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MAKING FUN OF POWER: ANALYZING HUMOR AND IRONY IN MEMES ABOUT VLADIMIR PUTIN AND XI JINPING

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ABSTRACT

The aim of this study is to examine how Ukrainians and Taiwanese combine conceptual, visual, and verbal modes to conceptualize humor and irony in internet memes featuring Vladimir Putin and Xi Jinping, the leaders of Russia and China, respectively. Additionally, it aims to determine if the analyzed memes reflect cultural differences between Ukraine and Taiwan. The analysis is based on Lin and Chiang's (2015) multimodal fusion model and utilizes Baurecht's (2020) typology of memes (i.e., *images macro*, *panel memes*, *description memes*, *screenshot memes*, *crossover memes*, and *meta memes*). Our findings suggest that internet or social media users in Ukraine and Taiwan tend to express their anger and dissatisfaction through the use of humor and irony. The analysis of Ukrainian and Taiwanese memes reveals similarities between the two countries' memes; both use dialogue and diminutive suffixes to create a humorous effect. These memes also depict Putin and Xi differently, further reflecting cultural differences between Ukraine and Taiwan. While Ukrainian memes frequently reference historical events and figures, Taiwanese memes tend to create humorous scenarios featuring current politicians. Furthermore, the humor and irony in Ukrainian memes are created through punning wordplay, whereas the humor and irony in the Chinese language memes are presented through the wordplay of word formation. This study concludes that internet memes, conceptualized through the fusion of visual, verbal, and conceptual modes, are utilized as visual representations of anger and discontent among Ukrainians and Taiwanese to depict Putin and Xi in a humorous and ironic way.

1. INTRODUCTION

Ukrainians and Taiwanese have a long history of animosity with their neighboring countries, i.e., Russia and China. Most do not share the political aspirations and ideals of Vladimir Putin and Xi Jinping, the leaders of their neighboring countries. In the case of Ukraine, the wave of animosity toward Putin began to build toward the end of 2013, as evidenced by revolutionary events in the country. After the annexation of Crimea by Russia, the animosity greatly increased, and reached its peak after the invasion in February 2022. Regarding Taiwan, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP)'s one-China policy considers it to be part of the People's Republic of China. Despite differing levels of disapproval for Putin and Xi between Ukraine and Taiwan, people in both countries still use humor and satire, such as cartoons and memes, to challenge the authority of their neighboring countries. Notwithstanding this, the freedom to create cartoons in Asia has been inconsistent, fluctuating depending on those in power (Lent 2023). However, the means of generating and sharing memes through online social media networks remains easily accessible to anyone.

Baurecht (2020) notes that internet memes emerged in the 1990s, as demonstrated by the "Godwin's Law" meme, which originated with the rise of the internet. Baurecht goes on to describe four frameworks commonly used to analyze memes. The text categorizes memes into four approaches: *phrasal memes*, *video memes*, *interactive memes*, and *promotional memes* under the content approach; *image (macro) memes*, *photo memes*, *video memes*, and *word memes* under the medium approach; the creation approach focuses on how memes are created and how the medium functions in the process; and the contextual approach argues that memes communicate additional meanings (pp. 141–144).

Internet memes are often created to convey humor and/or irony for various communicative purposes. However, they are a non-homogeneous genre of comical text, and the perception of different types of memetic humor is likely based on different principles (Rivin & Shcherbakova 2021). In his study, Tella (2018) analyzes internet memes created during the 2015 Nigerian presidential election campaigns to explore how two major candidates were portrayed. He finds that meme producers often used humor to negatively frame their opponents in an attempt to boost their own candidate's chances of winning. Stankevičiūtė (2022) observes that Pink Poodle, a fictional character and pseudonym for a collective of fashion lovers, used irony and sarcasm in fashion memes to exercise power by distinguishing between the fashionable and non-fashionable, thereby confirming the ontological importance of fashion.

Internet memes reflect current crises and social changes. During the COVID-19 outbreak in 2020, many memes were generated and circulated, including those related to wearing masks and working from home. Han and Kuipers (2021) analyze memetic videos that emerged on Chinese TikTok during the COVID-19 pandemic in China. They find that the video memes consist of three genres of mothers working from home: *balancing mothers*, *pedagogic mothers*, and *commercially oriented mothers*. The memes provided temporary relief through humor. Mifdal (2022) observes that memes posted on Moroccan Facebook pages during the first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic helped

people cope with fear and uncertainty. Memes were also used for social control and the expression of conflict and resistance. The memes generated during COVID-19 show how humor has a significant function in terms of contingent motivations.

In summary, analyzing the linguistic and semiotic practices of meme producers allows researchers to understand how they conceptualize and visualize humor and irony, as well as current crises and social changes in their culture. Section 2 introduces the importance of using a multimodal fusion model to analyze the visual data.

2. THE MULTIMODAL FUSION MODEL

The combination of text and image creates meaning for various communicative functions in different genres, such as in comics (Chen & Hajndrych 2021a, 2021b) and political cartoons (Dugalich 2018). However, there have been few studies on internet memes that explore how the conceptual mode interacts with the visual and verbal modes in relation to specific political meme topics. In recognition of the importance of the conceptual mode, Lin and Chiang (2015) propose a crucial cognitive mechanism of multimodal fusion that emerges from the metonymic-metaphoric network and integrates the conceptual, visual, and verbal modes. According to their study, the representation technique of multimodal fusion is designed to facilitate the cognitive function of summarizing abstract, complex, and critical messages, as well as political ideology, irony, and humor, as they are presented in political cartoons.

Using the multimodal fusion model, Chen and Hertsiuk (2021) analyze the cognitive mechanisms encoded in Chinese online advertising. Their study examines how online advertising affects potential consumers, and the tactics used by sellers to become market leaders in the competitive Chinese business world, closely linking these factors to current and potential consumers' conceptualization of the visual, verbal, and conceptual modes of an advertisement.

The analysis of internet memes can also benefit from the application of the multimodal fusion model, as memes often use a combination of visual, verbal, and conceptual elements to convey critical messages in a humorous and ironic way. It is worth noting that many of the memes featuring Putin and Xi make use of metonyms. This study, therefore, aims to demonstrate that while the analyzed internet memes about Putin and Xi use humor and irony that are constructed multimodally, understanding the encoded humor and irony requires the combination of the visual, verbal, and conceptual modes. The memes also rely on allusions to other sources of popular culture.

3. ANALYSIS

As discussed above, Baurecht (2020) proposes an updated typology of memes that associates their formation with their structure and creation. This study will adopt this typology to analyze the collected visual data, specifically examining how the structure and creation of Ukrainian memes about Putin and Taiwanese memes about Xi contribute to humor and irony.

3.1. Images macro

An image macro is a picture with two lines of text, one at the top and one at the bottom, used for humorous effect (Baurecht 2020, 145). While some images macro include only a photoshopped image, others include the accompanying text. Figure 1 illustrates how an image macro uses only a photoshopped picture of Putin to mock his cruelty in a humorous way. The process of multimodal fusion involves both visual and conceptual elements. The visual aspect is represented using the metonymy "the serial killer", while the conceptual aspect is exemplified by *The Silence of the Lambs* scenario.

(1) (WWW1)

Figure 1. An image macro depicting Vladimir Putin wearing the same mask as the serial killer Hannibal Lecter from the 1991 movie *The Silence of the Lambs*

In the movie, Hannibal Lecter is apprehended, and a conversation ensues between him, the police, and the senator. The meme originated from the International Criminal Court's decision to issue an arrest warrant for Putin in March 2023. At that time, the Ukrainian internet was filled with memes depicting Putin as a prisoner. One of these memes was posted on Ukrainian politician Anton Gerashchenko's Facebook page, containing the mocking phrase in Ukrainian Недалеке майбутнє *Nedaleke maibutnie* 'The not-too-distant future'. Thus, Putin wearing a mask as Hannibal is the metonymy for the Russian invasion of Ukraine. The meme not only mocks Putin, but it also expresses the Ukrainian public's jubilation at the fact that an arrest warrant has been issued for him. The humor and irony in the meme depicted in Figure 1 are based on internet

users' allusions. Putin by allusion is linked to the serial killer Hannibal, and Hannibal being brought to justice with a mask on his face alludes to the arrest warrant. The scenario of *The Silence of the Lambs* is conceptually integrated with Putin wearing a mask as the serial killer in the movie. By integrating the conceptual scenario and visual cue, the multimodal fusion portrays Putin as a murderer of Ukrainians since he launched the Russo-Ukrainian War.

Figure 2 is a traditional image macro. The meme uses Xi's picture as its background with two texts at the top and bottom as the punchline. The process of multimodal fusion involves the visual cue of Xi's entertained facial expression, his laughter and unexpected proposal as verbal cues, and the conceptual scenario that Xi's anger is concealed behind his laughter.

(2) (WWW2)

Text in Traditional Chinese Characters
1. 哈哈哈哈真有趣
hā hā hā hā zhēn yǒuqù
2. 馬上送去再教育
mǎshàng sòngqù zài jiàoyù
'Send him/her to the re-education camp right now'

Figure 2. An image macro featuring Xi Jinping's picture as its background, with two texts positioned at the top and bottom

Figure 2 depicts Xi smiling and pointing with an index finger, while the accompanying text consists of words attributed to Xi, although they were created by the meme producer. The first line matches the picture, indicating that Xi finds someone's speech entertaining. However, the second line contrasts sharply, suggesting that despite Xi's own amusement, he does not tolerate such humor and will send the speaker to a re-education camp immediately. The meme incorporates the visual, verbal, and conceptual frame of multimodal fusion to convey an ironic and critical message about Xi's intolerance toward dissenting voices and opposing views. The humor in this piece is constructed using both a picture and two contrasting texts to create an entertaining effect. Specifically, internet users are led to imagine a context in which the text at the top (line 1) fits the picture, suggesting that Xi is amused by someone's funny remarks. However, this constructed context is later contradicted by the text at the bottom (line 2), generating incongruity as the source of humor. The sudden shift in the proposition can be considered as 無厘頭 *wúlítóu* 'nonsense humor', a type of humor commonly used in Taiwan

(see Chen 2016, 2017). This meme mocks China's free speech crackdown under Xi's rule in a humorous way.

3.2. Panel memes

A panel meme usually consists of four or more panels that take different forms to create a contrast (Baurecht 2020, 145). Figure 3 references the tank man, an unidentified protester who confronted a column of tanks leaving Tian'anmen Square in Beijing on June 5, 1989, the day after the Chinese government had "cleared" hundreds of protesters.[1] The process of multimodal fusion involves the integration of both visual cues and a conceptual scenario. The visual cues of the meme depict Xi's facial expressions of joy and anger upon seeing Pui Pui Molcars and their portrayal as a column of tanks, respectively. The tank man is used as the conceptual scenario.

(3) (WWW3)

Figure 3. A panel meme illustrating the change in Xi Jinping's facial expression upon seeing Pui Pui Molcars and their portrayal as a column of tanks

Figure 3 comprises four panels: the two on the left depict the change in Xi's facial expression, while the other two on the right are from *Pui Pui Molcar*, a Japanese stop-motion short anime series. According to Cohn's (2013) definition, the two panels on the left are micropanels, which depict less than one active entity, such as in a close-up. The other two on the right are macropanels, which portray multiple active entities, as in a long shot. The bottom-right panel is photoshopped, alluding to the famous tank man and portraying the Pui Pui Molcars as a column of tanks. In other words, the Pui Pui Molcars can be seen as metonymy for a column of tanks in the Tian'anmen Square protests. The use of

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[1] https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tank_Man

micropanels allows the meme producer to present the change in Xi's facial expression from being pleased to being antagonized by the allusion to the 1989 Tian'anmen Square protests. This multimodal blend of the visual cues and the conceptual scenario is meant to be ironic and critical of Xi for still refusing to revise the Chinese government's condemnation of bloodshed. More concretely, the meme is intended to mock Xi and his CCP's continuous denial of the Chinese army crackdown on the 1989 Tian'anmen Square protests.[2]

3.3. Description memes

A description meme is an image that metaphorically represents something else, and is often accompanied by additional text (Baurecht 2020, 145). In an internet meme generated by artificial intelligence (AI), Xi is depicted as Winnie-the-Pooh, the Chinese people as Chinese leeks, and China as an annihilated city. The process of multimodal fusion includes both visual and conceptual elements. The visual elements involve the use of metonymy, such as "Winnie-the-Pooh", "Chinese leeks", and "an annihilated city". The conceptual scenario is represented by a city that has been destroyed. The three visual elements, as shown in Figure 4, are used to mock Xi and his followers in an entertaining way.

(4) (WWW4)

Figure 4. An AI-generated description meme consisting of three visual elements: *Winnie-the-Pooh*, *Chinese leeks*, and *an annihilated city*

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[2] https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/1989_Tiananmen_Square_protests_and_massacre

The use of Winnie-the-Pooh with a crown is a humorous way to mock Xi and his one-man rule, especially since this beloved bear has been censored on the internet in China since 2017. The censorship of Winnie-the-Pooh has led to an increase in the creation of internet memes that mock Xi in an amusing manner. Furthermore, the utilization of the crown serves to depict Xi in a satirical light as an emperor. It is worth noting that in Figure 1, Ukrainians refer to Putin as the serial killer from a 1991 Hollywood movie. Pro-Russian forums, in point of fact, also use memes. For example, Putin's launch of the Russo-Ukrainian War has been compared by some Russian internet and social media users to the Crusades against Heretics. Additionally, Putin has been portrayed as the Emperor of Mankind, a fictional character in *Warhammer 40,000*, a miniature wargame produced by Games Workshop. An AI-generated internet meme depicts Putin as the God-Emperor holding a large hammer while wearing armor (see List of Internet Sources: WWW5). Although both Putin and Xi are referred to as emperors in the memes, they convey distinct connotations. In summary, Putin is portrayed positively by his Russian supporters as a competent hero in armor holding a big hammer, while the cartoonization of Xi, represented by Winnie-the-Pooh, reinforces the sarcastic nature of the meme. This is due to the fact that the well-known cuddly bear is not typically associated with the crown, a symbol of power.

Chinese leeks (also known as garlic chives), on the other hand, are used to mock Xi's blind followers. The expression 割韭菜 *gē jiǔcài* 'to harvest leeks' is used to describe unsuspecting Chinese middle-class investors losing their hard-earned savings in the Chinese stock market after being cut down by big players. These gullible Chinese investors are referred to as leeks (WWW6). While the term "harvested leeks" refers to those who are forced to leave the market, there will always be new and inexperienced investors entering. This expression has been adopted by Chinese internet users to express their frustration with political and social control in China. The use of leeks to describe Xi's blind followers who are "harvested" by the CCP is specific to Chinese society. The use of an annihilated city is a satirical reference to Xi's failure in promoting 共同富裕 *gòngtóng fùyù* 'common prosperity', a term that first appeared in the headline of an article in the *People's Daily* on September 25, 1953 (see Dunford 2022). Despite Xi's emphasis on common prosperity and associated domestic goals such as innovation, improved governance, and ecological and spiritual civilization, there are growing socio-economic disparities in China under his rule.

The three visual elements mentioned above are culturally specific and can be seen as metonyms for Xi, Xi's supporters, and the economic depression in China. As messages spread widely and quickly on social media, the metonymy of Winnie-the-Pooh and the Chinese leeks to represent Xi and his exploited blind followers have become conventionalized. Through the integration of the visual cue and the conceptual scenario, the multimodal fusion implies an ironic and critical message. Despite Xi's failure to promote common prosperity, many Chinese people still blindly follow him. Internet users can understand the encoded humor and irony without additional text, but not if any of the three visual elements appear alone. Therefore, the humor and irony in this meme are constructed multimodally.

3.4. Screenshot memes

A screenshot meme is a media screenshot, often with subtitles (Baurecht 2020, 145). As shown in the following two figures, a screenshot meme may contain a few cartoon screenshots within a specific culture (Figure 5) or a scene from a famous movie (Figure 6). The humor and irony are based on allusions to characters or movie scenes that internet users are familiar with, but with changed subtitles.

(5) (WWW7)

Text in Ukrainian
1. Піду почитаю, що там Путлєр наговорив
Pidu pochytaiu, shcho tam Putlier nahovoryv
'Let's read what Putler said'
2. П'ятачок, неси кулемет
Piatachok, nesy kulemet
'Piglet, bring the machine gun'

Figure 5. A screenshot meme featuring characters from the Soviet cartoon Винни Пух *Vinni-Pukh* 'Winnie-the-Pooh'

To comprehend the meme in Figure 5, it is necessary to understand the context. For those who are not acquainted with the Soviet version of Winnie-the-Pooh, the meme portrays characters from the Soviet cartoon *Vinni-Pukh* by Fyodor Khitruk. The Soviet version differs significantly from the American Disney adaptation. The Soviet version is based on a retelling by Boris Zakhoder of the original story. However, the main characters in the Soviet version are strikingly different from the original characters, not only in appearance but also in personality. In contrast to the good-natured, smiling, and somewhat clumsy original Winnie-the-Pooh, the Soviet Vinni-Pukh has a different physique and a rough voice. Throughout the entire cartoon, he never smiles. Additionally, the Soviet Vinni-Pukh moves and speaks at a faster pace than his Western counterpart, resulting in a less bear-like appearance. Figure 5 introduces another character, П'ятачок *Piatachok* (Ukrainian)/ Пятачок *Piatachok* (Russian) 'Piglet', who differs from the original version in both physical appearance and personality. The Soviet Piatachok is shorter and more robust, with stronger determination. These variations provide a more intriguing context for the meme and enhance its humor.

The meme in Figure 5 illustrates the reaction of Ukrainian internet users to Putin's speech on February 21, 2022, shortly after the start of hostilities in Ukraine. During

his speech, Putin discussed Ukraine's recent history and foreign policy, claiming that since the change of power in 2014, Ukraine has pursued a confrontational course with Russia. He also mentioned Ukraine's desire to join the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and made statements about Ukraine's return to nuclear power status. Putin's speech provoked anger among Ukrainian internet users, who responded with numerous memes and jokes.

The process of multimodal fusion includes three components: visual, verbal, and conceptual. The visual component here involves an interaction between Vinni-Pukh and Piatachok. The verbal component is demonstrated through Vinni-Pukh's angry reaction to Putin's speech. Finally, the conceptual component is illustrated by the scenario of Vinni-Pukh planning to shoot Putin. The text employs humor and irony through the use of two specific words: Путлєр *Putlier* 'Putler' (line 1) and кулемет *kulemet* 'machine gun' (line 2). The term, Putler, is a derogatory neologism used to refer to Putin, which is similar to the last name of Adolf Hitler, the Austrian-born dictator of Nazi Germany who aimed to eliminate Europe's Jews. Putler, therefore, is a punning wordplay used to refer to Putin. The slogan Путлєр капут! *Putlier Kaputt!* 'Putler no more!' was first used in Russia in 2009 at a rally in Vladivostok. Although the origins of this satirical portrayal of Putin are in Russia, it has become deeply ingrained in Ukrainian internet culture. The expression неси кулемет *nesy kulemet* 'bring the machine gun' implicitly conveys Vinni-Pukh's anger toward Putin's speech and his desire to harm him. The multimodal fusion combines the conceptual scenario, visual cues, and verbal cues to convey an ironic and critical message that Putin's discussion of Ukraine's recent history and foreign policy is intolerable. The screenshot meme ridicules Putin and humorously expresses the anger of Ukrainians through a conversation between two well-known Soviet cartoon characters.

Screenshot memes have also been used to mock China's removal of the two-term limit on the presidency humorously, which allows Xi to remain in power for life. The multimodal fusion in this example involves visual, verbal, and conceptual elements: The visual element is a scene of Captain America fighting a group of Hydra soldiers in an elevator, the verbal element is a conversation about Xi's successor, and the conceptual element is Captain America fighting.

Figure 6 shows a meme composed of four screenshots from the elevator scene in the 2014 American superhero movie *Captain America: The Winter Soldier*. The Avengers movies are known for their light comedy and many screenshot memes are created using scenes from them. The original scene depicts Captain America fighting a group of Hydra soldiers in an elevator, and this meme template is often used for various screenshot memes. By merging the conceptual scenario, the visual cue, and the verbal cue, the multimodal fusion delivers an ironic and critical message that no one wants to see the CCP removing Xi's presidential term limits, thus allowing him to lead China indefinitely. The meme in Figure 6 uses changed subtitles to mock Xi's consolidation of power as the leader of the state. This consolidation gives him virtually unlimited power and the right to lead the country for life.

(6) (WWW8)

Text in Traditional Chinese Characters
1. 習近平的接班人確定了
Xí Jìnpíng de jiēbānrén quèdìng le
'Xi Jinping's successor has been confirmed'
2. 是誰
Shì shéi
'Who is it?'
3. 習近平
Xí Jìnpíng
'Xi Jinping'

Figure 6. A screenshot meme featuring the elevator scene in the 2014 American superhero movie *Captain America: The Winter Soldier*

3.5. Crossover memes

According to Baurecht (2020, 145), a crossover meme is created by combining different meme images to convey a new meaning. Figures 7 and 8 demonstrate that crossover memes in both Ukraine and Taiwan may be based on conversations between people, but also highlight cultural differences.

To analyze the humor in the meme in Figure 7, it is necessary to identify the historical figures depicted. The man in the top-left panel is Putin, while the woman in the top-right panel is Princess Olga of Kiev, who was the ruler of Kievan Rus. In Ukraine, Princess Olga is an important figure, known for her harsh but wise rule. The bottom-left panel does not depict any specific historical figures. This image is a fragment of Ilya Repin's painting *The Cossacks*. The Cossacks were originally peasants who fled from landlords and later formed a large paramilitary group. In Ukraine, they are considered to be freedom fighters and the first fighters for independence. The bottom-right panel displays

Vladimir Lenin's surprised expression. Lenin is known for creating the first socialist state in world history and is an important historical figure for Russia, Ukraine, and other former Soviet republics. In a speech on February 21, 2022, Putin promoted the narrative that Ukraine, as a nation, was created by Lenin. Putin's assertion caused controversy on Ukrainian social media as it was interpreted as an attempt to deny Ukraine's history.

(7) (WWW9)

Text in Ukrainian and Russian
1. Путин: Украину придумал Ленин
Putin: Ukrainu pridumal Lenin
'Putin: Ukraine was invented by Lenin' [Text in Russian]
2. Княгиня Ольга: Що???
Kniahynia Olha: Shcho???
'Princess Olga: What???' [Text in Ukrainian]
3. Козаки: Що???
Kozaky: Shcho???
'The Cossacks: What???' [Text in Ukrainian]
4. Ленин: Что???
Lenin: Shto???
'Lenin: What???' [Text in Russian]

Figure 7. A crossover meme showcasing a conversation between Vladimir Putin, Princess Olga of Kiev, the Cossacks, and Vladimir Lenin

The multimodal fusion in this example involves visual, verbal, and conceptual elements. The visual component consists of four panels displaying Putin, Princess Olga of Kiev, the Cossacks, and Lenin; the verbal component consists of Putin's speech about Ukraine and the reactions of other historical figures; and the conceptual component consists of a scenario in which the historical figures react to Putin's speech. The humor and irony in this statement are based on the astonishment of these figures, who lived in the 10th, 16th, and 20th centuries, respectively. Important historical figures would have refuted Putin's assertion that Ukraine was created by Lenin, even Lenin himself. By bringing together the conceptual scenario, the visual cue, and the verbal cue, the multimodal fusion therefore conveys an ironic and critical message that no one supports Putin's claim that Ukraine was created by Lenin, a Russian.

On the other hand, Figure 8 contains a crossover meme that employs humor and irony based on Xi's telephone conversations with other leaders during the same period. The multimodal fusion in this meme involves visual, verbal, and conceptual elements. Visual elements include pictures of Xi and other world leaders holding phone receivers.

Verbal elements include Xi's assertion about China, and his phone conversations with other world leaders about the COVID-19 pandemic and the development of COVID-19 vaccines. The conceptual scenario is the world leaders having a phone conversation.

(8) (WWW10)

Text in Traditional Chinese Characters

1. 中國為世界首強，必能迅速完成武漢病毒疫苗
Zhōngguó wéi shìjiè shǒuqiáng, bì néng xùnsù wánchéng Wǔhàn bìngdú yìmiáo
'China is the most powerful country in the world, and we therefore can rapidly develop Wuhan pneumonia vaccines'

2. 安倍桑，武漢病毒我傳過去了，疫苗拜託了
Ānbèi-sāng, Wǔhàn bìngdú wǒ chuán guòqù le, yìmiáo bàituō le
'Abe-san, I have sent Wuhan pneumonia to Japan. Please develop vaccines for it'

3. 川普大，武漢病毒我傳過去了，疫苗拜託了
Chuānpú-dà, Wǔhàn bìngdú wǒ chuán guòqù le, yìmiáo bàituō le
'Big brother Trump, I have sent Wuhan pneumonia to the States. Please develop vaccines for it'

4. 普丁：小習，病毒傳過來你就死定了
Pǔdīng: Xiǎo-Xí, bìngdú chuán guòlái nǐ jiù sǐdìng le
'Putin: Little Xi, you will be dead if you send us Wuhan pneumonia'

Figure 8. A crossover meme displaying telephone conversations between Xi Jinping and other world leaders

The use of diminutive forms, kinship terms, and honorific suffixes among peers, such as 小 *xiǎo* 'little' in 小習 *Xiǎo-Xí* 'Little Xi' (line 4), 大 *dà* 'big brother' in 川普大 *Chuānpú-dà* 'Big brother Trump' (line 3), and 桑 *sāng* '-san' in 安倍桑 Ānbèi-sāng 'Abe-san' (line 2), creates a false sense of intimacy between these world leaders.

Interestingly, Xi addresses Trump as "big brother" and is addressed by Putin using the diminutive form "little", which portrays Xi as the younger brother of Putin and Trump. By incorporating the conceptual scenario, the visual cue, and the verbal cue, the multimodal fusion thus communicates an ironic and critical message by mocking China for being less powerful than Russia and the United States, and for boasting about its greatness without being able to actually develop vaccines.

Figures 7 and 8 also suggest a further cross-cultural comparison between Ukrainian and Taiwanese crossover memes. The Ukrainian meme (Figure 7) depicts conversations between people from different historical periods, while the Taiwanese meme (Figure 8) depicts conversations between people from the same period. This suggests that Ukrainians are perhaps more familiar with historical figures and have a stronger emotional connection to them. However, Taiwanese individuals may not find memes based on conversations between historical figures as amusing.

3.6. Meta memes

Finally, a meta meme does not follow the typical structures of memes but is popular for its originality. Figure 9 demonstrates how this meme creatively uses the game of bingo, where players match numbers on cards, to represent issues raised in Putin's speeches. The multimodal fusion in this case involves a visual representation of a bingo template, verbal representation of issues raised in Putin's speech, and conceptual representation of the bingo game scenario.

(9) (WWW11)

Путин-бинго 2023

Сражаются за родную землю	Крым	Анекдот	"Кхе-кхе"	Экстремизм	Вообще что творится?!?
Трансформеры	Киевский режим	Оппозиция	Духовные скрепы	Пенсии	Всё под контролем
ЛГБТ	Нет времени на раскачку	Запад врал о мире	Великая российская культура	Иностранные агенты	Спекуляция
Исторические земли	Рывок	Нужно крепче сплотиться	Минские соглашения	Специальная военная операция	И не с таким справлялись
Преодолеем все трудности	Мы народ-победитель	Энергетическая сверхдержава	Не надо паниковать	Победа будет за нами	Неонацисты в Киеве
Информационная война	Наши западные партнёры	Санкционная война	Исторические ценности	Этот гражданин	Патриоты

| **Text in Russian** | | | | | |
Putin Bingo 2023					
Putin Bingo 2023					
Srazhaĭutsĭa za rodnuĭu zemlĭu 'Fighting for their home-land'	*Krym* 'Crimea'	*Anekdot* 'Anecdote'	*Kkhe-kkhe* 'Ahem-ahem'	Ėkstremizm 'Extremism'	*Voobshche chto tvoritsĭa?!?* 'What the hell is going on?!?'
Transformery 'Transformers'	*Kievskiĭ rezhim* 'The Kiev regime'	*Oppozicija* 'Opposition'	*Duhovnye skrepy* 'Spiritual sta-ples'	*Pensii* 'Pensions'	*Vsjo pod kon-trolem* 'Everything is under control'
LGBT 'LGBT'	*Net vremeni na raskachku* 'No time to swing'	*Zapad vral o mire* 'The West lied about peace'	*Velikaja rossijskaja kul'tura* 'Great Russian culture'	*Inostrannye agenty* 'Foreign agents'	*Spekuljacii* 'Speculation'
Istoricheskie zemli 'Historical lands'	*Ryvok* 'Leap'	*Nuzhno kre-pche splotit'sja* 'We need to pull together'	*Minskie soglashenija* 'Minsk agree-ments'	*Special'naja voennaja ope-racija* 'Special mili-tary operation'	*I ne s takim spravljalis'* 'We've han-dled worse than this'
Preodoleem vse trudnosti 'We'll over-come all diffi-culties'	*My narod--pobeditel'* 'We're a victo-rious nation'	*Jenergeti-cheskaja sver-hderzhava* 'Energy super-power'	*Ne nado pani-kovat'* 'There's no need to panic'	*Pobeda budet za nami* 'Victory will be ours'	*Neo-nacisty v Kieve* 'Neo-Nazis in Kiev'
Informa-cionnaja vojna 'Information war'	*Nashi zapad-nye partnery* 'Our Western partners'	*Sankcionnaja vojna* 'Sanctions war'	*Istoricheskie cennosti* 'Historical values'	*Jetot grazhda-nin* 'That citizen'	*Patrioty* 'Patriots'

Figure 9. A meta meme created based on the game of bingo

Figure 9 displays a meta meme based on bingo that requires players (internet users) to be familiar with Putin's speeches, specifically the phrases and expressions they contain, in order to collect the bingo. The bingo card consists of 36 different phrases and expressions, some of which may require context to understand. The expression Сражаться за родную землю *Srazhaĭutsĭa za rodnuĭu zemlĭu* 'Fighting for their homeland', for example, refers to the military operation conducted by the Russian Federation, the military of the Donetsk and Lugansk People's Republics, and the Ukrainian military. Putin also mentions Крым *Krym* 'Crimea' as a political triumph for Russia, since the annexation of Crimea is also known as вернулся в родную гавань *wiernułsia w rodnuju gawań* 'return to home port'. Interestingly, Putin frequently includes jokes in his speeches,

which are often remembered by internet users due to their political implications. To fill pauses in his speeches, Putin may cough while shuffling papers or selecting his words. Users have compiled entire collections of Putin's coughing, such as кхе-кхе *kkhe-kkhe* 'ahem-ahem', which occurs frequently. Putin often mentions the long-standing struggle against экстремизм *èkstremizm* 'extremism' in Russia when discussing the weapons used by other countries against Russia. He has also used the expression Вообще что творится?!? *Voobshche chto tvoritsi̯a?!?* 'What the hell is going on?!?' to express his dissatisfaction with the work of government officials, ministers, or others. By linking the conceptual scenario, the visual cue, and the verbal cue, the multimodal fusion thus communicates an ironic and critical message by mocking the issues raised by Putin in his past speeches.

Meta memes alluding to published books have been popular among internet users in China and Taiwan. For instance, Figure 10 originated on Weibo, a Chinese microblogging website, in July 2017. Although it was quickly censored and deleted, the meme is still in circulation on other social media platforms. This meta meme does not follow typical meme structures, but creatively mimics the design of an actual book cover (see Figure 11).

(10) (WWW12)
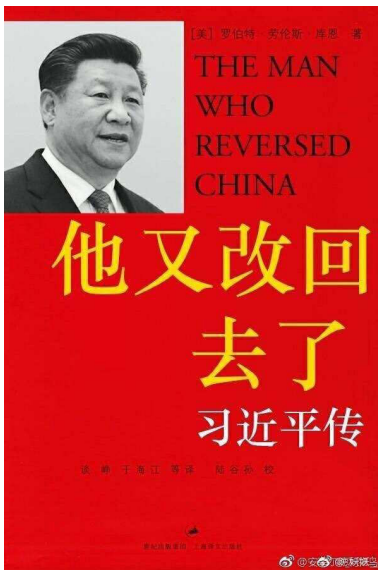
Text in Simplified Chinese Characters
1. 他又改回去了
tā yòu gǎihuíqù le
'He, however, changed it back'
2. 习近平传
Xí Jìnpíng zhuàn
'A biography of Xi Jinping'

Figure 10. A meta meme making reference to the biography of Jiang Zemin

Figure 10 shows a meme referencing the biography of Jiang Zemin (Figure 11), a Chinese politician who served as general secretary of the CCP from 1989 to 2002, chairman of the Central Military Commission from 1989 to 2004, and president of China from 1993 to 2003. During Jiang's leadership, China experienced significant

economic growth due to the continuation of market reforms. Under Jiang's rule, China maintained tight control over the state, but also saw improved relations with the outside world. The Chinese title of the book, 他改变了中国 *tā gǎibiàn le Zhōngguó* 'He changed China', can be interpreted as a positive view of Jiang's impact on the country. However, Figure 10 is intended to mock Xi. The multimodal fusion involves three elements: visual (Xi's profile picture appearing on a fake book cover), verbal (a fake book title), and conceptual (a fictional biography scenario). By blending the conceptual scenario, visual cue, and verbal cue together, the multimodal fusion carries an ironic and critical message that despite Jiang's efforts to change China for the better, Xi has changed it back, as relations between China and the Western world have worsened. The humor and irony are based on the wordplay of word formation. In Figure 11, the verb phrase 改变 *gǎibi* 'to change' implies that China has been improved, while 改回去 *gǎihuíqù* 'to change back' suggests that China has been made worse.

(11) (WWW13)
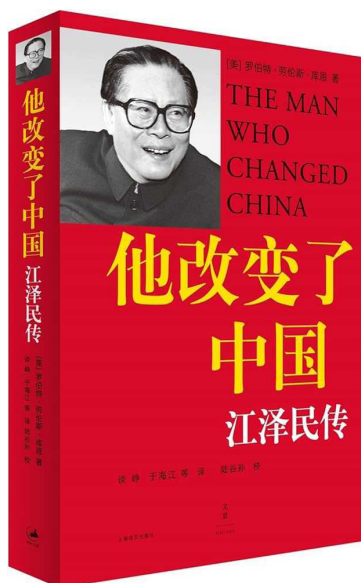
Text in Simplified Chinese Characters
1. 他改变了中国
tā gǎibiàn le Zhōngguó
'He changed China'
2. 江泽民传
Jiāng Zémín zhuàn
'A biography of Jiang Zemin'

Figure 11. The biography of Jiang Zemin

To summarize, the meta meme style is intended to exploit shared humor and irony. The humor and irony may fail if the recipients do not understand the phrases and expressions. In Figure 9 the meme is used to mock Putin's assertions, policies, ideas, and even his unique talking style. On the other hand, comprehending the humor and irony in Figure 10 requires familiarity with the book to which the meme refers. Both meta memes foster a sense of solidarity among those who understand and are entertained by the humor and irony. As argued by Oshima (2013), humor serves to establish what is normal within a group. More specifically, humor can reinforce ingroup solidarity. These

two memes are popular for their originality, and may evoke laughter from Ukrainians/ Russians and Taiwanese/Chinese who oppose Putin and Xi, respectively, thereby solidifying their identity as ingroup members against the outgroup – Putin and his adherents, and Xi and his adherents.

4. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The present study highlights the role of memes in entertainingly challenging power. Irony is often used for social criticism or to comment on reality (Chernyshova 2021). Chernyshova notes that her study's selected materials, two contemporary Russian newspapers, use means of contrast to create a comic (ironic) subtext. The frequent means also include hyperbolization, characterized by the use of a multitude of words, which ultimately results in a sense of fulfillment with regard to the "positive" aspects of the described image. The use of these means further reveals the presence of a hidden subtext that expresses the author's true intention. The findings of the present study suggest that the analyzed memes rely primarily on allusions to implicitly convey the intentions of the meme producers. As asserted by Williams et al. (2016), memes frequently utilize humor to convey a wide range of ideas or messages, from the absurd to the offensive. The analyzed memes, therefore, can be interpreted as satirical depictions of Putin and Xi.

The selected Ukrainian and Taiwanese memes share similarities. Yemelyanova and Baranova (2023) analyze the genre and stylistic markers of Ukrainian folk jokes and find that they often use a dialogue format and vocabulary with diminutive suffixes to achieve humorous effects. This is also evident in Figure 5, where the humor is constructed through a dialogue between Vinni-Pukh and Piatachok. Putin is further referred to as Путлєр *Putlier* 'Putler' using a diminutive suffix. Figure 8 also demonstrates the use of diminutive forms, kinship terms, and honorific suffixes among peers in phone dialogues between leaders from the same period.

The analysis of the selected memes also shows that Putin and Xi are depicted differently and often in different contexts due to the cultural differences between Ukraine and Taiwan. For instance, Ukrainians frequently refer to historical events and figures from their past. They are proud of their history and often humorously speculate on how a historical figure would react to contemporary events (see Figure 7). In contrast, Taiwanese internet or social media users seem to find more amusement in creating humorous scenarios featuring current politicians (see Figure 8). Additionally, the humor and irony in Ukrainian memes are created through punning wordplay (see Figure 5), whereas the humor and irony in the Chinese language memes are presented through the wordplay of word formation (see Figures 10 and 11). Ukrainians and Taiwanese are also found to use culture-specific visual metaphors or phrases/expressions in their memes, as demonstrated in Figures 4 and 5, respectively. While the content of memes may vary, individuals use similar patterns to convey their ideas through this medium.

In a nutshell, a successful internet meme about politicians should effectively integrate the conceptual scenario, visual cue, and verbal cue to create an ironic and critical

message in an entertaining way. With the recent advancements in artificial intelligence, it is now possible to generate images based on specific keywords and phrases. This enables those familiar with some socio-political terms to quickly and easily understand the message of the meme.

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Żartowanie z władzy – analiza humoru i ironii w memach o Władimirze Putinie i Xi Jinpingu

Słowa kluczowe: humor, ironia, memy, Tajwan, Ukraina.

STRESZCZENIE

Celem tego artykułu jest ukazanie, w jaki sposób Ukraińcy i Tajwańczycy łączą elementy pojęciowe, wizualne i werbalne, aby wyrazić humor i ironię w memach internetowych z udziałem Władimira Putina i Xi Jinpinga, przywódców Rosji i Chin. Ponadto celem badania jest ustalenie, czy analizowane memy odzwierciedlają różnice kulturowe między Ukrainą a Tajwanem. Analiza opiera się na modelu wielomodalnej fuzji Lin i Chiang (2015) oraz wykorzystuje typologię memów Baurechta (2020), tj. *makroobrazy*, *memy panelowe*, *memy opisowe*, *memy ze zrzutami ekranowymi*, *memy krzyżowe* oraz *meta memy*. Wyniki analizy sugerują, że użytkownicy internetu i mediów społecznościowych z Ukrainy i Tajwanu mają tendencję do wyrażania swojego gniewu i niezadowolenia poprzez użycie humoru i ironii. Analiza ukraińskich i tajwańskich memów ujawnia podobieństwa między memami obu krajów; oba wykorzystują dialogi i zdrobnienia, aby stworzyć efekt humorystyczny. Analizowane memy przedstawiają jednak Putina i Xi w różny sposób, co odzwierciedla różnice kulturowe między dwoma krajami. Podczas gdy ukraińskie memy często odnoszą się do wydarzeń i postaci historycznych, tajwańskie memy mają tendencję do tworzenia humorystycznych scenariuszy z udziałem obecnych polityków. Ponadto humor i ironia w ukraińskich memach są tworzone poprzez kalambury bazujące na podobieństwach fonetycznych, podczas gdy humor i ironia w memach chińskojęzycznych są prezentowane poprzez grę słów bazującą na słowotwórstwie. Wyniki analizy wskazują, że memy internetowe, zbudowane poprzez połączenie elementów wizualnych, werbalnych i pojęciowych, służą jako środek wyrażania gniewu i niezadowolenia Ukraińców i Tajwańczyków poprzez humorystyczne i ironiczne przedstawiania Putina i Xi.