

Cultural Boundaries in Humor Across Chinese and Western Comedy Films

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Abstract

Humor is often considered a universal element of human communication, yet its expressions and interpretations are deeply embedded within specific cultural contexts. In the age of globalization and transnational media consumption, the cultural boundaries of humor have become increasingly relevant, particularly in the realm of international cinema. This paper explores the distinct mechanisms and cultural assumptions underlying humor in Chinese and Western comedy films. Drawing on humor theories such as incongruity theory and relief theory, as well as Hofstede's cultural dimensions and Hall's context theory, this study employs comparative textual analysis to examine selected representative films from both cultural spheres including *Kung Fu Hustle* (Stephen Chow), *Hi, Mom* (Jia Ling), *Mr. Bean* (Rowan Atkinson), and *Borat* (Sacha Baron Cohen). The analysis focuses on four major dimensions of humor: linguistic play, situational and physical comedy, sociocultural references, and audience reception. It reveals that while some comedic devices (e.g., slapstick and exaggeration) may cross cultural lines, others—such as wordplay, political satire, and culturally specific references—often result in misinterpretation or reduced comedic effect when transplanted across cultures. The findings suggest that comedy serves as a potent yet fragile tool of cultural expression, one that resists easy translation and adaptation. This study highlights the importance of cultural sensitivity in the global distribution of comedy films and offers implications for international film translation, media localization, and transnational audience engagement strategies.

Keywords: Cultural Boundaries, Comedy Films, Cross-Cultural Communication

Introduction

Humor serves as a complex and culturally nuanced form of human expression, deeply embedded within specific linguistic, social, and historical contexts. While laughter is a universal human behavior, the stimuli that provoke it are often culture-specific (Marsudi et al., 2024). What elicits amusement in one cultural environment may be perceived as nonsensical, offensive, or emotionally flat in another. This cultural specificity becomes particularly evident in the realm of comedy films, where humor is conveyed through a delicate interplay of language, visual cues, social expectations, and narrative conventions that rarely translate seamlessly across cultures.

In the contemporary globalized media environment, the international circulation of cinematic humor has grown exponentially due to streaming platforms, transnational film festivals, and multilingual subtitling technologies (Marsudi et al., 2024). However, cross-cultural transmission of humor in films has emerged as one of the most intricate challenges in translation studies and intercultural communication. Numerous scholars argue that humor is among the most difficult textual elements to translate due to its reliance on sociocultural references, implicit meaning, and linguistic play (Gibson, 2019; Lionis, 2021; Marsudi et al., 2024; Mulyadi et al., 2021). Successful humor translation thus demands more than literal or semantic accuracy that requires “transcreation,” an adaptive and creative process that reformulates the humorous content for a target audience while preserving the original’s comedic essence.

The process of transcreation, while gaining prominence in audiovisual translation (AVT), often reveals structural and ideological tensions in the reception of culturally embedded humor. For instance, idiomatic wordplay, taboo references, regional dialects, or culturally specific parodies can rarely be rendered without significant transformation. According to the UNESCO Courier, the translation of humor involves negotiating national identities, emotional landscapes, and ethical sensibilities, highlighting humor as entertainment and ways for cultural meaning and power (Marsudi et al., 2024).

Chinese comedy cinema has undergone significant transformation over the past few decades. Historically influenced by folk humor, slapstick traditions, and socialist satire, modern Chinese comedic narratives reflect the complexities of a society in transition. Films such as *Hi, Mom* (2021) and *YOLO* (2024), both directed by Jia Ling, exemplify a growing trend towards emotionally resonant comedies that draw upon personal memory, generational conflict, and familial affection. These films resonate strongly with Chinese audiences using cultural references, linguistic familiarity, and collective memory. *YOLO*’s success at the domestic box office, grossing over 3.4 billion yuan and becoming one of China’s highest-grossing films of 2024, illustrates the powerful connection between culturally embedded humor and local viewership (Li & Deng, 2016).

In contrast, Western comedy, particularly from the United States and the United Kingdom, often leverages irony, absurdity, and social critique as core comedic strategies. The British series *Mr. Bean*, created by Rowan Atkinson, illustrates how visual and physical comedy drawing from silent film traditions can bypass linguistic barriers and appeal to international audiences. Its minimal use of dialogue allows viewers from diverse cultural backgrounds to engage with universally recognizable scenarios. However, not all Western

comedies enjoy this level of global intelligibility. Films such as *Borat* (2006), directed by Larry Charles and starring Sacha Baron Cohen, deploy highly contextual satire, exaggerating ethnic, religious, and cultural stereotypes to critique Western ideologies. The film's success in English-speaking contexts did not translate equally across Asia, Latin America, or the Middle East, where the humor was often misunderstood or viewed as offensive.

These disparities reflect broader theoretical frameworks, including the "cultural discount" hypothesis introduced by Hoskins and Mirus (1988), which posits that audiovisual content loses value when exported to audiences unfamiliar with its cultural codes. The reception of *Hi, Mom* outside of China remains limited, in part because it relies on culturally embedded nostalgia and linguistic nuances. Similarly, jokes based on Western popular culture or liberal political ideologies may fail to resonate or even register among audiences in more collectivist or conservative cultures.

Analyzing these divergences in comedic style, thematic focus, and audience reception requires a multidisciplinary framework. Classical humor theories such as the superiority theory (Plato, Hobbes), relief theory (Freud), and incongruity theory (Kant, Schopenhauer) offer foundational insights into why people laugh and what triggers amusement (Lionis, 2021; Stavovy, 2017). However, such psychological perspectives must be supplemented by sociocultural theories that account for context-specific humor construction. Hofstede's cultural dimensions, especially "individualism vs. collectivism" and "high vs. low power distance," provide a valuable lens to interpret how cultural norms shape humor production and reception. Edward T. Hall's theory of high-context and low-context communication further explains the degree to which meaning is derived from explicit speech versus implicit social cues, a crucial distinction in comparing Chinese and Western comedic styles.

To operationalize this framework, the present study proposes a comparative textual analysis of four representative films: *Kung Fu Hustle* (2004) and *Hi, Mom* (2021) from China, and *Mr. Bean* (1990–2010s) and *Borat* (2006) from the West. These works have been selected based on their popularity, cultural impact, and the range of comedic strategies they exhibit. *Kung Fu Hustle*, directed by Stephen Chow, is renowned for its blend of slapstick, visual exaggeration, and homage to classic martial arts cinema making it accessible to international viewers while retaining deep cultural references. *Hi, Mom*, on the other hand, is more introspective and localized in its humor, heavily grounded in Chinese familial values and socio-emotional cues.

Mr. Bean serves as an example of non-verbal, universally accessible humor. At the same time, *Borat* presents a case study in culturally specific satire, where humor is tightly linked to political parody and ethnolinguistic inversion. Comparative analysis of these films will include narrative structures, character archetypes, visual and linguistic humor mechanisms, and audience reception data where available. It will also consider subtitles, dubbing, and other localization strategies used in international markets.

Understanding how humor travels or fails to travel across cultural boundaries has far-reaching implications. Beyond the domain of film studies, it informs translation practices, global media marketing, educational programming, and intercultural competence training. As digital platforms such as Netflix, iQIYI, and Amazon Prime facilitate the global exchange of

entertainment content, miscommunication in humor can lead to cultural alienation or misrepresentation. Conversely, successful adaptation of comedic content can foster cultural empathy and transnational engagement.

In conclusion, the proposed research addresses a pressing scholarly and practical issue: the cross-cultural dynamics of humor in contemporary cinema. By examining the semiotic, cultural, and communicative dimensions of humor in Chinese and Western comedy films, the study aims to contribute to a deeper understanding of cultural literacy, audience diversity, and the global politics of laughter.

Theoretical Framework and Literature Review

Understanding humor necessitates a theoretical grounding in how it functions and why it affects audiences differently. Classical humor theory is commonly categorized into three main perspectives: superiority theory, relief theory, and incongruity theory (Morreall, 2009).

Superiority theory, dating back to Plato and Hobbes, suggests that laughter emerges from a sense of triumph over others. This theory is especially relevant in analyzing character-based comedy that invites ridicule of foolish or socially inept individuals—such as Mr. Bean’s socially awkward persona or the “loser hero” archetype in Stephen Chow’s films.

Relief theory, attributed to Freud, conceptualizes laughter as a release of psychological tension or suppressed energy. This model is often applied to sexual or political humor, such as in *Borat*, *Shaolin Soccer*, where laughter acts as a discharge of cultural or emotional repression.

Incongruity theory, by far the most widely adopted in contemporary humor studies, argues that humor arises when there is a deviation between expectation and reality. The tension between the anticipated and the absurd is central to many forms of humor—especially wordplay, visual gags, or ironic reversals (Attardo, 1994). This theory is constructive for comparative analysis, as incongruity is often culturally conditioned. While these theories offer a foundation, they must be understood in light of cultural specificity, which shapes both what is considered humorous and how it is socially interpreted. This brings the discussion to cross-cultural frameworks.

Cultural dimensions significantly affect humor’s form, function, and reception. Hofstede’s (2011) cultural dimensions theory provides a systematic way of understanding value systems across societies. Western cultures, especially the United States and the UK, score high on individualism. Their comedies often feature individual rebellion, subversion of norms, or iconoclasm (e.g., *Borat*’s critique of American culture). In contrast, Chinese comedy tends to stress relational harmony, family ties, or social conformity—even when using satire (e.g., *Hi, Mom* emphasizes familial devotion despite its playful tone).

Chinese society traditionally exhibits higher power distance, which influences the acceptability and focus of satire. Political humor or jokes about authority are less commonly permitted or embraced in public media. In contrast, Western comedy often targets institutions and leaders, as seen in the biting social commentary of Sacha Baron Cohen’s work.

While British humor may delight in ambiguity and understatement, Chinese humor leans towards structured narratives with clear moral or emotional resolution.

Meanwhile, Hall's high-context vs. low-context communication theory (1976) provides an additional lens. Chinese comedy, as part of a high-context culture, relies on shared values, implicit understanding, and indirect expression—requiring viewers to “read between the lines.” Western comedy, particularly American, often operates in a low-context mode with explicit messages and overt punchlines. This difference directly impacts comedic pacing, delivery, and audience engagement.

Existing literature on national comedy styles reflects these cultural distinctions. For Chinese comedy, scholars like Zhu (2019) and Yu (2020) have discussed the evolution from early socialist slapstick to the rise of “new realism” and family-oriented humor in post-2000s cinema. Stephen Chow's works are frequently cited as exemplars of postmodern hybridity, mixing martial arts, absurdity, and underdog narratives (Zhang, 2015).

On the Western side, studies on British humor emphasize irony, understatement, and deadpan delivery (Kuipers, 2008), while American comedy is characterized by punchline-driven dialogue, cultural parody, and self-deprecating wit (King, 2002). Rowan Atkinson's *Mr. Bean* represents visual comedy stripped of linguistic barriers, showcasing a more universal mode, while *Borat* is highly culture-bound and functions through the shock value of social transgression.

Few comparative studies exist that systematically examine how these styles interact with audience expectations across cultures. One notable exception is the work by Zolczer (2014), who explored the translation challenges of humorous subtitles in East Asian cinema. Another is Chen & Chang (2024), who analyzed cross-cultural audience reception in the context of global streaming platforms and found that many jokes—primarily linguistic puns and culturally specific idioms—lose meaning in translation.

Translation, whether linguistic or cultural, presents one of the most significant challenges to global comedy. Subtitling and dubbing are not merely technical processes; they are acts of cultural negotiation. Humor often hinges on timing, tone, and social nuance—elements difficult to replicate across languages. Research by Chiaro (2010) and Vandaele (2001) suggests that translators must either localize jokes (replacing them with culturally relevant equivalents) or preserve original meaning at the expense of comedic effect. In Chinese comedies, puns and dialect-based humor often defy direct translation, while in Western comedies, sarcasm, and intertextual references may fall flat among international audiences unfamiliar with the source culture.

The issue of audience reception is equally complex. Chinese viewers may find *Mr. Bean* funny due to its visual gags but may struggle with *Borat*'s aggressive satire. Conversely, Western audiences may appreciate *Kung Fu Hustle*'s martial arts parody but may not emotionally connect with the maternal themes of *Hi, Mom* unless properly contextualized. Although comedy is increasingly globalized, comparative studies of its cultural mechanisms remain underdeveloped, especially between Chinese and Western contexts. Much of the existing research either focuses on national cinema traditions or translation strategies

without exploring the underlying assumptions that make humor intelligible or effective in different societies.

This study aims to address the existing gap by presenting a cross-cultural textual analysis. The analysis compares comedic devices and investigates the profound cultural logics that shape the creation and reception of humor. Through this lens, the paper contributes to broader discussions in intercultural communication, global media studies, and film semiotics, offering practical insights for filmmakers, translators, and cultural intermediaries navigating the global comedy landscape.

Method

This study adopts a comparative qualitative analysis approach, grounded in textual and contextual interpretation of selected Chinese and Western comedy films. The central aim is to examine how cultural frameworks influence comedic structure, audience interpretation, and thematic orientation across cultural contexts. Qualitative methods are particularly suited to analyzing the layered, culturally embedded nature of humor, which is often resistant to quantification (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018).

By comparing comedic strategies across national cinemas, this research seeks to uncover patterns of cultural encoding and decoding, offering insight into the divergent sensibilities that govern humor production and reception. Given that humor is both textual and performative, this approach facilitates analysis of narrative devices, character archetypes, visual gags, dialogue, pacing, and social satire.

Case Selection Criteria

To ensure cultural representativeness and thematic richness, four films were selected, two each from Chinese and Western (British/American) contexts:

Chinese Films:

- *Kung Fu Hustle* (2004), directed by Stephen Chow – A fusion of martial arts, slapstick, and surrealist parody that reflects postmodern humor within Chinese cultural motifs.
- *Hi, Mom* (2021), directed by Jia Ling – A time-travel family comedy blending sentimentality with situational humor grounded in filial piety and collective memory.

Western Films:

- *Mr. Bean's Holiday* (2007), directed by Steve Bendelack – A largely non-verbal British comedy that relies on physical gags, absurdity, and deadpan delivery.
- *Borat: Cultural Learnings of America for Make Benefit Glorious Nation of Kazakhstan* (2006), directed by Larry Charles – A mockumentary-style satire that deploys shock humor and cultural transgression to critique American society.

These films were chosen based on their critical and commercial success, international visibility, and their emblematic status within their respective cultural traditions. They also provide a broad spectrum of comedic styles—visual, verbal, narrative, and satirical—allowing for a multidimensional analysis.

Data Analysis

The data analysis in this study is anchored in two interrelated conceptual frameworks that collectively support a rigorous and culturally sensitive interpretive methodology. The first is Applied Humor Theory, particularly the incongruity theory, which elucidates the cognitive dissonance that often triggers laughter by highlighting unexpected or contradictory elements within a narrative. This is complemented by the cultural context model (Davies, 1990), which focuses on how humor is deeply embedded in shared social norms, linguistic practices, and collective value systems. Together, these models enable the identification and interpretation of comedic elements not merely as isolated moments of amusement but as culturally coded semiotic events.

The second guiding framework is derived from Cross-Cultural Communication Theory, notably Hofstede's cultural dimensions and Hall's high/low-context communication theory. Hofstede's model provides a lens through which to understand how factors such as individualism versus collectivism or power distance shape the creation and reception of humor. Hall's theory further refines this analysis by distinguishing between cultures that rely on explicit verbal communication (low context) and those that depend more heavily on implicit, situational cues (high context). These frameworks inform the comparative dimension of the analysis by mapping how divergent cultural logics influence both comedic construction and audience interpretation. Based on these theoretical foundations, the analytical process was conducted in three systematic stages designed to ensure both textual specificity and cultural contextualization:

Textual Analysis

Each selected film was subjected to close reading with an emphasis on identifying comedic devices such as narrative timing, character archetypes, dialogue, visual exaggeration, and physical comedy. Particular attention was given to sequences involving culturally specific humor, intertextual references, or moments likely to provoke cross-cultural ambiguity. Scenes were annotated and categorized according to the type of humor employed (e.g., slapstick, satire, wordplay, parody) and their narrative function within the film.

Contextual Interpretation

Identified comedic moments were then examined within their socio-cultural contexts. This involved interpreting linguistic idioms, symbolic gestures, cultural references, and expressions of values or social norms, particularly those tied to national identity, family structures, gender roles, and authority. Where necessary, secondary academic literature, film criticism, and audience reviews (particularly from online forums and review aggregators) were consulted to enrich the understanding of local reception and culturally specific meanings.

Comparative Synthesis

The final stage of analysis involved cross-referencing the findings from each film across key analytical categories. These included the dominant type of humor employed, structural aspects such as plot rhythm and character positioning, the depth and nature of cultural specificity, and representations of social institutions or power relations. Where available, reception data (box office records, audience ratings, cross-national viewership patterns) were integrated to trace the cultural permeability or resistance of each film's humor across different regions.

Through this multi-tiered approach, the study seeks to balance formalist textual scrutiny with interpretive cultural analysis. The integration of humor theory with intercultural frameworks minimizes the risk of ethnocentric bias. It allows for a more nuanced understanding of how cinematic humor functions as both an aesthetic device and a site of cultural negotiation. Ultimately, the method enables a comparative reading that is analytically rigorous and responsive to the complex dynamics of global film reception.

Discussion

Cultural Logic and Humor Construction

The most salient distinction between Chinese and Western comedic films lies in their cultural logic—the underlying value systems and narrative archetypes that inform humor construction (Table 1). Chinese comedies such as *Hi, Mom* and *Kung Fu Hustle* prioritize collective values, emotional resonance, and moral resolution. Humor is frequently deployed not only to amuse but to reconcile emotional tensions, reinforce social norms, or navigate loss and memory. In contrast, Western comedies like *Mr. Bean* and *Borat* often foreground individual disruption, subversion of norms, and irony. These films engage humor as a tool of critique or absurdist exaggeration, often eschewing emotional closure in favor of provocation.

Table 1

Comparative Analysis of Key Dimensions

Dimension	Chinese Comedy	Western Comedy
Cultural Framework	Collectivist, Confucian values	Individualist, liberal-democratic values
Narrative Structure	Moral arc, closure, transformation	Fragmented, episodic, anti-heroic
Humor Mechanism	Situational, emotional, visual parody	Irony, satire, shock, absurdism
Communication Context	High-context (implicit, symbolic)	Low-context (explicit, direct)
Political Commentary	Subtle, allegorical	Direct, confrontational
Translation Viability	Moderate (requires transcreation)	Varies (high for physical, low for satire)

The difference in humor construction aligns with Hofstede's cultural dimensions: China scores high on collectivism and power distance, which correlate with an emphasis on relational harmony and reverence for authority in humor narratives. Western countries such as the UK and the US rank high on individualism and low on uncertainty avoidance, supporting humor that challenges societal norms or satirizes institutional authority (Hofstede, 2011).

Structural Patterns and Character Archetypes

Chinese comedic cinema favours redemptive storytelling that aligns with Confucian moral philosophies emphasizing familial duty, respect, and internal transformation. In *Hi, Mom* (2021), the protagonist Jia Xiaoling's time-travel journey is not simply a fantastical device but a dramaturgical mechanism to confront filial piety, maternal sacrifice, and self-actualization within cultural parameters of emotional reciprocity. Her evolving awareness of her mother's experiences reveals a common Chinese narrative archetype: the unassuming moral heroine whose emotional insight supersedes outward rebellion. This progression embodies what Zhang (2021) calls "emotive historicism," wherein collective memory is framed through intergenerational effect.

Similarly, while more exaggerated and stylized, *Kung Fu Hustle* (2004) utilizes a classical journey of virtue. The main character, Sing, transitions from petty thug to martial arts saviour not by rejecting his roots but by reconciling with the moral fabric of the community he once scorned. This trajectory mirrors traditional *xianxia* (immortal hero) narratives, recontextualized in comedic form, and reflects enduring Daoist motifs of chaos yielding to cosmic harmony (Szeto, 2007).

In contrast, Western comedies frequently resist such linear redemptive arcs. Rowan Atkinson portrays Mr. Bean as a static character whose comedic value lies precisely in his resistance to change. The comedy emerges from his incapacity to learn or adapt, reinforcing a British comedic tradition of absurdist anti-heroism traced back to post-war slapstick and Monty Python's anarchic irreverence. On the other hand, Borat complicates narrative structure further by disrupting the boundary between diegetic fiction and real-world documentary. His character, built around strategic naïveté, is deployed as a provocateur in real-world settings to expose latent sociocultural prejudices. This lack of character development shifts the burden of transformation to the viewer, who must reconcile entertainment with discomfort. According to Tager (2017), Borat's trajectory is best understood not through narrative closure but through "spectator reflexivity"—where the narrative structure prioritizes public confrontation over character resolution.

Reception and Emotional Register

Audience response to comedic texts is mediated by individual taste and deep cultural grammar of emotion and expression. In China, *Hi, Mom* achieved critical and commercial success largely due to its invocation of maternal nostalgia and sacrificial narratives, tropes that resonate powerfully within East Asian kinship systems. This emotional register, characterized by what Qorie, et.al. (2025) term "affective intimacy," positions the mother-daughter bond as both a personal and national allegory. Box office figures and social media sentiment analyses confirm the film's effective potency, especially among millennial and Gen Z women navigating the contradictions of modern filial duty.

In Western contexts, *Borat* (2006, 2020) generated polarized reactions. While American and European liberal audiences praised its aggressive satire for challenging bigotry, others found it offensive or culturally insensitive. The backlash in more conservative and high-context cultures, including bans in Middle Eastern countries and sharp criticism in Southeast Asia, highlights what Edward Hall (1976) conceptualized as high- vs. low-context communication frameworks. High-context audiences, accustomed to implicit messaging and communal harmony, may find Borat's confrontational approach abrasive. The film's success, therefore, is not uniform but contingent upon viewers' cultural schema and media literacy. Recent ethnographic audience studies by Han (2015) and Berry & Farquhar (2006) affirm that comedic appreciation is deeply situated in socio-emotional proximity—*Hi, Mom* draws tears in Tianjin; *Borat* draws gasps in Tehran.

Translation and Translatability

The humor in comedy films often hinges on shared semiotic codes, idioms, and cultural references, translating a complex act of cultural negotiation. *Kung Fu Hustle* achieved global appeal through its use of physical comedy, hyperbole, and choreographed absurdity. These elements, rooted in slapstick and wuxia exaggeration, possess a cross-cultural legibility that

bypasses verbal language. Kinetic humor's "visceral universality" enables exportability, particularly when paired with visual spectacle and archetypal storytelling. Conversely, *Hi, Mom* struggled internationally not because of narrative weakness but due to the specificity of its cultural allusions. References to the 1980s reform-era China, subtle inflexions of the Hubei dialect, and the embodied memory of socialist upbringing resist straightforward translation. Chiaro's (2010) transcreation framework is vital here: translating comedy is less about linguistic substitution and more about reconstructing equivalent emotional and cultural resonance. Subtitles fail to capture the tonal subtext that Chinese audiences inherently grasp, limiting the film's international affective traction.

Meanwhile, *Mr. Bean* exemplifies how non-verbal comedy can sidestep linguistic barriers. However, the character's humor, which is rooted in British class structure, public decorum, and awkwardness, can still be misread. Attardo (2022) pointed out that even "universal" humor is embedded in socio-pragmatic norms. *Borat* poses the most significant challenge to translatability. Its reliance on satire, irony, and deliberate cultural offence requires high sociopolitical awareness. Viewers unfamiliar with American culture wars or Kazakh stereotypes may fail to decode the film's layered meanings. Humor that demands meta-awareness of multiple cultures becomes an elite discourse—accessible only to globally literate or transnationally exposed audiences.

Sociopolitical Commentary and Ethical Boundaries

The scope of permissible satire within comedic films highly depends on national regulatory regimes and cultural ethics. In China, overt political satire is constrained by state censorship and prevailing norms of social cohesion. Consequently, filmmakers channel critique through metaphor, nostalgia, or personal narrative. *Hi, Mom* critiques gender expectations and the historical erasure of female agency by humanizing a working-class mother's sacrifices. The subversion is emotional, not explicit. *Kung Fu Hustle*, while not overtly political, mocks social hierarchies through caricature and inversion—gangsters become monks, weaklings achieve strength—a strategy akin to the carnivalesque, as theorized by Bakhtin (1984), but stripped of its political edge.

By contrast, American and British comedies frequently utilize humor as a mechanism of dissent. *Borat* weaponizes satire to expose social prejudices under the guise of mockumentary. However, its method—provoking real people into displaying racist or sexist attitudes—raises ethical concerns. Critics argue that this approach borders on "performative entrapment," where the humor derives from ridiculing unsuspecting subjects rather than the systems they inhabit (Zillmann & Cantor, 2022). Recent discourse on post-ironic comedy by Koivukoski (2022) complicates this further, suggesting that audiences are now split between those who consume satire as critical media literacy and those who misread or reject it as offensive. The collapse of clear authorial intention in *Borat*-style satire leaves room for progressive interpretation and reactionary backlash.

Ultimately, comedy's capacity for sociopolitical intervention is shaped by the structures in which it is produced and received. Chinese comedic films operate within constraints that favour allegorical storytelling and moral reconciliation. Western films, freer in terms of speech but entangled in polarized discourse environments, often vacillate between critique and

provocation. The ethical line is neither fixed nor universal—it is a negotiation between intention, interpretation, and cultural terrain.

Implications for Global Media and Cultural Literacy

The divergent nature of Chinese and Western comedic forms underscores the need for deeper cultural literacy in global media production and consumption. As streaming platforms expand their global reach, there is a growing responsibility to mediate humor across cultural boundaries without flattening its meaning. Content producers must consider not only the linguistic translation but the cultural framing necessary to retain comedic intent. Audience education and paratextual aids (e.g., glossaries, commentary tracks) could serve as tools to foster cross-cultural understanding.

Moreover, filmmakers and translators must remain sensitive to humor's ethical limits. What may be perceived as liberating in one culture might constitute offense in another. As intercultural tensions grow in the digital era, comedy must walk a careful line between critique and caricature, empathy and exploitation. The comparative exploration of Chinese and Western comedy films reveals that humor is not a neutral or universally legible mode of expression, but a deeply cultural phenomenon, shaped by historical experience, ideological norms, and narrative tradition. Understanding humor across cultures requires not only theoretical rigor but a commitment to empathetic interpretation. As the global media landscape becomes increasingly interconnected, the study of cinematic humor offers a valuable lens into the values, tensions, and aspirations that define human societies.

Conclusion

This study has illuminated the deeply entrenched cultural mechanisms that govern cinematic humor's creation, delivery, and reception across Chinese and Western comedy films. What emerges is not simply a contrast of style like emotional vs. ironic, linear vs. episodic, but a contrast of worldview; far from being a universal equalizer, Humor functions as a culturally coded language that speaks most fluently to those within its semiotic orbit. From the emotional resonance and collectivist moral arcs of *Hi, Mom*, and *Kung Fu Hustle* to the satirical abrasiveness and anti-heroism of *Mr. Bean* and *Borat*, the comedic idiom is revealed to be a reflection of each society's deepest social contracts, anxieties, and ethical limits.

However, this conclusion is not a closure but a critical aperture, a call to reimagine humor studies as a transdisciplinary and transcultural inquiry. In a media landscape defined by algorithmic curation and platform globalization, humor becomes not just entertainment but an ideological interface, a test of intercultural empathy and political tolerance. Films like *Borat*, which rely on audience complicity to expose social prejudice, or *Hi, Mom*, which mobilizes affective intimacy for cultural healing, raise important questions about who laughter includes and excludes.

The theoretical implications are manifold. Existing models of humor like superiority, incongruity, and relief, must be expanded with cultural dimensions, communicative context, and media literacy as analytic layers. This calls for an integrative framework that considers humor as a cognitive-linguistic construct and a cultural performance shaped by historical memory, social hierarchy, and institutional boundaries. For instance, humor that thrives on

satire in low-context, individualist cultures may falter or offend in high-context, collectivist societies. What is catharsis in one environment can be trauma in another.

Moreover, the translation of humor is revealed not as a mere linguistic task but a cultural negotiation that implicates power, voice, and intent. The concept of “transcreation” must be taken seriously in global film marketing, not as a creative convenience but as a practice of ethical mediation. When humor fails to cross borders, it is not only a technical failure but a cultural breakdown. When it succeeds, it builds a rare bridge between worlds.

From a practical standpoint, this research urges filmmakers, distributors, subtitlers, and educators to adopt culturally adaptive strategies that preserve the laughter and the values encoded. Streaming giants like Netflix and iQIYI could incorporate paratextual tools contextual glossaries, translator commentaries, cultural cue indexes to aid comprehension without diluting intent. Educational programs in translation studies and media production should embed cultural competence and ethics of representation into their training.

Future research should further explore underrepresented comedic traditions like African, Southeast Asian, Indigenous, whose humor mechanisms have been largely omitted from global discourse. There is also a need for empirical audience studies that track real-time responses to translated humor across different cultures and age groups. How do digital-native Gen Z audiences interpret culturally alien jokes? What role does social media play in recontextualizing comedic intent?

In an age where laughter is weaponized and commodified, this study affirms that humor is neither universal nor trivial. It is a mirror and a mask, a release and a revelation. As cultural boundaries shift and hybrid identities proliferate, understanding humor across differences may not only make us better translators, filmmakers, or scholars that it may also make us better listeners, better citizens, and ultimately, better humans.

This study contributes a theoretically integrative and contextually grounded perspective to the field of humor studies by bridging performance theory, intercultural communication, and film analysis. In doing so, it enriches the prevailing Western-centric paradigms with nuanced insights into collectivist affective aesthetics, culturally encoded narrative arcs, and ethical complexities embedded in Chinese comedic forms. By analyzing films such as *Hi, Mom* and *Kung Fu Hustle* alongside Western counterparts like *Borat* and *Mr. Bean*, this research situates humor not as a neutral linguistic artifact, but as a performative and symbolic act shaped by history, ideology, and audience expectation. Contextually, it addresses the growing urgency for cross-cultural literacy in globalized media consumption and production. As transnational streaming platforms reconfigure how humor is circulated and interpreted, this study’s findings emphasize the importance of culturally attuned strategies in film translation, distribution, and pedagogy. Ultimately, the research enhances the scholarly discourse by framing humor as a critical lens through which to examine broader questions of identity, representation, and social cohesion in an increasingly pluralistic world.

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