

**ILLUMINATION OF FANG CHENG'S VISUAL
HUMOUR PRINCIPLES ON MEME DESIGN
AMONG SELECTED UNIVERSITY STUDENTS
IN CHINA**

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UNIVERSITI SAINS MALAYSIA

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IN CHINA**

by

LI CHENXI

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**ILUMINASI FALSAFAH VISUAL HUMOR FANG CHENG DALAM REKA
BENTUK MEME DI KALANGAN PELAJAR UNIVERSITI TERPILIH DI
CHINA**

ABSTRAK

Kajian ini meneroka bagaimana prinsip humor yang diperkenalkan oleh kartunis terkenal China, Fang Cheng, boleh membimbing pelajar universiti dalam mereka bentuk meme yang berkesan untuk komunikasi digital. Dengan mengaitkan persamaan antara meme dan kartun humor, kajian ini menggunakan Teori Ketakselarasan (Incongruity Theory) untuk menilai kerangka humor visual Fang Cheng melalui perbandingan imej, analisis kartun, analisis meme stimulatif, dan tinjauan kuantitatif melibatkan 230 pelajar dan lebih 10 orang pakar. Dapatan kualitatif menunjukkan bahawa kartun dan meme berkongsi strategi penceritaan visual seperti metafora, sindiran, dan hiperbola, serta logik dwi Fang Cheng yang menggabungkan ketakselarasan dan kewajaran memperkayakan Teori Ketakselarasan. Analisis meme stimulatif mengesahkan nilai praktikal taksonomi humor Fang yang merangkumi Coincidence (Kebetulan), Empathy (Empati), Converse (Songsangan), dan Fallacy (Kesesatan) dalam penciptaan meme. Analisis kuantitatif pula menyokong keberkesanan teori dan komunikasi dalam strategi Fang Cheng. Peserta lebih menyukai meme yang menggunakan peranan simbolik, keterlaluan emosi, dan penceritaan yang berputar belit, sekali gus mengesahkan pendekatan ini sebagai alat yang berkesan dalam reka bentuk humor. Secara keseluruhan, kajian ini menawarkan

satu model berstruktur dan berasaskan teori untuk humor visual dalam reka bentuk meme, menyumbang kepada bidang kajian humor dan komunikasi digital yang semakin berkembang.

**ILLUMINATION OF FANG CHENG’S VISUAL HUMOUR PRINCIPLES
ON MEME DESIGN AMONG SELECTED UNIVERSITY STUDENTS IN
CHINA**

ABSTRACT

This research explores how humour principles derived from renowned Chinese cartoonist Fang Cheng can guide university students in designing effective memes for digital communication. Drawing parallels between memes and humorous cartoons, the study applies Incongruity Theory to assess Fang Cheng’s visual humour framework through image comparison, cartoon analysis, stimulative meme analysis, and quantitative surveys involving 230 students and over 10 experts. Qualitative findings reveal that both cartoons and memes share visual storytelling strategies such as metaphor, satire, and hyperbole and that Fang Cheng’s dual logic of incongruity and reasonability enriches Incongruity Theory. Stimulative meme analysis confirms the practical value of Fang’s humour taxonomy, Coincidence, Empathy, Converse, and Fallacy for meme creation. Quantitative analysis supports the theoretical and communicative effectiveness of Fang Cheng’s strategies. Participants favored memes with symbolic roles, emotional exaggeration, and narrative twists, validating these approaches as effective tools for humour design. Overall, the study offers a structured, theory-informed model for visual humour in meme design, contributing to the evolving field of humour studies and digital communication.

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

1.1 Research Background

1.1.1 Therapeutic Function of Laughter

A philosopher said, “Humans have their fill of hardships, yet their strong desire to survive make them strive to preserve the power bestowed upon them by the nature, laugh, even if they are deprived of everything.” Another famous scholar said, “Humans have fallen into extreme sufferings under the sun, for which they have to create laughter for the sake of their disentanglement.” (Fang, 2001, p.186). Studies have shown that laughter plays a positive role in people’s physical and mental health (Kuru and Kublay, 2017; Goldstein and Ruch, 2018; Heidari et al., 2020). People who laugh too little or have no habit of laughing about 1.42 times more likely to suffer from functional problems (Tamada et al., 2020). Laughter is a non-invasive, cost-effective, and easily implementable intervention to alleviate stress (Akimbekov & Razzaque, 2021), it has significant therapeutic effects on many diseases (e.g. Gremigni 2012; e.g. Bolkan, Griffjn, and Goodboy 2018), which is why we can see laughter therapy department in some hospitals (Fang,1995).

1.1.2 Healing Effects of Humour

In modern society, the pace of life is as fast as a bullet train, not to mention our haunting work pressure. In the middle of fatigue and distress, we need humour to relax our tense nerves and vent the depression that has accumulated in our hearts. Sigmund Freud believed that when a person used humour to cope with fear and anxiety, he or

she may considerably avoid experiencing negative feelings and emotions (Steir-Livny, 2016). Freud asserts that there is a subconscious repression in the human heart, that is, a psychological inhibition. Laughter is produced when this inhibition is broken. (Fang, 2001) So as we can see, laughter is a hormone that plays a regulating role for people. The healing effect of humour has been confirmed in many countries, such as the “Humour Club” in Germany and UK, the “Humour Festival” in Canada and Japan, the “Association of Humour” in Yugoslavia, and Gabrovo in Bulgaria, which is known as the “City of Humour” (Fang,2001).

1.1.3 Emergence of Humorous Meme

Humorous cultural products that trigger laughter have become an indispensable spiritual food for modern people (Musztafa, 2020). As fast-paced and high-intensity lifestyle fragments our time and makes us receive information on a fast-consumed basis (Rui Yang, 2023), the pinpoint, short and concise humorous culture products emerge (Chiaro, 2017). People are glad to easily and promptly participate in the creation and dissemination of these humorous culture products through smartphones and other terminal devices as they are the most popular communication tools (Nagle, 2017; Tuters & Hagen, 2020). Humorous memes are the most representative among these humorous cultural products. Musztafa (2020) describes the popularity of meme with such a sentence : “Why doesn’t anyone tell jokes any more ? Well, we have memes now” (Musztafa, 2020, p.10).

1.1.4 Metamorphosis of Humorous Meme

The development of mobile network technology drives meme to quietly undergo a range of astonishing changes. (This research investigated the impact of present network on the design of meme and their transmission through mobile platforms, the result has been published in Scopus journal *International Journal of Advanced and Applied Sciences*. See the publication list at the end of this thesis for more information).

The increased image size makes it easy to accommodate more narrative plots, the raised image precision leads to a significant improvement in image quality, let alone more and more sound elements and interactive designs. These changes have shed the immaturity of meme from its earlier generations, making internet memes fully qualified for carrying the true humorous art as a new medium. Humour worthy of scholarly attention and research endeavors (Blaber et al, 2021), and meme-the emerging medium for carrying humour certainly deserves attention from scholars studying humour (Shifman, 2014). The relaxing, enjoyable and rigorous creation of memes has also become an academic topic highly worthy of in-depth research (Yaqing Han, 2020).

1.1.5 Present Situation of Worldwide Meme Creation

Social scientists have conducted extensive surveys on online memes (Bayerl, 2016; Tynes & Mitchell, 2014; Marcus, 2017). However, it is not yet clear who are creating and sharing online memes. This is mainly because the surveys usually focused on memes from their digital medium perspective, but overlooked to look into other concerns (Davis, 2016; Gal, 2016; Nissenbaum & Shifman, 2017; Milner, 2016;

Marcus, 2017). Accordingly, many scholars such as Smith et al. (2021) conducted surveys on what they believed to be a major group - university students. The scholars have derived the general situation and trend of meme creation nowadays from students in universities such as Central Washington University by observing up close how they create and use internet memes. It is indicated in their surveys that university students are undoubtedly heavy users of the internet, who spend more time online than all other groups. 80% of university students equate the importance of internet surfing with air, water, and food (Deatherage, et. al. 2014). Therefore, it is reasonable to conclude that university students are the most active group in creating and using internet memes. As heavy users of internet memes among netizens, university students naturally ride the tide of meme innovation.

1.1.6 Current Status of Meme Design in China

In China, online communication via WeChat have been increasing rapidly in last decade and smartphone has already become a main device for using WeChat. WeChat possesses more than 1.2 billion users, second only to WhatsApp and Message in the globe. By the statistic in the year 2021, 44,300,000 university students in China are one of the biggest groups of WeChat user and may be one of the most productive and creative groups for creating meme. In this context, this study probes into memes - the popular humorous culture products on the current mobile network in China, and Chinese university students - the important group of creators of these humorous culture products.

1.1.7 Fang Cheng's Theory of Humour: A Cultural Foundation for Meme

Design

Fang Cheng (方成), a pioneering Chinese cartoonist and scholar, is widely credited for establishing a culturally distinct and ethically conscious theory of humour rooted in Chinese traditions. His theory has become especially relevant in the era of digital media, offering a structured lens through which humour in visual forms such as memes can be understood, taught, and critiqued. As contemporary meme culture continues to evolve in complexity, Fang Cheng's humour principles provide a foundation for exploring how visual humour can be both impactful and morally grounded.

Fang Cheng emphasized a series of fundamental principles such as: “从不协调到合理性的动态演变” (Dynamic development from receiving incongruity to perceiving reasonability), “区分滑稽与幽默”(Distinguish humour from comicality), and “考虑主体间关系” (Consider inter-subjective resonance between creator and audience). “Reasonability” ensures that even in satire or absurdity, the humour must possess internal logic and cultural coherence, humour should be understandable, not chaotic. “Humour instead of comicality” in his theory refers to refinement and aesthetic taste of elegance and profoundness. Rather than indulging in crude or offensive jokes, Fang advocated for humour that uplifts, educates, and cultivates humanistic values (Fang, 2001). The “Inter-subjective relationship” highlights the shared cultural and emotional codes that make humour effective; a joke only succeeds when it connects with the audience's lived experience, social context, and ethical sensibilities.

Unlike Western theories such as Freud's Relief Theory or the Incongruity Theory, which emphasize emotional release or surprise, Fang Cheng's framework merges aesthetic judgment, moral philosophy, and cognitive clarity (Fang, 1995; Fang, 2001). This culturally embedded view of humour also aligns with the therapeutic and psychological functions of laughter documented in Western psychological studies. For example, Kuru and Kublay (2017) found that laughter therapy can significantly alleviate anxiety, stress, and depression in patients.

Goldstein and Ruch (2018) further emphasized the emotional and physiological role of amusement, identifying cheerfulness as a stable emotional trait that promotes well-being. Similarly, Akimbekov and Razzaque (2021) highlighted laughter as a cost-effective, non-invasive intervention with substantial psychological benefits, especially in stress reduction and emotional regulation. These findings echo Fang's claim that laughter functions not merely as a reaction, but as a "psychological hormone" that fosters emotional resilience and social harmony (Fang, 2001).

Moreover, Fang's emphasis on moral boundaries in humour creation parallels broader sociological perspectives, which position humour as a means of promoting empathy, ethical reasoning, and cultural dialogue. As Steir-Livny (2016) notes in her study of Holocaust humour, even the darkest comedic expressions can serve therapeutic and reflective functions when framed appropriately. In this light, Fang Cheng's distinction between refined humour and vulgar comedy offers an ethical framework highly

applicable to today's meme culture, where boundary-pushing content can easily spiral into offensive or dehumanizing territory.

In the context of meme creation, Fang Cheng's principles help bridge the gap between traditional Chinese visual art and modern digital storytelling. As students design and share memes on platforms like WeChat, understanding humour through Fang Cheng's lens enables them to move beyond impulsive joke-making toward a more intentional, culturally rooted practice. Fang Cheng's view that humour should be "thoughtful, beneficial, and beautiful" (Fang, 2001, p. 186) offers a necessary corrective to the proliferation of shallow or harmful content in digital spaces.

This research positions Fang Cheng's humour theory as a visual literacy framework for meme pedagogy in Chinese universities. By embedding humour creation within an ethical and intellectual structure, it promotes meaningful, resilient, and culturally resonant forms of digital expression.

1.2 Problem Statement

Humour has long been recognized as a critical medium of communication, reflection, and social critique. In the Chinese context, humour is often layered with cultural, political, and philosophical connotations that distinguish it from Western traditions. One of the most prominent figures in the evolution of Chinese visual humour is Fang Cheng (方成), whose works have not only entertained but also offered profound socio-political commentary through a unique synthesis of wit, visual minimalism, and cultural sensitivity (Fang, 2009; Lent & Xu, 2007). Fang Cheng's philosophy of

humour emphasizes clarity, elegance, and a sharp awareness of the relationship between the humour creator and the recipient—a conceptual framework that remains underexplored in scholarly literature.

Despite Fang Cheng’s historical significance, there is a marked lack of academic attention to his principles of humour, particularly in the context of digital and visual communication. His ideas are rarely integrated into current humour theories such as the Incongruity, Superiority, or Relief theories, which are commonly grounded in Western paradigms (Yue, 2010; Bartosch, 2024). This lack of integration leads to a narrow understanding of humour, ignoring valuable insights from non-Western thinkers and visual artists. While Chinese humour has been acknowledged as a culturally specific expression of social relations, resistance, and philosophical inquiry (Caschera, 2017), Fang Cheng’s body of work remains largely unutilized as a resource for expanding humour theory or as a foundation for practical application in the field of design and communication.

At the same time, memes have become a dominant form of digital expression, especially among university students, often functioning as modern tools for satire, identity formation, and collective commentary. However, most memes remain superficial, driven by internet trends and lacking depth in both form and meaning. As visual communication becomes increasingly prevalent in online interactions, the demand for more intellectually grounded and culturally sensitive meme design is growing. Fang Cheng’s humour principles—centered around elegance, reasonability,

and visual contradiction, etc—could provide a powerful theoretical and artistic framework for meme creators to design with purpose, reflection, and depth (Li et al., 2023).

Nevertheless, few studies have attempted to explore the transferability of traditional cartoon humour into meme design. The fundamental relationship between memes and cartoons as parallel forms of visual language has not been fully established in academic literature, despite their shared reliance on image, symbolism, and intertextuality (Li et al., 2023). There is a notable absence of systematic frameworks or empirical investigations on how Fang Cheng's humour principles can be adapted to fit the digital meme format—an issue that limits both theoretical advancement and practical creativity in the field of visual communication and design education.

Moreover, there exists a cross-cultural gap in understanding how Chinese humour, especially that of Fang Cheng, can be made relevant and intelligible in a global meme culture that is predominantly shaped by Western internet norms. Cultural translation, audience reception, and humour sensitivity are rarely addressed when adapting traditional Chinese artistic philosophies into contemporary online discourse. This highlights the urgent need for a dialectic and taxonomic approach to map out Fang Cheng's humour systematically, evaluate its theoretical robustness using existing humour models, and explore its potential application in a medium as dynamic and globally interconnected as internet memes.

In summary, the underrepresentation of Fang Cheng's work in humour scholarship, the absence of practical adaptation strategies in meme design, and the cultural and theoretical disconnect between traditional Chinese humour and modern digital media form a critical research gap. Addressing this gap not only contributes to the diversification of humour studies but also offers a pedagogical and creative solution for students and digital creators seeking to elevate meme design through intellectual and culturally meaningful humour.

1.3 Research Objectives

The creation of humour in meme design has emerged as a cognitively demanding and context-sensitive task, especially among university students who frequently engage with visual digital culture. Preliminary findings from a pilot survey conducted in this study reveal that 57.83% of participating students expressed significant difficulty in producing humorous content and indicated a strong need for structured theoretical guidance. These students believe that humour creation, particularly in the meme format, is not solely a matter of innate talent but a skill that can be cultivated through exposure to the right principles and cognitive frameworks.

To address this challenge, the present study introduces the visual humour philosophy of Fang Cheng (方成)—a celebrated pioneer in the Chinese cartoon industry, whose work is renowned for its enduring popularity, intellectual depth, and refined aesthetic. As one of the most influential figures in 20th-century Chinese cartooning, Fang Cheng developed a set of humour principles grounded in clarity, elegance, and the subtle

interplay between visual language and social commentary. These principles, though historically applied in traditional cartooning, offer valuable theoretical insights that can be adapted for the design of modern memes.

This research proposes that Fang Cheng’s visual humour framework can serve as a pedagogical and design-oriented guide for students struggling with humour creation. By systematically applying Fang Cheng’s principles to meme design, the study aims to offer a structured, culturally grounded, and intellectually rigorous model to enhance the creative process. The research thus responds to both a pedagogical gap and a practical need, empowering students to engage more effectively with the meme medium and contribute to more meaningful digital communication.



Figure 1. 1 Fang Cheng’s Humorous Cartoon *Wu Dalang Open a Shop*

Source: Page.116 in Fang Cheng’s book *Wo De Man Hua Sheng Huo-Fang Cheng* [My Career as a Cartoonist-Fang Cheng] (Dialogue in the cartoon: Our boss would not hire anybody who is taller than him.)

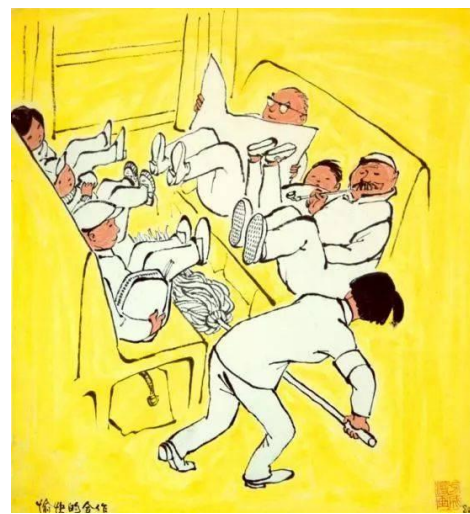


Figure 1. 2 Fang Cheng’s Humorous Cartoon *a Pleasant Cooperation*

Source: Page.192 in Fang Cheng’s book *Wo De Man Hua Sheng Huo-Fang Cheng* [My Career as a Cartoonist-Fang Cheng]

Research Objectives

This research focuses on three main objectives as below:

- a) To examine the relevance and applicability of Fang Cheng's visual humour principles in contemporary meme design.
- b) To analyse the strengths of Fang Cheng's humour principles through the lens of Incongruity Theory.
- c) To identify effective and systematic strategies for applying Fang Cheng's visual humour to meme creation through dialectic analysis and humour taxonomy.

1.4 Research Questions

The research questions are as below:

- 1. What conceptual and aesthetic factors support the applicability of Fang Cheng's visual humour in contemporary meme design?
- 2. In what ways do Fang Cheng's visual humour principles align with and extend the theoretical framework of Incongruity Theory?
- 3. What analytical strategies provide an effective and systematic approach for applying Fang Cheng's visual humour to meme creation?

1.5 Scope of Research

This study investigates the application of Fang Cheng's visual humour principles in the context of meme design among university students in China. The scope of the

research is defined across five key dimensions: period, geography, demographic group, meme type, and methodological approach.

1.5.1 Scope of Period

The study focuses on the current era of digital and mobile internet communication, where memes have become an integral part of online interaction. Specifically, the research examines the role of humour in meme creation during the latest period of mobile network development, emphasizing the increasing influence of digital platforms such as WeChat, Douyin, and Weibo on students' visual communication habits.

1.5.2 Geographic Scope

The research is conducted in China, with a particular focus on Hubei Province, which hosts the largest number of university students in the country. As a result, the region is considered highly representative for this study. The concentration of digital-savvy students and access to diverse academic institutions make Hubei an ideal setting to explore meme creation behaviours and the adoption of visual humour principles.

1.5.3 Scope of Demographic Group

The study narrows its focus to university students as the primary demographic group. Although various netizen groups participate in meme creation, university students are identified as one of the most creative, expressive, and engaged in digital content production. Their cognitive readiness, frequent exposure to digital media, and

familiarity with meme culture position them as ideal respondents for examining how humour principles can guide meme design.

1.5.4 Scope of Meme Type

This research specifically concentrates on cartoon and animation-based memes, due to their strong visual connection with traditional humorous cartoons. By selecting this type of meme, the study aligns its conceptual foundation with Fang Cheng's artistic style and allows for a more accurate transfer of his visual humour principles into meme design practice.

1.5.5 Methodological Scope

To achieve a comprehensive understanding of the research problem, the study employs a mixed methods approach. Quantitative data is gathered through surveys involving university students, while qualitative data is obtained through expert interviews. This methodological triangulation allows for a richer interpretation of how Fang Cheng's principles can be practically and effectively applied to modern meme creation, both in theory and in design practice.

1.6 Research Significance

This study offers both theoretical and practical contributions to the fields of humour studies, visual communication, and digital media design, particularly within the context of Chinese culture and contemporary meme-making practices. By focusing on the underexplored humour principles of Fang Cheng, the study aims to bridge the gap between traditional Chinese visual humour and modern digital expressions, such as

memes. It also contributes toward developing a pedagogical approach for enhancing creative literacy among university students.

1.6.1 Theoretical Significance

From a theoretical standpoint, this research addresses several critical gaps in humour literature and communication theory. First, it contributes to the diversification of humour theory by incorporating non-Western perspectives specifically, Chinese humour into academic discourse. Much of the existing scholarship on humour is heavily centered around Western paradigms, particularly Incongruity Theory, Superiority Theory, and Relief Theory. While these models are foundational, they do not fully account for the cultural, aesthetic, and philosophical depth of humour as it is practiced and appreciated in other regions, especially in East Asia. This study introduces Fang Cheng's visual humour principles as a culturally rich framework that complements and extends existing Western models, especially the Incongruity Theory, which deals with expectation and surprise as sources of humour.

Second, the study provides a theoretical synthesis between Fang Cheng's ideas and modern humour theories by mapping his concepts—such as "reasonability of incongruity" and the "inter-subjective relationship between creator and audience" onto the cognitive processes that underlie humour perception and appreciation. In doing so, it advances the understanding of humour not merely as an emotional reaction but as a form of intellectual engagement and cultural expression. The theoretical framework

developed in this research offers a new lens through which to interpret visual humour, particularly in visual narrative forms like cartoons and memes.

Third, by exploring the linguistic, symbolic, and semiotic parallels between cartoons and memes, the study reinforces the conceptualization of both as visual languages. This insight contributes to communication theory by proposing that memes, like cartoons, operate on multiple semiotic layers and can be subjected to structured analysis using visual and humour theories. The research, therefore, enriches the academic conversation on how meaning, irony, and satire are constructed and interpreted across different mediums.

Lastly, the study proposes a taxonomic and dialectical framework for analyzing and categorizing visual humour. This framework may serve as a foundation for future theoretical research in visual communication, media studies, and digital semiotics. By codifying elements of visual humour into systematic categories, the study lays the groundwork for comparative and interdisciplinary analyses.

1.6.2 Practical Significance

From a practical perspective, this study offers several important contributions for educators, students, digital designers, and content creators.

Firstly, the study responds directly to the challenges faced by university students in creating effective and meaningful memes. According to preliminary survey data, a significant number of students express difficulty in crafting humour and believe that theoretical guidance is necessary for improving their creative output. By introducing

Fang Cheng's humour principles as a set of structured guidelines, this study aims to empower students with concrete tools and cognitive strategies to improve meme creation in a purposeful and aesthetically grounded manner.

Secondly, the research provides a pedagogical framework for visual communication education, particularly in courses related to digital media, design thinking, and creative communication. Educators can incorporate Fang Cheng's humour principles and the study's dialectical analysis model into curriculum design, thereby enhancing students' cultural literacy, humour appreciation, and visual storytelling skills. This aligns with 21st-century education goals that emphasize creativity, critical thinking, and cross-cultural competence.

Third, for practitioners in advertising, media, and content creation, the study offers practical insights into how to craft humour that is not only engaging but also culturally resonant and intellectually reflective. In an age where digital content often spreads rapidly but lacks depth, Fang Cheng's humour principles can serve as a benchmark for ethical, refined, and impactful humour creation. Designers can apply these principles to improve content quality while appealing to diverse audiences in global communication spaces.

Moreover, the research could serve as a foundation for developing workshops, toolkits, or applications that assist creators in analyzing or generating humour-infused content. The taxonomy developed in this study could be translated into templates or visual grammar tools that streamline meme design while maintaining creativity and integrity.

Lastly, the findings can contribute to cross-cultural media literacy, helping global audiences understand the nuances of Chinese humour and visual expression. This is especially relevant in a digital age where memes function as tools for both entertainment and transnational dialogue. By making Fang Cheng's work accessible and applicable in a modern context, the study promotes intercultural understanding through humour.

Psychological studies have consistently shown that humour contributes to mental and emotional well-being by reducing stress, alleviating anxiety, and promoting positive emotional states. In today's fast-paced and highly digitalized society, memes have emerged as an accessible and relatable form of humour that resonates with daily struggles and shared human experiences. This study acknowledges the healing potential of memes as micro-moments of laughter and reflection, helping individuals manage emotional fatigue and psychological tension. By providing university students with structured tools to create humour-infused memes, grounded in Fang Cheng's visual humour principles, this research contributes to broader conversations about mental health in digital environments.

Sociological perspectives suggest that humour is not only a tool for entertainment but also a moral force, cultivating empathy, tolerance, and ethical reasoning. When designed thoughtfully, humour can guide audiences toward constructive reflection and moral awareness. Memes, as a dominant channel of communication among youth, have the potential to embed messages of kindness, justice, and ethical living. Fang

Cheng's approach, which draws a clear line between elegant humour and vulgar comedy, provides an ethical framework for meme creation. By promoting meaningful, tasteful humour, this research enhances the potential of memes to contribute positively to moral discourse in society.

Memes play a vital role in shaping cultural identity and disseminating local culture to global audiences. Just as Malaysian cartoonist Mohd Nor Bin Khalid uses humour to share Malaysian values and perspectives, Fang Cheng's cartoon heritage is a cultural treasure for China. His humour, deeply embedded in Chinese values and aesthetics, can serve as a cultural bridge in meme form, fostering intercultural understanding. This study positions meme design not just as a creative act but also as a cultural act, equipping students to use Fang Cheng's techniques to convey Chinese culture to the world through short, impactful visuals.

With the rapid evolution of mobile networks and digital trends, memes have transformed from static images into dynamic multimedia art forms. This continuous innovation poses challenges for student creators, who may struggle to keep pace with shifting formats and expectations. Memes today require multi-layered humour, contextual awareness, and visual sophistication. By introducing Fang Cheng's visual humour principles, which emphasize form, structure, and visual wit, this study provides students with a sustainable creative strategy to engage with evolving meme formats, while also helping them develop long-term skills in visual communication and humour writing.

Despite the popularity and relevance of memes, most art and design curricula in universities lack formal courses dedicated to meme creation as a legitimate visual art. This study proposes the foundation for establishing academic courses in meme design, supported by structured content and theoretical foundations drawn from Fang Cheng's work. His well-established humour principles, honed through decades of observation and innovation, can be restructured as practical guidelines that meet the learning needs of students. As the first study to systematically align Fang Cheng's humour theory with meme pedagogy, this research opens new possibilities for creative education and visual literacy in higher education.

1.7 Definition of the Terms

Visual Humour

Visual humour refers to the use of images, illustrations, or animations to create comedic or amusing effects that elicit laughter, irony, or reflection. In this study, visual humour encompasses the techniques used in cartoons, comics, and memes to communicate humour through visual representation rather than text alone.

Fang Cheng's Humour Principles

Fang Cheng's humour principles are the aesthetic and philosophical guidelines formulated by the Chinese cartoonist Fang Cheng. These principles include ideas such as dynamic development from receiving incongruity to perceiving reasonability, distinguish humour from comicality, and consider inter-subjective resonance between

creator and audience. These principles guide the structure, tone, and content of humour in visual works.

Meme

A meme is a digital image, video, or piece of text, typically humorous in nature, that is shared and modified across the internet. In this study, the term refers specifically to cartoon or animation-style memes that rely on visual elements to convey humour, particularly among university students.

Meme Design

Meme design refers to the creative process of conceptualizing and producing memes. This includes selecting or creating visuals, writing captions, and structuring content in a way that delivers humour or social commentary effectively. In this study, meme design focuses on applying Fang Cheng's humour principles to improve students' ability to create meaningful and elegant humorous memes.

1.8 Research Gaps

In recent years, academic interest in memes has grown significantly, as evidenced by the increasing number of research papers available across scholarly databases. Although memes originated as popular culture artifacts—evolving from early prototypes such as emoticons, emojis, and stickers—they have since established themselves as a distinct and rich medium for communication and creative expression.

Unlike their predecessors, memes exhibit unique multi-modal properties and cultural functions that position them as valuable subjects for academic inquiry.

Literature reviews and bibliometric analyses reveal that current meme research is largely focused on topics such as historical evolution, social functions, political symbolism, and semiotic interpretations. However, studies specifically addressing humour in memes remain limited. This gap may be attributed to the complexity and novelty of memes as an emergent media form, which blends visual and verbal modalities in intricate and context-dependent ways. As Tanaka et al. (2022, p. 82) note:

“Due to the importance of humour in human communication, several previous studies have aimed to recognize or generate humour of a single modality. These include research on fixed forms of language-based humour jokes (Petrović & Matthews, 2013), Knock-Knock Jokes (Rayz, 2004), miscellaneous short-text humour (Annamoradnejad & Zoghi, 2020), humour in dialogues (Ziser et al., 2020; Yoshikawa & Iwakura, 2020), and visual humour (Chandrasekaran et al., 2016). However, few studies have considered multi-modal humour, such as humour in memes.”

This quote underscores the fact that while humour research has made progress, it has mostly concentrated on single modalities, such as purely linguistic (verbal jokes or dialogues) or purely visual (images) forms of humour. What remains underexplored is multi-modal humour, the type of humour that arises from the integration of both visual and verbal elements, which is a defining characteristic of internet memes. This oversight is significant, considering the dominant role that such hybrid forms play in contemporary digital communication.

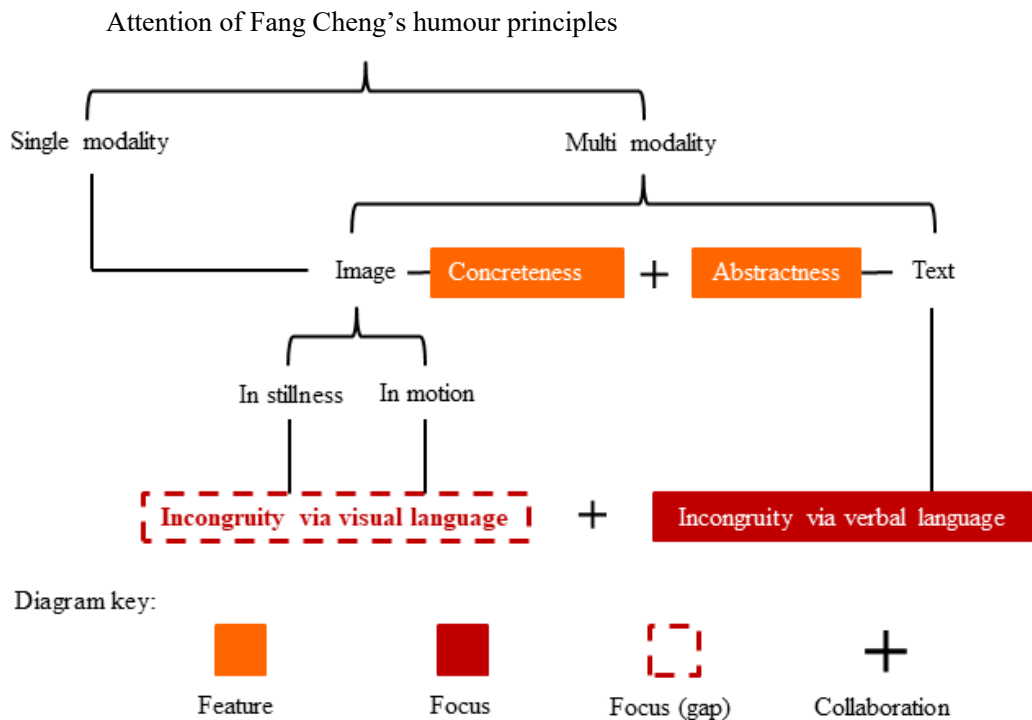


Figure 1.3 Specific Areas of Attention Addressed by Fang Cheng's Humour Principles

As showed in Figure 1.3, memes often function as a fusion of visual and verbal communication, though in some cases, they rely entirely on imagery. This hybrid structure presents a unique challenge for humour analysis, as it combines the abstraction and flexibility of language with the immediacy and clarity of imagery. While this dual modality enhances the communicative power of memes, it also introduces a level of complexity that demands new interpretive frameworks for humour creation and analysis.

In an effort to address this scholarly gap, the present study applies Fang Cheng's visual humour principles to the domain of meme design. Fang Cheng, a pioneering figure in Chinese cartooning, approached humour through both visual and combined visual-verbal modalities. His work offers valuable insight into the structural, aesthetic, and cognitive elements of humour, which may be equally applicable to meme creation.

The diagram presented below (Figure 1.4) outlines the specific dimensions of Fang Cheng’s humour principles. These principles have long guided cartoonists and visual communicators in China and offer a promising foundation for systematic humour development in digital formats like memes.

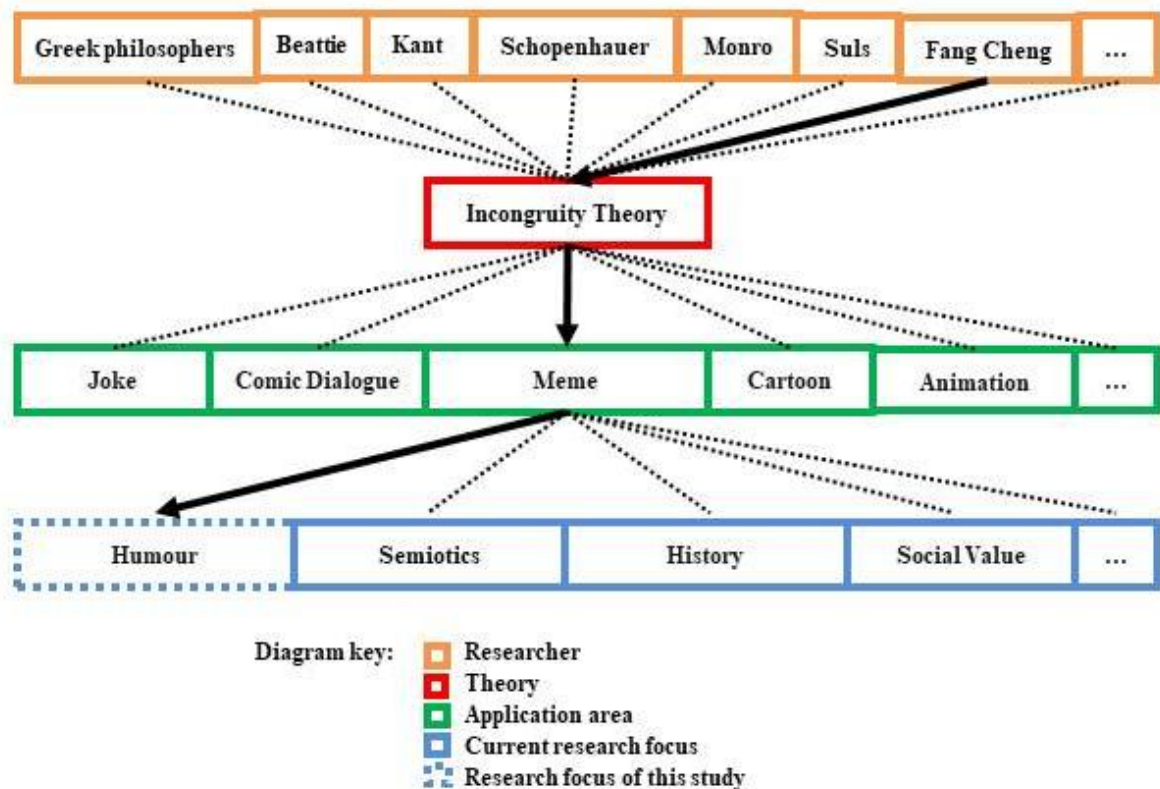


Figure 1. 4 Gap to be Filled by Fang Cheng’s Account of Incongruity Theory

Given the shared semiotic and multimodal structure of cartoons and memes, this study posits that Fang Cheng’s principles—originally developed for cartoon art—can be effectively translated into meme design strategies. Both media formats rely on concise storytelling, visual exaggeration, irony, and symbolic representation, making them near-analogous in form and function.