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Parodies in Chinese Government Work Reports

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Abstract: This study accounts for how parody enters such official political discourse as Chinese Government Work Reports (GWRs). It quantitatively and qualitatively studies parodies from 44 GWRs (1978–2021) via the convergence-economy, variation-effectiveness, and relevance model. Our findings are: 1) parodies have appeared more and more frequently in GWRs over the last 44 years; 2) word parodies occur more frequently in GWRs than phrase, sentence, and paragraph parodies; 3) brand-new parodies, of higher pragma-rhetorical values, are used in GWRs; 4) parodies tend to reoccur mimetically once utilized, for ready-made security and effectiveness; and 5) the increasing frequency of parodies is caused by the politicians' quest for their identification-oriented "markedness effects."

Keywords: parody; political discourse; political rhetoric; pragma-rhetorical value

1 Introduction

Parody, as a figure of speech, has long existed in human history. It was first used by Greeks, as "a song or poem that imitated the style and flow of another poem" (Han 2013: 367). It later found its way into English literature, as early as Geoffrey Chaucer (1342–1400), well before Ben Johnson (1572–1637), who was mistakenly believed to be the first English parody user (Han 2013: 368). *The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language* defines parody as "a literary or artistic work that imitates the characteristic style of an author or a work for comic effect or ridicule." *Webster's New World Dictionary* says that parody means "literary or musical composition imitating the characteristic style of some other work or of a writer or composer, but treating a serious subject in a nonsensical manner, as in ridicule." Both definitions show that comic effect or ridicule is the key feature of parody. Usually, we can find parody in stage plays, movies, radio, TV, paintings, typographic artifacts, music, advertisements, websites, blogs, and language (stories, speeches, short messages, etc.) (Sinclair

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2019: 62; Zhang 2015: 188). Can parody serve formal political discourse? If parody is found in serious political discourse like Chinese Government Work Reports (GWRs), what is the pragma-rhetorical motivation for the rhetor?

2 Literature review

For many years, linguists have approached parodies from various perspectives, like translatology, psycholinguistics, sociolinguistics, internet linguistics, and pragmatics. A panoramic view of these parody studies reveals a gap in the area of serious political writings. Most literature was found in twentieth-century parody surveys, such as Rose (1988, 1993), Kreuz and Roberts (1993), and Rossen-Knill and Henry (1997), to name but a few. In its heyday in the last century, as Rossen-Knill and Henry (1997: 719) observe, “Parody [had] so pervaded Western Society that it [had] become the concern of twentieth-century literary theorists.” In the twenty-first century, mainstream Western parody studies are conducted in a variety of fields, including politics (D’Errico and Poggi 2013; Hariman 2008; Maronikolakis et al. 2020; Peifer and Landreville 2020), the media (Dubisar et al. 2017; Hoppenstand 2013; Kelen 2015; Kenny 2009; Tervo and Ridanpää 2016), crisis communication (Wan et al. 2015), psychology (D’Errico and Poggi 2016), and law (Posner 1992; Troitskiy 2021). It is not difficult to identify more perspectives of the media, public relations, and pragmatics, on parody such as those of Rossen-Knill and Henry (1997), Xu (2002), Niu and Xi (2009), Hou (2015), Wu and Hou (2015), and Hou and Feng (2020). On this score, parody is thus envisaged as more than a figure of speech and rather as “a human behavior which is enacted in various ways” and “in various contexts” (Rossen-Knill and Henry 1997: 720).

The Chinese counterpart or translation of parody is “仿拟” (*fangni*) (Chen 2008: 89). The first Chinese book on parody was published in 2003 (Xu 2003), a relatively complete and detailed investigation of Chinese parodies. Xu (2003) tackles parody from the standpoint of conventional rhetoric, as well as functional and cognitive linguistics. She classifies parodies into four types according to their constitute units: word parody, phrase parody, sentence parody, and paragraph parody (Xu 2003: 57). The latest parody studies in China were conducted by Wu and Hou (2015) and Hou (2015). Wu and Hou (2015) study parody in advertisements pragma-rhetorically, discussing the pragmatic conditions of well-formed advertising parodies and their translation. And Hou (2015) formulates a “Model of Convergence-Economy, Variation-Effectiveness and Relevance” (CEVER, hereafter) for parody generation and interpretation.

Hariman (2008: 247–272), as far as we know, conducted pioneering research on what can be called “political parody,” or parody used in political discourse. Hariman (2008: 247) maintains that among other things, “parody and related forms of political humor are essential resources for sustaining democratic public culture” that “parody culminates in modern laughter, which is the shock of delighted dislocation when

mediation is revealed,” and that “laughter provides a rhetorical education for engaged spectatorship.” Political parody is parody used in political discourse or topics “to imitate an entity for comedic or critical purposes and represents a widespread phenomenon in social media” (as in Tweets, presidential debates), for instance “through many popular parody accounts” (Maronikoulakis et al. 2020; Peifer and Landreville 2020: 200). However, English parody and Chinese *fangni* are not exactly the same thing, so that definitions and models for English parodies may not match with Chinese *fangni*. Therefore, it is interesting to find Chinese parodies occurring in natural or institutionalized Chinese contexts, like those present in Chinese political discourse such as GWRs.

In general, parody is not related to official reports or serious documents, because as Wu (1990: 251) notes, texts like political and scientific writings are supposed to be concise, precise, gestaltized or constructionalized, and stay away from flowery language (like tropes). And as parody means being humorous or sarcastic, it seldom, if ever, finds its way into formal texts. The problem is, as we find, parodies do appear (but scarcely) in GWRs, one of the most formal political discourse types in China. And they are linguistic parodies in nature, rather than political parodies. Most of the previous literature on GWRs deals with linguistic or pragmatic description (Di and Yang 2010; Jiang 2014; Li and Hu 2017; Qian and Tian 2011; Wu 2014) and translation methods (Lu and Wang 2016; Tong 2014; Wang 2016; Wu 2010). Xu (2012), for instance, shows a lexical transformation in official documents via analysis of 1978–2010 GWRs. Wu finds that words of official documents tend to be more concise, energetic, and diversified. Given the popularity of research into GWRs, it is not difficult to detect parodies in GWRs as a gap, which this study attempts to fill by using a multiple perspective of pragmatics, politics, rhetoric, discourse analysis, and construction grammar (of cognitive linguistics). Pan and Kádár (2011) comparatively analyze historical and contemporary Chinese politeness and observe how the unique historical changes in late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century China impacted Chinese “sociopragmatic norms” at the time. While they address the changes of Chinese language use (polite communication) caused by foreign invasions or interventions, we attempt to uncover the changes resulting from intra-national revolutions and reforms in the late twentieth century till now.

Thus arise our questions to be addressed: when and how often do parodies occur in GWRs? What are the pragma-rhetorical attributes of GWR parodies, and what are their pragma-rhetorical motivations?

3 Theoretical framework

A parody is the word play between parodied and parodier. A “parodied” is the original work, the implicitly alluded-to item which the parody in question imitates,

while a “parodier” is the target rhetorical artifact. For example, in *Bored of the Rings* (Kreuz and Roberts 1993: 103), “Lord of the Rings” is the parodied and “Bored of the Rings” is the parodier. The rhetor, say, in GWRs, chooses parody, a marked expression, for a marked pragma-rhetorical effect. A parody in advertisements, for instance, carries a high pragma-markedness value and conveys positive emotions to the audience (Hou 2015: 41).

A parodist¹ chooses a certain construction among countless constructions due to his understanding of the default context and default subject of the construction, as well as the current context and current subject. The former is the social cultural and register subject hotbed of the constructional parodied, while the latter is the social cultural and regional subject hotbed of the constructional parodier. A parodist discovers or constructs context relevance between a default context and a current context, while discovering or constructing subject relevance between a default subject and a current subject. (Hou 2015: 45)

So, parody (of GWRs) is a pragma-rhetorical phenomenon, or the political rhetor opts for a linguistic parody for a pragma-rhetorical value (PRV), pragma-rhetorical effect, or pragma-markedness value, which excels its unmarked counterpart in PRV. Then we can resort to Hou’s (2015) CEVER, a pragma-rhetorical model for parody. CEVER stands for three facets: 1) convergence-economy, 2) variation-effectiveness, and 3) relevance. According to CEVER, in a parody, we can discover an economy-oriented convergence and an effect(iveness)-oriented variation. Without convergence or variation, a parody is of low (or zero) PRV.

Hou (2015) supposes an “ABC parody construction,” viz., a typical parody consists of three components, and then in principle as many as six constructional parodiers can be created (see Hou and Feng 2020: 75–76):

- 1) Parodier₁: A’BC (one punch point, namely A),
- 2) Parodier₂: AB’C (one punch point, namely B),
- 3) Parodier₃: ABC’ (one punch point, namely C),
- 4) Parodier₄: A’B’C (two punch points, namely A and B),
- 5) Parodier₅: A’BC’ (two punch points, namely A and C),
- 6) Parodier₆: AB’C’ (two punch points, namely B and C).

The gist of Hou (2015) runs like this: based on his own understanding of the constructional parodieds, the parodist may wish to generate a parody and out of several possible constructional parodiers, s/he chooses the one, like 1)–6) above, which serves CEVER the best, namely, converges (relevantly) economically, and varies (relevantly) effectively – hence to achieve a high PRV. Other things being equal, the longer and the more complex the constructional parodied is, the more

1 A “parodist” refers to “the author of a parody” (Kreuz and Roberts 1993: 103).

likely it is that more constructional parodies are created. A construction without any punch point is by definition a non-parody. Likewise, a construction with too many parodied components, more than necessary, is a poor/bad or ill-formed parody. Only if the number of punch points is smaller than that of original parts can it be a well-formed parody.

CEVER will be further elaborated and exemplified in Section 4.2.1.

4 Data collection and discussions

4.1 Data on GWR parodies

Parody means “writing, music, art, or speech that intentionally copies the style of someone famous or copies a particular situation, making the features or qualities of the original more noticeable in a way that is humorous” (*Cambridge Dictionary* [online]), for example, “食话食说” (*shi hua shi shuo*, name of a Quanzhou restaurant), meaning literally ‘chat over the table,’ is a parody of the four-character Chinese idiom “实话实说” (of the same sound, meaning ‘to be frank,’ ‘to be honest,’ or ‘Let me tell you the truth’ (Hou and Feng 2020: 77). This parody seems to imply that the food this restaurant serves is good, down-to-earth, and reliable. For consistency in understanding parody or differentiating parody from non-parody, our data collection abides by Xu’s (2003: 6) definition “[p]arody is a figure of speech which is a temporarily created new expression that imitates some existing language form”² and her fourfold classification (Section 2). Parody, phrasal or idiom-based parodies in particular, often lend themselves to a historical or literary allusion, occasionally with a proportion of punning effect. Parodies in political discourse, like those discussed below, are mostly allusion-based phrasal parodies, not meant to pun. All our data samples of parodies used in Chinese Government Work Reports come from the official website³ of the People’s Republic of China, covering a span of 44 years, from 1978 to 2021. Though the first or earliest GWR appeared in 1954, five years after the national “liberation” and “standing up,” we focus on GWRs of the reform epoch. The year of 1978 is the time when Deng Xiaoping’s reform and opening-up policy⁴ started nationwide, and the four decades see the beginning, continuation, deepening, and

² Our translation.

³ All data in this research comes from <http://www.gov.cn/index.htm>.

The URL of the website page is http://www.gov.cn/guowuyuan/2006-02/16/content_2616810.htm (last access date: 2021-03-13).

⁴ The Chinese names in this research associated to GWRs are thus presented (surname ere given name) because this is the common order in Chinese naming, as seen in Chinese newspapers. And we translate them alike.

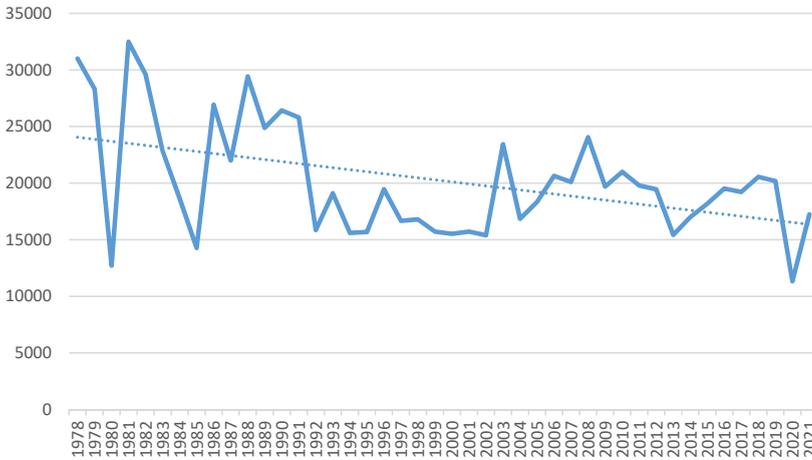


Figure 1: Length of GWRs (number of Chinese characters, 1978–2021).

ripening of reform in many aspects. All this finds expression in the language people use, including GWRs, hence we collected 44 full texts of GWRs for this research, each with a length of 11,332–32,485 Chinese characters, mean number being 20,000. As Figure 1 indicates, the general trend is brevity.

A GWR is a formal, official document issued annually by the State Council of China shortly after talk delivery by the Premier of the State Council of the time, which has the entire Chinese population as the target audience. A GWR represents the attitudes and policy of the government about important issues, including the government's previous achievements, problems, and measures and means for the “next” year. Thus, a GWR is, so to speak, not only a work summary and work promise of the government but also a blueprint for future national development. As far as form and style are concerned, it is a work report in content, with very precise, well-measured diction and sentence patterns, and an objective, comprehensive, in-depth way of narration, making the highest-ranking report file of the country. Unlike popular social media, like TV commercials, a GWR does not try to sell anything or make people laugh. It just reports on what was, is, and will be done by the government, enjoying well-formedness in sentential grammar, coherence/unity in textual grammar, and appealing persuasiveness in rhetoric(ality).

Ours is research on parodies in GWRs from 1978 to 2021, about four decades of economic and political reforms, trying to find out their generation motivation, mechanism, and sociopragmatic or/and pragma-rhetorical values. The four decades of reform and opening-up initiated by Deng Xiaoping from 1978 to 2021 can be roughly divided into three stages:

- Stage One:** Initial Stage: 1978–1990 (preliminary reform);
Stage Two: Deepening Stage: 1991–2003 (deepened reform);
Stage Three: Maturity Stage: 2004–2021 (ripening reform).

Stage One witnessed the beginning of the all-around preliminary reform policy of Deng Xiaoping, who helped the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) stop the so-called Cultural Revolution (which was literally a form of cultural suicide) and who as the “general designer/programmer” designed the entire reform program that was to last many decades. Mistaken policies were halted or remedied, and economic reform took the lead ahead of all other reforms to bring about an economic revival. Stage Two was a critical period for the entire country, for it met with the ordeal of a political and financial crisis. The government strengthened its reform policies and theoretical exploration, developing fundamental reform and principles for what was believed to be “socialist market economy.” This period saw a noticeable economic take-off. Stage Three can be thought of as a stage of sustained economic development and rapid improvement of people’s life. Every day there is international cooperation and communication. As a result, China is felt to be an “economic power,” and one of the cultural and athletic leaders in the world.

4.2 Quantitative study of GWR parodies

4.2.1 Parodies in GWRs of the “preliminary reform”

A total of 17 parodies were found in Stage-One GWRs, as shown in Table 2. Every parody is now analyzed in light of the CEVER model, as shown in Table 1. The PRV of GWR parodies is identified as low (zero) (L), medium (M), high (H), or very high (VH).

GWR parodies of 1978:

- Ex. (1) [...] 抓好低产缺粮地区，使它们在两、三年内实现粮食自给自余。
 [...] We will make adequate efforts to ensure that the low-yielding and grain-short districts *become affluent through self-support* within two to three years.

Parodied				Parodier			
自	给	自	[足]	自	给	自	[余]
zi	ji	zi	[zu]	zi	ji	zi	[yu]
self	give	self	[suffice]	self	give	self	[over]
suffice through self-support				become affluent through self-support			

Ex. (2) [...] 重点抓好培育和推广良种，改进耕作制度，广开肥源，大抓有机肥料，合理使用化肥。

[...] We will improve cultivation systems, with a focus on the breeding and promotion of superior varieties. We should use more diverse and better fertilizers, especially organic fertilizers, and use them properly.

Parodied				Parodier			
广	开	[言	路]	广	[开]	[肥]	源
guang	kai	[yan	lu]	guang	[kai]	[fei]	yuan
wide	open	[speech	road]	wide	[open]	[fertilizer]	source
create more opportunities for others to comment				use more diverse and better fertilizers			
[财]	源	广	[进]				
[cai]	yuan	guang	[jin]				
[wealth]	source	wide	[come in]				
gain much more money							

Ex. (3) 抗拒从严，悔改从宽。对罪行严重而又不肯悔改的一小撮“四人帮”死党，对进行破坏活动的反革命分子，必须坚决打击。

We should follow the principle “severity to those who resist, leniency to those who regret their mistakes and are ready to correct.” We must crack down on a handful of diehard followers of the “Gang of Four,” who committed serious crimes and refused to repent, as well as the rebels who resort to acts of sabotage.

Parodied				Parodier			
[坦白]	从	宽		[悔	改]	从	宽
[tanbai]	cong	kuan		[hui	gai]	cong	kuan
[confess]	follow	wide		[regret	correct]	follow	wide
leniency to those who confess their crimes				leniency to those who regret their mistakes and are ready to correct			

Ex. (4) 求全责备，金要足赤，人要完人，是形而上学的表现。

Demanding perfections and expecting everything to be perfect is the manifestation of metaphysics.

Parodied	金	[无]	足	赤，	人	[无]	完	人。
	jin	[wu]	zu	chi,	ren	[wu]	wan	ren
	gold	[no]	full	red	people	[no]	perfect	people
	Not everything has to be perfect.							
Parodier	金	[要]	足	赤，	人	[要]	完	人。
	jin	[yao]	zu	chi,	ren	[yao]	wan	ren
	gold	[need]	full	red	people	[need]	perfect	people
	Everything needs to be perfect.							

Table 1: Parody PRV evaluation (data from GWR 1978).

Serial number	Parodied	Component/ unit number	Parodier	Component/ unit number	Number of punch point	PRV
Ex. (1)	自给自足	4	自给自余	4	1, 余	M
Ex. (2)	广开言路 财源广进	4	广开肥源	4	2, 开, 肥	VH
Ex. (3)	坦白从宽	4	悔改从宽	4	2, 悔, 改	H
Ex. (4)	金无足赤, 人无完人	8	金要足赤, 人要完人	8	2, 要, 要	M

Table 2: PRV of GWR parodies in Stage One.

Year	Parody number	Serial number	PRV
1978	4	1 2 3 4	7/16 3/4 1/2 1/4
1979	0		0
1980	0		0
1981	2	5 6	1/2 1/2
1982	4	7 8 9	1/5 2/3 1/2
1983	3	10 ₂ 11 12 ₂ 13 ₂	1/2 1/4 2/3 1/5
1984	0		0
1985	0		0
1986	1	14 ₃	1/5
1987	0		0
1988	0		0
1989	1	15 ₄	1/5
1990	2	16 17	1/3 1/2
Total	17		Avg. 0.37

As illustrated by Table 1, parody PRV is determined by the relationship between the component/unit number of the parodier and the number of the parody punch point (for difficulty of quantitative evaluation, the newness of a punch point is not considered). If there is one punch point in a phrase with four components, this parody is evaluated as medium (M) PRV, as in Ex. (1). With two punch points in a four-component phrase, this parody's PRV (1/2) is high (H), as in Ex. (3). Therefore, Ex. (3) is a well-formed parody and its PRV should be graded as H. Ex. (2) is slightly different from Ex. (3), since it is derived from two parodies (“广开言路” and “财源广进,” see the Parodied in Ex. (2) above). Such a derivation causes Ex. (2) to be more unrecognizable in meaning and thus more “marked” as a parody construction which merges two parodies together. Therefore, with two punch points, Ex. (2) has a very high PRV (VH). With two punch points in an eight-component phrase, as in Ex. (4), its PRV (1/4) is graded as medium (M). All parodies in GWRs from 1978 to 1990 analyzed by this token are presented below in Table 2.

To make comparison easier for variance, we now digitalize the PRV (degrees): $L = 0$, $0 < M < 1/2$, $1/2 \leq H < 3/4$, $3/4 \leq VH < 1$ (see Hou 2015: 46).

$$PRV = \frac{\text{punch - point number}}{\text{component number}}$$

Though the semantic newness counts more or less in PRV calculation, we do not consider it in digitalizing the constructional PRV for convenience. In treatment of a parody construction composed of two parodies, such as (2) and (50), we add 1, an extra PRV value-point, to the numerator (where the “punch-point number” lies) in PRV calculation. For its constructional complexity (parodic pun), such a bi-parody construction achieves a higher PRV than an unmarked one. In case there is more than one parody in one GWR, the PRV is averaged. The numeral subscript as may appear suggests the times of repetition of the same parody in the same or different GWR discourse(s).

Table 2 shows that the average PRV (approximately 0.37) of these 13 years is medium. Furthermore, the use of parody is not very common in these reports (only 17, four being repeated use). Used repeatedly, a parody drops its PRV and “markedness” moderately. Due to difficulty of reduction accuracy, however, we do not bring into consideration the minute PRV differences between a new parody and one that occurs the second, third, ..., n th time. Figure 2 may better illustrate the trend of parody use in GWRs.

To conclude, Stage-One GWRs are generally written/prepared, oral before written/published documents, serious in tone. Infrequent parody use suggests their medium PRV.

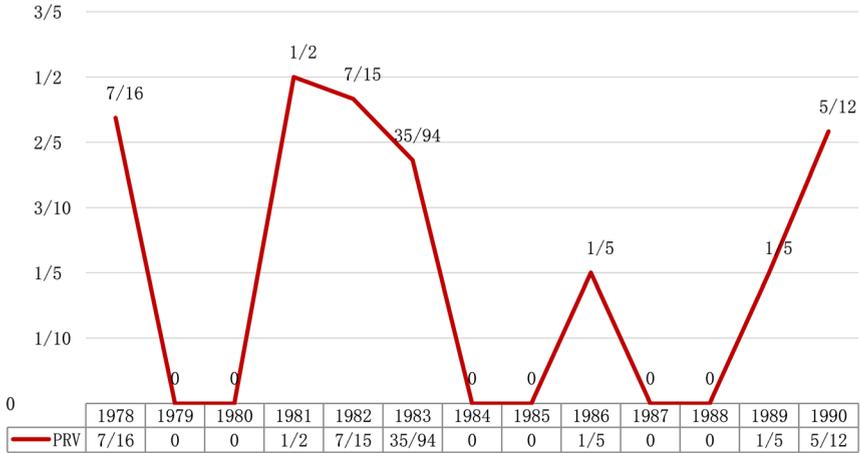


Figure 2: PRV of parodies in Stage-One GWRs.

4.2.2 Parodies in Stage-Two GWRs

Stage-Two GWRs create 11 parodies, as shown in Table 3, three being repeated ones. Figure 3 shows the trend of parody use in GWRs of this stage.

Stage-Two GWRs do not possess as many parodies as Stage-One GWRs, and repetition frequency drops a little too. The average PRV (0.40) of Stage-Two GWRs parodies is relatively higher.

4.2.3 Parodies in Stage-Three GWRs

A total of 62 parodies are available in Stage-Three GWRs, as shown in Table 4, with 27 occurring repeatedly.

As shown by Table 4 as well as Figure 4 below, Stage-Three GWRs witness a greater number of parodies (62) than previous stages, mostly with a correspondingly higher PRV. It is worth noting that there are five reports with high PRV (1/2), which marks the highest record (considering Stages One and Two). The average PRV of Stage Three is 0.45 (M), also higher than that of previous stages. In addition, the lowest PRV in this stage (excluding GWRs without any parody) is 1/3 in 2014, the highest among three stages. Yet, a noteworthy fact is that the parody number in GWRs of 2020 ranks as the top one. Although the average PRV is not high (H), their PRV actually approaches level H. Besides, the parody number for this stage may affect the average PRV of GWRs (high PRV being evened out).

Table 3: PRV of parodies in Stage-Two GWRs.

Year	Parody number	Serial number	PRV
1991	1	18 ₂	1/3
1992	1	19 ₃	1/3
1993	1	20	1/4
1994	2	21	1/4
		22 ₄	7/24
1995	0		0
1996	0		0
1997	1	23	1/2
1998	0		0
1999	1	24 ₂	1/2
2000	0		0
2001	0		0
2002	2	25	1/2
		26 ₂	1/2
2003	2	27 ₂	1/2
		28 ₃	1/2
Total	11		Avg. 0.40

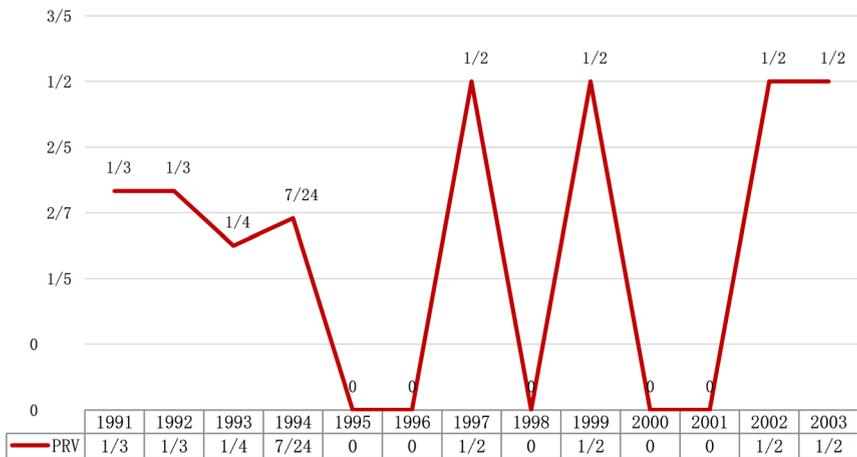


Figure 3: PRV of parodies in Stage-Two GWRs.

4.2.4 General trend of GWR parodies of all three stages

With all the 90 parodies in all GWRs through the three stages and their distribution, we can draw the following figure for a bird’s eye view of the trend of GWR parody appearance. The dotted line in Figure 5 suggests the linear trend of the PRV changes over 44 years.

Table 4: PRV of parodies in Stage-Three GWRs.

Year	Parody number	Serial number	PRV
2004	0		0
2005	0		0
2006	1	29	1/2
2007	0		0
2008	0		0
2009	2	30	1/2
		31 ₃	1/2
2010	2	32 ₄	1/2
		33 ₄	1/2
2011	3	34	1/2
		35	1/2
		36 ₅	1/2
2012	1	37	1/2
2013	0		0
2014	4	38	1/4
		39 ₂	1/2
		40	1/4
		41	1/3
2015	5	42	1/7
		43	1/2
		44	1/2
		45	1/2
		46	1/2
2016	6	47	1/4
		48	1/2
		49 ₂	2/3
		50	1/4
		51 ₆	1/2
		52	4/7
2017	8	53	1/4
		54 ₂	1/2
		55 ₂	1/2
		56	1/4
		57 ₂	1/4
		58	1/2
		59 ₂	1/2
		60 ₇	1/2
2018	8	61 ₃	1/2
		62 ₃	1/4
		63 ₃	1/2
		64	1/2
		65	1/4
		66 ₂	1/2

Table 4: (continued)

Year	Parody number	Serial number	PRV
2019	8	67 ₂	4/7
		68 ₈	1/2
		69	1/3
		70	1/2
		71	1/2
		72 ₄	1/2
		73	1/2
		74	1/4
2020	9	75 ₃	1/2
		76	1/2
		77 ₅	1/2
		78 ₅	1/2
		79	1/2
		80	1/2
		81	1/4
		82 ₄	1/2
2021	5	83 ₉	1/2
		84	1/2
		85	1/4
		86 ₆	1/2
		87 ₅	1/2
2021	5	88 ₂	1/2
		89	1/4
		90 ₂	1/4
Total	62		Avg. 0.45

As shown in Figure 5, parody occurrence in GWRs from Stage One to Stage Three has been on the rise, with higher and higher PRV for brand-new or ad hoc parodies and lower and lower PRV for the ones that used to appear in older GWRs. It is also found that GWRs of the latest sixteen years (2006–2021) carry more parodies, of higher PRV.

4.3 Qualitative study of GWR parodies

4.3.1 Classification of GWR parodies

It is perhaps surprising to find a parody, a figure of speech meant for ridicule and humor (Xu 2003: 252), in official reports like GWRs. Therefore, a causative discussion is compelling and interesting. As noted earlier, there are four types of parody: word

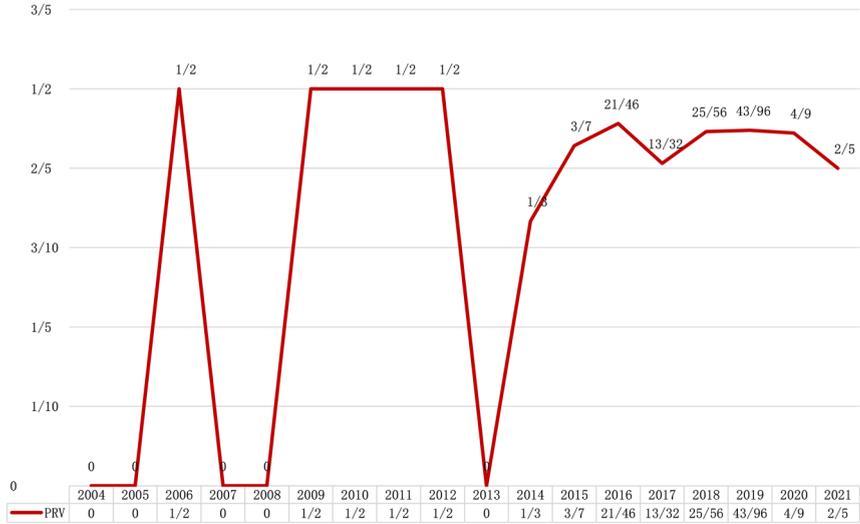


Figure 4: PRV of parodies in Stage-Three GWRs.

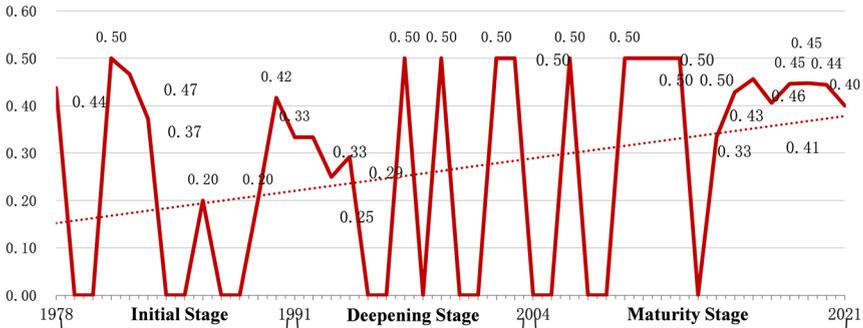


Figure 5: Trend of GWR parodies in three stages.

parody, phrase parody, sentence parody, and paragraph parody (Xu 2003: 57). This is because “parodies can be composed in different discursual forms: a phrase, a clause, a sentence, a paragraph, or even a whole essay” (Zhang 2015: 188), as seen below in Table 5. Chinese words and phrases are at times hard to distinguish, so are phrases and sentences, hence the necessity for a standard for parody classification. In this study, a construction with no more than four components/units (with idiom-likeness or idiomaticity) is treated as a word group, and a construction with more than four

Table 5: Four types of GWR parody in three stages.

Stages	Word parody	Phrase parody	Sentence parody	Paragraph parody	Total
Stage One	9 (75%)	1 (8%)	2 (17%)	0	12
Stage Two	4 (100%)	0	0	0	4
Stage Three	30 (86%)	5 (14%)	0	0	35
Total	43 (84%)	6 (12%)	2 (4%)	0	51

components/units (like Chinese allegorical sayings, sentential componentiality) is regarded as a phrase group. Finally, a complete sentence (for ideational completeness, syntactic sententiality, like a Chinese proverb, is seen as a sentence [group]). In the percentage calculation, a parody repeated once or more times will be counted but once, for economy.

Table 5 shows that, among others, word parody is used most frequently (43 times), followed by phrase parody (6 times). Sentence parody shows up only twice, while no paragraph parody is ever employed. It should be noted that we take it for granted that, other things being equal, every type of parody is regarded as morally acceptable in the Chinese culture, for instance in GWRs, if the parody in question suits the expected tastes and values of the mass audience.

4.3.2 Parody repetition in GWRs

Now in GWRs across 44 years, we find in 90 parodies, 39 are repetitions, accounting for about 43%. A parody's debut PRV is presumably high, and its reoccurrence PRV drops moderately. Given a parody aims at PRV height, why then do GWRs repeat an older parody, of low PRV? This has to do with the GWR's writer/reporter and style of presentation. The writer/reporter of a GWR takes over a used parody, economically, to help emphasize his own political point or stance. And unlike other styles or genres, GWRs do not strive for creativeness of diction or rhetoric. On the contrary, gaudy words or rhetorical devices may stain the nature of a GWR's political reporting. If a parody is acceptable in a previous GWR, it is inclined to reappear mimetically *iff* (if and only if) its idea is deemed suitable in the new GWR. Moreover, some parodies have turned into (four-character) set-phrases or even catchphrases (e.g. *ying shou jin shou* “应收尽收” ‘collect all due [taxes],’ lit. “should collect all collect”; *ying bao jin bao* “应保尽保” ‘cover all possible insurances,’ lit. “should ensure all ensure”). Once used, they readily drive home the urgency and prominence of a government policy or notion. Investigation shows that there are eight GWR reporters, mostly premier or vice-premier of the State Council. Li Peng is a special case because he delivered GWRs from 1988 to 1990 as Acting Premier of the State Council, and again delivered GWRs

Table 6: Eight reporter/writers of all GWRs.

Years	Reporters/writers	Parody number
1978–1979	Hua Guofeng	4
1980	Yao Yilin	0
1981–1987	Zhao Ziyang	10
1988–1990, 1992–1998	Li Peng	3 + 5 = 8
1991	Zou Jiahua	1
1999–2003	Zhu Rongji	5
2004–2013	Wen Jiabao	9
2013–2021	Li Keqiang	53
Total	8	90

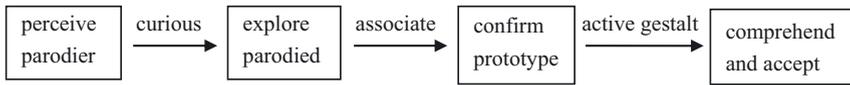
from 1992 to 1998 as Premier of the State Council. For a picture of the reporters/writers of the 44 GWRs of the four decades and the number of parodies they used, see Table 6 below (repeated parodies are dealt with independently because the users were different reporters/writers).

4.4 Causative discussions

The “multiple layers of societal changes” in Chinese history, as Pan (2008: 328) notes, brought about by several dramatic revolutions that cast in-depth, hidden impacts not only on the overall Chinese linguistic landscape but also on the more petit/subtle aspects of Chinese “lingua-scape,” make the research of modern Chinese politeness and pragma-rhetoric a greater challenge. Such changes could be demonstrated, say, by the language and style of official reports of the Chinese government. There can be found parodies in GWRs. What does this mean?

Figures of speech carry a certain extent of pragma-rhetorical value (PRV) to optimize communication, if used properly. That is why all speeches and discourses (including political ones) are rich in rhetorical devices. But can parody occur in political discourses like GWRs? It is true that the rhetorical features of parody, as Wu (1990: 251) notes, usually rule out its appearance in serious texts, but it does find its way, coyly, into GWRs. The GWR is a special, perhaps China-specific form of communication between the government leader/representative and the mass audience; on the one hand people do not expect a rhetorical device (parody) in a GWR, while on the other hand, parody, like other rhetorical means, helps the GWR achieve an effect of ready-made identification, achievable through the parody receiver’s psychological process (Xu 2003: 41), as illustrated in the following model:⁵

⁵ Our adaptation in the translation.



As suggested, receivers do not perceive a parodier as a completely new concept, but rather as “a new wine (that) tastes like the old” (Macdonald 1960: 559). The receivers can associate a parodier to the original saying and process the parodier via the psychological process called “active gestalt.” As a result, introducing a new concept with a pre-allocated meaning makes parodies easier to comprehend and accept. A GWR parody, as seen, is not “an imitation of or ‘take off’ on an original work or character” meant to “create an entirely new work” (Posner 1992: 68), but rather it makes a new expression by copying the main structure of an old one. Such a parody, if not inappropriate, lends repression impetus and easier accessibility to the GWR in question, to the delight of the audience, youngsters in particular, who keep their eyes open for newness and originality in modern Chinese expressions.

Moreover, the entire Chinese society plays a part in the use of parodies in GWRs. In Stages Two and Three, especially the latter, Deng Xiaoping’s program of reform and opening-up was deepened, seeing the people’s living standard elevated, and political and linguistic democracy enhanced. In this e-epoch, an era of postmodernism and mega-data, information dissemination is becoming increasingly easier. That more than half of the Chinese people have access to the internet has fundamentally altered their lifestyle and expectations. More specifically, public speeches worldwide (e.g. TED talks, presidential campaign speeches, inaugural speeches, commencement speeches at elite schools) are thriving in an “era of speeches,” where people itch for rhetoricality via rhetorical devices. All this affects the way politicians prepare and deliver their GWRs, what the audience expects, and how it interprets the politicians’ new policies, attitudes, and socio-pragmatic or pragma-rhetorical means and style of narration and persuasion. So, if a GWR is unproblematic in terms of propositional content, its parody humor does not harm the GWR, given the feasibility of the number and attributes of the parodies used and appropriateness of their PRV for the GWR per se. A GWR with the right number of parodies with the right PRV signals the government’s open-mindedness, humor, inclusiveness, and up-to-dateness.

It can be inferred so far that parody is utilized more and more often in GWRs and that new parodies achieve higher and higher PRV as the years pass, which implies that in pragma-rhetorical terms the parodies in GWRs have become increasingly daring, original, or “better” over the 44 years. According to the above quantitative study, GWRs during Xi Jinping’s presidency are parody-equipped, with 15 parodies of high PRV. This can be accounted for by the following: 1) Xi’s administration with its “think tank” has upgraded its political rhetoric and humor; 2) In this “era of

speeches,” average, let alone well-educated, people expect novel verbiage and rhetorical delights in saying and hearing; 3) Rhetorical devices (like parody) do not only express and impress, i.e. mean a thing by an impressive means; and 4) If GWRs are increasingly rhetorical, parody is one of the most interesting rhetorical figures, like ad hoc metaphors. With globalization occurs fiercer competition for discursive power in the political context. As the second-largest economy in the world, the Chinese government wishes to be on the rise in discursive power, hence the liberal use of such rhetorical devices as parodies in GWRs. In light of Hou’s CEVER model, parody use means economy and originality, or stylistic originality in lexical/linguistic economy. “As a marked expression, parody is used to gain markedness effects, namely ‘rhetorical value, aesthetic value, communicative value, pragmatic value’” (Hou 2011: 111, cited in Wu and Hou 2015: 72). The increasing use of parodies over the 44 years can account for and be accounted for by the GWR writers’ pursuit of identification-oriented “markedness effects” and “communicative value” by using more lively expressions and newness-oriented pragma-rhetorical means.

5 Conclusion

This study is an investigation of all 90 parodies collected from all 44 Chinese Government Work Reports (GWRs) from 1978 to 2021. Quantitatively and qualitatively, we analyzed the data in light of the CEVER model devised by Hou (2015) in order to uncover the mechanism of parody usage in Chinese political documents. It was found that the language used in official documents/speeches by the Chinese government has become more marked and impressive over the years, and is more open for newness and revolutionary changes in response to the rapid scientific, economic, and sociopolitical developments in China and the world.

In terms of parody use, we find that, first, parodies find their way more and more often into GWRs over the three stages (Initial Stage (of reform), Deepening Stage, and Maturity Stage), each lasting nearly thirteen years. Second, brand-new or ad hoc parodies of higher pragma-rhetorical value co-occur with older ones with lower PRV. GWRs under Xi Jinping’s presidency (from 2013 to date) are greater parody carriers, aiming at greater PRV. In these five years, parodies of high PRV (1/2) appear as many as fifteen times, far more than before. Third, of the four types of parody (word, phrase, sentence, and paragraph parody), word parody is used most often. Fourth, of the 90 GWR parodies in all, 39 are repeated ones, which implies that there are only 51 distinct GWR parodies that count. GWR parody reoccurrence can be accounted for by the unmarkedness or less markedness of old GWR parodies, suggesting security, brevity, and effectiveness. Fifth, more parodies enter recent GWRs because GWR reporters/writers are younger, better informed, more open-minded, and in the

meantime, the average audience has greater expectation of lively expressions, even in serious texts like GWRs.

This research may have some limitations. All the data on GWR parodies was collected only by manual inspection of the texts, which suggests the possibility of potential parodies overlooked by us yet identifiable to observers with other background knowledge. In addition, in our case study of word parodies exclusively, the merits of other types of parody may not have been fully accounted for. Finally, the causal analysis might be more convincing with support from authentic questionnaires for GWR reporters/writers, unaffordable for the moment.

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