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Jokes from Post-Reform China

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Last week, we ran the first part of a series of popular Chinese jokes, translated by Guo Qitao, a UCI history professor. While the earlier jokes were from the Cultural Revolution period, the two jokes presented today are more recent and address issues at the core of the Chinese people’s concerns about their nation: responsible governance, inequality, and corruption.

Translated and Glossed by Guo Qitao

江泽民来到天安门城楼上。
往南看，贪官污吏一大片；
往北看，下岗工人八百万；
往东看，走私货轮正靠岸；
往西看，百姓全是穷光蛋；
往下看，法轮功还在转；
往上看，美国导弹到处窜；
往后看，接班人挤向前；
往前看，问毛主席怎么办？
毛主席说：你下来躺着，我起来干。

Jiang Zemin mounted the gate at Tiananmen Square to survey the scene.[1]
Looking south, he saw a sea of grubby officials all on the take; Looking north, eight million workers with no money to make.[2]
To the east, ships of smuggled goods were coming into port; To the west, the unwashed masses all left with no support.[3]
Looking down, Falungong was still doing its thing;[4]
Looking up, American missiles were plummeting.[5]
Behind him would-be successors were vying to be Number One;
In front lay the late Chairman Mao and so he asked: "what's to be done?"[6]
The Chairman said: "you lie down in my place, and let me have another run."

–Anonymous, circa late 1999-2000

[2] Northeast China has been home to much of China’s state-run heavy industry; since the 1990s, workers at these state-run factories have been laid off in droves.
[3] The fruits of China’s economic “take-off” have not been distributed equally; while wealth in cities along the eastern seaboard has burgeoned, China’s largely rural interior regions in the west have remained poor.
[6] The mausoleum to Chairman Mao, housing his preserved body, is situated in the center of Tiananmen Square, directly south of Tiananmen Gate.
The Rookie Cop

A young man gets hired as a local policeman. He is issued his new uniform, and to celebrate his new job, he decides to take in a movie.

He goes to the movie theater and stands in line to buy a ticket. When he gets to the ticket window, the woman selling tickets takes one look at him and says, "Oh, you must be the new policeman for this area."

Pleasantly surprised at being recognized, the new policeman asks, "How did you know?"

The ticket seller says, "Only a rookie cop would stand in line to buy a movie ticket. The seasoned ones just walk right up to the front of the line."

The policeman nods in understanding and enters the theater. When he hands his ticket to the ticket taker, the ticket taker says: "Oh, you must be the new policeman."

Surprised again, he asks: "How did you know?"

The ticket taker says: "Only a rookie cop would actually buy a ticket to come into the movie theater. The seasoned ones just walk right in."

The policeman nods in understanding and finds his seat in the movie theater. An usher walks by, spots him, and yells out: "Oh, you must be the new policeman!"

Surprised that everyone seems to know him, the policeman asks incredulously, "How did you know?"

The usher responds: "Only a rookie cop would actually sit in his assigned seat in the theater. The seasoned ones sit in the front row, and they even kick their feet up and rest them on the lip of the stage."

The movie begins, and just then the new policeman’s cell phone rings. It’s an emergency call from Headquarters. The new policeman is told that the Public Security Bureau has just gotten a tip about a prostitution ring that seems to be operating out of some rooms in the back of a certain movie theater. The new policeman has been assigned to investigate.

As chance would have it, the new policeman is sitting in that very same movie theater. Eager to take on this new assignment, the policeman quickly makes his way to the back of the movie theater. He takes out a flashlight and checks the doors of the back rooms. He hears noises inside one of them, and he kicks the door in, rushes into the room, and turns his flashlight on a man and a women lying naked on a bed.

"Aha! I’ve caught you," says the new policeman.

The prostitute looks up from the bed and says: "You must be the new policeman."

"How did you know?" says the new policeman.

The prostitute points at the man lying beside her on the bed and says: "Only a rookie cop wouldn’t recognize his Bureau chief."

–Anonymous, circa 2005-06