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Jokes from the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution (1966-1976)

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(Part One)
Understanding jokes in another language is often the highest test of fluency, based as they often are on puns and insider cultural knowledge. When Guo Qitao, professor of Chinese history at University of California, Irvine, mentioned to us that he collects clever Chinese jokes, we asked if he might share a few at China Beat. Even better—he offered to translate and gloss them. The first set we offer here are of jokes from the Cultural Revolution, a period when political rhetoric and in-fighting predominated in the public sphere. Through these jokes, we see the way that Chinese people skewered national political campaigns by punning their dogmatic rhetoric.

Translated and Glossed by Guo Qitao

(1) Something Is Missing

During the Cultural Revolution, all kinds of “bad elements” were punished for no reasons, and the ordinary people suffered a lack of necessary goods (food or materials). In the midst of the absolute poverty, the following rhyming couplet was posted:

One, two, three and five,
Six, seven, eight and nine.

Horizontal coda: South & North

What’s missing?

“For four and ten” (sishi) and “east and west” (dongxi)

Translator’s notes: The last phrases are puns on shishi, meaning “facts,” and dongxi, which as a compound also means “things.” The implication is that “bad elements” are being punished based on groundless assertions (without “facts”), while people are deprived of basic consumer goods (“things”).

(2) “You’re Late!”

Once, the Central Political Bureau convened an expanded meeting. Several founding marshals including Chen Yi, He Long, Xu Xiangqian, and Nie Rongzhen were notified to attend.

The time for the start of the meeting had already begun, but after waiting and waiting, the several marshals still had not made an appearance.

Finally, the marshals all arrived together. Wang Hongwen (the youngest member of the Gang of Four who was promoted from a factory worker to the vice chairman of the Chinese Communist Party) pointed an accusatory finger at them and said: “You’re late! How can you be so lackadaisical?!”

Marshal Chen Yi explained, “You dropped in suddenly from Shanghai via helicopter lift; we came from Yan’an riding “Mao” donkeys—how could we possibly get here as fast as you?”

Translator’s notes: There is a pun at work in the reference to “furry donkeys from Yan’an.” The “fur” or “mao” is a subtle reference to Mao Zedong. The implication in Chen Yi’s retort is that “we have been with the revolution (with Mao) from the Yan’an years,” whereas “you (Wang Hongwen) are just an upstart from Shanghai who has been ‘lifted’ to power quickly through your connections with Jiang Qing.”
(3) Nothing Can Stand without Destruction

Wang Hongwen went to see Marshal Zhu De, requesting him to hand over power. "You may take over, but only if you can make this egg stand upright," Zhu said, while handling him an egg.

After trying for several days, Wang was still unable to make it stand, so he went to see Deng Xiaoping for help.

"This is easy," said Deng, and he forcefully smashed the egg down into the table.

"Ai ya, it broke!" Wang exclaimed.
"Chairman Mao has said, 'nothing can stand without destruction,'" said Deng, "look, isn't the egg standing upright now?"

Translator's notes: The phrase "nothing can stand without destruction" was a revolutionary slogan that encouraged destruction of old, feudal things.

(4) Mao's Statues

The Lin Biao clique drafted a directive ordering the erection of statues of Mao throughout the country. Mao intercepted it and refused to send the order out saying, "You all get to sleep, while I'm going to have to stand on guard no matter whether rain or shine. I won't do it!"

(5) From Sun to Son

During the Cultural Revolution, all middle schools stopped offering classes in Russian (to show opposition to Soviet revisionism), which were replaced by English. All of sudden, the country became notably short of English teachers. One school had to select someone with little English to teach the language. As it turned out, one day in class this teacher misspelled the word "sun" as "son." Right then and there, a student pointed out the mistake. As a result, the teacher was publically accused of having "venomously belittled our Great Leader, Redder than the Sun," and dismissed from the school.

Translator's notes: Mao was likened to the Red Sun during the Cultural Revolution.

(6) The Color of the Sun

A woman poet had to do physical labor while being investigated for her reactionary words and deeds. One day, after working in the fields, she wrote in her diary the phrase, "The golden-yellow sun casts forth its brilliant rays..." The diary was discovered by the Red Guards and became new evidence of her "venomous slander against our Great Leader." The Red Guards organized a struggle meeting to criticize her at which they said: "Chairman Mao is the Reddest, Reddest sun in our hearts, but you dared to say that the sun is golden and yellow! What's gold? Gold is the stuff of the capitalist class. As for yellow, it represents decadent and dirty things! If this isn't an attempt to humiliate and vilify Chairman Mao, then what is?!"

Translator's note: The color yellow is used to denote pornographic literature or matters, much the way in English we might use "blue" or "red" (as in a "red light" district.) In Chinese, that would be a "yellow district."

(7) Go Ask Liang Shengbao

Liang Shengbao is the protagonist of Liu Qing’s novel Making History, and his lover, Xu Gaixia, is its female protagonist. At a struggle meeting, the Red Guards interrogated Liu Qing: "Why did Liang Shengbao dream about Xu Gaixia when he fell asleep at the Guo County railway station? When he took a break from cutting bamboo on Southern Hill, why didn’t Liang Shengbao organize the masses to study Chairman Mao’s works, instead playing the chess? When he served as a leader of a mutual aid team, why did he focus on peaceful competition, but not on the class struggle?"
To these questions, Liu Qing said, "I, too, am puzzled, you should go ask Liang Shengbao."

Tags: Cultural Revolution