there are other occasions where one has to be tactful or just mildly ironic.[10] Occasions where it is completely out of place to be cynical would be banquets with higher officials for instance. Here, as elsewhere, what distinguishes a capable social actor is tact and the apt use of irony and cynicism, that is, the appropriate implication of a shared intimate knowledge.[11]

Similar problems with kaleidoscopes of beautiful representations haunt journalists who have to deal with the constraints imposed by propaganda departments. Kevin Latham (2009) has recently proposed that their ways of dealing with these problems embody a particular kind of cynicism. The attitudes of the journalists among whom he did fieldwork in South China are in fact not too different from those I have described here in relation to the 'face projects' of rural development. Latham notes the concern with widespread cynicism in China in the 1980s (measured in his case by the number of academic publications on 'trust', 'belief', 'faith', or rather the lack thereof in the 1980s), and points out that, since the 1990s, the problem of cynicism towards the government and the media seems to have become of much less concern to both Chinese and foreign observers. He argues, however, that there are particular cynical practices which are of crucial importance for Chinese governance, and he gives the example of journalists who keep writing positive reports while being very outspoken about the less-than-perfect reality when talking in private. While these journalists are acutely aware of social problems (labour unrest in particular), they avoid publishing anything that is difficult to push past propaganda officials, newspaper editors and censors. And they even showed their awareness of such phenomena to Latham, and pointed out, with a smile, that these cases would have made good stories. Such practices of self-presentation Latham interprets as 'cynicism'.

The temptations of irony

Aside from Kevin Latham, Alexei Yurchak (1997, 2006) and Yael Navaro-Yashin (2002: 155–87) have written on cynicism as a major characteristic of the relationship between people and the state. The main theoretical references for all three are some pages from Peter Sloterdijk (1987 [1983]: 5, 101, 305) and Slavoj Žižek (1989: 27–30). In his *Critique of Cynical Reason*, Sloterdijk describes a widespread cynicism in the wake of critical theory and 1968. Rushing through centuries of thought, he discovers many different kinds of cynicism and loosely divides them into 'kynicism' with a 'k' which is bodily, active and aggressive, and 'cynicism' with a 'c', which is cerebral, passive and lethargic. The latter is then 'enlightened false consciousness', a consciousness which has gone through the critique of its own

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ideology, but for some reason still does not put these insights into practice. The classical Marxist formula 'they do not know it, but they are doing it' is thus put on its head: 'they know very well what they are doing, but still, they are doing it'.

Žižek explains the reason for this kind of cynical lethargy with his peculiar combination of Marxist critique and Lacanian psychoanalysis. To put it a bit crudely, psychoanalysis before Lacan had held that by interpreting a symptom one could make it disappear. Lacan asked why interpretation and analysis so often did not have this result, and why the symptom persisted, even though the patient might have well understood it. Further developing Freud's notion of the 'fetish', Lacan claims that the subject takes pleasure (*jouissance*) in his/her symptom. It becomes a 'fantasy' which the subject cannot imagine living without. This fetishistic 'fantasy', however, is not part of ideology but of the Lacanian 'real' itself. Applied to politics, then, the 'fantasy' is part of political reality, and it is constitutive of the cynical subject, who disavows belief in the status quo while nonetheless behaving 'as if' she/he really accepted it.

Sloterdijk and Žižek describe cynicism as an all-pervasive phenomenon of 'our' times, and it is clear that such a generalized and panoramic view stands in opposition to the specificity and situatedness of ethnographic description. Latham, as we have seen, proposes that only certain people at certain times are cynical. One is left wondering if this cynicism is diffuse enough for the kind of cynical subject that Žižek envisions? It is not clear to me how this theory would help us to see better who is cynical and when, that is, who might give up behaving 'as-if' and instead commit to something. Navaro-Yashin (2002: 162) also notes the problem, and calls for an anthropological approach to study 'situational and relative, positional relations with the state', yet the cynicism she detects seems to be pervasive and diffuse enough for Žižek's standards. In her account, 'cynical relations with the state [have] become the condition of the state's survival' (2002: 178). And while she cautions against the unspecified 'we' of the philosopher, she ends her chapter on cynicism by repeating Žižek's definition of cynicism with the same unspecific 'we': 'we are aware of our symptom of statism and yet we maintain it' (2002: 187). The weakness of such an account shows itself most obviously when she is dealing with those who are explicitly not ironic and not cynical. These people are invariably the powerful, semi-fascist conservatives and right-wing 'state fetishists' (2002: 176–7).[12]

Yurchak, finally, resolves this problem by diluting the concept: while he clearly claims to describe an entire generation – 'the last Soviet generation' – and the 'system' these people lived in, he leaves it open whether the people and the system in their entirety could be characterized in terms of Sloterdijk's and Žižek's cynicism.

Aside from its inadequacy for ethnographic description, there is another problem with Sloterdijk's and Žižek's outlines of cynicism: maybe they overrate the transcendental power of the systems they construct; that is, maybe they are themselves cynical. In a different context, Simon Critchley (2008) has recently pointed out a general problem with the politics of Slavoj Žižek: at the core of his work, indeed his over-production, might be an 'obsessional fantasy', an unbearable

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tension between doing absolutely nothing and a dream of a pure and violent ethical act. This, however, 'leaves us in a fearful and fateful deadlock': 'Don't act, never commit, and continue to dream of an absolute, cataclysmic revolutionary act of violence' (Critchley, 2008: 4).[13]

The opposition between doing absolutely nothing and the heroic act of pure ethics and pure violence seems to describe precisely the politics that correspond to cynicism: a representational form which uses absolute affirmation to express absolute denial. Yet such a deadlock is barely characteristic of everyday rhetoric and action, or for 'everyday ethics'.[14] While cynicism hovers between absolute denial and absolute cooptation, 'true irony' engages a productive tension between critique and commitment. Let me describe what I mean by 'true irony'.

True irony

Dealing with the 'Four Master Tropes' of metaphor, metonymy, synecdoche and irony, Kenneth Burke once called irony the total form, or the 'perspective of perspectives' (1969 [1945]: 512). While the three other tropes provide only single perspectives, irony includes at least two different perspectives. Hence only irony is explicitly dependent on the perspectives of others, and explicitly dialogical – or 'dialectical' in Burke's formulation – rather than just rhetorical.[15] Yet the dialogue implied in 'true irony' is always challenged by three temptations, which reduce the 'perspective of perspectives' into one single and unidirectional perspective: relativism, Pharisaism and the tendency towards the simplification of literalness. Let's deal with them one by one.

Relativism would be if one actor or one perspective is isolated and then the whole is seen from the position of this actor alone. Whereas, in irony, there is a tension of difference and an attempt to see two sides together, relativism cuts the link so that both perspectives stand next to each other without mediation. If an ironic statement by someone unprivileged, for instance, is stripped of the hegemonic form in which it takes place, or the perspective of officialdom and the state which it includes, then we have an act of pure resistance (and this is what happens in the huge literature on cultural resistance; see Scott, 1985, 1990; Ong, 1987; and, for China, Guo, 2009; Ku, 2004; Thornton, 2002a, 2002b).

Yet, on a very different front, we encounter the same problem of relativism: when everything has become ironic. This is the direction of literary scholars and postmodern anthropologists who are hung up on the indeterminacy of interpretation (e.g. Clifford, 2001; Marcus, 2001). But 'once everything is ironic, then nothing in particular is ironic' (Krupat, 2001: 162). Here the dialogic tension between different perspectives has become an arbitrary series in which every single perspective stands isolated.

The second temptation of irony is Pharisaism, which is the use of irony to claim superiority. This is a rather general problem for intellectuals. While only they use and understand irony, others are inferior because they can neither use it nor understand it. In China, for instance, numerous literary critics have extolled the ironic

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potential of avant-garde fiction, while only very few observers have explicitly written about the uses of irony of ordinary people.[16] The same implied superiority haunts the accounts of cynicism presented above: even though the intellectual might be cynical too, he or she at least understands just how cynical everyone else is.

The third temptation of irony is its tendency towards the simplification of literalness. Burke's example for this is Socratic irony. While irony pervades each Socratic dialogue, in the end it is always Socrates alone who through his maieutic practice, that is, through intellectual midwifery, comes closer to the truth. What started off as an encounter where both sides had the same claim to legitimacy and truth, ends as the fixation of the literal truth of one side. Any representation of irony by necessity has to face this challenge, as representation implies a fixation. But cynicism here again is the quick way out, whereas 'true' irony entails a more lasting tension.

Cynicism, in this way, is the direction all these temptations take: while cynicism refers to various perspectives, it is obvious to those who understand that one perspective is favoured and the other one dismissed. If irony tends towards an 'as-well-as' logic, cynicism tends towards an 'either-or' logic. While irony implies openness and a productive tension, cynicism implies closure and denial.

Hence in cynicism the claim to one singular truth is much more obvious than in irony. Here the dimension of dialogue and of the development of a whole that is put together of various parts, is replaced with a single, one-dimensional claim to truth.

Conclusion

To say and believe that 'we live in the best of all possible worlds' is the epitome of an optimism that lacks any irony. Since Leibniz coined it in his theodicy (1734 [1710]), the phrase has become a commonplace and so has its ironic denial. Voltaire's novel *Candide* (1990 [1759]) was the first satire on the optimism of this phrase, and its trust in the compatibility of reason and belief. Many other classics of political satire and dystopian science fiction, such as Huxley's *Brave New World* (1998 [1932]) and Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-four* (1984 [1949]) can be seen as ironic misrepresentations of the 'best of all possible worlds'. Chan Koonchung puts himself in this tradition when he uses the same phrase in its redundant form as an epigraph for his *The Fat Years*: 'All is for the best in the best of all possible worlds.'

Chan Koonchung's novel is a satire on contemporary Chinese society. Through the foil of a very near future, in which the doctrines of 'peaceful rise' and 'harmonious society' have become reality, he points towards the internal contradictions of contemporary Chinese society. Lao Chen, the ego-narrator, does not simply deny the optimism and happiness that is so pervasive in his time, he is also torn between giving in to this brave new world and escaping it, between cynicism and commitment, or between a 'false heaven' and a 'good hell', as he puts it (2009: 107ff).[17] This tension between cynicism and commitment is perhaps the main theme of the novel, and inasmuch it does not stand unmediated to present reality, inasmuch as

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this tension tends towards a further level of ethics and truth, the novel can be justifiably called a work of philosophical, stable and 'true' irony.

In their everyday struggle, Lao Ma and other people in Zhongba similarly negotiate different attitudes towards the state. Lao Ma, for instance, is cynical at some times (in particular about local officials) and quite literal at others. While most people in Zhongba are conscious of the commonplace of 'face' and 'face projects', they would refer to the development programmes of the local government in this way only on particular occasions and at particular times. The ways in which they refer to conventions and platitudes reproduce 'communities of complicity'. Different modes of un-plain speaking and action fulfil this aim in different ways. Cynicism, as a malicious form of irony, achieves it by exclusion. Such a radical form of creating consubstantiality can also turn more easily into its reverse: sometimes Lao Ma and Lao Chen's cynicism also serves to exclude them from certain communities. But to frame their stories in terms of a general cynicism would not help us to understand their struggles and aporias, neither in the sociological sense of understanding interactions and relations, nor in the philosophical sense of understanding dialogue and ethics.

In this article I have tried to argue two main points, one analytic and one synthetic as it were. The first is that distinguishing between irony and cynicism helps us to understand ordinary social interaction, and, in particular, social inclusion and exclusion. Like any other trope of indirection, irony and cynicism reproduce what I call 'communities of complicity'. But they do so in radically different ways, namely either by including or by excluding, either by humility or by arrogance.

Probably every one of us has experienced how jokes create communities. Either you understand a joke or you don't. Those who understand it share a common knowledge or understanding of something: it is clear to this group of 'us' what kind of background the joke refers to. In this way, a joke can create a 'community of complicity'.

But it often happens that some people don't get the joke. Hence indirection not only includes others, but also excludes. Dialogue, then, is something more complex, and that is my second point: 'true' irony is more susceptible to dialogue than other forms of indirection, cynicism in particular. Dialogue implies that different people meet; people who have different backgrounds, experiences and interests. It is impossible that different people, in all the aspects of their personality and identity, will ever form part of one single community of complicity, which would imply that there is one single perspective, one single description of a person, a community and the world. As this is not possible, different experiences, interests and perspectives have to be confronted when encountering other people, and some of these differences can never be overcome. Irony points towards communalities and acknowledges difference, whereas cynicism both exposes and denies difference.

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Notes

1. All names of people and places below the prefectural level are pseudonyms. The ethnographic material of this article is based on 18 months of participant observation in Zhongba village and Bashan Township in the Enshi region of Western Hubei Province between April 2005 and September 2007.
2. Throughout the text, Chinese words are written italicized in the standard pinyin form. Words in the Enshi dialect that differ markedly in pronunciation and meaning from standard Mandarin Chinese I have marked with an 'E'. All translations are mine, unless otherwise indicated.
3. For a detailed outline of this concept, see Steinmüller (2010).
4. Tact and politeness might be considered as other forms of indirection in this respect and there is a large literature on these issues in the Chinese context (e.g. Gu, 1990; Hwang, 1987; Mao, 1994). In this article, I do not deal with tact and politeness for two reasons: first, they seem to be clearly situated within the opposition between social structure and individual agency. One influential outline in 'politeness research', for instance, defines 'social politeness' as a 'system of social traffic rules' and tact as a 'matter of interpersonal driving styles and strategies' (Janney and Arndt, 1992: 24). Focusing on cynicism, embarrassment and irony, I attempt to avoid the deadlock of the opposition between social determination and individual agency. Second, while politeness and tact aim at social integration (that is, to coordinate and regulate social interaction), cynicism, embarrassment and irony point more directly to the incongruities of actions and representations. In this sense, irony and cynicism are perhaps more directly relevant for addressing the incongruities related to the Chinese state and its history. This does not mean that tactful behaviour cannot conceal similar incongruities: Alan Smart and Carolyn L. Hsu (2007), for instance, show how interactions which would have otherwise been interpreted as 'corruption' can be coded as reasonable 'human feeling' (*renqing*) and relationship (*guanxi*), if all actors involved (including outside observers) are willing to behave tactfully. What unites the actors is a shared and implicit understanding, a 'voluntary complicity' (2007: 181).
5. My outline of tropes of indirection and communities of complicity is similar in some ways to the rhetorical approach championed in anthropology by F.G. Bailey (e.g. 1969, 1991). But there are slight differences in the direction of our arguments: while Bailey tends to focus on power games (and perhaps sometimes reduces social reality to such games; for example see how he presents the relationship between ethnographer and informant, 1991: 68ff.), I am more directly concerned with the constitution of community. Whereas Bailey focuses on strategizing and deceit, I focus on indirection and irony. Hence if he shows the 'prevalence of deceit' (1991), my aim would be to show the 'prevalence of indirection and irony'.
6. The opposition between 'petty affluence' (*xiaokang*) and 'grand unity' (*datong*) appears already in the chapter on the 'Evolution of Rites' (*liyun*) of the Book of Rites (*Li Ji*), one of the classics of the Confucian canon. For the rise of 'petty affluence' over 'grand unity',

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and its implications as an official doctrine for the politics of consumer culture in the reform era, see Lu (2000) and Lu (2007: 200–3).

7. Stories about the contingency and fortuitousness of the revolution abound. In the novel *To Live*, for instance, Yu Hua tells a similar story: the hero of the novel, Xu Fugui, squanders his family property away in brothels and gambling dens. Some years before the founding of the People's Republic he loses all his land and his houses gambling with Long Er. With all this property Long Er becomes a huge landowner, and Fugui then has to rent land from him and work it with his own hands. When the Communist armies arrive, Long Er is executed as a landlord, whereas Fugui remains an ordinary peasant (Yu, 1998 [1992]).
8. While the two books ridiculing the irrationality of the Cultural Revolution are publicly available, the films *The Blue Kite* (1993, dir. Tian Zhuangzhuang) and *To Live* (1994, dir. Zhang Yimou, based on the novel by Yu Hua mentioned in note 7) were initially banned in China.
9. In general, officials would smoke tobacco that cost at least 10 Yuan a pack; and it is true that most of them have relatively big houses in the market town of Bashan, or even apartments in the city.
10. If tactful behaviour can transform 'corrupt' acts into acts expressive of *renqing* and *guanxi* (Smart and Hsu, 2007), it might equally transform (deplorable) face projects into (laudable) model projects.
11. Chan Koonchung beautifully describes the play of allusions and indirections during a banquet with officials in his novel (2009: 169–72).
12. 'Even though cynicism quickly became the most common reaction to ''Susurluk'' [an incident that exposed the links between politicians, police, and mafia], there were those who were not cynical' (Navaro-Yashin, 2002: 176).
13. Johnston argues along similar lines that, in Žižek's work, 'the combination of a purely negative, critical Marxism with the anticipation of the event of the Act-miracle' might turn into an intellectual fetish itself – a 'Cynic's fetish' which makes present reality bearable and political action impossible (2004: 280–1).
14. It is much rather the characteristic logic of the Leninist party, as Critchley (2008) points out, or of the political theology of Carl Schmitt: for instance, the absolute truth of the 'state of exception' which is created by pure violence. In Chan Koonchung's novel, this epitome of political cynicism is the main inspiration for a very influential clique at the highest echelons of power: the 'SS reading group', the 'SS' standing for Carl Schmitt and Leo Strauss. Towards the end of the novel it turns out that a similar logic is governing the entire 'age of prosperity': a timely crisis gave a limited few the opportunity to declare martial law and then reorder society. But even among this elite, there are pointed differences in the politics of cynicism, with a more radical fascist faction (embodied in the SS reading group) and a more moderate faction (personified in the politbureau member He Dongsheng).
15. An appendix to Burke's *Grammar of Motives*, this short essay on the 'four master tropes', with its exposition of 'true irony', can be understood as a key to Burke's unfinished trilogy of 'human motives', and it might offer 'the clearest view of Burke's own incipient theory of ethics', Jeffrey Murray points out (2002: 22). Murray's article is an excellent exposition and development of Burke's work towards a dialogical ethics based on irony.
16. The literary critic Yang Xiaobin, for instance, has interpreted the grotesque absurdities of the novels of Yu Hua, Ge Fei, and various other 'avant-garde' writers as an ironic re-working of a traumatic past. Such irony points towards the 'schizophrenia of the

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master discourse' of Maoism (Yang, 2002); irony provides relief but also reignites reflection. While Yang lauds these possibilities of irony, he cautions against its tendency towards cynicism:

> 'Postmodern irony in Chinese avant-gardism is not to be viewed, however, as the superlative literary quality without any danger. Arising out of the disillusionment of the absolute truth of the master discourse prevailing over idealism within social culture in the mid- and late 1980s, it verges on, or at least corresponds to, the widespread social trend of cynicism that reflects the ideological decline in the aftermath of the Cultural Revolution. Narrational self-skepticism is not tantamount to cynicism, but it manifests the typical social mentality of one who has been traumatized by a catastrophic experience. To take caution against the pitfall of cynicism, reading postmodern irony in Chinese avant-garde fiction must reveal its negative, and thus utopian, power, which nonetheless, persists in the self-involvement in, self-reflection on, and self-critique of the aporetic experience.' (Yang, 2002: 110)

Note that, for Yang, cynicism is a 'widespread social trend', whereas irony is a 'literary quality' of 'avant-garde fiction'. I agree with Yang's distinction between cynicism as passive resignation and irony as an active tension which can be productive. I do not agree, however, with allowing the latter to intellectuals only. The conflicting interpretations of past suffering, and the different uses of irony or cynicism respectively, are far from exclusive to authors and cultural critics. People in Zhongba have to confront the very same issues, and negotiate the uses of irony or cynicism in their everyday life.

17. It is beyond the scope of this article to analyse in detail the chapters of Chan Koonchung's novel using the concept of 'communities of complicity'. Numerous communities of those who share an intimate knowledge of common representations and (partly contradictory) practices could be pointed out: for instance the silent and happy majority, the SS reading group into which Wei Guo enters (by recognizing the underlying message of hatred behind the surface discourse of love, Chan, 2009: 65ff), the Christian community in Henan province (Chan, 2009: 154ff), or the community of Fang Caodi, Xiao Xi and Zhang Dou, who can look behind the discourses of the age of prosperity. Just as in Zhongba village, such communities form around the politics of selective memory, as Chan Koonchung shows with his variations of the theme 'never forget' (*qianwan bu yao wangji*) in Chapter 2. None of these communities is stable: they are recreated continuously through action and indirection (and never in exactly the same form). The reader's feeling of suspense is based precisely on the fact that Lao Chen, throughout most of the novel, does not exactly belong to any one of those communities, and struggles to find the appropriate way to deal with them.

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Hans Steinmüller is lecturer in the anthropology of China at the London School of Economics. Currently he is working on a book about everyday ethics in rural China based on long-term fieldwork in the Enshi region of Hubei Province.

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