CHINA BOOKS PODCAST

PODCAST

Chinese Comedy with Jesse Appell

The bilingual comedian talks us through the traditional "xiangsheng" form of Chinese comic repartee, and explains whether Beijing can take a joke.

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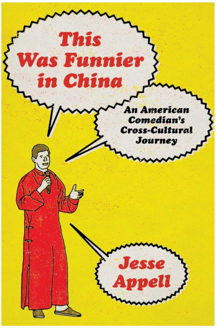
MEMOIR SOCIETY

There are many ways to connect people across distant countries and divided politics. Sharing a cup of tea is one, but laughing at a joke together is possibly the best. Jesse Appell, an American who lived in China for many years learning *xiangsheng* comic repartee, as well as performing stand-up and opening a comedy school, knows that better than most.


This Was Funnier in China
An American Comedian's Cross-Cultural Journey
Jesse Appell

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This month on the podcast we were delighted to be joined by Jesse Appell to tell us about his new book *This Was Funnier in China*, a memoir of his apprenticeship to the *xiangsheng* master Ding Guangquan. Jesse was involved in the rise of China's modern comedy scene as a writer and performer, and his own comic videos and appearances on Chinese TV have garnered over 500 million views. He also sells Chinese tea, and brought a brew to Asia Society's recording studio in New York, where we talked about the different forms of Chinese comedy, how the scene has changed, and what you can and can't make a joke about.

Listen to the podcast, or watch the video below:

Chinese Comedy with Jesse Appell

China Books Podcast

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An American Comedian's Cross-Cultural Journey
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Guest

Jesse Appell is a bilingual comedian, author and entrepreneur. He studied *xiangsheng* comedy in Beijing, and has appeared on Chinese TV shows including *Huanle Xiju Ren* (欢乐喜剧人). He is the author of *This Was Funnier in China* (2026), and the founder of Jesse's Teahouse.

> We're tearing down the bridges that allow regular people to connect with each other, make a living doing it, and have fun. And yeah, if you systematically tear down all the ways we interact as real people, now they look like an enemy.
>
> — *Jesse Appell*

Transcript

Alec Ash: We're recording this one in Asia Society's studio in New York. And you brought your tea kit.

Jesse Appell: I brought my tea stuff, 'cause I don't go anywhere without my tea stuff. And also you lived in Yunnan for years and years and years. So if there's anybody who can't refuse a good Yunnan red tea—ancient tree tea—it would be you. So I brought the Yunnan tea especially for you.

You know me too well. So tell us more. What are we drinking?

So we're gonna be drinking an ancient tree red tea. Ancient tree means that the trees are wild. In Yunnan, in this part of China, they have all these tea trees that grow wild up on the mountains. Tea farmers go up, they pick the leaves, they bring them back down, they turn them into the type of tea that we can actually drink. It's just really, really good because the old trees have these big root systems and they have lots of great scent to them.

[*Jesse pours first wash over a tea pet*]

Welcome back to Yunnan, immediately.

We should explain. Some of our listeners will know you from your online tea businesses, Jesse's Teahouse.

So, yeah, the book is all about my time doing Chinese comedy, and one of the things about Chinese comedy is that comedy and the tea world actually have these intersections. The traditional Chinese comedy that I studied took place at teahouses. And so I got into tea kind of through that.

And then also, when I was touring around doing comedy for my whole career—nine years in China—whenever I had a chance to go to a tea area to perform, I would just take a couple extra days and go up into the mountains and meet the tea people. It was just a hobby of mine. And then over COVID, world shuts down, can't perform. I start up a tea company and now that's also doing well. And so I'm trying to do both the tea and the comedy and juggle all the balls at the same time.

Because you got stuck in America. A nine-day vacation turned into five years.

I thought it'd be nine days. It turned out to be three and a half years before the borders opened, and now five years-ish or so since the pandemic. So everything kind of got turned upside down. But this is part of one of the fun things about the book was being able to go back to these periods—getting to China in 2010, 2011, 2012 and seeing kinda, getting back into the good energy we had in that time period for cultural exchange. It was a lot of fun.

Wonderful. So now we have our libations. Let's go back to the start and talk about your journey in this book: *This Was Funnier in China: An American Comedian's Cross-Cultural Journey* (Avid Reader Press, 2026).

I like how ripped up your copy is, 'cause I know you read it.

This is my copy, you know, it's been well-thumbed. This is why you don't read books inside the sauna. But I hope you take it as a compliment. So the journey that you talk of has been going on, as you said, more than a decade. We first met in Beijing in 2012, 2013, when we were both living there. So just take it from the beginning. How did you end up in China researching Chinese comedy?

Sure. I studied Chinese in school, basically for fun. I just thought it was interesting. I always liked the language classes—in America a lot of times people will complain they have to take foreign language, but I always really liked those classes. So I knew when I got to college I was definitely gonna try to study abroad somewhere. I had studied some Chinese and some Spanish, and I figured, China seems really interesting. Why not go there?

So I went and did these really intensive Chinese language study-abroad programs. You had to study a hundred characters a day and then every day we'd have a test on the hundred characters we learned yesterday. And we signed a language pledge saying that we would speak no English, other than calling our family, for the entire time we were there. So, six months of that study abroad, and it got me to the point where I had enough Chinese that I kind of wanted to be a real person again. In America, I'd always been into comedy—I did improv comedy, I wrote for our school's satirical newspaper. I just always liked comedy and making people laugh.

Then once I got to China, I was like, I wanna make people laugh here too. And that's when I realized that there are traditional Chinese comedy styles, there's Western comedy that's just reached China for the first time and nobody knows what it is, there's internet stuff that was growing all over the world at the same time. And it was just a really interesting time to be in China from a comedy perspective.

So I tried to just get in with the local comedy scene. I found I really enjoyed it, and then when I graduated college, I wanted to find some way of getting back to China to do comedy. And so that's when I applied for, and ultimately got, a Fulbright Fellowship to research Chinese comedy by apprenticing to a master teacher.

By Chinese comedy we're talking about *xiangsheng* (相声).

Yeah, right.

So what is *xiangsheng*, and who is Ding Guangquan (丁广泉)?

Good question. So *xiangsheng* is a traditional Chinese linguistic performance comedy art. It's all been taught master to student, master to student, master to student back from the Qing Dynasty. There's a joker and a straight man. They go back and forth, and back and forth and back and forth. For instance, if we were on stage, the audience in China—without being told anything—would know you are the joker because you are on the audience's left, and I am the straight man because I'm on the audience's right.

Basically it's like a comic dialogue. We come up with bits, we set each other up, we hit the ball out of the park. But also there's no fourth wall. We could talk with the audience. We could bring them into the show. I might be talking to you, or I might be talking to you.

Hi audience.

A lot of times the funniest bits are me talking to the audience as if you're not here, and I just keep going on, and, you know, what are you gonna do? You just gotta stand up there and take it.

So it's a lot of fun. And it was really cool to have this traditional art form be something that was still alive and going on. By the time I got there, there was this man I apprenticed to—Master Ding Guangquan—who is really the main character of the book other than me. He's this master teacher; by the time I met him, he had been doing it for 50 years. He was just really kind of like a father and a mentor to me in China—about how to be a good comedian, but also how to be a professional, how to be a good person, and also how to be yourself in another culture and also be able to make people laugh, but not just get subsumed by that culture or fight the culture. He was a very, very skilled cultural communicator. He had disciples from all over the world and we all got to do comedy together.

And*xiangsheng* is kind of an essential Chinese cultural art. Can you tell us a bit more about the origins of *xiangsheng*? One of the stories I enjoyed in your book was about Qiong Bu Pa, one of the early performers.

So the art of *xiangsheng* is interesting because we know who started it. It's unusual to know exactly who starts an art form. But there was this guy named Qiong Bu Pa (穷不怕) and that was a stage name that means "I do not fear poverty." I guess it was funny in the Qing Dynasty, it's like a good name. Now it's a weird name.

Unusual for a comedian not to fear poverty.

But he was doing his own thing. What happened was that one of the Qing emperors died, and they forbid any Beijing opera from being performed for what turned out to be two years, although at the time the opera performers didn't know it.

So all of the Beijing opera performers kind of had to hit the streets, and they created what they called the "hundred minor art forms." Everybody would just find a way to use the skills they had to make a living now as an independent artist before social media. Basically, the people who were acrobats started doing different juggling stuff. The people who were clowns started telling jokes. And one of the Beijing opera clowns—Qiong Bu Pa—started getting really, really funny. He got so funny that legends started being told about him in the city, that there's this really funny guy doing jokes in the Tianqiao area in Beijing.

And he got so big that the Empress Dowager Cixi invited him to the Summer Palace to perform. And thank God he killed the show, because otherwise the art form might've died right there. But because he did so well and people liked it so much, it became something that regular people liked and the Empress liked, and everybody in society had a blank check to enjoy this thing.

He took a disciple, and they realized that if you do back and forth, you get twice as much energy, you can set each other up. So it evolved from a one-person form very quickly to a two-person form. And from there it's just master-disciple, master-disciple.

So there's a lineage that goes through Hou Baolin?

Yes. So my master was Ding Guangquan. His master was Hou Baolin, who is one of the biggest comedians of the 20th century in China. There's a wax statue of him in the Beijing Madame Tussauds wax museum. And Hou-style *xiangsheng* is officially labeled in China as what they call an intangible cultural heritage. It's the sort of thing where if you have a special technique—like making this tea— that only you know and it's passed down in a village generation to generation, they call it intangible cultural heritage.

So we've got a tangible cultural heritage here. [*Gestures at tea*]

Yes. This is more tangible.

But we thought you could give us a little bit of a sampler of the intangible cultural heritage.

Hao! (好)—I'll do that. Yeah, I'll do a little bit. This is what they call a *guankou* (贯口), which is like a monologue. Sometimes these are funny by themselves, sometimes they're just showing off the speaking skill, or you can use them in different ways. Part of the thing about *xiangsheng* is you should be able to speak with such interesting energy that it draws in the audience just off of the way you talk. These were kind of ways to show off that skill. So I'll do a piece for you. It's called "The Map" (地理图). It's all these different country names, one after the other. So it goes like this:

[*Jesse performs the guankou in Chinese—a rapid-fire recitation of country names*]

That's a lot of countries.

Yeah. The budget-cut. So we would set this up in a bit—like, you know, my partner Master Ding would be like, "Oh, Jesse, I haven't seen you in a while. Where have you been?" "Oh, I was just traveling, doing a lot of shows." "Well, where did you go?" "Well, it was a lot of places. I don't wanna list them all." "No, no, go ahead." "Alright, well I went to…"

[*Jesse performs the guankou*] All the way down.

Do you put Taiwan in there sometimes?

Taiwan was not in there. I posted a video where I was just like, "Happy Chinese New Year, everybody, no matter whether you're from…" [*performs*] and I did get people in the comments being like, "Taiwan's not on the list." And I'm like—Czechoslovakia is on the list because it's an old bit, and nobody complained about Czechoslovakia being on the list.

Or Kosovo.

Yeah. Or Kosovo or something like that. So it's just a bit. But you could add it in there if you want.

Right. So, you know, firstly, as someone who has bashed my head against the granite cliff of Chinese myself for many years, just—props and admiration for the mastery of pronunciation, of tone, of intonation, of rhythm that goes into that. It's a lot of work. How do you deal with the epithet "performing monkey," which is still used for foreigners performing show business in Chinese? And maybe you could talk a little bit about why you think that stereotype persists in China for foreign performers, whereas a Chinese performer performing in English hopefully wouldn't get the same treatment.

Yeah. Basically, the phrase "performing monkey"—for people that might not have heard it—is a term used for Western performers in smaller markets around the world. In Thailand or Taiwan or China or Japan, if you go and speak the language well enough, there's always some TV show that'll put you on. It's usually pretty clear that this person probably wouldn't be qualified to perform on TV unless they were a non-Asian-looking Asian-speaker.

There were a lot of shows like that. The question of whether it really is a bad thing, and whether it deserves to be mocked, whether it's even accurate; a lot of it comes down to who has the power over the creative content. Who is in charge of making the bit. A lot of times the cringier versions of it come from some Chinese television writer who's overworked and doesn't have a lot of time to think about this stuff and doesn't know, say, America that well. They say, "I got this American coming on the show. He speaks some Chinese. Let's have him do some tongue twisters and then make a joke about cowboys."

And then when you go and watch it as an American, you're like—oh, this guy speaks Chinese and *this* is what they're talking about? This is really low-level stuff. I think that weirdness of seeing our culture treated with such little care—maybe in the way that Asian cultures are sometimes represented in our media, although I don't think everybody would make that leap, but I think it's a reasonable leap to make—I think it discomforts people. And it's also frustrating for the many people who want to make it in show business, television, film and they see spots being taken up by less qualified Westerners who just happen to speak a little bit of Chinese. Or in my case, I couldn't even get a lot of those jobs 'cause somebody else was gonna be three inches taller and blonde and blue-eyed. Those people would always be cast over me.

One of the ways I tried to work against, not so much that the point was to fight the stereotype. What I found very quickly was that I really liked doing the type of comedy where I was part of the writing room. I found very quickly that I can't expect Chinese people who don't know me and don't know my life experience and haven't lived in China as an American—they're probably not gonna write the best jokes for me, even if they were to write jokes for me. And part of what I always loved about the comedy was the writing, almost as much or maybe even more than the performing.

So it was always my way of try to say, to make sure: is this "performing monkey" quality or is it better? My way of thinking was: if I was part of writing it and it sucks, then I suck, and I'm kind of fine if I suck. I don't wanna suck with no chance of success, which is what a lot of those performing-monkey scripts are like.

But that being said, I don't actually like this phrase, in the sense that I think it's a dangerous thing to tell performers who are trying to do something new, like going into a new culture. "Oh that's bad." The people saying "that's a performing-monkey show" are not usually real scholars of Asian media. It's usually a gut reaction: there's a white guy on the show, he must be a fake-oh, because how else do you get there?

That was one of the reasons I had so much respect for Master Ding—we were there to learn traditional Chinese comedy. Yeah, we're foreigners, so the language may not be as slick.

And all of his disciples were foreigners, right?

He had Chinese disciples, but the foreign disciples were more famous. He performed with and taught Dashan (大山, Mark Rowswell), though Dashan is technically apprenticed to Jiang Kun (姜昆)—so there's all this internal politics. Kind of like in the NBA, everybody knows this guy was on that team and then they had a fight and they had to trade each other. Who was on whose team, who apprenticed to whom is all part of the Chinese comedy scene.

But Master Ding taught foreign disciples, and basically no other masters did. He had a real good touch for it—how do we do a bit that's gonna be funny, that you're gonna be able to do, that's gonna work for the local audience, but really bring *you* into the bit? Because if any foreigner could do it, it's probably not a good comedy bit—it's too broad. If only you can do it, then you have a shot of doing something really special.

That's something I've taken even back into my work doing comedy and art and creation in America. What book should I write? I should write the type of book nobody else is gonna be able to write. Whether it's good or not, that depends on the reader. But nobody else has made a book about *xiangsheng*, this traditional comedy style, in English. I believe it's the first one. So it's fun.

I think it's a good book. So we talked about *xiangsheng*, but you also mentioned some of the other forms. How has the scene changed and evolved? There's also *tuokouxiu* (脱口秀) standup, which has come along. Panel shows.

Sketch comedy is in right now.

The improv scene. What's new in the scene? How has it changed over the last ten years?

The Western comedy styles in China have been really dynamic since I got there in 2012. When I started full-time doing comedy in China, I'd say there were like ten people in the whole country that knew what standup comedy was. And we would all be doing these bar shows.

The Chinese translation for standup is *tuokouxiu*—literally "talk show." At that time, a lot of people thought any show that had talking in it was all "talk show." So standup comedy, Dave Chappelle—that's "talk show." But also Ellen—that's "talk show." We would do these shows in bars, and the host would come out and start talking, and the audience is like, "When is this guy gonna bring the guest on? He just keeps talking."

They think it's the host.

Yeah. He just keeps going, he's not stopping. And they would get really weirded out by it. But nowadays, there's standup on TV. There's big media brands pushing standup comedy. It's gotten so popular that I'd be willing to guess that on any given night, there are more Chinese people listening to live Western-style standup comedy in China than in the US.

Because there are just so many cities, so many big populations, so many people. And also, here there's a bajillion ways to express yourself. But in China, it's very unusual to have one person with a microphone talking to people directly and having it feel like they can share what they think about the world. There aren't a lot of places to see that. You don't really see that in Chinese movies anymore, in Chinese television anymore, in Chinese books. So it has a lot of value above the normal things we think of as standup being valuable for. And I think that's one of the reasons it's really blown up.

So what are some of the popular topics for jokes in China? Can you give some examples of what Chinese comedians are poking fun at in Chinese life and society?

Work and relationships are really big topics. Relationships especially for the female comedians. Historically in China, it's pretty unusual for a woman to have a mic and be able to say whatever she wants on a TV—and especially self-created content, not being a host for things other people have written, but writing their own material.

A lot of women—there's been a lot of viral jokes about, I guess you could call it feminism, but it really isn't feminism in the way that Western feminism would think of feminism. Questions like, "What's up with all these men being so confident when they're just very clearly average?" (普信男). And women thinking they do all this studying and then they have to marry down all the time. Or women thinking these men don't have good communication skills and then get angry. These are not unusual topics, even here, but in China no one has ever talked about this publicly in an interesting, entertaining way on major platforms.

Similarly with work—it seems crazy to say, but going on TV and saying, "Hey, I work at this company—because I'm doing this for fun part-time—and I hate my boss." Like, I couldn't imagine if I'm at a real job, going on TV and saying "I hate my boss"—what's gonna happen? There's a lot of energy there. Within that society, it means a lot to complain about your boss, to complain about overwork, to complain about everyday struggles.

Yeah. So it sounds like you're saying there wasn't really an outlet for that before *tuokouxiu* came along. TV shows weren't that outlet.

Yeah. And I think it has gone along well with social media in this new era of elimination of gatekeepers. Chinese art and culture traditionally has been master-disciple, passed down. Or there's one TV station in the entire region and it's all set ahead of time. It's the son of the director who's gonna get the job doing the show. There was never as much of an open possibility of succeeding in the arts that I think in America we take for granted. It's not easy here, but if you move to New York and you wanna audition for Broadway, you can do it. Whereas in China, people would be like, "No, you should be studying. If you're not an artist, you don't do art."

I think standup—particularly because you don't need to be a trained actor, you don't need to be super tall or good-looking—it has this extra element of realism that is missing in a lot of Chinese entertainment nowadays.

There isn't that much in your book about where the red line is. You bring up the phrase "to play an edge ball" (擦边球). Could you tell us more about where that edge is, where the red line is? If you want to make a joke that is politically or socially sensitive in China, how do you know?

Sure. I do talk about it in the book. I try to bring it up when it's relevant, because I feel like one of the big challenges of Western coverage of Chinese comedy is that the article will be about censorship. It's not just mentioned—that's what it's about, that's why the pitch got through, that's what got the editor interested. It's all about censorship.

As a comic there, you do need to be aware of what you're saying, where you're saying it, and how you're saying it. But it's usually very late in the process that you even think about it—or very, very early. Basically the way we would deal with these things: if I have a joke that's clearly a non-starter, that's never gonna be on TV, that doesn't mean I can't do it in a live club. There are types of jokes I do at a small show, types I do at a big show, types of jokes for a rural audience or an audience that doesn't know standup that well, and a type of joke for the big overseas college students-returnee clubs of Shanghai. Those people are very different than the audience that might be watching on TV.

As a comedian, I always start from "who's my audience?" before I think about the government or anything. But then it is true that if I want to do this bit, and I want it to be on TV, and I know it's going to be on TV, is there a way of massaging the bit to be more comfortable? Things you do, like in America, we're used to being able to say, "this person on this day said this thing"—all the receipts are there. But in China—and it is a bit of a chicken-and-egg problem, were Chinese people like this before the government adapted to it, or is it because of the way comedy is governed that people like it this way—but people tend to like their political or sensitive comedy done in a sensitive, subtle way.

It's like here in America you can make jokes about race, but there's no law saying you can't say the N-word. People choose not to because it's gonna be hacky or come off wrong, or the audience is gonna be [un]happy. There are societal ways we police each other in order to make sure the joke comes out as the funniest joke possible. The difference in China is that there's a second level: after you've done that, if the people who run the TV station don't like the joke, you still may find it cut from the broadcast.

And that's usually the worst that can happen. I wrote ten jokes, we filmed ten jokes, and it airs—four of them aired. Did four of them air because six were politically cut? Usually it's because, hey, we shot more than we have time for. If you go on *America's Got Talent*, you might be on stage for 35 minutes and then your end bit is four. That's just how television works.

The main thing about how and what you can say depends on context. Live stage is different from television, television is different from movies. And who you are matters. There are jokes I can tell that maybe Chinese people couldn't. There are also jokes I can't tell that Chinese people could tell. It all is based on the context. It's definitely part of something you need to consider if you want to be a professional comedian. But I definitely don't think—people might have this idea that there's a list of banned topics and there are people looking over every single show and you're gonna be dragged off to a cell if you do something wrong. It's not that way at all. Incentive-wise, if you do the type of comedy that's going to get blocked a lot, you just tend to not have people invite you to shows, you tend to not get funding for your show, you tend to occasionally get strikes on your social channels. So it does come into play.

Yeah. I mean, that's the line you quote or paraphrase—Master Ding saying, "Tell the jokes you can, so you can keep telling them."

Yeah. And all throughout Chinese society—not just entertainment society—there's always this mentality of "live to fight another day." It's actually, weirdly enough, one of the unique things about American creative culture that I never thought about before I went to China. People here will quit a show that is paying them if they don't feel like the show is good. If they feel like, "I'm the costume designer and the director is an asshole, or if he doesn't believe in my creative vision," they will quit paid shows for artistic purposes.

In a lot of places in the world that's just a luxury people don't have. People are like, "Hey, this might not be the favorite comedy show I'm doing costume design for, but I'm gonna fight another day. I'm not gonna go to the mat about this joke or go to that mat about that shot or go to the mat about this character being portrayed a certain way." One, because it's doomed to failure. But two, I think there is more of this idea that opportunities open at distinct times. Whereas here, people are like, "I don't care what time it is. If I believe this, I'm saying it now." I think that is a cultural difference.

It's a good rejoinder that in America, in every country, there's also self-censorship, social lines and red lines. But in China there are more real consequences. And in just the last couple of years, you had a couple of comedians on TV get in pretty major trouble for jokes. In 2023, Li Haoshi (李昊石) made this pretty anodyne joke about watching a dog chase a squirrel and saying it reminded him of PLA soldiers —"determined attitude" (作风优良，能打胜仗).

We could go into half an hour on this particular scandal if you wanted to, but basically, a lot of times when this stuff happens, the official story and what's actually going on are not the same.

So what's the real story there? Because his company got fined —

The company got fined. Part of the thing was that that company, there was financially shady stuff going on with the company.

It was Xiaoguo, right? That was the company you wrote for?

Yeah, I worked for this company [Ed.: Xiaoguo Culture, 笑果文化]—for about six months, so I know a lot of people that were in that company or got affected by this. There are multiple levels to the story.

One, with the joke, part of the problem was not so much that he did the joke… they did two shows that day. Occasionally they will have random checkers come by to see if you're doing the joke you submitted the script for. So in order to do a comedy show, you write the script, you submit the script, then you film a video of yourself doing the show into a camera with nobody there. Then if it's approved, occasionally people will come through and check it. That joke was pitched, approved, actually performed on TV. But the guy there that night—the checker—personally didn't like it. He told them on the second show, "Don't do that joke again." And Li Haoshi was like, "Dude, I'm approved. I sent in the script, I did this on TV. Whatever man." And he did it again. So he was really more being attacked for insubordination rather than because the joke was bad.

Hmm.

But then, within the Chinese system—and I think this is a weakness of the way China handles arts stuff in general, even by their own standards—once a complaint has been issued, there really is no brake in their system to stop this from being a problem.

In America, I don't know if you know about the comedy legal history of George Carlin and the "Ten Words You Can't Say on the Radio" [Ed.: 7 words]. So this is where American comedy free-speech law kind of came from. George Carlin did a bit about the ten words you can't say on the radio, and then he did them on the radio. They basically had people get sued. It went to the Supreme Court. And the Supreme Court said that he has the right to say it, and the station has the responsibility to have a dump button or some way of stopping it from airing. He can't be told he can't say the joke. He can not be invited to the next show. People can not buy the tickets. A theater could decide they don't like him personally and don't want to do it. But he has the right to say it.

So this is a brake: if an American were sued by the government and it goes to the courts, we have legal precedent that: "no, the comedian has the right to say that." In China, it's not really clear where those rights are or aren't, and I think it's deliberately unclear. That leads to situations where, as a comedian, a lot of times people are saying, "Can you do this? Can you not do that?" Who the hell knows.

Jimmy Kimmel getting pressured off the air is another example of that, maybe.

And within America as well, we have our own versions of this that happen, whether it's the soft version—cancel culture—there are people who have real consequences in their career from jokes that they do, but legally they're not gonna be thrown into jail or can't be fined for them. Similarly, you can have people pulled off the air—why were they pulled off? It seems a little political. But we at least have some law to stop that from getting too bad. Whereas in China, they really don't have that.

So once it became a story, now they have to act. They don't have the chance of sweeping it under the rug. And that's actually one of the things I have a little bit of conflict on, even talking about these topics. On one hand, I don't wanna give anyone the impression that I don't want to talk about it or that I can't, because that's just not true.

But also, when Western media comes into that world—I was there in China and had shows canceled because of this thing. And all I wanted to do was get back on stage. The longer the story stays in the Western media, the longer we can't perform. And I think that there's this idea that Western media generally thinks it has a right to the story. If it happened, then a journalist has the right to dig as far as they want, no matter who's disrupted in Asia, in order to get the story into a Western newspaper. But these stories have real consequences for the comedians in Asia. And ironically, if it becomes known in China that they do this, now they can't back down.

So it makes more trouble for them when it gets picked up.

It makes more trouble for everybody. And I think that it's one thing if people are genuinely interested in knowing about the culture, but there's also a class of people that make their living off of things outside of your country being bad. You see it in every country. There's a special type of media that goes and finds the worst story in America and airs it in China, and the worst story in China and airs it in America. And vice versa. Because there's a market—some people wanna hear bad things about other places.

So this is why, when it comes up in the book, I talk about censorship, I talk about how you make decisions about what type of comedy you do as a comedian in China. But I try to put it in context—it comes up where it comes up in the actual process.

It's not like you show up at an open mic and say one joke that mentions the government and then get pulled away to a cell.

Similarly in America, if someone came on stage with no knowledge of American culture and just made all sorts of really crazy race jokes, they'd probably not be invited back. And it could get a little bit ugly. The goal is to learn enough about each other's cultures that you're able to figure out where those lines are. And it's not to say you can't cross them or challenge them. But it's one thing to challenge a line in a way that is relevant to the people where the line was drawn, and it's another thing to challenge it for the sake of challenging the line, "because that's what I do."

Or to challenge it with knowledge and respect of the culture within which you are operating and living.

Yeah. I personally, if I were overlord of the world, I would not have comedians submit their scripts and have to do all this stuff. I would let comedians say the jokes they want. I think that would be the best way of running comedy virtually everywhere, with very minor exceptions. But I'm not in charge of that. So if I'm going to go to another country and they have laws, I feel like it's at least my job to try to understand what the law is, so that if I disagree with it or don't like it, at least I'm coming from a place of knowledge about what is actually happening.

And in China, that's very difficult because the reality and the written word are always a little bit different. They have the saying: "The people above have their rules, the people below have their ways" (上有政策，下有对策).

Yeah. It's a fuzzy line, and it's not always from the top, from high politics. It's at the bottom level—it's the company, it's the relationships.

And when it comes to censorship of comedy, it's actually very specific to the genre. You can get away with different things in a sketch comedy bit than you can with a standup bit, because a sketch comedy bit—these are actors. There's this layer of in-betweenness where you can have an actor say something that's not right, but they can still say it as a character, and people in the government will recognize that people know it's a character and they're not going to believe that you believe it.

But with standup—it may not actually be true, but if you say it in a standup show, people think it's true. So there might be tighter control over standup on some topics than in sketch, and vice versa. It takes a lot of ear-to-the-ground to try to figure out what's going on. Comedians will talk about this. They'll say, "Hey, this person did a bit on this topic and it was aired. Oh, we can talk about that. That's good to know. We can talk about relationships, we can talk about 'my boss is an asshole,' we can talk about mental health, or something like that." People keep an eye on that, to know what's being allowed at the highest levels, knowing you have more room in the small shows to figure stuff out. By the time you get to the high-level stuff, you'd have it worked out.

On perceptions of China in America and vice versa: I see all of your work over the last ten years as essentially building bridges—whether through tea or comedy—between China and the US and the West. That was presumably the mission of the US-China Comedy Center.

Rest in peace.

I have fond memories of it, when I could find it in the hutongs. I guess the question there is, in the grand scheme of international politics and public perception, what difference do you think that kind of cultural engagement can make?

I think it makes all the difference in the world. I think we've gotten into this weird funk where people look at international relations almost like a sports match. I have a team, you have a team, everything is a fight, I'll yell for my team and you're gonna yell for your team and whoever's strongest wins.

If you actually live and travel between cultures, this is not how people think about things. When I think of China, yes there are geopolitical elements, but I think of my friends. I think of the comedy club that I was running. I think of where I want to eat—oh, that's the good hot pot place, that's the bad hot pot place. I think about the traditional arts that I studied, *xiangsheng*, the tea and porcelain and botany and the way they grow the tea trees and all the techniques that are involved in that. It's a living, breathing place where people have hobbies and likes and dislikes.

And I feel like whether it's comedy or tea—or really could be anything, any book you talk about—it comes back to the people. I just think it's a grand mistake for people to think that the US and China, or even China and the world, are these sports-team-style relationships where China has a purpose and America has a purpose. I hate the term "American interest." Whose interest? My interest is being able to travel back and forth and eat hot pot and drink tea.

And not pay a tariff on the tea.

And not pay a tariff on the tea. Somebody else's interest—someone who sells weapons for a living—they'd like there to be more fights. That's an interest. I'm not gonna say their interest is invalid if mine's not invalid. We have to talk about *whose* interests we are serving.

One of the things I think that's cool about these cultural bridges is that if you open a bridge, lots of people start walking across. I even got tagged in an article about another American who's doing comedy in Shanghai now, and in the article it said, "Hey, I saw Jesse Appell do it. So I knew Shanghai had a comedy scene." How cool is that? You build the bridge, even other comedians walk across. You start sharing about Chinese tea, it comes into their life.

In my mind, when I look at the way I'd love the world to be, I'd love there to be tons of these bridges. And for the elements that we do need to consider as Americans—it's important somebody is making a plan about what to do if there's a conflict—but we need to make sure those people are siloed off from reality. Because if you have a hammer, everything looks like a nail.

I think one of the unfortunate parts of China becoming a national security issue for the US is that if you want to make your career in China—you went there, met the people, learned the language, you can now operate in China—what jobs are available? You better find some warships to count, 'cause no one else is paying you. We're making business hard to do with these tariffs. I went to China as a Fulbright scholar—the Fulbright program was canceled by executive order.

We're tearing down the bridges that allow regular people to connect with each other, make a living doing it, and have fun. And yeah, if you systematically tear down all the ways we interact as real people, now they look like an enemy. All the people being paid to do this only have hammers. And there are plenty of nails with China—it's not like there aren't any nails.

And it's easier to see it that way when there's less of that people-to-people engagement—less Chinese people watching your comedy videos, "Laowai style," commenting underneath. Or TikTok refugees getting on and seeing what's going on in China.

And we've been handed a lot of very imperfect systems. We're handed systems that are censored, we're handed systems that were split into multiple internets… No one asked me if there should be a separate internet in China. So we're handed imperfect tools to try to build the bridges.

But I think the bridge-building is so important. And keeping the bridges active is important. As much as I dislike the recent destruction of a lot of these bridges, I hope that newer, more relevant bridges will be put up in the future, because some of the ways we used to exchange culture might not be as relevant anymore, and there might be new ones we need to figure out. I like being one of those people bringing stuff together.

My idea of a good day is if I get to drink tea with a friend and talk about culture, and then at night I've got a comedy show. And I'm doing it tonight in New York with you guys at the Asia Society—I've got a show on after this.

By the time this airs, that'll be a couple of weeks ago.

Yeah. So you should have bought tickets before. But in my mind, that's a good day lived. Why isn't that an American interest—that we should enjoy our life with each other? I just think the national-securitization of all this stuff doesn't even make sense, because even if it *was* a national security problem, wouldn't the best way of addressing it be to have good relations and not need to fight? That seems like the long-term national security strategy—to live in a safe, stable world.

Yeah. It's just so generalized—the othering. I think the pandemic was the catalyst for that. But from this side of the bridge, I'm pretty new to America, but there's a new trend now, I think, a pushback against that hawkish attitude. There's more kind of China futurism, "China-maxing"—people getting on short-form video,

A very Chinese time in your life.

discovering Chongqing has neon lights. And I think it's in part more about America—a negative attitude to America—than it is positive attitudes to China. What's your view on this?

I think it's great. China is a very interesting and difficult place to learn about because they don't let journalists have free access. Part of the problem is cultural, but part of it is structural. It's just really hard to find out what's happening in China. Social media is actually one of the better ways to find out, because there aren't a lot of reporters left there anymore. And it's more relevant to most people who aren't foreign policy nerds.

You think about your own life, how you get to work, and then you say, "Hey, they take a train that goes through a building. Whoa." It's more relatable. I think it's great. And I think it is a little bit of a reaction to the generally increasingly negative feeling people have toward China, but that's coming with no data. It's not because they're seeing stuff, it's not because they know lots of Chinese people and stuff is getting worse—although it may be getting worse, depending on who you talk to.

But the fact that there's a group of people saying, "Hey, is it as bad as people are making it sound? Let's check what's actually going on there"—social media is a very imperfect way of doing that, but it at least lets you see stuff from a human perspective, at eye level. The bias is different. It's not coordinated in the same way that a media platform's decisions are made.

I think it's great. I don't know a single person in my life—maybe you do—who went to China, spent any amount of time there, even a week, and came back not completely changed in their opinion of China. I think we just simply don't know a lot about each other.

I'm big on the internet being the way we do that exchange, because we've been very fortunate in our lives to not just have trips to China but to live there. And it's just not realistic for half of China and half of America to have the chance to live with each other. But it is possible to connect on the internet. And because the internets are severed, this hasn't happened as fast as it should.

This is one of the reasons China is fascinating. There's no other place that's that big, that wealthy, that developed, and that isolated. When Americans look at that, I think to some degree they're looking at their own society through the lens of China, asking, "Hey, why don't we get the nice trains?" It's a good question. We spend our money on any number of other things, but certainly not on the trains. And sometimes we even spend money on the trains and we still don't get the trains.

So I think people are using China as that lens, because there aren't a lot of other developed countries—or countries with highly developed areas—that don't look a little bit like the US, since the US has been the leader of what we now call modernization. A lot of what modernization looks like just winds up looking like the United States. And China has done so, but in a different, unique way. You see that in the little mini details that make a good social media video or a good joke. So the jokes, the comedy, the tea—these are all really good ways of allowing people to come in and do the bridging on their own terms.

Well, I can't think of a better way to build that bridge than sharing the same joke or sharing the same cup of tea. I've already got that Yunnan ancient tree tea buzz going on.

There you go.

Jesse Appell, thank you so much for coming on the pod.

Thank you so much. ∎

Alec Ash is a writer focused on China, and editor of *China Books Review*. He is the author of *Wish Lanterns* (2016), following the lives of young Chinese in Beijing, and *The Mountains Are High* (2024) about city escapees in Dali, Yunnan. His articles have appeared in *The New York Review of Books, The Atlantic* and elsewhere. Born and educated in Oxford, England, he lived in China from 2008-2022, and is now based in New York.