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Brought to You by the People's Republic of *The Onion*

July 27, 2009 in [Watching the China Watchers](#) by [The China Beat](#) | [No comments](#)
By Haiyan Lee

America's finest news source [The Onion](#) has a new owner! Since last week, readers have been bombarded with the good tiding, from the modified masthead, logo, and tagline, to news headlines, editorials, audio and video clips, and ads, lots of ads. The new owner goes by the appetizing name of Yu Wan Mei 鱼完美 Amalgamated Salvage Fisheries and Polymer Injection Group, supposedly a Chinese conglomerate from the inland province of Sichuan. The corporation specializes in fish by-products salvaged from the "ocean's bounty." Some of its finer samples are "Broiled Shark Gums," "Multi-Flavor Variety Pack Of Pickled Fish Cloaca," "Lightning Power Monkfish Cerebral Fluid Energy Drink," "Mr. Steve's Safe And Natural Rhinoceros-Cure For The Inferior Male," and "Yu Wan Mei Miscellaneous Flavor Paste."



But, as the [YWM homepage](#) proclaims in bold letters, the corporation is "diversifying into myriad subsidiaries" such as "Szu-Maul Lethal Injection Truck And Van Manufacturing," "Speedee Slab Quick-Setting Concrete Consolidated," "Jhonson & Jhonson Baby's Shampoo," "Yu Wanmei EZ Home Foreclosure Program," and "Amalgamated Chinatowns of America, Inc." The new owner is pushy, to say the least. Every news and non-news item in the paper comes with at least one YWM product placement reference. Ads containing shibboleths in simulated non-grammatical English ("Glorious Fish By-Product Make for Long Life, Good Fortune") rudely bisect or multiply interrupt any and all reports. At a more subliminal level, the end of every text is marked with the Chinese character for fish. The video clips go overboard with animated YWM icons and messages flashing across the screen and with the anchors blending YWM commercials effortlessly into their tabloid-style interviews. *The Onion* has positively turned fishy. No savvy *Onion* reader should be fooled by this non-too-subtle effort at mocking the sorry state of the publishing industry and the corporate takeover of the media in contemporary America. No one, really, should even be surprised that a fictive Chinese corporation is the villain of this imaginary apocalypse. After all, wasn't GM's Hummer just sold to an obscure Chinese company called Sichuan Tengzhong Heavy Industrial Machinery Company Ltd.? Bizarre as it may have sounded, that piece of news shouldn't have surprised too many either. For better or for worse, China has been on Americans' mind for quite some time—at least those Americans who have been paying attention to the intricate linkage between the Chinese compulsion to save and the subprime mortgage crisis that has brought the American economy to its knees, to the chattering class ratcheting up the specter of "China rising," to the media coverage of the Beijing Olympics and the ethnic riots, to news stories about poisonous toothpaste, carcinogenic toys, and tainted milk powder.

In the new millennium, China's has mostly shed its Cold War cartoonish image as an evil Communist regime that hates freedom and democracy but cannot stop its citizens from loving those beautiful ideals, at least not in their basements (they must have basements where they can write subversive poetry, build little replicas of the Statue of Liberty, and dream of rising up against the gerontocrats ensconced behind the Gate of Heavenly Peace). Today, the Chinese are viewed with suspicion not as ideological fanatics (that role has been taken over by Islamic fundamentalists) but as relentless profit-seekers bound by neither law nor conscience. Thus a Chinese company coming out of nowhere to take a stab at acquiring a piece of what was once the pinnacle of American industrial achievements was truly a remarkable event whose significance could not be adequately marked by mainstream media trying to steer clear of fear-mongering. Thus it has fallen on a cabal of professional satirists to spell out its full implications.

It is commonly said that humor does not translate easily because it is deeply entrenched in the nitty-gritty of a given cultural and social milieu. It requires sustained immersion in local knowledge for the cues to be picked up and savored and for the punch line to hit home. *The Onion* has owed its success to mostly in-jokes designed for the well-trained ears and eyes of a stratum of Americans very much tuned in to the shifting landscapes of American culture and politics and yet disgusted with the many absurdities unfailingly trotted out by politicians as well as an assortment of celebrities. That we now have a China-themed issue of *The Onion* is an unmistakable indication of how much China has become part of American life and perhaps the American psyche as well.

But what exactly is it about China to which *The Onion* is directing its mordant sense of humor and irony? And if China is no more than a foil, what is it about the American self that is also being skewered? Let's begin with the [mock-announcement](#) of the transfer of ownership. Couched in the hoary voice ("news-paper," "owner-ship," "any-way") of the paper's 141-year-old "publisher emeritus" T. Herman Zweibel, the piece is strewn with racial slurs evocative of the times of Fu Manchu. Mr. Zweibel speaks of "China-men" crawling out of their "dank hut" to extend their "clammy clutch" into the Western world, getting what they wanted with "infernal bowing and other assorted chinky-dinkery" plus "an appropriately absurd parcel of riches." But the real bogeyman turns out to be Mr. Zweibel himself, who casually lets drop the paper's inglorious origin: his ancestors founded it to fleece "its porridge-brained readers out of as much precious capital as could be wrung from their grubby, desperately toiling fingers." Sharing his ancestors' profound contempt for readers and journalists alike, he is sick of trying to keep up the pretense of providing objective reporting for the benefit of an informed citizenry.

What is at first blush a spoof of old-fashioned American racism turns out to be a savage attack on the profanation of the profession of journalism by rapacious capitalists. Still, the racial slurs pile on, and the announcement ends with Mr. Zweibel wishing the "whimpering clods" who call themselves readers good luck with the new owner, who he promises will "surely dizzy you into stupefied obedience with their unnatural black Orient arts."

Is this funny? Does playing on unsavory, threadbare racial stereotypes tickle the American funny bone? *The Onion* does not seem so confident about the comic longevity of such old hat gags. Elsewhere in the paper, good old Americanisms about the "Chinaman" are banished in favor of a subtler brand of humor that invokes a different mythology: a China run by a ruthless and humorless authoritarian government. It's a government that has maintained its grip on power through unapologetic censorship and by feeding its populace falsehoods about itself and the outside world. It imprisons and butchers its citizens if they dare to grumble a bit or even take it to the streets.

Alarming, this recluse of a country has in recent decades steadily opened itself up and joined the global capitalist game without—aggravatingly enough—playing by the rules. It is like the genie let out of the bottle, gaining in size and menace in the blink of an eye and manifesting no intention of doing our biddings. For three decades now it has been sewing our clothes and shoes, stuffing our children's toys, filling our homes with cheap gadgets, packing our canned food, even financing our deficit spending at both the individual and national levels, but it doesn't seem to want to share our values and ideals. It doesn't seem to want anything from us other than our dollar, and maybe a few Hollywood blockbusters—not something we are unanimously proud of. What to make of such a "frienemy"?

Niall Ferguson has given a name to this uneasy interdependency: “Chimerica,” a pair of Siamese twins joined at the hip and yet feuding and straining to turn their backs on each other. Humor is one way to diffuse the tension and diminish the perceived threat of the other. *The Onion* at least gets this much across to its readers, with a wink and a nudge: Look, the Chinese have been stuck with a ridiculous control-freak of a government that blithely carries on its hilariously flawed propaganda blitz thinking that it’s cleverly pulling the wool over everyone’s eyes. Now they’re trying the same bag of tricks on us. Unfortunately, we Americans are defenseless against the onslaught because we have been disarmed by their cheap wares and capital infusion. They have bought us out, literally. In capitalism, money talks. So what can we do but surrender to their at once bombastic and insinuating messages, commercial as well as political? So here we go (and brace yourselves):

*China is a police state: there is no rule of law, no freedom of information; its media serve up lies, half-truths, and illiberal prejudices. If the oligarchic Party had its way, there would be only 12 websites altogether (“[Internet Adds 12th Website](#)”), with two of them being YuWanMei.com and ConfuciusQuotes.net (one imagines the latter site full of such gems of wisdom as “Confucius say, man who sit on red hot stove shall rise again,” though the actually existing ConfuciusQuotes.net doesn’t appear, unlike YuWanMei.com, to be a companion mock-site of *The Onion*). An Internet user registers total satisfaction with the extent of his virtual universe: “Who knew that someday we’d be able to carry forth our rich cultural traditions and promote the ethical norms of a socialist society, all at the touch of a button?” If you click on the editorial piece intriguingly entitled “[The Internet Allows For A Free Exchange Of Unmitigated Information](#),” a stern warning page springs up on your screen with the following message:

Secure Connection Failed

You have made a grave error.

(Error code: sec_error_cn_dissident_invalid)

Access to this page has been denied for your benefit by the Ministry of Public Security of the People’s Republic of China.

The State suggests: www.yuwanmei.com, www.mps.gov.cn, <http://bit.ly/jqfPe>

* Your ISP has been noted.

*China is a bully, especially vis-à-vis Taiwan, which it regards as a break-away province. In “[Toddler Chokes To Death On Plastic Taiwanese-Made Toy](#),” it tries, preposterously enough, to unload its toy scandal on the de facto island state that has over the years built a reputation for the reliability of its exports: “The cowardly and disloyal American-child-killing territory of Taiwan—properly known as Chinese Taipei—whose people and illegitimate government could be annihilated at any moment, has not yet issued an apology for murdering this gentle child with its hazardous toy product.”

*China does not play fair. In “[Intellectual Property Rights As Fleeting As The Scent Of Jasmine, Mayfly’s Wing In Autumn](#),” we are treated to a Daoist meditation on reality and illusion. Ever heard of the sage Zhuangzi waking up from a nap wondering if he was Zhuangzi who had just had a dream about a butterfly or if he was a Butterfly dreaming that it was Zhuangzi? Ever tried to apply that piece of ancient Chinese wisdom to our conceited world? Here’s the Chinese (or is it YWM?) showing you how to do it.

*China is a peculiar hybrid of arrogance, ignorance, and intolerance. In “[Weakling President Asks Imaginary Man In Sky To Bless Nation](#),” it’s bad enough that the president should ask “a pretend man who lives in the clouds” to watch over his nation, “even more incomprehensible, sources said, is that hundreds of millions of Americans openly worship the all-knowing invisible man—who apparently observes the world’s events from atop his perch in outer space—without fear of mockery, shame, or violent government reprisal.” Clearly, the Chinese have never heard of religion or spirituality and can’t even recognize a figure of speech. In “[Grandfather Disrespected In Own Home](#),” an American family are chided for deficiency of filial piety, as evidenced in the scant attention they pay to the patriarch’s “expert counsel on matters ranging from home maintenance to the best methods for attaining low-cost airfare to Florida.” Worse, the daughter-in-law dare deny the old man his request for a second slice of pie, forgetting that “to this day she has not produced a single male heir.”

You get the idea.

The kick one gets out of mocking one's opponent can be delectable. But when the opponent is one's (evil) twin, there's always the nagging doubt that the self is implicated. *The Onion* offers a few soothing salves for injured American pride. In "[U.S. Hunger For Fish Byproducts Not As Strong As First Imagined](#)," YWM is dismayed by evidence showing that "the American palette is far too unrefined and pedestrian to appreciate such delicacies as ground gas bladders, lymphoid tissue, and fresh gill paste." Americans have discerning tastes after all and have not entirely lost their gastronomical independence, which bodes well for keeping the browbeating Chinese at bay in other, more vital areas. In the "Infographic" feature called "[The Following Are Examples Of American Weakness](#)," Americans are reminded of their virtues and strengths by means of a slanderous and uncomprehending litany of defects: "Gymnasts are old, bulky and without grace"; "When people are permitted to so loudly discuss their rights, it is impossible to sit down and enjoy a peaceful Fish Time"; "Unwieldy system of checks, balances"; and so on. A beautiful landscape picture (the Rockies?) is given this caption: "[Clear American Sky A Constant Reminder Of Industrial Inferiority](#)."

What makes China such a delicious target of the lampoon artists and such an obliging foil for the American ego? If humor plays on perceived incongruity, then China very much has it coming, what with its bloated self-image and its bumbling presence on the international stage. The Chinese have an excellent sense of humor too, even under the most austere and repressive circumstances, as Guo Qitao's [collection](#) of Cultural Revolution era jokes testify. But satire, with its critical thrust against the powers that be, has always had to tread a very fine line. In the *People's Daily's* comic supplement *Satire and Humor* 讽刺与幽默 (inaugurated in 1979), the majority of the cartoons and comic strips are of a eulogistic nature, inconceivable as it might be. Entries with a bit of a bite usually target social ills and official corruption (the kind that is being openly prosecuted). High politics is strictly off-limits.

For all its avowed atheism, China has many sacred cows. This alone is an irresistible temptation for American satirists who thrive on brinksmanship with taboos of any kind. Politics has always been the most legitimate and prized target of caricature and its rich and inexhaustible supply of joke butts have sustained the careers of legions of satirists and catapulted a few to national stardom. Comedians-cum-journalists are national heroes: think of Jon Stewart, Jay Leno, Stephen Colbert, and Michael Moore. Politicians who are at the receiving end of their caustic commentaries are apparently eager to appear on their shows, as if to be a good politician entails not only the ability to withstand barbed wit, but also the proof that one knows how to deflate one's own pretensions and does not imagine oneself an uppity elite who is above the jesting of the common folk. Politics, in other words, has little of the mysticism or sacrality that typically shrouds it in authoritarian countries.

There is another aspect to Chinese politics that lends it to well to parody: theatricality. This is of course closely related to the mystified nature of political power in China, where pomp and ceremony is how power presents itself to the people and where reverence, obedience, fear, and enchantment are the proper response to the displays of power, not derisive laughter. Politics amounts to a theatrical spectacle, a ritualistic enactment of what James Scott calls "public transcript." It is a drama that commands participation, willingly or unwillingly, from the rulers and ruled alike. Both have their roles to inhabit and their scripts to act out; whatever foolish or insubordinate thoughts they might harbor in private (their "hidden transcripts") matter very little.

American politics, by contrast, leans on an ethos of authenticity. Politicians are expected to bare their bosoms to the voters, to speak their minds under any circumstances, to be his or her true self in public as in private, to show emotion when emotion is called for, and above all, to convince the electorate that they mean what they say and are not just going through the motion. They must come off as "genuine" and "sincere," not a phony robot manipulated by strategists or merely refracting public expectations.

Against this backdrop, the Chinese style of politics can strike a casual American observer as hopelessly hypocritical, a sort of gigantic shell game in which none of the players believe in what they are doing and nonetheless keep on with the charade. All that playacting, the disconnect between speech and action, between belief and practice, is an open invitation to mockery. (In that light, American politics is not without its own theatrical dimensions, which is why its comic quotient is also very high.) Theatrical politics makes for good satire because satire is theater too: what are speaking tongue-in-

cheek, punning, impersonating, and ventriloquizing if not theatrical arts? Who is a better match for the mealy-mouthed politician than the slick-tongued comedian? (One can only wonder why it should have taken the Minnesotans that long to send Al Franken to the U.S. Senate.)

Judging from the fun *The Onion* has been having with the China motifs, we would not be exaggerating in saying that China is a godsend to the comedic profession: an oversized arriviste on the global scene now preaching like a forbearing Confucian sage, now haranguing like a self-righteous commissar, now gushing like an overzealous salesman. Who among the funny set could have made that up?

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Screenshot of *The Onion* [from NPR](#).

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